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Sexless Lover: A Radical Reappraisal of Diotima's Speech

An orthodoxy among readers of Plato's *Symposium* deems Diotima's "ladder of [correct] love", as one that condones—or even prescribes—promiscuous sex.¹ Even the weakest of such readings however, commits Diotima to the view that having sex with two beautiful bodies is a step higher than having sex with one, and having sex with all beautiful bodies an even higher step than that, an assertion that is hard for many to swallow.² Some successfully forestall vivid images of young Socrates 'procreating speeches' amidst sexual gratification in his harem of beautiful boys.³ To my knowledge however, none offer arguments asserting that Diotima's ladder precludes sex.⁴

I aim to establish that a successful Platonic lover must wholly refrain from sex, even at the very first stages of ascent. I argue that Diotima's account offers not one, but two "ladders of love": one condoning sex (in the Lesser Mysteries), and one wholly asexual (in the Greater Mysteries). On this reading, the eventual move of the philosophical-lover 'from one to all beautiful boys' is not indiscriminate lust for all beautiful bodies, but one towards loving beauty indiscriminate of its body.

I then consider what asexual eroticism means to Plato. This point is of particular interest to those readers of Plato, who consider an asexual relationship not erotic.⁵ In my view such eroticism is certainly possible,⁶ especially for Plato.⁷ Indeed, I argue that one need not look much further than the *Symposium* itself to see Plato's conception of such eroticism.

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¹ Sheffield, Wardy, Nussbaum, etc.

² Moravcsik (291)

³ Bloom (143-7) and Halperin (185) assert that sex and philosophical discourse cannot happen simultaneously; Ludwig (313), that promiscuous sex is to make Socrates disgusted of bodies.

⁴ Except Rowe (247), who doesn't offer satisfactory arguments.

⁵ Price (37).

⁶ Burrus (14-20).

⁷ Jordan (23-37).

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