

# In search of the Divine: Philosophy and the Eleusinian Mysteries in Plato's *Symposium*

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Plato presents the *Symposium* as a dialogue on *eros*, love understood as sexual desire, but its true subject is the spiritual or religious dimension of his philosophy. Plato develops this theme by drawing an analogy between philosophy and the Eleusinian mysteries. In addition to focusing the dialogue on a god (Eros, the Greek god of love), and dramatically setting the dialogue immediately in the wake of the Great Dionysia (the religious festival at which tragic poets competed each year), Plato repeatedly hints at the spiritual nature of the *Symposium* in various other ways throughout the dialogue. We see this, for instance, in the portrayal of Socrates. At the beginning of the dialogue, we are told that Socrates has "bathed and put on his fancy sandals" before going to Agathon's house, "both very unusual events" (174a),<sup>1</sup> [1] which are perhaps reminiscent of a pre-ritual purification. Then, while he is on his way to Agathon's house, Socrates falls into deep contemplation in a neighbour's doorway and becomes completely oblivious to the mundane events around him. We are told that this is "one of his habits" (175a-b). Later, he claims to have spoken "like a prophet [*mantikōs*]" (198a) when he predicted that those at the end of the table would be at a loss for something to say after all of the others had delivered their encomia to Eros (177e). And at the end of the dialogue, when Alcibiades delivers

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<sup>1</sup> [1] All quotations from the *Symposium* are from Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), sometimes modified and hereinafter referenced in the text by Stephanus pagination.

an encomium to Socrates, we learn about many of Socrates' other odd characteristics: he is unfazed by the hardships of battle or hunger, he drinks without becoming drunk, he withstands cold weather that others find unbearable, and he is the most courageous of men in battle (219e-221c). Something is certainly afoot in this portrayal of Socrates.<sup>2</sup> [2]

In themselves, these references may not seem significant, but they become more so when taken in conjunction with the content of the second half of the *Symposium*. When Socrates' turn to speak comes, he speaks through the guise of Diotima, who is all but called a prophetess by Plato: her name, "*Dio-tima*," means something like "Zeus honoured" in the Greek;<sup>3</sup> [3] she is from "Mantineia [*Mantinikēs*]" (201d), a name with a strong allusion to "*mantikē*," the Greek word for the art of prophesy; and Socrates mentions that "once she even put off the plague for ten years by telling the Athenians what sacrifices to make" (201d). Finally, Plato overtly establishes an analogy to the mysteries at Eleusis near the end of Diotima's speech (as relayed by Socrates), when he has her say that "even you, Socrates, could probably come to be initiated [*myētheiēs*] into these rites of love [*erōtika*]. But as for the purpose of these rites when they are done correctly--that is the final and highest mystery [*ta de telea kai eoptika*]" (209e-210a). The Greek verb, *myētheiēs*, is related to the noun, *myesis*, which was the first level of initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries. And *eoptika*, here translated as "the highest mystery," is related to the

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<sup>2</sup> [2] Michael L Morgan also notes some of the following aspects of the mysterious portrayal of Socrates in *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990), 94-96. He adds that, especially in Alcibiades portion of the dialogue, references to mysteries other than the Eleusinian are applied to Socrates. This is true, but as explained below, the *Symposium* is primarily concerned with the Eleusinian mysteries, and, therefore, this paper does not stray from Eleusis .

<sup>3</sup> [3] James M. Rhodes, *Eros Wisdom, Silence: Plato's Erotic Dialogues* (Columbia & London : University of Missouri Press , 2003), 302.

noun, *epoptēs*, which means in general "watcher" or "witness," but is also the name for those who have achieved the highest level of initiation in the Eleusinian mysteries. *Epoptēs* appears not to have been used in reference to any other mystery rite.<sup>4</sup> [4] Thus, Plato is referencing specifically the highest revelation in the Eleusinian mysteries, the most popular mysteries in Athens (they were simply called the mysteries [*ta mysteria*]<sup>5</sup> [5]). Plato's choice of language, then, reveals that he expects his audience (and Socrates expects his interlocutors) to associate the content of Diotima's speech with the Eleusinian mysteries.

I hope to show in this paper that there are also more substantive, philosophical reasons for Plato's decision to draw an analogy between philosophy and the Eleusinian mysteries in the *Symposium*. First I will discuss the mysteries themselves and then I will turn to a discussion of Socrates-Diotima's speech, showing how knowledge of the mysteries can illuminate Plato's meaning in the *Symposium*. I argue that Plato sees a connection between the mysteries and philosophy because they both operate in an in-between or daimonic realm of human experience where man seeks a closer, more personal relationship to the divine. Both the mysteries and philosophy end with a final revelation, but the real fruits of both is the spiritual attunement to the divine that results from going through the initiation. However, while this search is active in both the mystery initiates and the philosopher, it is only the philosopher who is truly changed by his

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4 [4] Morgan shies away from this point because Burkert "does not refer explicitly to Eleusis" (*Platonic Piety*, 98), but then, in a footnote (220-221, n. 81), Morgan cites Burkert's claim that the passage in question "clearly refers to Eleusis" (*Ancient Mystery Cults* [Cambridge, Massachusetts and London England: Harvard University Press, 1987], 92). Moreover, Burkert only ever uses *epoptēs* and its variants in reference to Eleusis, and, in his "Index of Greek Terms" in *Ancient Mystery Cults*, *epopteia* is defined as "watching; experience of *epoptes* at Eleusis," *epoptes* is defined as "watcher; highest degree at the Eleusinian mysteries," and, finally, *epopteuein* is defined as "to watch; to become *epoptes* at Eleusis" (172).

5 [5] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 276.

experience and seeks to live according to the moral requirements he experiences as flowing from his experience of the divine.

### **The Mysteries at Eleusis 6 [6]**

This paper focuses on the Eleusinian mysteries because they are specifically referenced in the *Symposium*, but there were, of course, many other mystery cults in the ancient Greek world, each dedicated to a particular god (or gods). There is not sufficient space in this essay to engage in a full historical investigation of the emergence of the mysteries as a historical phenomenon, but a brief comment must be made on their place in ancient Greek religion. W. K. C. Guthrie observes that two opposite positions concerning the relationship between gods and men can be found coexisting in ancient Greek religion, one expressed in relation to Olympian (Homeric) gods and the other in relation to chthonic gods. In Homeric mythology, human beings and gods interact but they are of distinctly separate orders: gods are immortal and men are mortal. As Guthrie observes, "The lesson of Homer is clear, that men must keep their distance and not aspire to higher spheres. The gods go their way and we ours, and the two are essentially different."<sup>7</sup> [7] With the chthonic gods, on the other hand, the gap between human and god is bridgeable. Chthonic gods are gods of the earth, and gods of the grave; their rituals concern life (agriculture) and death (Hades and Persephone, rulers of the underworld, are chthonic). Because of their earthly nature, chthonic gods are usually tied to a particular place. Moreover, the nature

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6 [6] This overview is based on George E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961); C. Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1967); N.J. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Burkert, *Greek Religion*; and Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

7 [7] W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greek and their Gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), 143.

of their divinity is often ambiguous: chthonic rituals were performed for both gods or heroes, and sometimes the personality worshiped was both.<sup>8</sup> [8] The line between man and god is blurred. Further, as Francis M. Cornford writes, "Because the province of a Mystery God is always, primarily, the human society from which he immediately springs, it is possible for him to remain human as well as divine. In this lies the secret of the vitality of mystical religions. The characteristic rite is sacramental--an act of communion and reunion with the daemon."<sup>9</sup> [9] Worship of mystery gods provided an opportunity for a closer, more personal relationship between man and god than the external relationship that was available under the traditional polis religion of the Homeric epic. Initiates flocked to Eleusis and other mysteries because they were drawn by the appeal of a closer relationship with the gods and the promise of a better fate after death thereby received.

Those who were to be initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries had to go through preliminary rites of purification and instruction before they would be allowed to participate in the final revelations at Eleusis . The mysteries were divided into the Lesser and Greater mysteries. The Lesser mysteries were preparatory to the Greater, involving purifications and perhaps some instruction or other rites, and they were celebrated near Athens, at the Agrai by the Ilissos river in the Attic month of Anthesterion (March). Scholars agree in general on these points, although they debate exactly which rites were performed during the Lesser mysteries. The myth underlying the Lesser Mysteries is also uncertain: some evidence suggests that they were celebrated in honor of Persephone, other sources indicate Dionysus, and several existing reliefs

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<sup>8</sup> [8] *Ibid.*, 220, 223.

<sup>9</sup> [9] Francis M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 112.

associated with the Lesser mysteries portray Heracles being purified in preparation for the Greater Mysteries. But addressing these debates is not important for the purpose of this essay: what is important is establishing the stages through which initiates went, regardless of when and where each stage took place, and the scholars do not disagree on these points.

As Kerényi observes, the initial stages involved physical rites which were preparatory for the spiritual rites at Eleusis (much like, as he notes and as will be shown below, the love of bodies is preparatory to love of the Beautiful itself in the *Symposium*).<sup>10</sup> [10] The first action was the sacrifice of a pig (with which the initiates had bathed in the sea) as a "true expiatory sacrifice. The animals died in place of the initiand."<sup>11</sup> [11] A priest would then slay a ram, the hide of which would be used for the initiates to sit on during the rest of the ceremony. After a series of further ritual actions, the initiate was ready for the *myesis*, the first level of initiation, which was likely accomplished through the showing of objects and a period of instruction, but the exact nature of the ritual is unknown.

There is some help in a poem connected to the Eleusinian mysteries, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*,<sup>12</sup> [12] which has come down to us from antiquity. It discusses the myth behind the mysteries and provides the mythical basis for the rites that the initiates perform. The *Hymn* tells the story of the goddess Demeter who wanders the earth searching for her daughter Persephone whom she heard cry out as she was abducted by Hades. Unbeknownst to Demeter, Zeus had approved Hades' request to take Persephone as his wife. Demeter is enraged: she removes

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10 [10] Kerényi, *Eleusis*, 45-47.

11 [11] *Ibid.*, 55.

12 [12] The translations used below are from Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and referenced hereinafter in the text by line number.

herself from the realm of the gods, goes down in the disguise of an old woman to live among human beings, and enters a state of grieving which lasts until her daughter is returned. It is during Demeter's stay with a human family on earth that the mythical foundation for the mysteries is related. Demeter sits on a stool covered in a fleece with her face veiled; she fasts; her grief is lightened by the taunting of Iambe, an old woman; she drinks a barely drink mixed with mint (195-210)--all of these are re-enacted by initiates before they are permitted to witness the revelations of the Greater mysteries.

The Greater Mysteries began on 14 Boedromion (September/October), when the "sacred things," carried in baskets, were brought from Eleusis to Athens by the Eleusinian priestesses escorted by *epeboi* (young Athenians of military age). On the 15<sup>th</sup>, the hierophant opened the festival, making an announcement (*prorrhesis*) that those "who are not of pure hands or speak an incomprehensible tongue," that is, those stained by human blood and non-Greek speaking barbarians, were not permitted to participate. Other than these exclusions, anyone--including slaves, foreigners, men and women--could participate in the mysteries. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, the initiates went to the bay of Phaleron to purify themselves through bathing. Then, on the 18<sup>th</sup>, everyone remained home, fasting; on this day, the *kykeon*, a barley drink mixed with pennyroyal, was likely prepared.

A procession, named the Sacred Way, began at Athens on the morning of 19<sup>th</sup> of Boedromion and ended that evening in Eleusis. Priestesses brought back the sacred things, with a procession of dancing and chanting initiates, perhaps almost in state of ecstasy. The crowd repeatedly chanted *Iakch' o Iakche*, related to the name, Iakchos, perhaps a *daimon* of Demeter, or perhaps another name for Dionysus. Bundles of branches, or *bakchoi*, were waved to the

rhythm. Between the two cities, while crossing a bridge, *gephyrismoi* were acted out, obscene shouting at the members of the procession which mimicked how Iambe caused the grieving Demeter to laugh in the myth. It was likely here that the *kykeon* was drunk: as darkness fell and the stars became visible, the fast was broken. Somewhere before entering the site of the Greater Mysteries, the initiates had to recite a *synthema*, a password: "I fasted, drank from the *kykeon*, I took out of the *kiste* (big basket), worked, placed back in the basket (*kalathos*) and from the basket into the *kiste*."13 [13]

Only the initiates were allowed to proceed further into the cult area, which was dedicated to Hades. The mysteries took place in the *Telestrion*, a large building which could hold a few thousand people. The only ones permitted to enter were the *mystai*, those entering for the first time, and the *epoptai*, for whom it would be at least their second experience (initiates could re-experience the mysteries as many times as they wished, and they had to go through the process at least twice to become an *epoptēs*). Each *mystai* had a *mystagogos*, someone who had been previously initiated and would lead the new initiate through the rites and into the site of the mysteries at Eleusis . In the center of the *Telestrion* was the *Anaktonon*, a rectangular structure with a door at one end where the hierophant's throne was placed. A fire burned on top of the *Anaktonon*; otherwise, it was dark until a flash of light emerged as the Hierophant emerged from the *Anaktonon*. It is unclear exactly how the proceedings at this point transpired, but it is suggested that terrifying things were shown to the *mystai* in the dark until finally the hierophant emerged from the *Anaktonon* at the sound of a gong and announces "The Mistress has given birth

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13 [13] The password has been passed down by Clement Of Alexandria. Quoted in Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 286.



to a sacred boy, Brimo the Brimos," the product of a Sacred Marriage, likely enacted (if this was, in fact, a part of the ritual) between the hierophant and one of the priestesses.

The certainty of all this and its possible meaning is not settled in the scholarship; the situation is the same regarding the *epopteia*. Sometime during the ceremony, other objects and sayings were likely revealed to the initiates, but the historical evidence is scanty and reconstructing the order of the ceremony is difficult. One source reports that "the Athenians, celebrating the Eleusinian mysteries, show to the *epoptai* the great, admirable, most perfect epoptic secret, in silence, a reaped ear of grain."<sup>14</sup> [14] But scholars are uncertain about both the veracity and the possible significance of such pieces of information. Whatever was shown. the *mystai*, those to be initiated for the first time, may have had to leave before the final vision was revealed, or perhaps they only covered their eyes, since they were not permitted to see the highest mystery until their second initiation. However, the final events in the *Telestrion* transpired, the final revelations remain a mystery.

As mentioned above, the mythical basis for many of the mystery rites are accounted for in the *Hymn to Demeter*. The *Hymn* also helps to illuminate the meaning of the mysteries. While she is on earth, Demeter assumes responsibility for rearing the child of the family that has taken her in during her time among human beings. At night, Demeter places the child in a fire to bring him immortality, but she is caught one night by the child's mother, who was spying on the goddess. Demeter is outraged:

Mortals are ignorant and foolish, unable to foresee  
Destiny, the good and the bad coming on them.  
You are incurably misled by your folly.

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<sup>14</sup> [14] Hippolytus *Ref.* 5.8.39f., quoted in Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 91.

Let the god's oath, the implacable water Styx , be witness,  
I would have made your child immortal and ageless  
Forever; I would have given him unfailing honor.  
But now he cannot escape death and the death spirits.  
Yet unfailing honor will forever be his, because  
He lay on my knees and slept in my arms.  
In due time as the years come round for him,  
The sons of Eleusis will continue year after year  
To wage war and dread combat against each other.  
For I am honored Demeter, the greatest  
Source of help and joy to mortals and immortals.  
But now let all the people build me a great temple  
With an alter beneath, under the sheer wall  
Of the city on the rising hill above Kallichoron.  
I myself will lay down the rites so that hereafter  
Performing due rites you may propitiate my spirit" (256-274).

Thus the mysteries are established by the goddess, and the spiritual motivation for the mysteries is revealed: human beings are ignorant, but help is available from Demeter, and this help can be gained through the ritual of the Eleusinian mysteries.

Next, Demeter leaves human beings and stops their crops from growing, thus depriving the gods of their honors by preventing human beings from sacrificing. Zeus eventually capitulates and persuades Hades to release Persephone to her mother, but Hades tricks Persephone into eating a pomegranate seed which forces her to return to him for two thirds of every year. As he releases Persephone, Hades tells her

You will have power over all that lives and moves,  
And you will possess the greatest honors among the gods.  
There will be punishment forevermore for those wrongdoers  
Who fail to appease your power with sacrifices,  
Performing proper rites and making due offerings (365-69).

Persephone returns to Demeter and Demeter lifts the moratorium on the humans' crops; Zeus ordains the new order and balance is restored among the gods. As the *Hymn* comes to its end, it speaks of the mysteries once more. Demeter

revealed  
the conduct of her rites and taught her Mysteries to all of them,  
holy rites that are not to be transgressed, nor pried into,  
nor divulged. For a great awe of the gods stops the voice.  
Blessed is the mortal on earth who has seen these rites,  
But the uninitiated who has no share in them never  
Has the same lot once dead in the dreary darkness (475-82).

While the myth does not give a full account of the ritual of the mysteries,<sup>15</sup> [15] it gives an indication of the spiritual reasons for their existence. By suffering through the events of the myth, the initiates follow the goddesses and become dear to them--a true feeling of contact with the Divine is achieved, and it is believed that a better lot, perhaps in this life, perhaps in the next, will be afforded to those who have suffered with the goddesses. Despite the undoubted significance that initiation would have for an individual, the event did not seem to change their lives dramatically. There was also no moral doctrine associated with the mysteries--which is probably a part of the reason why they were able to coexist with the polis religion--and upon returning home, initiates were likely unchanged in the manner in which they lived their lives.

The secret nature of the mysteries is also referenced in the passage of the *Hymn* just quoted, where it is said the "holy rites that are not to be transgressed, nor pried into, nor divulged. For a great awe of the gods stops the voice." The question is: what does this last

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<sup>15</sup> [15] It should be remembered that only one poem has come down to us from antiquity, but there were probably countless poems written about the mysteries and the myth surrounding them. Elements of ritual not accounted for in the *Hymn to Demeter* could have been left out for the author's own reasons, while they could have been included in other versions of the myth.

statement mean? Were initiates forbidden to reveal the mysteries, or simply incapable of doing so? In speaking on the secret nature of the mysteries, Walter Burkert suggests that perhaps it is both:

Two adjectives, *aporrheta* (❖forbidden') and *arrheta* (❖unspeakable'), seem to be nearly interchangeable in this usage, hinting at a basic problem inherent in the ❖secret' of mysteries: a mystery must not be betrayed, but it cannot really be betrayed because told in public it would appear insignificant; thus violations of the secrecy that did occur did no harm to the institutions, but protection of the secrecy greatly added to the prestige of the most sacred cults.<sup>16</sup> [16]

The significance of the mysteries lies in the experience--relating the events, objects or sayings of the mysteries was insufficient to communicate their meaning. There is ancient evidence testifying to a similar conclusion. In a fragment, Aristotle said that the initiates did not learn (*mathein*), but experienced (*pathein*) the mysteries and were brought to an appropriate state of mind,<sup>17</sup> [17] and Sopratos says "I came out of the mystery hall feeling like a stranger to myself."<sup>18</sup> [18] Foley agrees that the mysteries did not transmit to the initiates any knowledge as we normally understand it: "the secret rites did not pass on any secret doctrine or worldview or inculcate beliefs, but that its blessings came from experiencing and viewing signs, symbols, stories, or drama and bonding with fellow initiates."<sup>19</sup> [19] They did not store up a collection of facts or propositions in their minds; rather, what the initiates received was an experience of contact with the Divine--a sharing in and overcoming of Demeter's grief. By going through the

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<sup>16</sup> [16] Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> [17] Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 286.

<sup>18</sup> [18] Quoted in Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> [19] Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 70.

experience, initiates felt closer to the goddess and took new hope with them when they returned to their normal lives.

This is not something that can be explained by words and factual details, and it is for this reason that we do not have an adequate account of the mysteries. As Walter Burkert has written:

◆if we had a fuller account [of the Mysteries at Eleusis ], or even a filmed record such as modern anthropologists provide to document exotic customs, we would still be baffled. The gap between pure observation and the experience of those involved in the real proceedings remains unbridgeable. Who can tell what the experience is like without having undergone days and days of fasting, purifications, exhaustion, apprehension, and excitement?<sup>20</sup> [20]

It is probable that we know as little as we do about the mysteries because they were an ineffable experience which could not be communicated by initiates to non-initiates. The rest of this paper attempts to show that Platonic philosophy is in a similar predicament.

### *Symposium*

The first (and most superficial) ground for arguing that knowledge of the Eleusinian mysteries is helpful for understanding Plato's *Symposium* is that the portion of the dialogue allotted to Socrates-Diotima is modeled on the ritual stages of the mysteries. This becomes evident near the end of Diotima's teaching when she says that Socrates could "perhaps be initiated [*myētheiēs*]" into the "rites of love [*erōtika*]" of which she has spoken so far, and then calls what is to come "the final and highest mystery [*ta de telea kai eoptika*]" (210a). Diotima thus divides her teaching according to the two levels of initiation in the mysteries, *myesis* and *eoptēs*. Further examination reveals that Socrates-Diotima's speech is actually divided into the

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<sup>20</sup> [20] Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 91.

three stages of the Eleusinian mysteries. The first stage is Socrates' questioning of Agathon and Diotima's of Socrates; these serve as the purification stage in the mystery rites. The second is the myth of Eros' origins and what follows up to Diotima's announcement that she is about to relate the highest mysteries. This portion matches the stage of instruction that initiates had to go through before being admitted and the revelations to which the *mystes* (first-time initiates) were permitted. The third stage, finally, is the highest mystery of philosophy, the Beautiful itself, which corresponds to the *epoptika* at Eleusis .21 [21]

These characteristics of the dialogue merely point the way to the importance of considering the Eleusinian mysteries and Plato's *Symposium* together. The more significant reasons lie in the similarities between the experiences of mystery initiates and those of philosophers. The most important questions remain: why did Plato use initiation into the mysteries as an analogue for philosophy? What does Plato see in the mysteries that compares to philosophy? The answers to these questions must be sought in the content of Socrates-Diotima's speech on Eros and the Beautiful, to which we now turn.

When the time for Socrates to deliver a speech arrives, he refuses to follow the examples that the others have set. He protests that when he agreed to participate, he did not understand what they meant by praising Eros. He "thought you should tell the truth about whatever you praise" (198d), but the others appear to think that the goal "is to apply to the object the grandest and most beautiful qualities, whether he actually has them or not" (198e). Socrates' protest is grounded in his concern for the truth of the matter: "Your description of him and his gifts is designed to make him look better and more beautiful than anything else--to ignorant listeners,

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21 [21] *Ibid.*, note 18, p. 154.

plainly, for of course he wouldn't look that way to those who knew" (199a). Socrates agrees to take his turn, but only after being permitted to give a speech that suits his preferences. Because the others have agreed to his, he announces, they "will hear the truth about Eros, and the words and phrasing will take care of themselves" (199b).

But before turning to his speech, Socrates questions Agathon, who had claimed that Eros is the most beautiful of all the gods. Socrates begins by asking Agathon about the nature of *eros*. In the course of a brief exchange, Agathon agrees that "a thing that desires something of which it is in need" (200b), and, therefore, also "first, that Eros is the love of something, and, second, that he loves things of which he has a present need" (200e). Since Eros loves beautiful things, and because good things are also beautiful, Eros must need, rather than possess, beautiful and good things (201a-c). It follows that Eros cannot be the most beautiful god as Agathon had said. Agathon resigns: "I am unable to challenge you. Let it be as you say." To which Socrates replies: "Then it's the truth, my beloved Agathon, that you are unable to challenge. It is not hard at all to challenge Socrates" (201c-d).

As suggested above, Socrates' questioning of Agathon parallels the first stage of initiation into the mysteries, namely, purification. While initiates were purified in preparation for communion with a mystery god, Socrates purifies Agathon's mind of his misconceptions about Eros, something, we learn, Socrates himself had to go through once. Socrates says that he will repeat "the speech about Eros I once heard from a woman of Mantinea, Diotima--a woman who was wise about many things besides this: once she even put off the plague for ten years by telling the Athenians what sacrifices to make. She is the one who taught me the art of love [*erōtika*]" (201d). Socrates, who now plays the role of *mystagogos*, was once initiated into the erotic

himself. He tells Agathon and the others that he once held an idea of Eros very similar to Agathon's, namely, "that Eros is a great god and that he belongs to beautiful things" (201e), but that Diotima questioned him as he had just questioned Agathon and showed him that "Eros is neither beautiful nor good" (201e). Thus, Agathon now, and Socrates in the past, have been purified of their erroneous views of Eros and prepared for initiation into the erotic. Socrates agrees with the method Agathon used in his speech, that "one should first describe who Love is and what he is like, and afterwards describe his works" (201d-e), and this is the plan that he will follow.

Picking up from where Socrates left off with Agathon, Diotima claims that because Eros is not beautiful, it does not necessarily follow that he is ugly. Rather, just as there is something in between wisdom and ignorance, so is there a space between beauty and ugliness. In between wisdom and ignorance is "judging things correctly without being able to give a reason" Correct judgment, of course, has this character: it is in between understanding and ignorance [*metaxy phronēseōs kai amathias*] (202a). And "It's the same with Eros: when you agree he is neither good nor beautiful, you need not think he is ugly and bad; he could be something in between [*ti metaxy*]" (202b). Socrates-Diotima will, in fact, place Eros in this "in between" category.

Echoing the distinction Socrates made earlier between those who know and those who do not (199a), Diotima makes the radical claim that those who know about Eros know that he is, in fact, no god at all (202b). The argument is as follows. Socrates agrees that he would "never say a god is not beautiful or happy," and that by "happy" he means that "they possess good and beautiful things" (202c-d). But he has also agreed that Eros lacks all of these things. The conclusion, then, is that Eros cannot be a god. But when Socrates asks if Eros is therefore a



mortal, Diotima responds that he certainly is not. Rather, "He is in between mortal and immortal [*metaxy thnētou kai athanatou*]" (202d). She tells Socrates that "He is a great spirit [*daimōn megas*]" Everything spiritual, you see, is in between mortal and immortal [*kai gar pan to daimonion metaxy esti theou te kai thnētou*]" (202e). Diotima's description of the daimons who inhabit the space in-between men and the gods is worth quoting in full:

They are messengers who shuttle back and forth between the two, conveying prayer and sacrifice from men to gods, while to men they bring commands from the gods and gifts in return for sacrifices. Being in the middle of the two, they round out the whole and bind fast the all to all. Through them all divination passes, through them the art of priests in sacrifice and ritual, in enchantment, prophesy, and sorcery. Gods do not mix with men; they mingle and converse with use through spirits instead, whether we are awake or asleep. He who is wise in any of these ways is a man of the spirit [*daimonios anēr*], but he who is wise in any other way, in a profession or any manual work, is merely a mechanic. These spirits are many and various, then, and one of them is Eros (2023-203a).

In this passage Plato establishes two important associations. First, while he maintains the Homeric distinction between men and gods, his emphasis is on the daimonic realm of existence, which provides a means of communication between man and the gods. This is the realm of Eros and other daimons. The meaning of the word *daimōn* in Greek religion is notoriously elusive; sometimes the word is used to refer to Olympic gods, but more often it refers to indefinable spiritual forces. Chthonic mystery gods are also sometimes referred to as daimons by scholars (as by Cornford in the quote above) and, given the fact that initiation into erotics ends in a vision of the *epoptika*, it appears that Plato is identifying Eros as kind of mystery god. The second point that Plato makes in the above passage is that Socrates is a *daimonios anēr*. Earlier Socrates had said that he "claims to know nothing but the art of erotics [*hos ouden phēmi allo apistasthai ē ta erōtika*]" (177e)--the exact criteria for being a *daimonios anēr*. (Later, after hearing the others speak, Socrates expresses regret over having said so (198d), but this comment is surely

ironic in light of his ensuing critique of the others' speeches.) These associations will become significant for the *Symposium's* account of philosophy in a moment.

Having heard that Eros is a great daimon, Socrates abruptly asks who Eros' mother and father are. Diotima proceeds to give a mythical explanation of his birth and a description of his nature (203b-204a). She relates that on the day of Aphrodite's birth, Poros (resource) got drunk, and Penia (poverty), when she came begging, connived to lay with him and became pregnant with Eros. Thus, says Diotima, Eros always seeks beauty because he was conceived on Aphrodite's birthday, and his parentage (a mixture of resource and poverty) gives him a peculiar nature: "he is always poor, and he's far from being delicate and beautiful (as ordinary people think he is); instead, he is tough and shrivelled and shoeless and homeless, always lying on the dirt without a bed, sleeping at gates and in roadsides under the sky" (203c-d); but he is also 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 [*philosophōn dia pantos tou biou*], a genius with enchantments, potions, and clever pleadings" (203d). He is neither immortal nor mortal, but repeatedly comes to life and dies only to come back to life (like a mystery god such as Persephone, who must return to Hades for two-thirds of every year).

In this passage, as in the last, Plato accomplishes two important associations. First, he calls Eros "a lover of wisdom through all his life [*philosophōn dia pantos tou biou*]," thus drawing a connection between the mysteries and philosophy through Eros, who is both daimonic and a mystery god, and a lover of wisdom and a philosopher. The connection between the two is their "in-between" status. The in-between nature of the daimonic has already been described,

and Diotima explains that philosophy also has an in-between nature when Socrates asks, "who are the people who love wisdom [*hoi philosophountes*], if they are neither wise nor ignorant?" She replies, "They fall in between [*metaxy*] those two extremes. And Love is one of them, because he is in love with what is beautiful, and wisdom is extremely beautiful. It follows that Love must be a lover of wisdom [*philosophon*] and, as such, is in between [*metaxy*] being wise and being ignorant" (204b). Lovers of wisdom, Socrates and Eros included, are in between knowledge and ignorance, but they are also in-between gods and men. They are not gods because gods already have wisdom, and they are unlike most men because they are aware of their ignorance. Lovers of wisdom are thus seekers of wisdom, and this is what distinguishes them from the ignorant: "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). Here one cannot help but be reminded of the Socrates of the *Apology* who goes among the wise men of the city testing their wisdom only to find that he alone is wise, because he alone recognizes his ignorance: "just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do" (21d).<sup>22</sup> [22]

In fact, the second association that Plato develops in this passage is between Eros and Socrates. Earlier he identified Socrates as the *daimonios anēr* and now he draws a parallel between Socrates and Eros himself. At least three of the characteristics that Eros receives from

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<sup>22</sup> [22] Translation from: Plato and Aristophanes, *Four Texts on Socrates*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1984). The Symposium is an odd dialogue in that here Socrates makes a positive claim to knowledge, namely, knowledge of erotics (177e). However, given the nature of what erotics is turning out to be, it is quite possible to reconcile these claims. Socrates' statement that all he knows is that he does not know is an "erotic" statement--it reveals awareness of the in-between nature of man: he neither has knowledge nor remains in ignorance.

his mother are shared by Socrates: poverty, being far from being beautiful, and pausing in doorways. And in accordance with Eros' paternal characteristics, Socrates is always hunting for good arguments and setting snares for bad ones, he is a philosopher through all his life. Like Eros, Socrates is always seeking what is beautiful and good, he is a lover of wisdom, and, as we learn when Alcibiades crashes the party, Socrates has other noble traits that Eros received from his father, such as bravery and intensity. Socrates is philosopher, *daimonios anēr*, *mystagogos*, and maybe Eros himself. But how can Socrates be both the philosopher-*daimonios anēr* acting as *mystagogos* by initiating the others into erotics, and Eros himself at the same time? The whole situation is left a little ambiguous--perhaps somewhat like the status of the chthonic mystery gods who were sometimes gods, sometimes heroes, and sometimes both.

By this point in the *Symposium*, Plato has effectively tied the Eleusinian mysteries and philosophy together through the mythical personality of Eros. But the question remains: why should we care about Eros? Or the mysteries? Or philosophy? What advantage does the *daimonios anēr* have over other men? Having heard Diotima's account of who Eros is, Socrates wants to know what good he accomplishes for human beings, and Diotima moves on to his works, the second half of the procedure first suggested by Agathon. Based on the preceding analysis, it is now clear that Socrates is also asking what good the philosopher is to human beings. The question and the answer, however, are still expressed mythologically in terms of Eros and in analogy to the mysteries.

Diotima begins with an elaboration of the connection between beauty and goodness, which is important for knowing what Eros truly longs for. The point of wanting good things is happiness, which is an end in itself and common to all human beings (204d-205a). This desire

for happiness is a kind of love, and "every desire for good things or for happiness is the supreme and treacherous love in everyone" (205d). Love is longing for the good and happiness.

Referring to Aristophanes' speech, Diotima says that "a lover does not seek the half or the whole, unless, my friend, it turns out to be good as well. Diotima and Socrates agree that "love is wanting to possess the good forever" (206a), but when Diotima claims that the "real purpose of love" is "giving birth in beauty, whether in body or soul" (206b), Socrates exclaims that "it would take divination [*manteias*] to figure out what you mean. I can't" (206b). Diotima explains further.

She tells Socrates that "all of us are pregnant both in body and in soul" (206c) and "what Eros wants is not beauty," but "reproduction and birth in beauty" (206e). Beauty is not the true goal of *eros*; rather, it facilitates men's desire for reproduction. Why is reproduction so important? Reproduction "is what mortals have in place of immortality" (206e-207a). "A lover must desire immortality along with the good, if what we agreed earlier was right, that Eros wants to possess the good forever. It follows from our argument that Eros must desire immortality" (207a). Diotima argues that the desire for immortality exists in animals as well, and that "everything naturally values its own offspring, because it is for the sake of immortality that everything shows this zeal, which is Eros" (208b). "I believe," she says, "that anyone will do anything for the sake of immortal virtue and the glorious fame that follows; and the better the people, the more they will do, for they are all in love with immortality" (208d-e).

While some people are pregnant in body, others are pregnant in soul (209a). Those who are more pregnant in their souls beget "wisdom and the rest of virtue, which all poets beget, as well as all the craftsmen who are said to be creative. But by far the greatest and most beautiful

part of wisdom deals with the proper ordering of cities and households, and that is called moderation and justice" (209a). One who is more pregnant in soul seeks souls that are "beautiful and noble and well-formed" (209b). Such men make "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" (209c). And these ones, the great poets and law-givers, leave behind "offspring, which, because they are immortal themselves, provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance" (209d). The great offspring of these men are the ways of life they represent in their poetry and their legislation. Men do not pursue beauty for beauty's sake, but rather for the benefits that come from pursuing it, namely, giving birth to virtue. Likewise, mystery initiates do not participate in the mysteries for the revelations in themselves, but, rather, for the benefits that the gods grant those who have been initiated. The purpose of both philosophy and the mysteries is more than simply witnessing the final revelation, which Diotima is fast approaching.

Socrates-Agathon's preliminary initiation into philosophy is over, but the most important teaching is yet to come. In a statement that we have quoted before, Diotima acknowledges the gap between what has been so far related and the next stage in her teaching:

Even you, Socrates, could probably come to be initiated [*myētheiēs*] into these rites of love [*erōtika*]. But as for the purpose of these rites when they are done correctly--that is the final and highest mystery [*ta de telea kai eoptika*], and I don't know if you are capable of it. I myself will tell you," she said, "and I won't stint any effort. And you must try to follow if you can" (209e-210a).

Diotima proceeds to describe the process by which human beings should follow Eros to the highest revelation (210a-e). They begin as the lover of one beautiful body, but eventually they come to recognize the beauty of all bodies. Having generalized their love, they then rise again to

understand that beauty of soul is more important than physical beauty. Once they have elevated their love above the physical level, they come to see the beauty of laws, customs and the various activities of human beings, then knowledge, and finally "the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom [*philosophia*], until having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such knowledge, and it is the knowledge of such beauty❖" (210d-e). Diotima pauses to tell Socrates to concentrate, thus emphasizing the difficulty she expects Socrates to encounter as he approaches the final revelation (as will be discussed below, the difficulty is also stressed in the *Republic* and the *Seventh Letter*).

But she continues: "You see, the man who has been thus far guided in matters of Eros, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is coming now to the goal of Loving: all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labors" (210e-211a). This something is the *epoptika* of philosophy, the final and highest revelation, and as Cornford observes, Plato has in this passage made further allusions to the mysteries:

Plato here borrows from the Eleusinian mysteries the language of the Sacred Marriage and of the final revelation, when the ancient symbols of divinity were disclosed to the purified initiate in a sudden blaze of light. The soul is united with the divine Beauty, and itself becomes immortal and divine. The offspring of the marriage are not phantoms of goodness like those images of virtue which first inspired love for the beautiful person. The child of Love and Beauty is true virtue, dwelling in the soul that has become immortal, as the lover and the beloved of God.<sup>23</sup> [23]

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23 [23] Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae: The Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1952), 86.

The events at the height of the Greater mysteries may have involved a marriage and the birth of the child, as well as a flash of light from the *Anaktoron* as the hierophant emerged to produce the highest revelations. It is likewise in the *Symposium*: a human being guided rightly by Eros (or a *daimonios anēr*-philosopher such as Socrates) weds himself to the divine Beauty in itself and produces a sacred child, beautiful virtue in the soul; and contact with the Beautiful comes in a sudden flash.

Diotima makes an effort to describe this highest vision as best she can:

it always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change (211a-b).

As Professor James M. Rhodes observes, "We are only told what the highest vision is not."<sup>24</sup>

[24] Diotima is either unwilling or unable to provide any sort of positive description of the Beautiful. But she tells Socrates she "won't stint any effort" (210a); perhaps Diotima simply cannot give a more adequate description: "eros leads us to a wisdom that is silent because it is ineffable, not because it is secret."<sup>25</sup> [25] Like the highest mysteries at Eleusis, the first

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24 [24] Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, Silence*, 361.

25 [25] Ibid., 360. Morgan, on the other hand, allows for "referential access" in Plato's epistemology, but maintains that the goal of philosophy "is precisely essential knowledge, and to have it is both to have the Form in one's ken and to know a certain logos to be true of that Form, a logos that spells out what the Form really is, its nature or essence. In short, Platonic knowledge is about the essence of Forms, for strictly speaking only essential knowledge is real knowledge and only Forms have (or are)



principles of philosophy are unspoken because they cannot be adequately expressed in language.

In thinking about the highest vision of philosophy, Professor Rhodes' words are again apt:

The highest beauty is so utterly different from everything we know that it must be said to have no spatiotemporal presence, for that which is exempt from every kind of change, that which is contained in no body, that which is identical with no logos or science, and that which "is not in earth, heaven, or anything else" is nowhere. Hence, it is in no time. It follows that the ultimate beauty does not share our mode of being and that if we attribute existence to it at all, we can do so only analogically. The beauty is beyond being.<sup>26</sup> [26]

Like the initiates at Eleusis, the philosophers, guided by Eros, move toward a divine reality which they experience as there, but cannot describe with words in any meaningful way. It is only after a long and arduous process of purification and instruction that the initiates can be initiated into the final revelations of philosophy--they must experience it for themselves.

Diotima concludes: "So when someone rises by these stages, through loving boys correctly, and begins to see this beauty, he has almost grasped his goal. This is what it is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of Eros--from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful" (211b-d). Knowledge of the Beauty itself is the end of philosophy, but the purpose of initiation is not simply contemplation of this Beauty: it is also the state of soul that results from going through the process and witnessing the Beautiful as a true source of order.

This aspect of philosophy is emphasized in Diotima's concluding remarks. Here Plato is perhaps

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essences" (*Platonic Piety*, 128-29). Plato, however, does not speak of a *logos* of the Beautiful, and analogizing the philosophy to the mysteries does not contribute to such a view either. In fact, if the interpretation advanced here is correct, it speaks against it.

26 [26] Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, Silence*, 361.

also breaking ranks with the mysteries by writing what could be understood as a counterclaim to those who think that their initiation into the mysteries at Eleusis is enough to bring them favour from the gods:

in that life alone, when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen--only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true Beauty). The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it, and if any human could become immortal, it would be he (212a-b).

The philosopher becomes virtuous himself at the end of his initiation and this brings himself as close to the gods as a man can come.<sup>27</sup> [27] And, finally, the last line presents an alternative to the claim seen earlier in the *Hymn to Demeter*:

Blessed is the mortal on earth who has seen these rites,  
But the uninitiated who has no share in them never  
Has the same lot once dead in the dreary darkness.

Plato uses the mystery religions as a pedagogical tool, but the mysteries and philosophy are competitors, not equals.

The analogy between the mysteries and philosophy can only be pushed so far. The mysteries are still locked into or encapsulated by ancient Greek mythology. Philosophy, on the other hand, has transcended belief in the actuality of these gods. The philosopher sees through mythology, but, in so doing, he also sees through to the truths that are contained at its core.

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<sup>27</sup> [27] Morgan concludes the same (*Platonic Piety*, 88-89), but he does not explicitly address the implications of comparing the mysteries and philosophy for understanding what knowledge is in Platonic philosophy. It is not clear that he thinks the mystery experience adds anything to our understanding of the highest philosophical knowledge.

Moreover, the mysteries, while apparently having an effect on the state of mind of the initiates, did not seem to impart on participants the necessary human response to the experience of the divine. The mysteries did not teach a moral code or provide an impetus for ethical conduct. Initiation in no way impacted the status of participants in the community and very likely had little or no impact on the way they lived their lives. But for Plato, the experience of the Good and the Beautiful has a formative effect on the soul and the philosopher's life is changed forever: he cannot simply go back to the way he was.

### **The *Symposium* and other Accounts of the Highest Things**

An important question remains: does the *Symposium* ascend to the height of Plato's philosophy? Professor Rhodes suggests that Diotima says that when the philosopher catches a flash of Beauty that "he has almost grasped his goal" (211b) perhaps because she "indicates the necessity of rising above the vision of the ultimate beauty to the vision of the good."<sup>28</sup> [28] It seems more likely, however, that the Good in the *Republic* and philosophical knowledge in the *Seventh Letter* are synonymous with the Beautiful in the *Symposium*. Diotima says that when the initiate "begins to see this beauty, he has almost grasped his goal," which could indicate that the goal would be to live in permanent and full association with the Beautiful or to come to a fuller awareness of it--whether Plato thinks that either of these is possible or not is not clearly addressed in the *Symposium* (unless Socrates and Diotima represent the possibility).

Professor Rhodes himself notes that the division of Diotima's speech into a process of initiation and a higher vision corresponds to the division in Plato's *Seventh Letter* between

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<sup>28</sup> [28] Rhodes , *Eros, Wisdom, Silence*, 361.

names, definitions, sights, and sense perception, and philosophy proper, the fifth kind of knowledge.<sup>29</sup> [29] And Plato (in response to Dionysius II's claim to have written a book on philosophy) tells us in the *Seventh Letter* that

There is no writing of mine about these matters [philosophical knowledge], nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself. And this too I know: if these matters are to expounded at all in books or lectures, they would best come from me. Certainly I am harmed not least of all if they are misrepresented. If I thought they could be put into written words adequate for the multitude, what nobler work could I do in my life than to compose something of such great benefit to mankind and bring to light the nature of things for all to see?<sup>30</sup> [30]

In parallel to Diotima's experience in the *Symposium*, here Plato writes that the highest philosophical knowledge cannot simply be transmitted to the uninitiated. The themes of suddenness and reproduction are also repeated, and, in another passage in the *Letter*, Plato again emphasizes that the road to becoming a philosopher is difficult and requires effort:

You must picture to such men [those who would be philosophers] the extent of the undertaking, describing what sort of inquiry it is, with how many difficulties it is beset, and how much labor it involves. For anyone who hears this, who is a true lover of wisdom, with the divine quality that makes him akin to it and worthy of pursuing it, thinks that he has heard of a marvellous quest that he must at once enter upon with all earnestness, or life is not worth living.<sup>31</sup> [31]

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29 [29] *Ibid.*, 360.

30 [30] Plato, *Seventh Letter*, in *Plato's Epistles*, A Translation, with Critical Essays and Notes, by Glenn R. Morrow (Indianapolis & New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962), 237-38.

31 [31] *Ibid.*, 236.

These passages appear to indicate a parallel between the processes and goals of the *Symposium* and the *Seventh Letter*.


The scene in the *Symposium* is also reminiscent of the *Republic*. There, Socrates struggles to lead Glaucon and the other interlocutors down the "longer road" (504b-d), professing to have only inadequate knowledge of the Good, and, thus, offering to discuss only the "offspring of the Good" (506e), the sun. Socrates makes two further attempts to communicate something about the Good, the divided line and the allegory of the cave, but all of his attempts leave his listeners baffled. Like Diotima in the *Symposium*, Socrates is simply unable to communicate knowledge of the Good. Moreover, Cornford notes a parallel between the mystery-inspired divisions in the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, which would further suggest a parallel between the two dialogues:

The line which divides the Lesser from the Greater Mysteries corresponds to the line dividing the two stages of education in the *Republic*. The earlier books of that dialogue describe the simultaneous training of soul and body, or rather of all the three parts of the soul, by means of music and gymnastic. In this lower education every citizen must share. It is a training of the soul for life in this world. The higher education of the later books, reserved for the philosopher, is a training of the Reason, turning the eye of the soul away from the phantoms of the Cave towards the light of truth. [ ] The upward journey of emotion runs parallel to the upward journey of the intellect in the mathematical and dialectical studies of the *Republic*. The intellect soars from the world of sense to the source of truth and goodness; but the wings on which it rises are the wings of desire for the source of beauty. The true self, the divine soul, is not a mere faculty of thought and dispassionate contemplation of truth; it has its own principle of energy in the desire kindled by goodness in the guise of the beautiful<sup>32</sup> [32]

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32 [32] Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae*, 85-86.

If these parallels are correctly drawn, then the mystery religions are an analogy not just in the *Symposium*, but for Plato's understanding of philosophy in general.

Understanding Plato's philosophy in this way also makes sense of his use of mythical language. Because the highest experience of philosophy transcends human language and understanding but still must be accounted for and communicated to others in some way, Plato continues to use myth at the center of his philosophical investigations. These myths are not to be read as dogmatic statements about what Plato believed, nor are they to be read as fictions written to fill in the shortcomings of a primitive mind. Speaking of Diotima's myth of the daimonic realm of the metaxy, Paul Friedlander writes, "It is a myth, to be sure, and the Platonists were quite wrong to make a dogma out of it. On the other hand, to say that it is nothing but' a myth is equally wrong, and evades the question of what the point of the myth is, a question that must be asked even though there is no final answer. Plato would not have chosen the form of a myth if he had been able to find a perfect expression in the form of a logical concept."<sup>33</sup> [33] Eros as a characteristic of the human soul eludes propositional language; Plato must employ the language of myth to account for his experience of longing toward the Beautiful in itself, which he experiences as there. Plato also makes use of his audience's experience of the mysteries to help convey the sort of experience that he is speaking of. Just as the initiates at Eleusis acted out the rites of Demeter and Persephone to come under the favour of the goddesses, so does the philosopher go through the rites of Eros to achieve the blessed state of the philosopher, which is as close to immortality as a man can ever come.

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<sup>33</sup> [33] Paul Friedlander, *Plato, vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Inc., 1958) 42.

Knowledge in Platonic philosophy is experiential, and it is in this respect that the mysteries proved useful to Plato. He does not use the mysteries only as an analogy for the pedagogical steps of philosophy; rather, knowledge of what it meant to be an *epoptēs* could also contribute to understanding the philosophical experience of the Beautiful. Both the mysteries and philosophy move in the in-between region of the human soul where man feels the desire to seek out the divine--indeed where man feels that he has something of the divine inside himself. And, finally, both the mysteries and philosophy affect the soul, bringing to initiates a feeling of blessedness. It is only philosophy, however, that completely changes a man's way of life, compelling him to live according the order that he experiences as flowing from the Beautiful itself.

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