Diotima / Διοτίμα ~440BC

Great Philosopher Lecture Series 2019
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Public Lecture: 'The Problem of the Direction of Time'

Dr David Albert
Frederick E. Woodbridge Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University.

Monday 23 September 2019
7 - 9pm, Neill Lecture Theatre, Trinity Long Room Hub, Trinity College Dublin
Great Philosopher Lecture Series 2019

1. Plato
2. Diotima
3. Aquinas
4. Spinoza
5. Leibniz
6. Wollstonecraft
7. Fichte
8. James
9. Heidegger
10. Dennett
11. Cohen
Structure of the Talk

• Diotima - Who She Was
  • And some more recent controversies about her existence

• Her Philosophy
  • “Platonic” love!

• Her Influence
  • Contemporary debates in the philosophy of love
Diotima - Who She Was

• Ancient Greek who lived ~440BC

• We mostly know about her from Platonic dialogues, but her ideas were different to either Plato’s or Socrates’
Mantinea, Greece
(now a part of Tripoli)
The Greek form: Mantinike
Diotima - Who She Was

• We think she was a priestess or a prophetess because of where she was from.

• Mantinike -> Mantis -> Prophet
Diotima - Who She Was

- In her time she was also credited with holding back a plague for ten years from Mantinea.

- The plague devastated Athens during the Peloponnesian War.

- Athens lost 25% of its population!
Diotima - Who She Was - Why did I pick her?

• There are no works of her own, but that’s a familiar story with many of the ancient Greeks.

• Socrates credits her as someone who taught him all he knew.
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Diotima - Who She Was - Why did I pick her?

• An important figure in Ancient Greek philosophy

• One who doesn’t get enough credit

• Someone who had a huge impact on thinking today

• Because that impact is particularly relevant right now in the philosophy of love!
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Cogito Ergo Sum

Giants of philosophy.
“Fifty Major Philosophers”
"Fifty Major Philosophers"

- Thales
- Pythagoras
- Heraclitus
- Parmenides
- Zeno
- Socrates
- Democritus
- Plato
- Aristotle
- Plotinus
- Augustine
- Moses
- Maimonides
- Aquinas
- John Duns
- Scotus
- William of
- Ockham
- Machiavelli
- Francis Bacon
- Galileo
- Hobbes
- Descartes
- Spinoza
- Locke
- Leibniz
- Berkeley
- Hume
- Rousseau
- Kant
- Bentham
- Hegel
- Schopenhauer
- Mill
- Kierkegaard
- Marx
- Charles
- Sanders Peirce
- William James
- Nietzsche
- Frege
- Husserl
- Dewey
- Russell
- Moore
- Wittgenstein
- Collingwood
- Heidegger
- Popper
- Quine
- Merleau-Ponty
- Ayer
- Rawls
- Sartre
Some reasons women are under-represented in philosophy:

• Structures at various points in history preventing women from participating in academia (even more the case when we start to think intersectionally)!

• Rewriting the history of philosophy so that even fewer women are in it.
Diotima is an interesting case of the latter.
We know about her existence as well as we know about many of the Ancient Greek philosophers. There are other statues and writings that mention her.

“A first century bronze relief found in Pompeii depicts Diotima and Socrates with the figure of Eros between the two. This relief shows her in the middle of an animated discourse while Socrates listens attentively. Writings from the second through the fifth centuries AD also referred to Diotima as a real person.”

https://www.ancient-origins.net/history/philosophy-love-0011471
Diotima – Who She Was - Some controversies!

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499)

Catholic Priest, Italian, Scholar.

He declared that Diotima was the only character in a Platonic dialogue who wasn’t real.

Why? Because she was a woman!
Diotima - Who She Was - Some controversies!

• The (probable) myth that she was a fictional character is still around today.

• When researching for this presentation, sources nearly all either:
  1. Stated that she was fictional, but gave no reasons why.
  2. Discussed the controversy, and concluded that she was likely real.

• The evidence seems to point to her being real.
Diotima - Who She Was - Other Women in Ancient Philosophy

• Aspasia

• Hipparchia

• Hypatia
Diotima - Who She Was - Some controversies!

• Although it’s worth saying conditions in Ancient Greece still weren’t exactly perfect for women - I don’t want to downplay sexism where it did genuinely exist.

• Women still couldn’t vote, inherit, own land, etc. (Generally, but not always the case - eg Sparta)
Her Philosophy

• We know of her ideas from The Symposium

“The real Diotima only appears in one place in recorded history, but if you can only make your mark once, you couldn't pick a better place to do it than the most famous book of philosophy ever written: the Symposium, by Plato.”

http://garycorby.com/blog//2011/04/who-was-real-diotima.html
Her Philosophy

• It begins with some talk of the Greek myths about love.
Aristophanes:

“At the period to which I refer, the form of every human being was round, the back and the sides being circularly joined, and each had four arms and as many legs; two faces fixed upon a round neck, exactly like each other; one head between the two faces; four ears, and two organs of generation; and everything else as from such proportions it is easy to conjecture. Man walked upright as now, in whatever direction he pleased; and when he wished to go fast he made use of all his eight limbs, and proceeded in a rapid motion by rolling circularly around, - like tumblers, who, with their legs in the air, tumble round and round.”
Her Philosophy

- Even though their understanding of sex was more binary than we know from modern science, the myth was at least fairly LGB-friendly.
Her Philosophy

• It then quickly gets into some classic Socrates banter.

• The people in the room are all praising Love. Socrates started asking questions but they told him off.
“I immediately perceived how ridiculously I had engaged myself with you to assume a part in rendering praise to Love, and had boasted that I was well skilled in amatory matters, being so ignorant of the manner in which it is becoming to render him honour, as I now perceive myself to be. I, in my simplicity, imagined that the truth ought to be spoken concerning each of the topics of our praise, and that it would be sufficient, choosing those which are the most honourable to the God, to place them in as luminous an arrangement as we could. I had, therefore, great hopes that I should speak satisfactorily, being well aware that I was acquainted with the true foundations of the praise which we have engaged to render. But since, as it appears, that our purpose has been, not to render Love his due honour, but to accumulate the most beautiful and the greatest attributes of his divinity, whether they in truth belong to it or not, and that the proposed question is not how Love ought to be praised, but how we should praise him most eloquently, my attempt must of necessity fail”
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Her Philosophy

• The rest of the Symposium is a flip from what we normally expect from a Socratic dialogue.

• Socrates famously doesn’t know much - but what he does know he attributes to Diotima

• The dialogue is between Diotima and Socrates, and Socrates plays the role of the person being questioned.
• “She ceaselessly questions Socrates on his positions but without, like a master, positing already constituted truths. Instead, she teaches the renunciation of already established truths. And each time that Socrates thinks that he can take something as certain, she undoes his certainty. All entities, substantives, adverbs, sentences are patiently, and joyously, called into question.”

Irigaray & Kuykendall, 1989 P.33-34)
Her Philosophy

• What does she question him on?

• One of the ideas being floated at this party is that Love is a great god, divine and beautiful.

• This is something everyone else had said about Love when they were praising him.
Socrates disagrees with this conception, just as Diotima did when he said the same thing to her years before.

Socrates is surprised, just as Agathon was

Does that mean Love is ugly?
Her Philosophy

1. **Love is like a between-state.**

Just because something isn’t beautiful, it doesn’t have to be ugly.

Just because something isn’t divine, that doesn’t mean it’s evil.
“Love is the child of Poverty and Plenty, his nature and fortune participates in that of his parents.”

“[Love’s] nature is neither mortal nor immortal, on the same day when he is fortunate and successful, he will at one time flourish, and then die away, and then, according to his father’s nature, again revive. All that he acquires perpetually flows away from him, so that Love is neither either rich or poor, and holding for ever an intermediate state between ignorance and wisdom.”
Her Philosophy

“Love is the desire of generation in the beautiful, both with relation to the body and the soul.”

Socrates seeks further clarification.

2. Love is like a ladder

This is known as “Diotima’s Ladder”
Her Philosophy

“Love is the desire of generation in the beautiful, both with relation to the body and the soul.”

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2. Love is like a ladder

This is known as “Diotima’s Ladder”
She talks about sexual love, romantic love.

Sexual love must be outgrown!

“It makes the lover, she says, into a "servant" subject to the needs and desires of a master, struggling trivially and small-mindedly” (Nye, 1990)
Some examples?

Maybe the things we do for sex are not super virtuous (compared to, say, the things we do for love)

And some pretty bad stuff can happen ‘in the name of romantic love’
So we need to move up the ladder. Love isn’t just about romantic, personal, sexual love.

This is where we get the idea of ‘Platonic’ love - love that isn’t romantic or sexual in nature.
Her Philosophy

Love for beauty itself

Love for knowledge

Love for laws and institutions (I’ll come back to this one)

Love for souls

Love for all bodies

Love for a person’s body
Her Philosophy

Why is it a ladder? How do we climb it?

All of the steps of the ladder are an attempt to climb up, our desire for beauty

Love can lead us to become better people through sharing experiences, hobbies

Loving a quality in one person can lead to loving that quality generally

We can feel more strongly and vividly about each other through the intimate experiences of love
Her Philosophy

How does this relate to her first point, about how love is like a between-state?

Love isn’t about getting to the top rung, the divine, the form of beauty.

Love is about the process.
How does this relate to her first point, about how love is like a between-state?

Love isn’t about getting to the top rung, the divine, the form of beauty.

Love is about the process.
Her Philosophy

Philosopher -> Lover of Wisdom

Philos -> “Loving”

Sophos -> “Wise”

You can’t do philosophy if you know everything!
3. Love is about creation

We try to create the beautiful, as a way to strive for immortality.

She talks a lot here about procreation.

But at least partially as a metaphor.

Love is about coming together to create new thoughts, new knowledge, new ways of living with others. (love for laws and institutions!)

Philosophy is about helping people give birth to their thoughts(!)
Overall themes:

Stepping away from just this idea of bodily pleasure

Stepping away, too, from the child-rearing aspect

Stepping away from this idea of love itself as being divine
All of the aspects of Diotima’s account of love have been influential to some extent.

But particularly “platonic love”, which is a phrase we think about and use a lot!
Her Influence - Critiques

Are we really supposed to rise above love of individuals?

And love of individuals for their own sake, not as a step on the ladder to a higher kind of divinity.

If love is about a desire for the abstract good, then surely it doesn’t matter who we love!

Martha Nussbaum, whose ideas are discussed in Nye, (1990).
This is a criticism repeated a lot in contemporary philosophy of love.

Rival views argue about what love is, but some of them share this appealing idea about love as valuing someone in a certain way.

But if it can all be reduced to a person’s *features*, why is it we don’t (usually) want to trade upwards?
Her Influence - Critiques

But for Diotima this is *kind of the point*!

Perhaps it’s not just sexual love that isn’t the most important, but romantic love.

Her ultimate idea of love isn’t supposed to be personal as such.

And maybe loving an individual can be a way of obtaining that ultimate love.
Do we need to be able to love to be good people? The top of the ladder is strongly associated with virtue, but do we need to know love to be virtuous?

Hopefully not!

What about people who can’t/ haven’t experienced that kind of love?
But only some of the love at the early rungs of the ladder seem to be the kind of love we tend to worry about.

Perhaps it’s possible to skip a rung.

To love humankind without loving individuals.
Her Influence - Critiques

Perhaps we shouldn’t think of it as that we need to strive to go beyond sexual and romantic love, but that we should seek to extend our range.

She’s not advocating for throwing away the ladder, perhaps we can stretch across it.

Even then, though, is it really the case that romantic love should be superseded in any sense?
Do you need to believe in a God (or Platonism?) to get something out of this account of love?

No! You can take the ‘divine’ aspect to be metaphorical.
Summary

• Diotima was an incredibly influential (and great) philosopher, both at the time and now - even though her influence sometimes goes unrecognised.

• I emphasised three aspects of her philosophy of love:
  1. Love is a between-state
  2. Love is like a ladder
  3. Love is about creation
All quotes (unless stated otherwise) are from The Symposium, but here are some other sources you might want to take a look at

https://www.newstatesman.com/2019/07/where-are-all-women-ancient-philosophy
Irigaray, L. & Kuykendall, E. (1989) ‘Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato’s Symposium, Dioima’s Speech’ in Hypatia
Further Reading and Interesting Links

(June 2020)