


12-1994

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Recommended Citation

Thorp, John, "Sex & Mysticism in Plato" (1994). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 205.
<http://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/205>

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Sex & Mysticism in Plato
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This paper is for presentation at the joint meeting of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy and the American Philological Association, Atlanta, December 27-30, 1994

There is a stark and central tension in Plato's thought. It concerns the grand epistemic adventure which he recommends in various language throughout his life, the adventure of dialectic, of true philosophy, of coming to know the forms. For there seem to be three structurally different pictures offered of what that adventure is.

On the one hand, in the arguments that all undergraduates can repeat by heart, it is a form of remembering, *anamnesis*. It is a priori knowledge, garnered in the preincarnation period, which does not however lie ready to hand for incarnate people; rather it has to be prompted or teased out of forgetfulness. In the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, this knowledge is represented as a fairly humdrum affair: everyone can talk about equal sticks, and nearly everyone can sort out some elementary truths of geometry. In the *Phaedrus*, however, this triggering of the memory of the forms is represented as a much more exciting, a much more rarely successful, and a much more satisfying process: indeed the supreme adventure of human life.

On the second hand, though, another current of thought in Plato seems to represent knowledge of the forms as a posteriori, as produced by abstraction from particular sensory experiences. Nowhere is this thought clearer, perhaps, than in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, where the would-be initiate into the mysteries of love is urged to notice that the beauty that is upon one beautiful body is the same as that which is upon another, and ultimately that it is the same beauty which infuses bodies, souls, institutions, and sciences. Or again the *Sophist* represents the achievement of philosophy as the summative grasp of the map of the forms, possible only after much quiet labour working out the relationship among individual forms by the method of division (253 d-e). In the *Symposium* the process of coming to know the forms is represented as the highest experience of which a human being is capable (211d); it is described in the language of the mysteries, of the epiphany of the divine. In the *Sophist* on the other hand this high language is absent, and the achievement of the philosopher gives a much calmer pleasure and satisfaction. This last is the sensible Plato, the Oxford Plato, the Plato who thinks that the aim of dialectic is 'to achieve, by means of argument, an understanding of the terms, concepts, distinctions or what you will that we employ in thought'¹.

On the third hand, however, there is yet another picture of the dialectician's knowledge of the forms, and especially the superior forms; it is a posteriori knowledge of a very different kind — mystical intuition. That is, we do not come to know the form of the good by abstracting it from various good things; rather we experience it directly in an intellectual act. Language suggesting this picture abounds in the *Republic*, and the *Symposium*, and is to be found also, I think, in the *Seventh Letter*. It is a side of Plato which has not, in my view, been taken seriously enough in the literature and at which we shall have cause to look more carefully below.

I do not think that there is any very easy way out of this tension, this contradiction. No doubt it is wise on many grounds to distinguish Plato's Earlier Dialectic from Plato's Later Epistemology, but that distinction will not itself resolve the tension, for chronology cuts across it. Anamnesis is, explicitly, a doctrine of the early *Phaedo* and *Meno*, but it is also implicitly present in the *Philebus*², and, in a way, in the theory of the *Sophist*: language itself contains the record of the map of forms, though it has to be teased out (διὰ γὰρ τὴν ἀλλήλων τῶν εἰδῶν συμπλοκὴν ὁ λόγος γέγονεν ἡμῖν 259e)³. Abstraction is perhaps most clearly described in the

Symposium, but it remains the Platonic tool *par excellence* from the very early 'What is...?' dialogues right through to the *Sophist* (e.g. 240a). And although one can draw a chronological bell curve of mystical excitement in Plato, beginning low in the *Phaedo*, running to fever pitch in the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium*, and the *Republic*, and going calmer in the late dialogues, still certain mystical elements — like the clear segregation of initiates, (philosophers or dialecticians) from noninitiates — run throughout.

We cannot, then, resolve the tension by a simple appeal to Plato's *development*. Nor, I think, can we resolve it straightforwardly by distinguishing higher from lower forms — saying, for example, that the form of bed or of mud or of hair is learned by abstraction, but the form of the Good or Beauty or Being has to be grasped by mystical intuition. It is true, of course, that Plato's most striking mystical language occurs when he is talking about the knowledge of the more important forms; but in the *Sophist* the culmination of the philosopher's life-work is that of seeing the totality of the forms in their relationship to each other (253d-e). Again, it won't do to think that *anamnesis* will suffice for lower forms like equality but we need mystical intuition for the Beautiful; in the *Phaedo* the *anamnesis* account is said explicitly to apply to beauty, goodness, uprightness, holiness as much as it does to equality (75d).

So a simple distinction between lower and higher forms will not resolve our tension either. Nor, indeed, can we hope to do it by importing a distinction between two kinds of knowledge, say knowledge as practical use of concepts *vs* knowledge as contemplation of forms. This might be tempting, for the *anamnesis* doctrine of the *Meno* or the *Phaedo* seems pretty practical: comparing sticks and doing elementary geometrical proofs, and the mystical passages of the *Symposium* or the *Republic* seem contemplative. But it will run into the difficulty that the hallowed term *ἐπιστήμη* is used in both contexts (e.g. *Phaedo* 75c, *Republic* 510ff). And it will run into the difficulty, also, that the high mystical moments of the *Phaedrus* are themselves represented as moments of recollection, of remembering.

One might, finally, seek an easy resolution of at least some of the tension by downplaying the mystical element in Plato, by relegating the high language to the category of myth, and so sending it off for consideration under the eternally recurring question of the use that Plato intends to make of myth. Indeed, it seems to me, that there is almost a tacit agreement among Plato scholars to do just this⁴. Virtually none of the standard general works on Plato has a chapter on Plato's mysticism⁵, and very few even have index-entries under 'mysticism', and where they do they usually flag nothing very substantial — remarks in passing, referring loosely to 'mystical elements' in Plato's thought, or to passages of mystical language⁶. Plato is not, in general, taken seriously as a mystic. I think it would be useful to consider whether he should be.

The problem, of course, is that 'mysticism' is itself a vague idea. I think, though, we can make some headway with the question by establishing a rough and ready distinction between what I shall call soft mysticism on the one hand and hard mysticism on the other⁷. By soft mysticism I mean the indulgence in obscure language, extensive allegory, or extravagant images; the suggestion of such language is that what is being expressed is difficult to say otherwise — or not permitted to be said otherwise. I have in mind here such things as the visions of Ezekiel, the Gospel of John with its impenetrable language about *λόγος*, the Apocalypse, or, the newest addition to the ancient corpus of mystical literature, the 'Chariots of Glory' scroll from Qumran⁸. The Kabbalah falls into this category, as do the amazing constructions of Marsilio Ficino⁹, and the works of Madame Blavatsky. Many works are softly mystical from beginning to end; others have only moments of such soft mysticism — I might instance even Aristotle on *νοῦς ποιητικός* or *ον νοῦς θύραθεν*.

From all this huge and diverse corpus of soft mysticism I would want to distinguish what I shall call hard mysticism, which is the literature of a peculiar and special experience whose marks are or include the following: (a) it is the experience of loving union with God or absolute reality; (b) it is a *direct* experience, and it is frequently described in terms of touch or sexual union; (c) it is an experience which seems immune from doubt — self-authenticating; (d) though one may prepare oneself for it, the experience itself is gratuitous; (e) the experience is usually sudden and unannounced, being often described as 'rapture'; (f) it is regarded as the highest sort of moment of which human life is capable, and those who have had the experience typically devote all their efforts to being able to have it again; (g) it typically requires a long and arduous preparation. Readers of the Christian mystical tradition will recognize in these marks such mystics as Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, and many others.

It needs no argument that Plato is at least a soft mystic, and that is what is frequently meant when people speak of his mystical passages. He uses allegories, he describes visions, he takes over the language of the Mysteries¹⁰. The interesting question is whether Plato is also a hard mystic. I think that in fact the experience he describes as knowing or contemplating the supreme forms exhibits most of the above marks. Let us go through some of the evidence, and then think about the implications.

(a) *the experience of loving union with God or absolute reality; and (b) direct experience, frequently described in terms of touch or sexual union.* Let us look at two texts which hold some surprises.

Republic 490a7-b7:

Ἄρ' οὖν δὴ οὐ μετρίως ἀπολογησόμεθα ὅτι πρὸς τὸ ὄν πεφικῶς εἴη ἀμιλλᾶσθαι ὃ γε ὄντως φιλομαθῆς, καὶ οὐκ ἐπιμένοι ἐπὶ τοῖς δοξαζομένοις εἶναι πολλοῖς ἐκάστοις, ἀλλ' ἴοι καὶ οὐκ ἀμβλύνοιτο οὐδ' ἀποληγοί τοῦ ἔρωτος, πρὶν αὐτοῦ ὃ ἔστιν ἐκάστου τῆς φύσεως ἄψασθαι ᾧ προσήκει ψυχῆς ἐφάπτεσθαι τοῦ τοιοῦτου - προσήκει δὲ συγγενεῖ - ᾧ πλησιάσας καὶ μίγεις τῷ ὄντι ὄντως, γεννήσας νοῦν καὶ ἀλήθειαν, γνοίη τε καὶ ἀλήθως ζῶη καὶ τρέφοιτο καὶ οὕτω λήγοι ὠδίνος, πρὶν δ' οὐ;

Will it not be a fair plea in his defense to say that it was the nature of the real lover of knowledge to strive emulously for true being and that he would not linger over the many particulars that are opined to be real, but would hold on his way, and the edge of his passion would not be blunted nor would his desire fail till he came into touch with the nature of each thing in itself by that part of his soul to which it belongs to lay hold of that kind of reality — the part akin to it, namely — and through that approaching it, and consorting with reality really, he would beget intelligence and truth, attain to knowledge, and truly live and grow, and so find surcease from his travail of soul, but not before? (tr. Shorey¹¹)

This is part of Plato's description and defence in Book VI of the true philosopher. A number of things in this passage are worthy of note. The philosopher strives (ἀμιλλᾶσθαι) toward being. What Shorey translates as passion is in Greek ἔρωσ: this drawing of the philosopher toward being is a matter of love¹². And this love is not blunted until the philosopher has laid hold (ἄψασθαι), has *touched*, the real being of each thing. And notice now that the philosopher approaches reality and consorts with it. Jowett translates 'drawing near and mingling and becoming incorporate with very being'. Adam in his commentary *ad loc.* writes 'having come nigh unto and married with true being....' The Greek for consorting, mingling, marrying here is μίγεις, one of whose common meanings is to have sexual intercourse; and indeed that must be its meaning here, since we immediately learn that the mingling results in the begetting. Our standard translations have erred by indirection: *Plato clearly uses the language of sexual intercourse,*

sexual possession, to describe the mystical state of union with being. And what about this being? Shorey has the soul consort with reality really, though the other two translations take the adverb *δυντως* to qualify *δντι*: true being, very being. This seems to me a tempting way to take it. And what is the ultimate result of this intercourse with the really real? The philosopher *ἀλήθως ζῶη* καὶ τρέφεται; the philosopher comes really alive, his life is new.

Republic 500c9-d2:

Θείῳ δὴ καὶ κοσμίῳ ὃ γε φιλόσοφος ὁμιλῶν κόσμιός τε καὶ θεῖος εἰς τὸ δυνατόν ἀνθρώπῳ γίγνεται

Then the lover of wisdom associating with the divine order will himself become orderly and divine in the measure permitted to man. (tr. Shorey)

Here we have the identification of what it is that the philosopher associates with as divine, and as orderly. Being itself, true being, the form of the Good is therefore divine, and it is orderly. Why orderly? This is aristocratic Greek tidy-mindedness, the deep moral and aesthetic preference for having a place for everything and everything in its place¹³. And what is this associating? The verb *ὁμιλέω* means to consort with, to frequent, to talk with, to have sexual intercourse with. Probably some translation using the word 'intercourse' would be best. It would preserve the ambiguity of *ὁμιλῶν*, an ambiguity which Plato's contemporary readers surely heard, and which he surely intended.

In other places Plato uses the language not of touch or sexual possession but rather that of sight to describe the philosopher's knowledge of the forms (*ιδεῖν*, *Republic* 511a1; *ὁρᾶν*, 476b10; *θεᾶσθαι*, 518c10; *ἀυγή*, 540b7); and of course the whole notion of contemplation which became such a topos in antiquity was constructed on the model of vision, *θεωρεῖα*. Perhaps this is a pity.

(c) *the experience seems immune from doubt — self-authenticating.*

Famously and infamously, Plato considers that knowledge in the strong sense, knowledge of the forms, is infallible (*ἀναμάρτητον*, 477e6). A very great deal of scholarly ink has been expended over the difficulty of understanding why a dialectical method of enquiry which proceeds by making assumptions and testing them should ever be able to yield infallible certainty. In such an epistemological approach nothing is ever final, all is subject to question and revision. But the difficulty vanishes — I mean the difficulty of interpretation — if we realize that the infallible certainty is the product of mystical intuition, and that one of the standard features of this experience is precisely the sense of unshakable certainty which surrounds it. The anhypothetical principle of knowledge is a different kind of knowing, the product of a mystical experience¹⁴. Just understand that Plato was a mystic, and take him seriously as one, and the long difficulty about dialectic and certainty vanishes.

(d) *though one may prepare oneself for it, the experience itself is gratuitous.* Here, I think, is one place where Plato sometimes misses the mark, or one of the marks, of hard mysticism. For he sometimes writes as though gaining knowledge of the forms is a matter of the exercise of will and discipline, and for one who has the discipline, is subject to the will. Thus in the *Republic*, where Plato describes the last stage in the formation of the Rulers, when they have reached the age of fifty and have been through all the other tests,

Republic 540a7ff:

ἀναγκαστέον ἀνακλιναντας τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς αὐγὴν εἰς αὐτὸ ἀποβλέψαι τὸ πᾶσι φῶς παρέχον, καὶ ἰδόντας τὸ ἀγαθὸν αὐτό...

We shall require them to turn upward the vision of their souls and fix their gaze on that which sheds light on all, and when they have thus beheld the good itself... (tr. Shorey)

The clear implication is that one who has been through all that preparatory work, one has only to turn the eye of the soul to the Form of the Good, and one will see it. The formula ἀποβλέπειν εἰς seems to imply that the thing one looks at is a thing one will see (unlike, for example, ἀποβλέπειν πρὸς)¹⁵. It would indeed be awkward for the ideal state if the mystical experiences which the rulers need to run it were entirely gratuitous. For if the tap of knowledge of the forms were to be turned off by the gods then the whole assumption on which the elaborate structure of the state is built would vanish. On the other hand, a slightly different accent is present in the account of this moment of accession to mystical knowledge in the *Symposium*:

Symposium 210e2ff:

ὅς γὰρ ἂν μέχρι ἐνταυθα πρὸς τὰ ἐρωτικά παιδαγωγηθῆ, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλά, πρὸς τέλος ἤδη ἰὼν τῶν ἐρωτικῶν ἐξαίφνης κατόψεται τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν, τοῦτο ἐκείνο, ᾧ Σώκρατες, οὗ δὴ ἔνεκεν καὶ οἱ ἐμπροσθεν πάντες πόνοι ἦσαν....

Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love and has viewed all these aspects of the beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. (tr. Joyce¹⁶)

Here the meaning of κατόψεται is clearly to see or descry, rather than to look down upon. The initiate suddenly (ἐξαίφνης) sees Beauty itself. The implication here, unlike in the passage from the *Republic* which we have just examined, is that the looking does not itself guarantee the seeing; the seeing is in that measure gratuitous. Nevertheless, it is also implied that whoever does the preparatory work correctly, going through all the stages of erotic education in order, will be vouchsafed this vision. So in this passage from the *Symposium* Plato does not suggest that one can see Beauty itself at will just by looking at it; but he does seem to suggest that the vision is eventually granted to those who have prepared properly.

Symposium 211d8-e1

τί δῆτα, ἔφη, οἰόμεθα, εἴ τῳ γένοιτο αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν ἰδεῖν εἰλικρινές, καθαρὸν....

But if it were given to a man to gaze on beauty's very self — unsullied, unalloyed.... (tr. Joyce)

Here the use of the phrase γένεσθαι τῷ suggests passivity and gratuitousness: if it were given to a person to have this vision.

(e) *the experience is usually sudden and unannounced, being often described as 'rapture'*. The idea of suddenness is present in the passage we have just considered. But the idea of rapture, of being forcibly seized (raped) by the divine is not very prominent in Plato. Two passages in the *Phaedrus*, however, need to be mentioned.

Phaedrus 250a5-b1

ὀλίγοι δὲ λείπονται αἷς τὸ τῆς μνήμης ἱκανῶς πάρεσθιν· αὐταὶ δέ, ὅταν τι τῶν ἐκεῖ ὁμοίωμα ἴδωσιν, ἐκπλήττονται καὶ οὐκέτ' ἐν αὐτῶν γίνονται, ὃ δ' ἔστι τὸ πάθος ἀγνοοῖσι....

Few indeed are left that can still remember much, but when these discern some likeness of the things yonder, they are amazed, and no longer masters of themselves, and know not what is come upon them...(tr. Hackforth¹⁷)

And then there is the passage at 251a3ff, where the person who sees 'a godlike face or a beautiful form' at once begins to shudder (ἔφριξε), and then καὶ ἰδρῶς καὶ θερμότης ἀήθης λαμβάνει — a

strange sweating and fever seize him. But we musn't make too much of these passages, for they are, after all, intended as descriptions of the arising of sexual love; what makes them relevant to us here is of course that Plato explains the phenomenon of love as an urge to the contemplation of the form of Beauty. To feel such love is to be forcibly seized by beauty, or — if the analysis of the *Phaedrus* is correct — to be forcibly seized by the memory of Beauty.

(f) *the experience is regarded as the highest sort of moment of which human life is capable, and those who have had the experience typically devote all their efforts to being able to have it again.*

Symposium 211d1ff:

ἐνταῦθα τοῦ βίου, ὦ φίλε Σώκρατες, ἔφη ἡ Μαντικὴ ξένη, εἴπερ που ἄλλοθι, βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπῳ, θεωμένῳ αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν.

And if, my dear Socrates, Diotima went on, man's life is ever worth the living, it is when he has attained this vision of the very soul of beauty. (tr. Joyce)

The text makes the mystical point and the translation masks it: θεωμένῳ is present, not perfect, and so it should be translated by the present tense. It is the moment of contemplation that makes life truly worth living, not the fact of having contemplated. It is clear that having contemplated has its other rewards, like the production of true virtue and consequent immortality (212a). And the longing of someone who has once had the vision of the forms to do so again is eloquently expressed in those well-known passages at the end of Book VII of the *Republic*, where the rulers have to be forced back down into the cave for periods of service.

(g) *the experience typically requires a long and arduous preparation.* The fifty-year strenuous training of the rulers before they can turn their gaze upward (*Republic* 539-540), and the due regimen of toil (πόνος) in erotics (*Symposium* 210e) are presented as necessary (and perhaps, we saw, sufficient) conditions for being able to experience the supreme forms.

From all of this it seems to me pretty clear that Plato was, in the hard sense, a mystic — or at least that he had had some mystical experiences and based a good deal of his thought on them — and that we must take this fact into account as we interpret and assess him. His thought was formed, in part, by some unusual and exciting theophantic (or ontophantic) adventures that few can share. His closed theocratic utopia, which seems repellent to us, is justified very simply in his own mind, and rendered understandable to ours, by the sense of infallibility which seems to be an unvarying part of mystical experiences. His fantastic construction of an art of erotics as the engine of the soul's ascent to mysticism is a real contender if indeed his mystical experiences of Beauty happened as he says they did. He keeps company with John of the Cross and Marie de l'Incarnation as much as he does with Lucretius or Leibniz. He is not fully a philosopher. Why then, we may well wonder, is the history of philosophy a series of footnotes to him?

I would now like to open a parenthesis, but an important one, to consider the role of sex in Plato's mysticism. Vlastos, in his article 'Love in Plato', and especially in its appendix 'Sex in Platonic Love'¹⁸ has argued that Platonic love was anything but platonic¹⁹; using evidence mainly from the *Phaedrus*, he shows that the lover is, and is broadly expected to be, a sexed, sexual, and sexually active person. Nevertheless it would be hard to deny that the general drift of this dialogue is that sexual restraint, if not abstinence, is the recommended course. Thus, at 256a1ff, we have the celebrated depiction of the pair of lovers lying side by side, desiring sex, and

resisting it and going on thereby to a life of blessed happiness and concord 'for the power of evil in the soul has been subjected, and the power of goodness liberated' (tr. Hackforth) (δουλωσάμενοι μὲν ᾧ κακία ψυχῆς ἐτίγνετο, ἐλευθερώσαντες δὲ ᾧ ἀρετῇ). Nevertheless those who do succumb are still counted blessed, even if not as blessed as those who do not (256d). While not a stern or implacable attitude toward loving sex, this seems at least to advocate what we might now call sublimation: the sexual urge is restrained and its energy passes into other things.

I think the picture in the *Symposium* is rather different. Before Diotima gets to the mystical ascent, and while she is describing the right uses of love (*paideia* through pederasty), she says of the lover who undertakes the education of the beloved:

Symposium 209c2-3

ἀπτόμενος γὰρ οἶμαι τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ὁμιλῶν αὐτῷ, ἃ πάλαι ἐκεί τίκτει καὶ γεννᾷ...

...by constant association with so much beauty...he will be delivered of the burden he has laboured under all these years (tr. Joyce)

Constant association indeed! ἀπτομαι has as its general meaning to fasten upon or grasp; one of its prominent figurative meanings — found in Plato and Aristotle among others²⁰ — is to have sexual intercourse. And we have already seen that ὁμιλέω means to frequent, to talk with, and to have sexual intercourse with (a new slant on homiletics!). Moreover the sexual imagery is underlined by the pregnancy and the giving birth that is described in the context. The translator has done us a disservice here: Plato's language about the time which the lover and the beloved spend together is charged with sexual ambiguity. The right translation would be a word like 'intercourse', leaving the resolution of the ambiguity to the reader's imagination²¹.

There is a problem, next, about just what it is that is generated as a result of this love. On the one hand it appears to be virtue and wisdom in the beloved youth (209c1). On the other it appears to be poetry and the creative arts (209a3; d1), and finally laws and constitutions (209b1, d3ff). Is Plato suggesting that homoerotic satisfaction is a necessary condition, or even a frequent concomitant, of artistic creativity? Is this gay stereotyping at a very early date (before there was even homosexuality)? It may ring true to us, but it is very surprising. Is he suggesting, though this sounds much odder to our ears, that homoerotic satisfaction is a condition of legislative creativity? Are the best parliamentarians the gay ones? What is perhaps even stranger for us in this set of ideas is that the creativity, whether artistic or legislative, happens when erotic desire is satisfied; we are very used to the opposite idea, the Freudian idea, that *frustrated* eros makes great artists. These are surprising ideas.

So far, however, we have been considering the hypomystical case, the relatively ordinary case of erotic love bearing fruits of the spirit. What about the path of mystical ascent? What role is sex to play here?

Symposium 210a4-8

δεῖ γὰρ, ἔφη, τὸν ὀρθῶς ἰόντα ἐπὶ τοῦτο τὸ πρᾶγμα ἀρχεσθαι μὲν νέον ὄντα ἰέναι ἐπὶ τὰ καλὰ σώματα, καὶ πρῶτον μὲν, ἐὰν ὀρθῶς ἠγῆται ὁ ἠγούμενος, ἐνδὲς αὐτὸν σώματος ἐρᾶν καὶ ἐνταῦθα γεννᾶν λόγους καλοῦς, ἔπειτα....

It is necessary ... for one who proceeds correctly in this matter to begin when young by heading for the beautiful bodies; and first, if his guide leads him correctly, he must love one body and generate beautiful speeches therein. Next.... (tr. Rosen²²)

What is this *λέναι ἐπὶ τὰ καλὰ σώματα*? Jowett memorably translates it as to 'visit beautiful forms'. It is striking that the phrase *λέναι ἐπὶ* is used twice in the same sentence, presumably with different meanings. In the first it means to embark upon a venture (*πρᾶγμα*); in the second it seems more natural to take it to mean to frequent, to keep the company of, some translators suggest 'to devote oneself to'. But why *τὰ καλὰ σώματα*? Why *the* beautiful bodies? Most translators have ignored the definite article here. But its presence suggests a far more deliberate activity than is suggested if it is not there. Not so much 'frequent beautiful bodies' as 'go for the beautiful ones'. And then another curiosity: who is the guide? Dover²³, *ad loc.*, takes it to be the lover, the older man of the pair, the erastes. But this would entail one of two unlikely interpretations, either that the erastes tries to make the eromenos fall in love with him (not an unlikely thing in itself, but a very strange way to express it), or else that the erastes tries to make the eromenos fall in love with *someone else*. Who, then, is the *ἡγούμενος*? I think the best answer here is the one that Bury gave²⁴ *ad loc.*: the *μυσταγωγός*, the spiritual director, if you like²⁵. And once we see this we need to become clear as to who the *νέος* is. It is not, surely, *pace* Dover, the eromenos of the traditional pederastic-paideutic pair; it is rather the young man who is himself preparing to fall in love, the one who is about to be an erastes. So the young man should keep the company of the attractive youths, so that the constant sight of such beauty will spur him to fall in love with one of them, to take a young eromenos. Now this generation of beautiful speeches (what an extraordinary idea!) seems the same as what happened in the nonmystical love in the last passage we considered. So the approach to mystical love is via nonmystical love of the conventional, satisfied homoerotic, arts-and-laws-generating kind. The relatively ordinary love which Plato characterizes as spiritually procreant (209a2) is identical with the first step in the mystical ascent, and it, we have seen, is a sexually satisfied love.

But what happens then? At 210b1 Plato says that having been stirred by beauty to fall in love with one person, the aspirant to mystical vision realizes (*κατανοῆσαι*) that beauty of one body is related to the beauty of another, and so he loves the one selfsame beauty that is on all bodies bodies. He steps, that is, in one leap, from loving one person to loving the beauty of all bodies. But a little later, when Diotima reviews the procedure in the peroration of her speech, it is put differently.

Symposium 211b5-c5

ὅταν δὴ τις ἀπὸ τῶνδε διὰ τὸ ὀρθῶς παιδραστεῖν ἐπανίων ἐκείνο τὸ καλὸν ἀρχῆται καθορᾶν, σχεδὸν ἂν τι ἄπτοιτο τοῦ τέλους. τοῦτο γὰρ δὴ ἐστὶ τὸ ὀρθῶς ἐπὶ τὰ ἐρωτικά λέναι ἢ ὑπ' ἄλλου ἀγεσθαι, ἀρχόμενον ἀπὸ τῶνδε τῶν καλῶν ἐκείνου ἕνεκα τοῦ καλοῦ αἰεὶ ἐπανιέναι, ὡσπερ ἐπαναβασμοῖς χρώμενον, ἀπὸ ἐνὸς ἐπὶ δύο καὶ ἀπὸ δυοῖν ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ καλὰ σώματα, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν καλῶν σωμάτων ἐπὶ τὰ καλὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα....

...when someone ascending from the previously mentioned stages through the correct kind of pederasty begins to see that beauty, he will almost grasp the end. This is the right procedure or way of being led by another in erotic matters; beginning from the earlier beauties for the sake of this one, he must always ascend, as on the steps of a stair, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; and from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs.... (tr. Rosen)

What is striking here is that instead of quickly loving the single selfsame beauty that is in all bodies, the aspirant loves one individual beautiful body, then two individual beautiful bodies, then all beautiful bodies.... It is only at the end of the procedure that he is portrayed as stepping from loving individual beautiful things to loving beauty itself. This point is emphasized, it seems to me, by the explicit mention of the stage at which he loves *two* bodies. The mystic ascent requires erotic attention to many individuals before the attention to the universal is possible. In a word: erotic promiscuity.

In none of this theory of the *Symposium* is there any suggestion of sublimated desire. Sexual desire, *eros*, is the engine of ascent, though to be sure it is like a the primary stage of a rocket, which falls away when its work is done.

We return now to consider the tension in Plato's epistemology which has driven this enquiry. Is the knowledge of the forms a priori, a posteriori by abstraction, or a posteriori by mystical intuition? Or are these three in some way compatible?

Phaedrus 249b5-c1

οὐ γὰρ ἢ γε μήποτε ἰδοῦσα τὴν ἀλήθειαν εἰς τόδε ἦξει τὸ σχῆμα. δεῖ γὰρ ἀνθρώπων συνιέναι κατ' εἶδος λεγόμενον, ἐκ πολλῶν ἰδὼν αἰσθήσεων εἰς ἓν λογισμῶ συναιρούμενον· τοῦτο δ' ἔστιν ἀνάμνησις ἐκείνων ἃ ποτ' εἶδεν ἡμῶν ἢ ψυχῆ....

For only the soul that has beheld truth may enter into this our human form — seeing that man must needs understand the language of forms, passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning — and such understanding is a recollection of those things which our souls beheld aforetime.... (tr. Hackforth)

This passage proposes that recollection is a precondition of abstraction²⁶. The problem is, of course, that if you already have the idea of beauty, you do not need to perform abstractions to achieve it. On the other hand, if you do not already have the idea of beauty, it is hard to see how you manage to group together beautiful things in order to abstract the idea. The solution to this part of the tension, which is an old sophistic argument, surely lies in distinguishing clarities of knowledge. One may dimly remember a form, just enough to do some grouping and abstracting; but the grouping and abstracting clarifies the form remarkably²⁷.

And can knowledge be both by abstraction and by mystical intuition? This is surely the whole problem of the unhypothetical principle, the problem of how a method of enquiry and concept-construction should end in certain and infallible knowledge. I have already urged the solution which lies in seeing the mystical knowledge not as a sure product generated logically by the method, but rather the method as a preparatory exercise upon whose completion the mystical intuition may or may not supervene. (Plato is not unfailingly helpful to me here, since, as we noted above, he sometimes writes as though mystical intuition is a sure-fire result of the preparatory work.)

And finally, can we reconcile knowledge of the forms as recollection with knowledge of the forms as mystical intuition? *Prima facie*, it would seem not, for the one is a priori and the other a posteriori. Mystical experience is normally cast as a fresh and absolutely true and valid contact with being itself; not a contact with a remembered image of being. Plato, to my knowledge, does not consider this problem, does not help us to resolve this tension. But I think there is a way to soften it. The distinction between a priori knowledge — knowledge which we have independently of experience — and a posteriori knowledge — which we have only on the basis of experience — seems a firm one as long as the experience in question is sensory experience. But if we recall that mystical experience is for Plato an intellectual experience, the distinction softens. If I learn and know the classical quadratures of lunes, and then call them to mind again, am I not knowing them afresh? Does not the distinction between knowledge and remembered knowledge quickly blur when the knowledge in question is not sensory but intellectual?

NOTES

- ¹ I.M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, Volume II, London, 1979, 562. A similarly deflationary analysis is offered by John Ackrill, 'ΣΥΜΠΛΟΚΗ ΕΙΔΩΝ', in Gregory Vlastos, ed., *Plato*, Volume I, Garden City, 1971, 207: '...the task assigned in Plato's later dialogues to the dialectician or philosopher is the investigation and plotting of the relations among concepts, a task to be pursued through a patient study of language by noticing which combinations of words in sentences do, and which do not, make sense, by eliciting ambiguities and drawing distinctions, by stating explicitly facts about the interrelations of word meanings which we normally do not trouble to state, though we all have some latent knowledge of them insofar as we know how to talk correctly.'
- ² E.E. Benitez, *Forms in Plato's Philebus*, Maastricht, Van Gorcum, 1989 113-117.
- ³ See also *Republic* 534b8ff.
- ⁴ Geneviève Droz in her recent book *Les mysthes platoniciens*, Paris, 1992, 107, does just this. 'Nous dirons ... que le discours de Diotime n'est pas un mythe, mais qu'il se meut dans le champ du mythe platonicien'.
- ⁵ The great exception is Paul Friedländer, *Plato*, Volume I, New York, 1958, 59ff. His conclusion is that Plato is not a mystic in the full sense because for him the object of mystical knowledge is Being itself, or is a being — it is not *beyond* being.
- ⁶ T.M. Robinson, *Plato's Psychology*, Toronto, 1970 is an exception here. See especially p. 50, n.10.
- ⁷ For a very much fuller and more complete categorization of types of mysticism see Elmer O'Brien, *The Varieties of Mystic Experience*, New York, 1965.
- ⁸ Robert Eisenman & Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, New York, 1992, 222.
- ⁹ For example his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, the *De Amore*. Various passages of Plato are given interpretations which employ several levels of heaven, divers orders of angels, the World Soul, the Angelic Mind, the Venerean Demons, and all the rest. See Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, tr. Sears Jayne, Dallas, 1985.
- ¹⁰ Odo Casel, *De philosophorum Graecorum silentio mystico*, Giessen, 1919, 35.
- ¹¹ in Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, Princeton, 1969.
- ¹² In his book *Platonic Love*, Westport Conn., 1963, Thomas Gould argues that the great difference between Platonic and Christian love is that for Plato love is not a property of God, but only of the soul seeking God; in the Christian understanding, on the other hand, overflowing love for humankind is a property of God. (Plato's God could not love, for love is essentially a desire for immortality, and no one desires that which he already has.) But for an argument against this tidy distinction see John Rist, *Eros and Psyche*, Toronto, 1964, 35-40.
- ¹³ I argue in a forthcoming paper 'Aristotle's worst idea' that the predilection for tidiness was what ultimately lay behind Aristotle's strange insistence that each of the dispositions of nature properly has only one end, and if anything has more than one end that is a sign of imperfection (e.g. *Politics* 1252b1ff).
- ¹⁴ This has been argued fully by Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 2nd edition, Oxford, 1953, 172ff.
- ¹⁵ See the careful discussion of these formulae in Léonce Paquet, *Platon: la médiation du regard*, Leiden, 1973 153-201
- ¹⁶ in Hamilton & Cairns, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*
- ¹⁸ in Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic Studies*, Princeton, 1973, 3-42.
- ¹⁹ French scholars frequently distinguish *amour platonique* from *amour platonicien*.
- ²⁰ Liddell & Scott instance Plato, *Laws* 840a, and Aristotle, *Politics*, 1335b40.
- ²¹ G.M.A. Grube, *Plato's Thought*, Boston, 1958, 103 argues that Plato seems to be describing the same sort of pederastic-paideutic relationship as that which Pausanias had described, and it is clear that sexual intercourse was part of that relationship.
- ²² Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, 2nd edition, New Haven, 1987.
- ²³ Sir Kenneth Dover, ed., *Plato: Symposium*, Cambridge, 1980.
- ²⁴ R.G. Bury, ed., *The Symposium of Plato*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, 1973.
- ²⁵ He adduces the following evidence: ἀγαγεῖν 210c, παιδαγωγῆσθαι 210e, ἀγεσθαι 211c.
- ²⁶ The passage, and the issue it raises in the *Phaedrus*, is studied by Julius Stenzel, *Plato's Method of Dialectic*, tr. D.J. Allan, New York, 1964, 149ff.
- ²⁷ See A.H. Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy*, London, 1968, 41.