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# Irony, Finitude and the Good Life

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Irony, Finitude and the Good Life: A Reading of Plato's *Symposium*

by

Nicole M. Ceconi

Under the Direction of Louis Ruprecht, Jr.

Abstract

“Irony, Finitude and The Good Life,” examines the notion that Socrates, as he is portrayed in the Platonic dialogues, ought to be viewed and interpreted as a teacher. If this assertion is correct, then it is both appropriate and useful to look to the dialogues for instruction on how to live a philosophical life. This thesis will argue that to look at Socrates as a teacher, a figure who imparts knowledge to those around him on how to live a philosophical life, misses the very conception of the good life that Plato sought to personify when he created the character of Socrates. The proceeding discussion draws upon the work of Alexander Nehamas and Drew Hyland, offering an alternate interpretation of the *Symposium*. This interpretation argues that viewing Socrates as a teacher falsely idealizes the philosophical life, in turn neglecting Plato's greater legacy for his character—a legacy in which true virtue lies in exposing the creative possibility inherent in living a philosophical life and prompting one's own expression of a life inspired by the legacy of Socrates.

Index Words: Plato, Socrates, Symposium, Irony, Finitude, *Eros*, Alexander Nehamas, Drew Hyland, teacher, erotic, Transcendence

IRONY, FINITUDE AND THE GOOD LIFE:  
A READING OF PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM

by

Nicole M. Cecconi

Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
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Georgia State University

2007

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Irony, Finitude and the Good Life:  
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**Dedication:**

This thesis is dedicated to:

My parents, Richard and Sandra, who instilled in me the power of knowledge and dreams

and

Tim, who held my hand and picked me up as I stumbled towards both.



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## Introduction

*Is this the life we want for ourselves? Is that the way we want, or need, to see and hear?....Socrates is weird. He is, in fact, 'not similar to any human being'. We feel, as we look at him both awestruck and queasy, timidly homesick for ourselves.*<sup>1</sup>

Plato managed to create, in a single character, a complex and remarkably timeless philosophical figure. One by-product of this legacy has been the tendency to view the character of Socrates as a teacher whom readers can study in order to learn how to live a good life. The inclination to read the Platonic corpus and the literary character of Socrates in such a light is quite understandable: Socrates is not just a character to whom we ascribe a body of philosophical positions; he is a vivid illustration of how philosophy can become integrated into the expression of one's personal identity. When we wonder what it actually means to say that philosophers are "lovers of wisdom," we need only examine the character of Socrates to begin to understand what this love *looks like* and what the cost of this claim might be. As a result, individuals seeking to live a life centered on philosophy study the Platonic corpus in their quest to construct such a life for themselves. But before looking to Socrates as an example, we must first question the underlying assumptions driving us to look toward him in the first place—first, that his is indeed the type of life worth living and second, that his is a life that is possible to emulate. Once we have examined Socrates from a different vantage point, one that questions his choice of *this* life above all others, we can honestly answer the question: "Is this the life *we want* for ourselves?" If the answer to this question is indeed "yes," then a further exploration remains into whether emulating such a life is even possible.

Plato's personification of a philosophical lifestyle in the character of Socrates is

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<sup>1</sup> Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 184

an impressive philosophical achievement for its inexhaustible relevance to such a wide variety of philosophical topics. It is precisely because of this breadth of relevance to so many areas that we are able to see that such a lifestyle is not always elegant nor without fault. The truth is, to borrow Martha Nussbaum's sentiment, Socrates is *weird*. On a superficial level, he is odd because he *asks* questions in response to questions asked of him. He does not care in the least about his physical appearance in a society that was very much preoccupied with beauty, yet he is the object of desire for many. He becomes so enraptured in his thoughts that he stops in the middle of a journey to further contemplate a promising idea with no concern whatsoever for his destination or his traveling companions.<sup>2</sup> He drinks but never becomes drunk. The modern reader's perception of Socrates as strange is not the result of an anachronistic misunderstanding. It is clear that his peers thought Socrates was quite odd as well. Nowhere is his oddness better illustrated than in his interpersonal interactions throughout the dialogues. In neither the arguments nor the questions that Socrates poses does the key to his strangely playful and elusive behavior emerge, requiring the reader to adopt a multi-layered interpretive approach if she is to begin to understand him.

This thesis offers an alternate conception of Socrates based on an examination of instances in the *Symposium* where he provokes both our wonder at his wisdom and our discomfort at his otherness. This discussion centers on the view that Socrates was primarily concerned with reconceptualizing commonly held views of daily experience, views that most people, in his day as well as in our own, take for granted. A close examination of the *Symposium* reveals that the commonly held conception of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues as a teacher, in the traditional sense of the term, begins to fall

<sup>2</sup> *Symposium* 174d-175b

apart. To view Socrates as a teacher is to miss the very conception of the good life that this character exemplifies: a life that is self-directed. His is a life that is not only *lived* but *created* with a deep concern for pursuing enduring answers to problems of great philosophical importance.

A recurring theme, especially prominent in the *Symposium*, along with several other dialogues, is the limitation that our erotic nature imposes upon us. Socrates makes one substantive knowledge claim in the dialogues: to be an expert in *ta erotika*—the erotic life. Traditionally, free-born, upper-class men of Athens adhered to a rigid social structure stipulating the appropriate relationship between a young boy and an older male who was both the boy’s pursuer and teacher.<sup>3</sup> The relationship was sexual in nature, yet it was expected to unfold under the strict social rules whereby the older of the two, the *erastes*, would pursue and teach the boy, the *eromenos*, and instruct him in matters of politics, warfare and other areas pertinent to becoming an adult male in Greek society.<sup>4</sup> Physical or sexual interactions, providing both parties were genuinely interested in creating a noble partnership, was to make up only a small portion of the relationship.

Socrates demonstrates an alternate conception of erotics in this dialogue, one which differs greatly from the conception that informed the traditional *erastes/eromenos* relationship. Socrates did not embrace the dominant erotic paradigm in Plato’s Athens. Socrates rejects the typical *erastes/eromenos* paradigm for the same reasons he overtly rejects the title of “teacher.” In the *Apology*, Socrates clearly rejects the title saying,

I have never come to an agreement with anyone  
to act unjustly, neither with anyone else nor with  
any one of those who they slanderously say are

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<sup>3</sup> Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 103

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 89

my pupils. I have never been anyone's teacher.<sup>5</sup>

In Socrates' view, the teacher, the *erastes*, become responsible not only for imparting knowledge to the student, the *eromenos*, but also for forming his character. To teach a young man about math and science, but fail to see that he grows into a man with true character, is to fail as a teacher. His refusal of this role entails the belief that, while it is possible to teach a student theoretical knowledge, it is impossible to teach him or her how to apply this knowledge to their erotic or practical experience in a manner that will necessarily inform the creation of an ethical and decent character. The application of theoretical knowledge to the banalities of everyday, corporeal life is where one's character is built. Socrates' reluctance to be considered a teacher reflects the belief that a person's character is built by him alone, even if others are there to help with the acquisition of knowledge along the way.<sup>6</sup> This is most clearly seen in Socrates' rejection of a hierarchical teaching paradigm for the dialectical, conversational approach for which his philosophy became famous. Socrates engages his interlocutors in conversations about topics that they believe they fully grasp. Only when these conversations prompt his interlocutors to reexamine concepts they had taken for granted do they realize that they have mistaken familiarity for understanding.

By not embracing the most intuitive label that could be placed upon him—teacher—Socrates makes others suspicious of him. In creating a life intent on breaking down commonly held conceptions and social norms, Socrates fell outside the conventional confines of the good life in ancient Greek society. One constant feature of the dialogues is that Socrates is exclusively shown engaging with others; his brand of philosophy is

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<sup>5</sup> *Apology*, 33a-b

<sup>6</sup> *Apology*, 33a-b

unarguably social in nature. Above all, he is concerned with the give and take, the back and forth between himself and his companions. When his dialectical approach is understood as distinct from the teacher/student paradigm, a different interpretation of Socrates' method and his actions emerges.

This project will focus on a single dialogue from which to examine the question of whether it is accurate to consider Socrates both a teacher and an individual who lived a good life. However, what makes a life "good" is not easily defined apart from a specific context, and given the plethora of scenes and situations in which Socrates is portrayed as a part of, one must examine the whole of Plato's work to answer the question in any definitive way. What is easier to grasp is the picture of Socrates that emerges when looking at the conversations in which he engages in the *Symposium*. This dialogue is particularly useful for collecting images of Socrates that help us to gain important insight into his character for several reasons. First, within this dialogue Socrates claims to be an expert in the erotic arts and demonstrates this knowledge in a speech recounting what he learned from a Mantinean priestess, Diotima. Second, this dialogue informs our inquiry into whether Socrates is a teacher. His final speech of the dialogue contains a detailed discussion of the form of Beauty. The portion of the dialogue dedicated to an explanation of this form is not so much a lesson Socrates teaches to his companions as it is an instance of his offering his insight on what he believes the final goal of *eros* to be. Lastly, this dialogue provides a number of dynamic interactions between Socrates and the men gathered in the dialogue which are illuminated once it becomes clear how his view of *eros* influences his interactions with them.

To narrow and guide the discussion, the work of Alexander Nehamas and Drew

Hyland will be applied to various interpretive aspects of the dialogue. Both philosophers share a broad view of the Platonic dialogue, one in which creativity is fundamental to Plato's project. In part, each shares the insight that gaining the richest and most accurate understanding of the dialogues requires one to read them while keeping in mind that, as Alexander Nehamas notes,

Philosophy in our time may have become a largely abstract discipline, whose task is to solve or dissolve an equally abstract set of philosophical problems. But we must recognize that it was not always so, and it was especially not so for Plato.<sup>7</sup>

Drew Hyland makes the similar point:

The truth is that philosophy *has become* a theoretical discipline over time and as a result of many complex historical developments.<sup>8</sup>

Nehamas's and Hyland's work reveals an interest in the convergence of problems typically thought of as abstractly philosophical and the concerns of our everyday life.

While this convergence does make Socrates a more dynamic character, it also creates a significant obstacle to understanding the role Plato intended his character to serve for his reader.

This challenge is reflected in one of the most perplexing facts about Socrates' behavior throughout the dialogues: he often behaves as a teacher and is perceived by many around him as a teacher, yet he himself never embraces the title. The discrepancy between how Socrates is perceived and the claims he makes lies at the heart of the confusion of trying to understand why Socrates is an example—if not *the best example*—of a good human life.

<sup>7</sup> Nehamas, *Art of Living*, 1

<sup>8</sup> Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence*, 3

This discrepancy is related to the paradox in “the problem of irony” that many Platonic scholars, including Nehamas and Hyland, have addressed. The interpretive problem asks whether Socrates’ refusal to be labeled a teacher should be taken at face value or whether it should be considered an important instance of Socratic irony. One proposed solution has been to postulate that while Socrates *says* he is not a teacher, he really *means* the opposite. The typical explanation for this is that Socrates uses irony pedagogically as a way of encouraging others to think on their own. This view of Socratic irony in the dialogues is explained in detail in Chapter One. In addition, the first chapter discusses how Platonic irony, as Nehamas understands it, relates to the general philosophical project Plato had in mind while writing the dialogues. Nehamas’ insight into irony demonstrates its use as a tool in the creation of a dynamic and creative life. This section concludes by outlining a new conception of a Platonic “good life,” one that is concerned with the creation of a unique self and not the adherence to a particular ethical framework. Chapter Two focuses on Drew Hyland’s work, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues*, and examines the limitations and possibilities that emerge from the interaction between intellectual and interpersonal relationships.

The ways in which the *Symposium* concretely demonstrate Socrates’ willingness to confront and accept his finitude is explored at length in Chapter Three. This chapter looks closely at Diotima’s speech on *Eros* and its culmination in an explanation of the ladder of love and the revelation of the form of Beauty. This final chapter closes with an examination of the interaction between Socrates and Alcibiades at the end of the dialogue in light of the dialectical approach to finitude discussed in Chapter Two and Nehamas’ claim that it is a mistake to consider Socrates a teacher.

Understanding whether Socrates lived a good life lies partially in examining how he navigates his own life, and this understanding must be had before deciding if he is an example to be emulated. What does the picture of Socrates that emerges from this dialogue offer by way of a model that helps to bridge the gap between our theoretical commitments and the experiences of daily life? The primary objective of the proceeding discussion is to demonstrate how one Platonic dialogue, the *Symposium*, can be read as an example of a successful merging of the theoretical, abstract work of philosophy and the practical realities of living a human life. This thesis argues that viewing Socrates as a teacher falsely idealizes the philosophical life. This wrong-headed assessment neglects Plato's greater legacy for his character—a legacy whose true virtue lies in exposing the creative possibility inherent in living a philosophical life and prompting the expression of a life inspired by the legacy of Socrates.

## Chapter 1

### Teaching Irony

*A philosopher who is a certain kind of person is also, of course, a person who has views on philosophical issues.... But what matters is not just the answers such a person gives. What matters is that a personality emerges who has asked certain kinds of questions and given certain kinds of answers to them, and who, most importantly, has constructed a life around such questions and answers.<sup>9</sup>*

One of the greatest obstacles confronting an interpreter of the Platonic dialogues is the problem of irony. Irony in the dialogues is enigmatic, leading an interpreter to question, at a minimum, the sincerity of Socrates' interactions with his interlocutors. On a deeper level, irony calls into question the widely held view of Socrates as an honest, sincere and paramount example of a life lived in the pursuit of knowledge. As Platonic scholarship has developed, the significance of irony in the dialogues has yielded varying accounts of the two types of irony found in the dialogues: Socratic and Platonic. Irony, in either form, can give the reader a deeper sense of the personality and character of Socrates while also highlighting the discrepancies between what Socrates says and how he often acts. Reconciling these discrepancies, or at the very least being able to account for their presence, is crucial in deciphering what kind of picture of Socrates one can reasonably form based on the Platonic dialogues.

Socratic irony, as it is commonly understood,<sup>10</sup> is exemplified when the character of Socrates seems to be saying one thing to his interlocutors but meaning the opposite.

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<sup>9</sup> Nehamas, as quoted in *Carrier*, 41

<sup>10</sup> This type of irony was made popular by Gregory Vlastos' work. Vlastos' book, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, grew out of a number of articles gaining him the reputation as a leading expert in Greek thought. Nehamas was a student of Vlastos and a great deal of his work on irony is a response to his mentor.

Socratic irony, in this simple form, is often easy to detect and decipher. Typically, one has only to assume that Socrates means the opposite of what he says to glean the actual meaning behind this type of irony. A paradigmatic example of Socratic irony can be found in the *Symposium* when Socrates praises Agathon's speech in honor of *eros* and comments, "I realized how ridiculous I'd been to agree to join with you in praising Love and to say that I was a master of the art of love, when I knew nothing whatever of this business, of how anything whatever ought to be praised."<sup>11</sup> Several lines later, Socrates illustrates just the opposite when he launches into a speech in which he recounts all that he has learned about Love from his teacher, Diotima. In addition to illustrating the ways Agathon's view is misguided, Socrates reveals the extent of his expertise in "the art of love."

In cases of Socratic irony, irony is attributed to the character of Socrates (as opposed to the writer, Plato) and is not often detected by those to whom Socrates directs his irony. Socratic irony often seems like a private joke between Socrates and the reader. As the reader watches Socrates question his conversation partners, she is able to see where his interlocutors' answers are unsatisfactory or ridiculous. This simple form of irony provides the reader with a sense that she understands Socrates, thus giving the reader the impression that she is clever in a way that Socrates' conversational partners are not. This understanding between the reader and Socrates is created by Plato's setting up the expectation in advance that Socrates is always going to be the wisest character present in the dialogue. The reader is made to feel that she understands Socrates' wisdom simply because (perhaps unlike his interlocutors) she already knows that Socrates is wise before he says anything at all. The presumption that Socrates is wiser than his interlocutor is

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<sup>11</sup> *Symposium* 198d

encouraged by the fact that we rarely see Socrates out-and-about looking for someone to enlighten *him*.<sup>12</sup> Socrates often claims to be seeking enlightenment from his interlocutor. Yet, such claims are quickly interpreted as ironic when the dialogue comes to an end and the clear inadequacies of his interlocutor's understanding of the topic is revealed. Additionally, Socrates is typically the one leading the conversation through the questions he asks, steering his interlocutors on to his desired path. As a result, our interpretation of Socrates will more than likely be in favor of finding wisdom in his words—even if we do not fully understand them ourselves.

Platonic irony is a more complicated and layered term that attributes irony to the writer of the work, not to the personality of the character. In the same manner that Socratic irony highlights the ignorance of the other characters in the dialogue, Platonic irony is aimed at exposing the ignorance of the reader. Platonic irony is revealed, in part, by the dialogue format. Because the dialogue provides the reader with clues about the characters' personalities and environment, it is somewhat easier for Plato's audience to understand why the characters and the subjects discussed are paired.<sup>13</sup>

Alexander Nehamas has contributed significantly to the topic of Platonic irony, and his work cites this particular form of irony as vital to understanding Plato's, rather than Socrates', overarching philosophical project. According to Nehamas, each type of irony is crucial to the existence of the other and their conjunction is important to the delivery of the overarching philosophical message within any given dialogue. While

<sup>12</sup> Nehamas, *Art of Living*, 36

<sup>13</sup> This important point will be examined in greater depth in the next chapter. For now, it is useful to note that both Nehamas and Hyland believe the issue of narrative context is more than a mere frame to display the more important theoretical content in the dialogues. It is probably going too far to say that the dialogue format is as significant as the philosophical content, but it is certainly seen by both philosophers as an influence that shapes the content of the dialogues.

Nehamas views each as a separate entity, each is so connected to the other and to the outcome of Plato's overall philosophical project that it often becomes difficult to delineate where one begins and the other ends. Before discussing how Socratic and Platonic irony are connected, each type of irony will be examined on its own to explore what Nehamas understands the function of each to be.

Nehamas claims that it is too easy for a reader to be mistaken about the meaning of Socratic irony. The seeming transparency of Socratic irony placates the reader into believing she has grasped the point of the dialogue and does not prompt her to dig deeper to discover Platonic irony. Platonic irony, he believes, is easier for a reader to miss because it affects her ability to intuit accurately the deeper message that Plato is trying to offer. Platonic irony, in conjunction with Socratic irony, unlocksthe overriding structure within the dialogue to deliver Plato's greater philosophic message.

Like his approach to Socratic irony, Nehamas partially rejects the common understanding of Platonic irony made popular by Leo Strauss and his followers. Strauss' position, as it is generally understood, is as follows:

The main idea is that Plato holds a number of explicit philosophical views that, for a number of reasons, he does not want to make public. Accordingly, he uses the structure and characterization of his works to undermine their obvious meaning and to suggest his real intentions to those who can follow the secret thread of his thought.<sup>14</sup>

What Nehamas rejects with respect to Strauss's position is the interpretive style that typically accompanies this conception of Platonic irony that, he suggests, "supposes the absolute distinction between the literary and the philosophical and rigidly subordinates

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<sup>14</sup> Nehamas, *Art of Living*, 35

the former to the latter.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, Nehamas believes that the more interesting aspect of Platonic irony lies in the assertion that Plato embedded his philosophical message within the literary form of the text. However, this position is often expressed alongside the view that Plato subordinates literature to philosophy and “transforms it into a supplementary carrier of a detachable philosophical message.”<sup>16</sup> For Nehamas though, viewing the characters of the Platonic dialogue as “detachable (from the) philosophical message” oversimplifies Plato’s project. To separate the philosophical lessons from the characters who struggle with them is to fail to recognize the seriousness with which Plato takes the connection between an individual’s knowledge and her character. Our philosophical convictions, our ignorance and even our indifference inform and reflect our character.

Socratic irony delivers the message in the conversations between Socrates and his interlocutors while Platonic irony ensures that the personal and more profound lesson is conveyed to the reader. If a reader is satisfied with the idea that Socrates’ interlocutor is foolishly mistaken, a crucial message and experience is missed. What this reader fails to understand, according to Nehamas, is that while she is passing judgment upon Socrates’ interlocutor, Plato is using her to make an example of an even deeper type of ignorance. Because the Platonic dialogues are concerned with philosophical topics, each dialogue bears importance not just for the persons with whom Socrates is engaged, but also to each and every one of us. When we come away from a dialogue with only the understanding of the errors of Euthyphro or Alcibiades, we fail to look more deeply at where *we* are mistaken with respect to the very same issue. Just because I can see, thanks to Socrates’ questioning, that Agathon’s speech in praise of *Eros* is lacking this insight, does not mean

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 35

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

I have any better of an understanding of why or how the activity of praising *Eros* is either useful or mistaken in the first place.<sup>17</sup> The idea is that if the reader is able to see the places where the interlocutors fail to get the deeper philosophical message, this ought to prompt her to take a step back and question the breadth and depth of her own understanding on the same matter. Upon reflection, she might find that she is no better off. And so for Nehamas, the central purpose of Platonic irony is to prompt reflection on the part of the reader, not to demonstrate the failures of the characters that Plato created with these shortcomings. Given the nature of these dialogues, we are obligated—if we are to be considered honest interpreters—not to leave the dialogues behind when we close our book. We are all too eager to agree with Socrates, “yet we refuse the kind of life our agreement with Socrates demands.”<sup>18</sup> The typical reader of a dialogue expects that by the end of a dialogue she will have learned something definitive from Socrates’ conversations with his interlocutors. But ironically, the reader is often left just as puzzled as the characters she encounter in the dialogue.

At this point, returning to Socratic irony is crucial to get a full sense of the overall interpretive problem of irony as Nehamas understands it. This will also more clearly situate the importance of irony in Nehamas’ broader thesis in the *Art of Living*. While Nehamas does not reject the notion that Socratic irony exists and plays a crucial role in the dialogue, he disagrees with the more basic conception of Socratic irony given earlier.<sup>19</sup> He argues that this definition is too simplistic to capture what Plato is up to in

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<sup>17</sup> This is because, as we learn from Socrates, one is mistaken to praise *eros* and attribute to the god qualities such as beauty, when *eros* has a desire for beauty and would not desire that which he already has.

<sup>18</sup> Nehamas, *Art of Living*, 43

<sup>19</sup> This more basic conception states that the true meaning of Socrates’ words can be found in assuming the opposite of what he says.

the dialogues. Additionally, this definition calls into question the sincerity of Socrates and his message. It is quite plausible to argue that Socrates often went around trying to trick his less intelligent interlocutors. That Socratic irony can be read as the philosopher being unkind to his conversation partners is central to a significant question surrounding the use of irony in the dialogues. Socrates has been seen as an example of an ideal philosopher and a teacher. As such, it is difficult to reconcile even the possibility of deceit in his words. Nehamas believes that a more accurate characterization of Socratic irony focuses on *concealment* rather than *deceit*. Viewing Socratic irony as concealment, instead of deceit, makes this type of irony a tool of indeterminacy and shrouds Socrates in mystery. Nehamas explains this indeterminacy as follows:

Intermediate between lying and truthfulness, it [Socratic irony] shares features with both: like truthfulness, concealment does not distort the truth; like lying, it does not reveal it. Once we have rejected the view that irony consists simply in saying the contrary of what you mean, concealment cannot, even when irony is detected, lead us to the ironist's real meaning.<sup>20</sup>

Nehamas believes that it is more helpful to look at what the *presence* of irony reveals about the overall accessibility of the character of Socrates than focusing on what each instance of Socratic irony *means*. For Nehamas, Socratic irony suggests depth within the character of Socrates but ultimately does not guarantee its existence.<sup>21</sup> His use of “depth” in this context refers to the underlying meaning or wisdom irony conceals. He argues that the reader may be able to recognize Socratic irony but is ultimately unable to determine the exact meaning of ironic statements. Even further, he argues that one cannot assume safely that the presence of irony *suggests* any wisdom or knowledge at all

<sup>20</sup> Nehamas, *Art of Living*, 62

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 67

on the part of this enigmatic philosopher.

Nehamas likens ironic concealment to a mask worn by Socrates. The Socrates of the early dialogues, he claims, reveals no depth and is fully hidden by this mask.<sup>22</sup> There is little revelation of the theoretical underpinnings, or depth, to either Socrates' behavior or his wisdom. The early dialogues contain scarce evidence indicating that his words and behavior are the expression of a larger set of theoretical convictions. Socrates is presented to the reader as an individual with a unified, coherent and consistent set of philosophical positions with little indication as to how he came to be this way. In later dialogues, Nehamas argues that the mask of irony Socrates wears begins to be partially peeled away and Plato reveals the philosophical underpinnings of his character's speech and behavior. Slowly pieces of information about Socrates are revealed in the middle and later dialogues and helps to focus the picture of how Socrates came to exemplify what many see as the ideal philosophical life.

Socratic irony and Platonic irony, come together in Nehamas' work to create the foundation for what he believes is an alternate way of *practicing* philosophy.<sup>23</sup> This alternate style began with the Socrates of Plato's dialogues and evolved into what became an underground philosophical culture continued by Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault. Nehamas refers to this alternate practice of philosophy as the "*art of living*." The art of living is primarily concerned with the creation of the self. Philosophers of the art of living "adopt the position that a self is not a given but a constructed unity."<sup>24</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 67-68

<sup>23</sup> By alternate way of practicing philosophy Nehamas means alternative to how philosophy is taught in schools and universities today. Specifically he is referring to the emphasis on theoretical philosophy over practical (or *lived*) philosophy which he focuses on in the *Art of Living*. See the introduction to the *Art of Living* for a more lengthy discussion (1-15).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

“materials” used to create this unity are composed of an individual’s philosophical position.<sup>25</sup> The unified and coherent articulation of philosophical positions *constitutes* both the work and the life of philosophers in this tradition.

Most crucial to this method of philosophical practice is that the creation of a self always culminates in an authentically one-of-a-kind individual. Because philosophers of “the art of living” draw on a mixture of life experiences and theoretical influences to construct the self, it is virtually impossible to imitate the process by which one comes to be a philosopher in this tradition. The inability to duplicate the process by which one becomes what one is is a crucial part of the art of living for Nehamas. Plato uses irony as a tool to conceal the process by which Socrates came to be the man and the philosopher he was. Nehamas acknowledges the possibility that Plato himself may not have had a solid conception of how the historical Socrates came to be the way he was, and this may have been a motive for creating the character of Socrates as the mouthpiece of his own philosophical work. Thus, irony is a means of reflecting Plato’s puzzlement. Yet there was something surrounding Socrates, both the historical and the fictional individual, which prompts others to wonder how he came to be the way he was. Irony creates the space in the dialogues for one to wonder how Socrates came to be “both the most coherent and the least explicable model of philosophical life we possess.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

## Chapter 2

### The Possibility of Finite Transcendence

*Human happiness is an objective goal. It can be approached using one's appreciation of what the world is like and how one can work within the constraints that nature places upon us . . . in order to change it.*<sup>27</sup>

The art of living requires focus, determination and a vivid understanding of the beliefs, principles and ideas that will guide the final product: the self. A life, unlike a sculpture that begins with a formless block of clay, comes with form (context) and content with which the creator must reckon, struggle and if she is to eventually succeed, transform. Yet we are bound to realize eventually that to practice the art of living one has to integrate the inevitable limitations that all human circumstances entail. This venture does not require creativity alone; it also demands coherence of vision.

Drew Hyland is interested in the creative aspect of the pursuit of a philosophical life as well as with demonstrating to a contemporary audience what the Platonic dialogues have to offer. Specifically, he is concerned with how our immediate spatial location and our situation in life play a role in our understanding of the dialogues.<sup>28</sup> Hyland's work outlines how place informs the content of any philosophical discussion. He maintains that the specific situations in which we see Socrates and his interlocutors reveal a more general theoretical framework guiding Socrates' project in the dialogues. Hyland argues that the dialogues show that,

A given philosophic position must always be understood as arising out of a given set of conditions: these sorts of people, with these abilities and limitations, in these sorts of situations, facing these problems, at these times in their lives, holding this or that conviction.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Reshotko, *Socratic Virtue*, 14

<sup>28</sup>Hyland, *Finitude*, 13

<sup>29</sup>Hyland, *Questioning Platonism*, 3

Hyland presents two themes that he argues are always present in the Platonic dialogues. The first theme is drawn from the observation that the situations in which we see Socrates and his conversation-partners always present some type of limiting condition. Limiting conditions can be represented in a wide variety of ways, ranging from the intellectual and conversational abilities of the characters, to their role in society, to the confines of a specific spatio-temporal location in which they find themselves (e.g. a prison or party). These limiting conditions always serve the greater purpose of providing the individual with the opportunity to confront his *finitude*: the restrictions determined by the human condition.

The second theme, which always appears alongside limitation according to Hyland, is possibility. Being able to recognize possibility in the presence of limitation depends upon an individual's attitude towards its presence. Hyland refers to this possibility as *transcendence* and claims that it serves two main objectives. Someone whose actions demonstrate transcendence is able to recognize the frailty of our human situation and, in turn, strives to make something positive and constructive in spite of the presence of limitations. The recognition of possibility allows us to look at the truth of our existence—our finitude—without leaving us completely overwhelmed. By providing a mechanism by which we can face our limitations without despair, human beings are able to transforming these limited circumstances. Transcendence requires adopting a way of viewing the world that guides us toward a more temperate alternative when confronting our existential constraints. In order to view the world from the perspective of transcendence, an individual must first recognize that there is something that they lack but also desire. The perceived lack could be any number of things: material objects, good

health, or even wisdom. When human desire, or *eros*, propels the individual toward the thing she lacks, the individual becomes mindful that there are constraints, either internal or external, that will interfere with fulfilling her desire. In Hyland's terms, "all human aspiration is a movement to negate experienced incompleteness. But this negation is not merely negative. It is at once an effort to transcend that incompleteness."<sup>30</sup>

According to Hyland, the alternatives to transcendence manifest themselves in several general ways that individuals typically react when confronted with the inherently limiting nature of our human situation. Some may become aggressive towards life.<sup>31</sup> Others become submissive in the face of the realization of human frailty.<sup>32</sup> Individuals who adopt a more passive approach do not question external restraints when confronted with them. Instead, they become resigned to these restrictions and eventually become dominated by limitation. The final way of addressing finitude is what Hyland refers to as the *dialectic position*. The dialectic position is the stance Hyland argues Socrates adopts throughout the Platonic dialogues. Adopting the dialectic position means acknowledging and seeking to understand finitude for what it is and responding to limitation by transforming these constraints into possibility.<sup>33</sup> Hyland notes that this last strategy is most difficult because the domination and submission responses are tempting and far easier options. Neither of these responses requires the same creativity involved in reframing one's reaction so as to engender possibility. The dialectic position requires us to accept that finitude exists as a real obstacle and that we have the creative ability to find

<sup>30</sup> Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence*, 108

<sup>31</sup> When we respond with aggression to the realization of finitude we try "to demolish the limiting conditions, to conquer or overwhelm it, to remove its limitation from our lives." Hyland, *Finitude*, 91

<sup>32</sup> Hyland, *Questioning Platonism*, 27-28

possibilities within this obstacles. For Hyland the dialectic position is not simply the position of Socrates; it is the purpose of philosophy.

The creative activity of finding not a *solution to* but an *opportunity in* finitude is grounded for Hyland in Socratic irony.<sup>34</sup> He believes that irony plays an important role in Plato's philosophy, particularly in illustrating Socrates' recognition and transformation of limitations. According to Hyland, Socratic irony serves several functions in the dialogues, not the least of which is to further the philosophical positions that Socrates defends. Hyland believes that Plato uses irony as a way of incorporating in the dialogues "the decisive presence of negativity in human life and as a philosophical issue."<sup>35</sup> While irony is not identical with negativity from his vantage point, he maintains that Plato uses irony to demonstrate the negativity often present in finitude.<sup>36</sup>

The nature of philosophy and the general project of philosophers is to gain knowledge of the whole of every aspect of our existence.<sup>37</sup> Despite our most noble attempts at achieving this knowledge, we are doomed to fail because of the magnitude of the project and the inadequacy of the resources at our disposal. Hyland claims that, had Plato believed knowledge of the whole was possible, he would have written a single comprehensive "speech" of philosophy.<sup>38</sup> It is because of Socrates' acknowledgement of our finitude that he claims that he is not wise even though everyone around him believes him to be. Socrates' claim that he is not wise reflects his "recognition that he is not wise

<sup>34</sup> Hyland is using Socratic irony in the more generally understood way as Socrates saying one thing but meaning the opposite, see *Finitude and Transcendence*, 91.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 97

<sup>36</sup> Hyland does not make a great deal of the differences between Platonic and Socratic irony in his discussion of irony as Nehamas does. He notes in his chapter devoted to irony that "for the most part I shall be concerned with issues that are true of both Socratic and Platonic irony." *Finitude*, 91

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

in the divine sense of comprehensive knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> This denial of wisdom, in the qualified sense of not possessing “divine, comprehensive knowledge”, demonstrates Socrates’ understanding of the limitations corporeal existence imposes on him.<sup>40</sup> Yet his continued dedication to philosophy in the face of this acknowledgement is the mark of finite transcendence.

Hyland’s interpretation of irony as a form of finite transcendence in the Platonic dialogues is well exhibited in the *Symposium* by the nature of *eros*. *Eros* is described in every speech given in this dialogue as having characteristics of both finitude and transcendence. This is because *eros* is inseparable from what it means to be human: “the central ontological source of negativity or finitude for Plato, and so of Platonic irony, is human nature itself: our nature as erotic.”<sup>41</sup> In her description of *eros*, Diotima uses language that reflects both the negativity often present in the limiting conditions of finitude and the incisive way in which negativity can be transformed into possibility, or transcendence within finitude.<sup>42</sup>

Like *eros*, finitude and transcendence are both only fully realized when an individual engages with others. The dialectic position cannot be taught, in the same way a deep and practical understanding of *eros* cannot be taught. This position allows two individuals to engage one another as equals, to see where the limitations of those specific circumstances arise and to understand how the limitations can be overcome. A teacher, by our common conception, does not engage a student as an equal and this lack of mutual reciprocity between the two is what stands in the way of *eros* being a teachable concept.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 108

<sup>42</sup> See the description of *Eros* in the *Symposium* 203b-204b. This passage will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

Socrates' actions, throughout the dialogues, can be minimally classified as being concerned with one fundamental task: engagement with others.

Hyland's ideas concerning finitude and transcendence illuminate the character of Alcibiades. His keen awareness of others' strengths and weaknesses is what makes Socrates such a good example of someone who adopts the dialectical position. He is able to see possibility in a situation or an individual even when it falls short of what he may want it to be.<sup>43</sup> At the end of the *Symposium*, Alcibiades recounts the ways in which he tried to seduce Socrates in to being his lover. This scene shows Alcibiades as a perfect example of someone who first handles confrontation with finitude and later, with aggression when that does not get him what he wants, with passivity. Alcibiades is not able to seduce Socrates by inviting him to the gymnasium and twice to dinner. Each time he plays the pursuer, even while Greek society had clear roles for the relationship: the older man was to pursue the younger. Alcibiades, the younger of the two, was to learn from Socrates and in this role was expected to be passive, allowing Socrates to pursue him. When Socrates does not respond to Alcibiades' physical beauty or advances, he reacts by taking control and trying to pressure Socrates to elevate their relationship to another level, one that incorporated a sexual dimension. The more general limiting conditions that confront Alcibiades in his pursuit of Socrates are the rule-and-role-bound mores of Greek society that governed the relationships between men and boys. To this limitation Alcibiades responds with aggression, violating conventions and trying to be alone with Socrates as much as possible. But when it is time to confess his love and devotion to Socrates, he becomes docile. He tells Socrates, "It would be really stupid of

<sup>43</sup> The broadest demonstration is that Socrates is able to engage his interlocutor even when he cannot admit the one thing he holds to be the mark of true wisdom—that they do not know.

me to not give you anything you want: you can have me, my belongings, anything my friends might have.”<sup>44</sup> When Socrates turns down Alcibiades’ offer to exchange his body for Socrates’ wisdom, the young man is struck by the realization that his good looks, what he *has*, will not get him everything he wants in life. Instead Socrates suggests that they pursue a different type of relationship, one defined in more mutual terms, terms that echo the dialectic position Hyland attributes to Socrates.<sup>45</sup>

Socrates’ behavior towards Alcibiades in this situation is the antithesis of the common *erastes/eromenos* relationship. Had Socrates cared to pursue a relationship with Alcibiades based on the teacher-student dynamic he would have found himself in an ideal situation. In a proper relationship between an older man and a boy, the older man was to act as the pursuer *and* teacher to the boy enlightening him in a wide variety of topics such as politics, economics and warfare. Instead, Socrates reframes their relationship for Alcibiades, creating a relationship that reached beyond the limitations of the traditional relationship and uncovering a different, mutual course for their relationship to take. By showing that his refusal of the young man’s advances did not mean the end of any sort of relationship between the two, Socrates offered Alcibiades something more valuable than the traditional relationship. Socrates shows Alcibiades that possibility can and often does dwell in limitation. Teaching, however, was not the goal of Socrates’ interaction with Alcibiades. Socrates was astute enough regarding Alcibiades’ emotional maturity to recognize that a physical relationship was not appropriate, nor could Socrates be responsible for making Alcibiades the kind of man he wants to be. While transforming the relationship into one beneficial to both might have taught Alcibiades an important

<sup>44</sup> *Symposium* 218 c-d

<sup>45</sup> Socrates tells Alcibiades, “In the future, let’s consider things together. We’ll always go with what seems the best to the two of us.” *Symposium* 219b

lesson, clearly Socrates was aware that Alcibiades might not be able to appreciate fully their new way of relating. In this confrontation with Socrates, Alcibiades is given renewed possibilities where he formerly viewed only limitations. Awareness of the dialectical position can be prompted in a context of mutuality, but it can only be actualized on one's own.

Hyland argues that with practice the dialectic position leads to what he refers to as “*finite transcendence*.” Finite transcendence is by no means an answer to the problem of human limitations. A crucial part of becoming successful at engaging situations from the dialectical position is finding a proper balance. An equilibrium must be struck between accepting the limitations of a situation that cannot be overcome and recognizing a chance for a limitation to be turned in to an opportunity. A crucial aspect of Hyland's thesis is that finding possibility in limitation does not always mean finding the solution originally sought. For this reason, finite transcendence is a particularly useful concept in the context of our erotic lives.

Finite transcendence shares similar characteristics with *Eros* (the divinity) that Diotima describes in the *Symposium* as being neither fully human nor fully a god. *Eros* is able to dwell within limitation because it is his nature to “always find a way.”<sup>46</sup> Finite transcendence is about finding and making “a way” when faced with limitations. Here we return to Nehamas' concept of the art of living as one such example of “finding a way” in the context of a greater intellectual and stylistic project.

Hyland's position on the presence of finite transcendence in the dialogues is compatible with Nehamas' concept of the art of living in part because both philosophers

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<sup>46</sup> This is because he is the son of Poros, the divinity whose name means “resource” or “way,” and Penia, “poverty.” *Symposium* 203c

recognize the creativity with which Socrates engages others and the world around him. Hyland's emphasis on locatedness in the dialogues indicates why Socrates often differentiates himself from those around him. He does not become frozen by limitations, and he is never seen trying to manage limitations within circumstances by acting aggressively or by behaving passively. Even when he dares to die, he does so in honor of something greater, not simply because he had given up. By acknowledging the possibility present within limitation, Socrates is able to find many different situations and interactions valuable an ability that affords him more opportunities to make the outcome of a set of circumstances his own. By making an outcome his own, Socrates is able to accumulate a set of experiences that over time define, in a deliberate and reasoned way, who he is.

Because of the emphasis Hyland places upon the specifics of the situation Socrates and his interlocutors are in, the concepts of finitude and finite transcendence complement the idea of the art of living. Others could never exactly duplicate Socrates' actions or responses because all of the contributing factors would never again be brought together in that particular configuration. What a reader of the Platonic dialogues gleans from Socrates is a *style* that does not lend itself to duplications. We can be given the basic tools to be able to recognize when further consideration of an idea or concept would be valuable. Yet, Socrates is not seen in the dialogues telling anyone how to apply an idea or a concept to another life. Socrates does not dictate to those around him how his philosophy would best be applied to their lives because to truly apply philosophy to one's life requires that an individual to bring her own personal style to the process of integration. And style is one thing Socrates cannot teach his interlocutors. Socrates

simply gets his fellow interlocutors to reconsider things they so often take for granted by engaging them in a novel way. A byproduct of studying his engagement with others could result in learning something from Socrates. Indeed, this may happen routinely when one spends time with the Platonic dialogues. However, attributing the title and responsibilities of “teacher” to Socrates encourages the reader to forget the aspects of mutuality that mark Plato’s philosophical project. Socrates may have pointed her in the direction of any number of philosophical realizations, but the reader must take responsibility for noticing where Socrates is pointing, figuring out what he meant, and deciding whether to make it her own.

### Chapter 3

#### Erotic Games of Irony

*You can't imagine how little he cares whether a person is beautiful, or rich, or famous in any other way that most people admire. He considers all these possessions beneath contempt, and that's exactly how he considers all of us as well. In public, I tell you, his whole life is one big game—a game of irony.<sup>47</sup>*

This chapter offers a detailed reading of the *Symposium*, drawing on the insights by Alexander Nehamas and Drew Hyland discussed in the previous two chapters. This analysis will emphasize two aspects of the text. First, it will examine how subtle details in the dialogue reveal Socrates' acknowledgement and acceptance of his finitude. The second part of this reading will focus on the speech Socrates gives on *eros* and its his explanation of the ladder of love. This reading pays particular attention to the interactions between Socrates and Alcibiades and Socrates and Diotima at the conclusion of the text and further substantiates the dialectical approach to finitude discussed in Chapter Two, while also incorporating Nehamas' insights about the limitations of Socrates' knowledge.

There are several details at the beginning of this dialogue which indicate to reader that she will observe Socrates in an anomalous set of circumstances. This dialogue forces the reader to integrate the philosophical nature of love put forth by Socrates with some intimate details in order to make sense of this unusual character. One such detail is when Aristodemus first meets Socrates on his way to Agathon's house and takes note of his unusual appearance. Aristodemus is struck by the fact that Socrates has "just bathed and put on his fancy sandals"<sup>48</sup> and asks him where he is going. Socrates' unusually

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<sup>47</sup> *Symposium* 216e

<sup>48</sup> *Symposium* 174a

meticulous appearance leads Aristodemus to wonder what occasion warrants such special effort on the part of the typically disheveled philosopher. Socrates' appearance may not seem to have anything to do with his philosophy, but in a culture such as ancient Greece, appearance mattered. And we know from Alcibiades' description of Socrates' attraction to beautiful boys that it mattered, or seemed to matter, to him as well. Socrates answers Aristodemus' inquiry with the following: "I took great pains with my appearance; I am going to the house of a good looking man; I had to look my best."<sup>49</sup> Socrates has taken usual care to make himself "beautiful" to go to a party—the very same party where he will try to persuade those present that seeing true Beauty alters how we perceive earthly beauty. This detail is compelling because it supports a claim made earlier: Socrates often seems strange because his words and actions do not make sense together. This claim coupled with the knowledge that Socrates is rather lax about keeping up his physical appearance fits nicely with the ascent to Beauty he explains later. But before reaching that part of the dialogue, the answer to Aristodemus' inquiry can cause confusions. This discrepancy between his claim that carnal beauty is the lowest form of beauty and his actions which indicate that he is very taken with the physical beauty of younger, desirable men can only be overcome by looking at this discrepancy with the insight provided by Hyland. Socrates appears to appreciate the physicality of those around him while also recognizing that it is the furthest from the ideal form of Beauty. He is consciously and comfortably able to occupy the middle ground between his temporal existence and his striving for the intellectual ideal of the form. He can see the relationship between the higher and lower manifestations of this form. While he is fully aware of the power of beauty beyond the confines of earthly instances, Socrates can also acknowledge physical

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 174a

beauty without losing sight of true Beauty.

Another revealing detail is found in the interaction between the priestess Diotima and the young Socrates. Even though he never embraces the title, those around him see Socrates as a teacher. As such, he is perceived as wise and always in possession of the answer to the philosophical questions he poses. The conversation between Socrates and Diotima, whom he identifies as the one who “instructed me in the things of love,” reveals Socrates in an uncharacteristic state: as a student who does not have the answers to his teacher’s questions. Diotima’s tone toward the young Socrates is one of frustration when he is unable answer her questions. Their exchange makes it clear that even Socrates struggled to understand the true nature of *eros* just as we see Agathon and the others struggle in their speeches in praise of the divinity. Comments like “at this point it’s clear to even a child,”<sup>50</sup> “do you think you will ever be skilled in the things of love if you don’t understand *this*?”<sup>51</sup> and “into these things of love, Socrates, perhaps even you may be initiated”<sup>52</sup> reveal the Priestess’ frustration with the places where his knowledge falls short. The readers as well as those present in the *Symposium* are meant to take away a clear message from this encounter: even Socrates had to labor to abandon his common but unreasoned beliefs in order to acquire true mastery of the one thing he later claims to know: *eros*.

Diotima’s speech lacks a crucial, perhaps more fundamental, requirement to gain mastery of the erotic—personal experience. Witnessing this exchange between Socrates and Diotima also makes clear that the conception of *eros* put forth by Socrates, in the

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<sup>50</sup> *Symposium* 204b

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 207c

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 210a, emphasis mine

words of Diotima, requires training and guidance to be “educated in the things of love.”<sup>53</sup> Yet no amount of instruction can serve as a substitute for the experience necessary to guide one toward the true purpose, the final goal of our erotic experience.

The fact that Diotima, a priestess, is the one who initiates Socrates into the only thing he will profess any knowledge of, gestures towards an answer to the problem of irony. Namely: what does Socrates mean when he says he is not a teacher? What kind of knowledge does he have if not the type transmittable to others? After seeing how Diotima initiated Socrates into this knowledge, it becomes clear that an expert of the erotic arts has the ability to take a prospective student only so far in the actualization of erotic knowledge. An expert in erotic matters can act as a guide but cannot supply a beginner with knowledge in the same way, for example, an artisan can. An artisan imparts his knowledge of a technique to his student who will, with practice, be able to replicate this. The limits of an expert in the art of *eros* to adequately impart knowledge of the erotic indicates this type of knowledge is fundamentally different from the kind of knowledge we generally think of as “teachable.” Diotima is not teaching Socrates by way of deductive argument or by passing down a set of techniques to him. As clearly seen in the climax of Diotima’s speech, an expert in such matters can beckon a potential student into an elementary understanding of the erotic arts but cannot accompany him along the road to self-mastery.

Diotima can describe the steps of the ascent, yet the knowledge gained at “the end of the things of love”<sup>54</sup> can only be partially communicated through words and images. The images Diotima provides when trying to explain the ascent to the form of

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 210e

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 210e

Beauty are only images of what one would value, appreciate and seek if one sought mastery of *eros*. These images serve only as general guidelines to help someone recognize each stage on the way to mastery. The limits of the transference of erotic knowledge from one person to another are a consequence of the inability of our words to capture fully and adequately the scope of our erotic life. This limitation of words in human experience brings to light an observation by Anne Carson. In her book, *Eros: The Bittersweet: An Essay*, Carson provides a series of meditations of the nature of Greek *eros*. She suggests that we become aware that “words have edges” when we are in love.<sup>55</sup> Her use of the term “edges” in this context refers to our realization of the instances in which words fall short of either helping achieve a sense of complete connection with another or capturing fully the depth of our erotic experiences. In this case, the limitations of Diotima’s description of the stages of the ascent mirrors the limitations of our erotic knowledge. In part, the usefulness of our erotic experiences lies in our ability to be mindful of how these experiences serve to further the development of our journey up the ladder of love. The scope within which Socrates can securely assert his knowledge is restricted by the fact that personal experience cannot be imparted to others—at least not while retaining the clarity and power that urge us upward.

Edges or limitations are most vivid in our consciousness when we are in the midst of erotic experience. We are frustratingly reminded of the place we end and our beloved begins, and in our enchantment with the other we strive to confront and overcome these limitations. We strive to become one with the other. This sentiment is present in Aristophanes’ speech in praise of *eros*: “Each of us then is but the token of a human

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<sup>55</sup> Carson, *Eros: The Bittersweet*, 50

being, sliced like a flatfish, two from one; each then ever seeks his matching token.”<sup>56</sup>

Diotima’s account of *eros* and its culmination in the form of Beauty indicates the areas where the limits of our rational abilities become apparent and a different type of knowledge—erotic knowledge—takes over and signals the beginning of a solo journey. This journey, which we only begin to learn about through a description of the ascent of up the ladder of love, shares a similar nature with *eros*. First let us examine the nature of *Eros*, the divinity.

Diotima recounts a myth of the conception of *Eros*, by Poros and Penia, which explains in greater detail the nature of *Eros*. She describes *Eros* as neither a god nor a human but something “in between”: a spirit or *diamon*. We learn that *Eros* is the child of Penia, the goddess of Want, who personifies human erotic experience, and Poros, the god of Resourcefulness, that essential tool on which human beings rely to overcome and satiate want. This union of Resourcefulness and Want results in the creation of a son with the following characteristics:

In the first place he is always poor, and he is far from being delicate and beautiful (as ordinary people think he is); instead, he is tough and shriveled and shoeless and homeless, always lying on the dirt without a bed, sleeping at people’s doorsteps and in roadsides under the sky, having his mother’s nature, always living in Need. But on his Father’s side he is a schemer after the beautiful and good; he is brave and impetuous, and intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life, a genius with enchantments, potions and clever pleadings. He is by nature neither immortal nor mortal. But now he springs to life when he gets his way; now he dies—all in the very same day. Because he is his father’s son, however, he keeps coming back to life, but then anything he finds his way to always slips away, and for this reason Love (*Eros*) is never completely without resources, nor is

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<sup>56</sup> *Symposium* 191d

he ever rich.<sup>57</sup>

Being neither fully divine nor fully human, *Eros* makes the best of his heritage. His “in-betweenness” firmly plants one foot in Hyland’s concept of finitude and the other in his concept of transcendence. Split between the two, *Eros* must try to find a way to synthesize both identities. The description of *Eros* as “tough,” “shriveled,” “shoeless” and “homeless” identifies not only his most human inclinations, but a particularly impoverished aspect of his human dimension. His roughness and hardness symbolize the pain so often present in the human experience of erotic love. Yet because he is also his father’s child, he always manages to find his way. He is able to harness his constant longing for “good and beautiful things”<sup>58</sup> and is being driven by his desire for understanding. *Eros*, as characterized by Diotima, is not the same glorious god that the others at Agathon’s party praise. Not so grounded in the realm of the gods that his success is assured, yet not so steeped in finitude that he surpasses poverty into destitution, *Eros*, always *in-between*, finds a way.

*Eros* shares similarities with the philosophical life and conjures up a mirror image of Socrates. Socrates, like *Eros*, lives in the space between this world and another. He is never fully able to achieve what he desires and is always in search of wisdom despite his limitations. Diotima’s account of *Eros*’ creation myth renders Socrates an icon of finite transcendence. Socrates tells us in the *Apology* that he spends his days seeking wisdom yet he is never able to become fully wise. His ceaseless quest leads him to conclude that the oracle at Delphi proclaims there to be no wiser man than he *because* he knows what he does not know. Even with the knowledge that his quest to obtain truth

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 203c-d

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 203d

and wisdom would never be fulfilled, he patiently continues his journey in search of knowledge.

The description of *Eros* from Diotima illuminates both his human and his other-worldly tendencies and makes it easier to understand Love's role in the ascent to the ultimate goal of erotic experience: the revelation of the form of Beauty. According to Diotima, there is a proper order to loving, which if followed correctly will culminate in a brief glimpse of Beauty—that form in which all other beautiful things participate. Diotima's describes moving through stages of loving: from the love of a particular person or idea, to a more universal love for all members of a group, on to love of country, institutions and ideas, and finally to the all-encompassing form of Beauty.

This is what it is to go aright, or led by another, into the mystery of Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stars: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives at these lessons, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful.<sup>59</sup>

Socrates is intent on gazing the form of Beauty, and his commitment to this goal explains his correcting the other speakers' conceptions of *eros*. They are hung up on the particularity of love (loving a person, a country, an idea),<sup>60</sup> which is indicative of a conception of *eros* that is mysterious, haphazard and impermanent. Something even greater than our most intense experience of earthly love must lie at the end of our limited, imperfect experiences. Without a higher purpose to the ecstasy, pain and drama of our human experiences, we are bound to become disappointed by love because we expect too

<sup>59</sup> *Symposium* 211b-c

<sup>60</sup> *Symposium* 211b

much from something that can only offer a limited vantage point of the true form of Beauty. Socrates' explains that the greater purpose of our erotic experiences is to inch us closer to an experience of the perfect form of Beauty. This evolution towards Beauty requires attention not to what Socrates has to teach us about love but to how our own personal experiences further our intellectual and erotic development.

Socrates understands that the erotic life is not about passivity or aggressiveness but possibility. Because Socrates was corrected by Diotima in his youth he knows that a real understanding of the nature of love lies in *being a lover*, not in being *loved*.<sup>61</sup> Taking the role of lover is a selfish pursuit, for the end goal of loving an individual person or idea is to be able to place the experience of that person or idea in the appropriate context of the ladder of love. Each level of the ascent requires mastery over a different aspect of one's erotic experience. Advancement at any level requires that one does not become so taken with beauty in its earthly form that one becomes trapped into believing that imperfect instances of beauty are the final goal of one's search. Socrates recognizes Alcibiades' physical beauty, but he also sees within him a deep desire, coupled with an even deeper reluctance to become the best man he can be.<sup>62</sup> Alcibiades is clearly split between his life in politics—his “desire to please the crowd”—and the suggestions Socrates makes to him about how to live a better life.<sup>63</sup> Socrates does not give in to Alcibiades' sexual advances because he understands that doing so would negate any serious possibility of the youth becoming the best possible man. By engaging in the kind of relationship Alcibiades wanted, the young man would have no impetus to look beyond the relationship to develop any greater wisdom and character on his own. Alcibiades

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 204c

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 218d

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 216b

would view an exclusive erotic relationship with Socrates as a medal signifying Alcibiades intellectual and erotic proficiency, impeding any further development and work on the young man's part. What more is there to learn when you have already secured the affections and commitment of a great philosopher like Socrates? Their relationship would cease to have the mutual element Socrates clearly thought crucial for both of them to benefit. One can imagine that Alcibiades felt just such a relationship would serve a very powerful statement to the world about his own capabilities and wisdom. Without the maturity to understand the currency of wisdom—what it is really worth and how one should rightly acquire and apply it—Socrates could not offer Alcibiades the appropriate context to grow into his erotic knowledge in the way Socrates felt was beneficial to either. Instead, Socrates rejects Alcibiades' advances and points towards another possibility. "In the future," Socrates says, "let's consider things together. We'll always do what seems the best to the two of us."<sup>64</sup>

In this snapshot of a deeply personal exchange, a parallel arises to Socrates' speech about *eros* at Agathon's party: he reframes the terms of his encounter with Alcibiades in the same way that he reframes everyone's understanding of *eros*. Both instances end with an alternate way of looking at the practical application of something that was really only a concept before. Instead of ending his relationships with Alcibiades because, like the young Socrates we see with Diotima, Alcibiades cannot grasp the purpose of love. Socrates firmly rejects the young man's idea about the limitations of the situation and suggests another kind of relationship. He offers a relationship that will loosen the young man's grasp on the physical, freeing up the possibility of Alcibiades realizing finite transcendence. But Socrates does so gently, offering Alcibiades not just

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<sup>64</sup> *Symposium* 219b

what he really needs, but what he can actually handle. His offer to Alcibiades is simple: exposure to someone who will remind Alcibiades that he can be more than a man who gives himself over to a “desire to please the crowd”<sup>65</sup> even if, in the end, Alcibiades chooses not to do so.

The details mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, such as Socrates’ unusual interest in his physical appearance and the way we see him during Diotima and Alcibiades’ speech, exemplify the ways in which Socrates is grounded in finitude. He is depicted in this dialogue with his humanity exposed, not as an intellectual demi-god. The reader gets the sense that he knows his own finitude; he knows that physical beauty pales in comparison to true Beauty, and yet he tries to make himself attractive when going to Agathon’s party. This effort is a nod in the direction of earthly interests, but it does not take away from his possession of the truth, a truth that he believes lies just beyond our grasp. Socrates, unlike Alcibiades, is able to live in the world without being taken over by it.

Nehamas astutely points out that the dialogues rarely show an instance of Socrates’ interlocutors being improved by him. In fact, many of his conversation partners remain unmoved by him. Examples of this are: Protagoras, Gorgias, Polus, Callicles, Hippias, Euthydemus, Dionysiodorus, Euthyphro, Ion and Meno to name a few.<sup>66</sup> In the end, we know both from the historical testimony of the life of Alcibiades, and his own confession in the *Symposium*<sup>67</sup> that no matter how convincing Socrates was, he was not able to change this enamored follower’s life. Socrates does not claim to be a teacher—

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 218d

<sup>66</sup> Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, 65

<sup>67</sup> “I know perfectly well that I can’t prove him wrong when he tells me what I should do; yet, the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways; I cave to my desires to please the crowd.” *Symposium* 216b

and rightfully so, given the understanding we come to in the *Symposium* of the kind of knowledge he claims to possess: erotic knowledge. Socrates shares Diotima's speech with those present at the *Symposium* not to teach them about the nature and purpose of love but to offer them the same opportunity afforded to him by Diotima: a chance to reconceptualize a universal experience that each thought he knew well. In offering this alternate perspective of the most common of all human experiences, the erotic, Socrates gives those around him, as well as the reader, a chance to reconceptualize themselves.

### Conclusion

*I'd like to tell the truth my way.*<sup>68</sup>

It is challenging, perhaps even impossible, to state definitively *what* makes Socrates so uncomfortably different from us. There are places in the dialogues to which one can point that evince his strangeness, such as those provided here from the *Symposium*. However, these passages do not amount to an explanation of the source of our discomfort. There is a vagueness that surrounds Socrates, and this vagueness is best understood by working to resolve the problem of irony and finitude. Maybe there is an underlying reason for our being both “awestruck and queasy” when we encounter Socrates; these feelings may signal to us that we have still more philosophical exploration to do, that we must push deeper into the character of this unusual figure. On the other hand, this unease may provide cause for our avoiding the work it takes to apply philosophy to all aspects of our life. It's simply not easy being philosophical.

Having Socrates claim to be an expert in the erotic—the ultimate expression of our finitude—is a philosophical leap for Plato. The assertion that Socrates is a paragon of

<sup>68</sup> *Symposium* 199b

a good life takes into account a rarely explored aspect of what it means to lead a philosophical life. Socrates is a prime example of a “good life” not only because he displays his ethical and intellectual knowledge but also because he acknowledges that he possesses a firm grasp on a less noted aspect of a philosophical life—erotic knowledge. Plato lived in a time and place where human sexuality was conceived in very different terms than it is today and fulfilled entirely different social and cultural role. It is nice to think that we are more advanced intellectually than the ancients, but the *Symposium* offers an excellent opportunity to show that this simply is not the case. Socrates recognizes the importance and power of uniting erotic experience with our intellectual ability. Yet Socrates’ speech in the *Apology* shows us that, by the end of his life, he did not feel that he had become wise. As revealed in the *Symposium*, what he had obtained was an understanding of the value of his erotic life and a better awareness of his own finite self-knowledge.

To say that Socrates represents the “best human life”<sup>69</sup> oversimplifies his strangeness and, more significantly, his uniqueness. Something can be learned from Socrates even if he was not a teacher: that what it means to be human rests on the precarious, messy and often strange relationship between our intellect and our erotic existence. Socrates is seen throughout the dialogues talking and *relating* to those around him, not because he views himself as a teacher but because he viewed the fundamental task of philosophy to be concern with the full scope of human experience—not just ideas. Socrates’ belief in the impossibility of humanity achieving total wisdom and his unwavering vision of the form of Beauty resulted in a *way* of living. But not necessarily the best way of living.

<sup>69</sup> To borrow Nehamas’ remarks on the problem of Socratic irony.

Drew Hyland and Alexander Nehamas are both concerned with the lessons we can learn by asking *what* Plato took to be the project of philosophy, instead of whether he created the best example of a human life. Each highlights the importance of creativity in Plato's writing and is concerned with the ways in which Plato reveals his vision of the purpose of philosophy. Similarly, they agree that Plato sought to demonstrate philosophy as an activity involving not simply the intellect but an entire life. With this in mind, we ask the logical question: how does one proceed with philosophy in a time when the academic model seems fixated on discerning the truth and falsity of propositions and the validity of arguments? Plato is focused on broadening our conception of the boundary between philosophy and our everyday life. By integrating personal experience and philosophical commitment into the most challenging project of all—the creative expression of one's life—Plato dares his reader to join in Socrates' legacy ...by reinventing it.

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