

CHAPTER I

Beyond Gender *The Voice of Diotima*

Frisbee C. C. Sheffield

Introduction

In the *Symposium*, Plato's great work on *eros* (passionate love, or desire), the central insights are gleaned from a wise woman (201d5, 204d2, 207a5), from whom Socrates learnt the single thing to which he laid claim to expertise, *ta erotika* (*Symp.* 177d; *Phdr.* 257a; *Lysis* 204b; *Xen. Mem.* 2.6.28). Since there is a widespread view that Plato stands at the head of a tradition of philosophical thinking in which women are eclipsed, or marginalised, this fact has been seen as significant.¹ That Diotima's gender has been the subject of such scholarly interest speaks volumes about the assumptions we make about gender and its importance; it is not clear whether and how Diotima's gender is significant for the philosophy of the *Symposium*, however. Gender categories are an explicit feature of this text, but Plato's playful and provocative use of them is not just a dialectical ploy to provoke reflection on the social norms around sexuality and gender that held sway in his day; toying with them exposes both the contingency of gendered categories and, ultimately, their irrelevance to a philosophical account of *eros*. It is in fact doubtful whether any of the images, or vocabulary employed by Diotima, or even Diotima's status as a 'woman' itself are, properly speaking, 'gendered' in any straightforward way. One of Diotima's central insights is that *eros* is a mediator between binary oppositions; *eros* is a non-binary facilitator. This explains a number of features of the supposedly gender-polarised vocabulary and imagery in this text, which fluctuates between (Plato's) contemporary associations of the male

¹ Lovibond (2000: 11): 'The most influential theme during this period has been that of the masculinism of ancient thought – its assumption, explicit or otherwise, of the centrality and superiority of the male point of view.' The seminal paper on the significance of Diotima's gender is Halperin (1990). See also Saxonhouse (1984); Brown (1988); du Bois (1994); Nye (1990); Tuana and Cowling (1994).

and the female and the gender-muddled portrait of Diotima herself, fused with her ‘feminised’ Socratic counterpart. Platonic *eros* seems genderqueer insofar as it does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions. One lesson learnt from Diotima is that human beings are needy, incomplete, and markedly *indeterminate* creatures; any determination we may ultimately find is up to the individual and the work they are prepared to do, which, ideally here, takes them beyond gender. Plato challenges the gender categories of his day in a way that serves as a timely reminder of their contingency; in doing so, he ‘de-center[s] the importance of gender’ in philosophy. From that perspective, such interest in Diotima’s gender reveals how far we are from that goal.²

The Question of Diotima’s Gender

Determining whether Diotima’s gender is significant is made difficult by the following features: (a) the difficulty of establishing whether Diotima is evidence for the thinking of any historical woman (the consensus has been negative, in which case she has little historical significance);³ (b) the fact that Socrates speaks her truth so that her presence is eclipsed, or at least mediated, by a man (in which case she is thin evidence for a vindication of the female voice);⁴ (c) the fact that Plato elsewhere attributes insights to certain ‘men and women who are learned in divine matters’ (*sophoi peri ta theia pragmata*, *Meno*, 81a–b) – which may make Diotima seem less unusual and minimise the significance of gender by making it parasitic on a relationship to the divine.⁵ It is worth noting,

² I take the phrase ‘de-center[s] the importance of gender’ from Faucette (2014: 78) who outlines this as part of the work of non-binary activism and those who identify as ‘genderqueer’. Faucette (2014: 75–76) argues that ‘non-binary activism brings something valuable . . . because it questions the logic behind rigid gender norms, hierarchies, and the state’s use of gender as an unnecessary control mechanism. This questioning benefits people of all genders, not only non-binary people.’ Compare Olson et al. (2019); Griffin (2020).

³ For a historical reading of Diotima, see Waithe (1987a: 83–117) and D’Angour (2019: 202), who argues that Aspasia of Miletus stands behind the figure of Diotima; she was the ‘intellectual midwife . . . whose ideas helped to give birth to European philosophy’. Attempts at a historical grounding for Diotima go back to Rettig (1876: 262). For scholarship on Diotima’s ‘historical authenticity’, see Halperin (1990: 119 n. 34).

⁴ On the ‘male embodiment of the voice of a woman’, see Irigaray (1989: 32).

⁵ Compare Aspasia in the *Menexenus*. We are told three things about Diotima: she is a foreigner, a priestess, and a woman. For an explanation of Diotima’s gender in terms of ‘prophetic temperament’ see Bury (1932: 193). Compare Nye (1989: 53): ‘In historical context . . . it is neither surprising nor anomalous that Diotima would appear in the authoritative role as the teacher of Socrates. As prophetess/priestess she was part of a religious order that had maintained its authority from Minoan/Mycenaean times.’ Evans (2006: 1) argues that: ‘The dialogue, including Diotima’s

though, that Diotima gives arguments and proposes a philosophical theory here and does not just supply a premise for an argument as those who are learned in divine matters do in the *Meno*. Diotima is one of the few named female interlocutors we witness engaged in philosophical thinking. So, despite the fact that this chapter will not approach Diotima as a historical woman philosopher, the dialogue nonetheless promises to show what female figures can tell us about gender dynamics, and their significance or lack thereof, in Platonic philosophy. The question is not whether Diotima the woman philosopher existed, who she was, and what she thought – but rather what this figure, the way Plato describes her, and the arguments ascribed to her, teach us about the significance of gender in Plato's philosophy.

Three features have lent urgency to the question of Diotima's gender: the context, the topic, and the imagery used to explore *eros*. I take each in turn. Diotima's 'presence' is situated in an all-male context (a symposium). This fact alone will not do much work because any female voice anywhere in the Platonic dialogues falls into that category (e.g., Sappho in the *Phaedrus*, Aspasia in the *Menexenus*). This need not be indicative of any deep-seated misogyny on Plato's part; the dialogues represent the cultural contexts of his day in dramatic form. Plato recognises the importance of embedding his philosophical thinking within 'socially articulated spaces', dominated by men though they were. This 'situatedness' allows for greater

speech, contains mystical language, some of which specifically evokes the female-centred celebrations of Demeter.' Further,

just as the Demeter tradition celebrated at Eleusis allowed individuals to reconstruct their conception of the divine and its relation to the human social and political structures inherent in the polis, so Plato in Diotima's speech presents a different conception of human experience and its relative distance to and difference from the divine. Centred on the experience of the divine mother and daughter, the Eleusinian Mysteries allowed initiates, both male and female, to experience the divine immediately and with their own eyes during the night ritual in the Telesterion at Eleusis. Likewise, Diotima the mystagogue leads Socrates to realise that initiates into her rites of love will, in loving their beloved, see Being and thereby enter into a new, mutual relation with the divine and become *theophiles*, both loving the divine and beloved of the divine. (7)

For Evans, then, Diotima's gender is explained in terms of the Eleusinian mystery cult, which, though based on the female experience of birth and nurturing, bestowed blessings on all human beings 'regardless of gender and civil status' (16). It is this feature, rather than anything distinctively 'female' that is to the fore here. Halperin argues that focus on her role as a prophetess should not detract attention from her being a woman (1990: 129). It is the latter issue that forms the focus of this paper. Though religion was one of the few areas beyond the household in which women could hold roles of authority, I agree with Halperin that the gendered language and imagery used here bolsters the question of Diotima's gender, which makes it difficult to reduce her gender to her role as a priestess, rather than to features of the theory under discussion.

scrutiny of existing prejudices around class and gender, for example, by encouraging awareness of the extent to which knowing subjects are not 'innocent and waiting outside the violations of language and culture'.⁶ The characters, along with their social status, gender, contextual situation, and the speech practices that are tethered to those, are brought to the fore in the *Symposium* and elsewhere, along with the social and political implications of this foregrounding.⁷ Plato nowhere professes to speak from a position of supposed neutrality; such devices serve as reminders of the embeddedness of his thinking in a particular time and place and expose the extent to which the gender of the participants and the dominance of their voices arise from, and are perpetuated in, particular social structures, such as those that dominated at the symposium.⁸ Whether Plato *endorsed* the kind of structures that are in evidence at this all-male gathering of the intellectual elite is another matter altogether. Diotima has been seen as one way in which Plato destabilises the gendered hierarchy of those structures, as he was to do elsewhere by providing a wholesale reform of society underpinned by argument for the equality of the sexes.⁹

⁶ See Haraway (1991: 183–201) on 'situated knowledge' and the claim that knowing subjects cannot be treated as straightforward, pre-theoretical entities, 'innocent and waiting outside the violations of language and culture'. See also Fricker and Hornsby (2000: 7): 'The space of reasons is a socially articulated space, so that all conceptual activity is understood as activity within a setting in which people adopt attitudes towards each other.' A virtue of this position is taken to be that 'they speak of something ineluctably related to other such subjects', and 'when the knowing subject is treated as a social being, testimony assumes its place as a fundamental mode of knowledge acquisition, attention is given to epistemic practices, and relations between knowers are brought to the fore'. This gets past 'the neutralism of traditional philosophy' to 'acknowledge located-ness' (8).

⁷ The latter of which is made vivid by the dramatic date of the work set in 416 BCE, just before the doomed Sicilian expedition, in which one of the participants played a central role, and the affair of the Mysteries in which three participants were implicated.

⁸ Though notice that the depiction of the golden age symposium-style gathering in the city of pigs in *Republic 2* is not gendered or hierarchical (372b–c).

⁹ See Peter Adamson in this volume (Chapter 12). *Republic* 5.455d–e: 'There is no pursuit of the administrators of the city that belongs to women because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all.' Whether that is sufficient to make Plato a feminist depends in part on what his motivations are for postulating such an idea, on which see Annas (1976) with the riposte by Lesser (1979). See also Vlastos (1994). Though there are debates about how far the proposals go, the *Republic* seems to continue what there is good reason to believe is a Socratic tradition of thinking about virtue as gender neutral (*Meno* 73a–c). As El Murr (2020: 96) has argued, in the *Politics* (1.13.1260a20–24), Aristotle takes this to be the view of Socrates and 'it is safe to assume that the beginning of the *Meno* and this passage from Aristotle's *Politics* echo a debate whose Socratic background should not be overlooked'. El Murr cites further evidence in support of this view from Xenophon, Aeschines of Sphettus, and Antisthenes. It is also worth noting that the provision of state-run nurseries in the *Republic* to free women to engage in higher education and allow them to stand as Philosopher Queens shows sensitivity to the kinds of issues raised time and again in feminist political philosophy (e.g., Okin (1989)). Okin (1979: 31, 42) gives Plato his due as

One feature that differentiates Diotima's presence in the *Symposium* from other dialogues where Socrates takes a female voice (e.g., Sappho in the *Phaedrus*, Aspasia in the *Menexenus*) is that Socrates introduces Diotima after women have been explicitly excluded from the discussion by the symposiarch (Eryximachus, 176e). This is certainly a transgression of the rules of this particular symposium, as are the attempts at dialectic instead of rhetoric in discussion with Agathon (*Phaedrus* has to remind Socrates of the rules). Eryximachus' move, by dismissing the flute girl, marginalises physical *eros* from the gathering, to focus on 'theoretical' *eros*, which suggests that within this social circle women were not considered to be part of any such discussion; anything that is noble and valuable (i.e., educative) in *eros* belongs to *paiderastia*. Socrates' transgression does not consist just in introducing a woman (who usually did take part in male symposia, i.e., as prostitutes or flute girls) but both in giving a woman the role of a wise discussant, which was traditionally assigned to men, and in making her knowledgeable on this particular topic.¹⁰

This is the second feature that has been thought to give Diotima's gender prominence: Diotima is responsible for insights on *eros*. Would it be more or less surprising if the insights of a woman had informed the topic of, say, false statements in the *Sophist*?¹¹ The issue is not that 'love' as opposed to 'negation' is a topic particularly suited for women – certainly not in ancient Greece, where the erotic paradigm was homoerotic.¹² The issue is that a woman schools men in a topic for which the paradigm was homoerotic, *to orthos paiderastein* (211b5–6). The extent to which Plato was committed to that focus is not clear, however.¹³ This is for two reasons. First, Plato's interest in homoerotic relationships takes us to the heart of his interest in moral education; relationships of the sort discussed

a pioneer with his argument for the equality of the sexes but argues that since this is tethered to the 'communism' of Book 5 it has limited appeal for a modern feminist).

¹⁰ I thank Christian Keime for discussion of this paragraph.

¹¹ Though here one could find historical precedent. The Muses, after all, are female sources of wisdom and inspiration on various subjects. Athena is the patron god of the arts, skill, wisdom, etc. And, perhaps closer, Parmenides' poem has the *kouros* instructed by an explicitly female divinity. Pythagoras was reputed to have been educated by a priestess Themistoclea (D.L. 8.8, on the evidence of Aristoxenus), but the evidence for this is post-Platonic.

¹² No less is the issue that love is a marginal topic for Platonic philosophy and so a member of a marginalised group will do. The repeated characterisation of philosophy as itself a form of *eros* in a number of dialogues (*Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*) is indicative of the kind of value wisdom is for Plato and the role he wants it to play in our lives. See Sheffield (2017).

¹³ There are those who speculate on Plato's own sexual proclivities here, which seem impossible to substantiate (e.g., Wender (1973: 31); Plass (1978)). It remains to be shown whether such speculation reveals anything interesting about Plato's philosophical commitments.

here, *to orthos paiderastein*, which took place at symposia such as this one, were a central way in which virtue was transmitted to the young. At their best, they had an educational function.¹⁴ The question, then, is whether there is evidence that Plato supposed moral education to be the preserve of men (i.e., one should not make the assumption that Plato had any deep investment in the institution of Greek pederasty for its own sake and take the significance of Diotima's gender from there). The fact that in the *Republic* Philosopher Queens, along with their male counterparts, have responsibility for civic education shows at least one context where moral education is *not* exclusively male. This is a context in which the moral education of men as well as women is not the exclusive concern of men. It would have been less unusual to think that women might be responsible for the moral education of other women.

Second, though in this context most speakers evidently do hold the view that such educational practices are male, the speech of Socrates-Diotima shows little investment in *to orthos paiderastein* as a male-male practice; this forms the *context* in which this discussion takes place (for reasons given above), but the *content* of the account of *eros* is not tethered to servicing this goal. The account of *eros*, with all of its educational aspirations, applies to *all* human beings (*pantes anthropoi*, 206c1–2), who are pregnant in both body and soul and enabled by *eros* in their creative endeavours as they strive to create a life worth living, be that as parents, educators, poets, lawmakers, or philosophers. The account applies to human beings regardless of gender (*anthropoi* 211e2, 212a, b7; *thnetes*, 211e3), and it is nowhere stated or implied that women are less good than men at the higher cultural pursuits described in the Highest Mysteries (209e5–12a7).¹⁵ The single line that could be so used is widely misunderstood.¹⁶ This is where Socrates describes those (presumably men) who are pregnant in body and turn to women to produce children, supposing

¹⁴ That pederasty was an important social institution in Classical Athens is now a commonplace of Classical scholarship, on which, see Dover (1978, 1980); Foucault (1985); Calame (1999). On the educative function of the symposium, see Bremmer (1990); Calame (1999).

¹⁵ See Evans (2006: 20) and Nye (1990: 142): 'Diotima, as any good teacher, uses homosexual examples relative to her audience's experience and refers to her potential initiate, who is in fact Socrates as male. There is nothing, however, in the content of her teaching that makes a sexual distinction necessary. We are all pregnant, she says, both in body and in soul. The generality of this conception can only be discounted if one is determined to accommodate Diotima's teaching with the gynophobia of several of the preceding speakers. It is not comprehensible that Diotima, taking the authoritative tone that she does on the subject, would think her own sex incapable of practicing her advice.'

¹⁶ E.g., Irigaray (1989: 41), who argues that love between men is superior to love between men and women.

that this will supply them with memory and *eudaimonia* for all time to come (208e5–6). The target is those who are pregnant in body and who suppose that producing physical offspring is sufficient for *eudaimonia*. This is a demand that we (all human beings) be culturally (particularly, philosophically) creative and not just biologically so. However much joy parents find in their children, Plato (along with many feminist thinkers) is surely persuasive in urging one to broaden aspirations beyond physical reproduction (leaving aside the obvious burden it brings to children to make them bearers of our *eudaimonia*). Nor is there anything here that tethers the female to being the beautiful ‘object’ that inspires creative work (unless one falls into the category of those who suppose that *eudaimonia* is had by the production of physical offspring). It is in the presence of another beautiful person (*anthropon*, 209b7) that one can give birth, and those who give birth to ‘wisdom and the rest of virtue’ (209b4) are also described by the inclusive ‘humans’ (*anthropoi*). The speech is consistent with the *Republic*’s proposal that ‘there is no pursuit . . . that belongs to women because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man’ (455d), and it is consistent with other accounts of gender-neutral virtue (e.g., *Meno* 73a–c).

Such a reading might bolster the significance of Diotima’s gender. If Plato’s contemporaries thought that such educational practices were the preserve of men, then there is value in showing us the ‘singularly fecund’ association between Socrates and Diotima to exemplify the inclusive tone of the speech.¹⁷ True education is revealed to be a form of reproduction, a point that suggests that the female voice needs to be incorporated – on the assumption that there is something distinctively female about this experience. From the perspective of the other symposiasts, the presence of a woman may well serve as a dialectical provocation, useful for the purposes of disrupting norms (e.g., those set by Eryximachus at 176e). So argues Halperin (1990: 129): ‘By the very fact of being a woman, Diotima signals Plato’s departure from certain aspects of the sexual *ethos* of his male contemporaries and thereby enables him to highlight some of the salient features of his own philosophy.’¹⁸ Whether Diotima’s gender moves beyond such provocation, what it provokes specifically, and whether it emphasises ‘salient features’ of Plato’s own philosophy – which I take, for

¹⁷ The phrase is taken from Wardy (2002: 41). For other scholars who argue that the introduction of a woman lessens the focus on the homoerotic in particular, see Nussbaum (1979: 145); Dover (1980: 137); Evans (2006: 20).

¹⁸ Compare Saxonhouse (1985: 62): Plato ‘has found in women – those who give birth, those who are different from the males, those who are closer to the private realm – a symbol that becomes useful for his critique of an Athenian society devoted to the political life of ambition, money, war’.

reasons I cannot defend here, to be best (albeit not exclusively) expressed in the speech of Socrates-Diotima – are further questions. In Halperin's view (1990: 117): 'Diotima underscores the specifically feminine character of her purchase on the subject of erotic desire by means of the emphatically gender-polarised vocabulary and conceptual apparatus she employs in discussing it.' This third feature, which is how the topic is treated here, has been seen as the most promising way to promote the significance of Diotima's gender. To that I now turn.

Mixing Things up

The seemingly gender-polarised vocabulary is included in the following account of *eros*. It is argued that the aim of *eros* is to secure the good things we suppose will bring us *eudaimonia* (205d). Since we are mortal, and subject to flux and change (207–8), we cannot secure anything without productive work; human beings have to be productive in a way that gods do not (207c–8b). This explains the productive work (*ergon*) of *eros*, which is giving birth in the beautiful (206b8), as the distinctively mortal way to secure those good things thought to be constitutive of *eudaimonia*. According to Halperin, the fact that the work of *eros* is *procreation* in the beautiful (206b–c) and that the text is rife with images of pregnancy, birth pangs, and nourishing offspring 'serves to thematize two of the most distinctive and original elements of Plato's erotic theory'. More specifically:

In Plato's conception (male) *eros*, properly understood and expressed, is not hierarchical, but reciprocal; it is not acquisitive, but creative. Plato's model of successful erotic desire effectively incorporates and allocates to men, the positive dimension of each of these two Greek stereotypes of women, producing a new and distinctive paradigm that combines erotic responsiveness with (pro)creative aspiration. (Halperin 1990: 130)¹⁹

In this way, 'Diotima's gender ... is a condition of her discourse'. Evidently, here the 'feminine' (which Halperin makes clear refers to what is constructed by the social group or historical culture in question) is playing a central role.

The reading assumes two things: (a) that the female (however conceived) can be located and (b) that it is then positively deployed, appropriated, or incorporated, in the account of '(male) *eros*'. The first assumption is in fact fraught with difficulty. Consider the gender-polarised

¹⁹ For the ancient Greek sexual norms for male desire that this picture disrupts, see Winkler (1990: 70).

vocabulary. A translation of the crucial passage by Robert Wardy brings out the ambiguities:

Whenever the [neuter] pregnant [*kuo* = ‘in pres. and impf., of females, conceive; in aor. act. *ekusa*, causal, of males, impregnate’ (LSJ s.v.)] approaches what is beautiful,²⁰ it becomes gracious and in its enjoyment relaxes and produces [*tikto* = ‘of the father, beget; of the mother, bring forth’ (LSJ s.v.)] and generates [*gemmao* = ‘causal of *gignomai*, mostly of the father, beget’ (LSJ s.v.)], but whenever it approaches what is ugly, it turns away and curls up and does not generate, but rather is in travail because it retains the embryo. That is why what is beautiful occasions much excitement in the pregnant and already swollen: *either* [taking *ton echonta* as subject and ‘understanding’ *to kalon*] because *he* who has beauty releases the pregnant from great pangs [*wdis* = ‘pangs of the birth of childbirth’ (LSJ, s. v.); *or* [taking *to kalon* as subject and *ton echonta* in one sense as object] because beauty releases *him* who has the embryo from great pangs; *or* [again taking *to kalon* as subject, but *ton echonta* in another sense as object] because beauty releases him who has great pangs from them. (206d3–e1; translation with notes taken from Wardy [2002: 45–6])

Many of the key terms in Greek do not have a meaning that is gender specific.²¹ For example, *kuo* (209a1, a2, b1, b5, c3) can mean ‘conceive’ in the sense that a woman conceives a child and becomes pregnant; but with a male subject, it has a causal meaning, ‘impregnate’. *Tikto* (209a3, b2, c3) can mean ‘bring into the world’ and ‘engender’; used with a female subject, it means ‘bear’, and with a male subject, ‘beget’. *Gemmao* is used mostly with male subjects but can also be used with female. As Evans (2006: 14) argues: ‘It becomes clear that these words in Greek cover semantic ground the corresponding English words do not. In English, beget and conceive are thought to be conceptually different, one used solely of the male, the other solely of the female; but in Greek, each single verb covers the role that both genders play in procreation. Verbs like *kuo* and *tikto* are, in a

²⁰ It should be noted that all the manuscripts have τὸ κούων (i.e., the participle of κυέω), which never means ‘impregnate’ but always ‘conceive’ or ‘be in travail’ (Liddell et al. (1940) and other dictionaries). Only κύω (non-contract) can mean (very rarely) ‘impregnate’, but its participle would be τὸ κύων: it is this verb (not κυέω) that we find in the example from Aeschylus’ Fr. 44 (‘δύβρος . . . ἔκυσε γαῖαν’). The aorist of κυέω would be ἐκύησε. I thank Christain Keime for drawing attention to this.

²¹ Noted by Dover (1980: 147); Halperin (1990: 117 and 139ff); Wardy (2002: 45–7); and Evans (2006: 14–15, n. 12), who cite examples of *kuo* meaning ‘conceive’ or ‘be pregnant’ are found in Hesiod *Theogony* 405; *Iliad* 19.117, 23.266; Herodotus 5.92. The causal meaning ‘impregnate’ that applies to the male is attested in the aorist tense in Aeschylus’ Fr. 44 (a fragment from the *Danaids*). In Homer, *tikto* is used of both men and women: of men, for example, *Iliad* 2.628, 6.155 of Phyleus and Glaucus; of women, for example, *Iliad* 16.180, 22.428 of Polymele and Hecuba. *Gemmao* is the causal form of *gignomai*, become, be born. See, for example, Sophocles, *Electra* 1412.

sense, gender neutral.’ Plato did not invent this male paradigm of procreation, which was well attested in early Greek mythology and thought.²² From the perspective of a gender binary at least, the language seems muddled on the issue. The question is why that is.

Let us first note that there is *no* reason to take this language as metaphorical.²³ It is only if we are already assuming that pregnancy, birth, and procreation are exclusively female activities, and their salient expression is physical, that we *then* suppose that their application beyond the sphere of the female is metaphorical. There is no evidence that Plato made this assumption, however; on the contrary, the text is emphatic that *all* human beings are pregnant in body and soul – in which case ‘it is no accident that the pregnant one is expressed by a neuter participle, *to kuoun*, to avoid a choice between masculine and feminine gender: the grammar is not casual’.²⁴ Pregnancy is categorised by *us* as female, but the philosophical point (supported by, and perhaps giving philosophical expression to, the use of *kuoin* and cognate terms more inclusively by poets and philosophers who applied such terms to males) is that physical pregnancy is but one species of a much larger phenomenon, which covers human creativity of all kinds (205b7–c3). The same point, which is grounded in clarifying genus and species correctly, is made more explicitly about *eros* (205d1–8): there is no ‘sublimation’ in this account of sexual *eros* onto *eros* for knowledge and so on; nor is *eros* for the intelligible form a metaphor. ‘The whole’ of desire for good things and happiness is *eros* (205d1–2): ‘But those who direct themselves to it in all sorts of other ways, in business, or in their love of physical exercise, or in philosophy are neither said to be in love nor to be lovers, while those who proceed to give themselves to just one kind of love have the name of the whole love’ (205d4–8). This is a mistake; just as it is to suppose that pregnancy comes in just the one physical, female, form.

Now, if it is the case both that the language is muddled (from the perspective of a gender binary at least) and that this is not a metaphorical usage of terms that apply properly and exclusively to women, then we cannot make assumption (a) that the ‘female’ can be located; nor then can we suppose, as (b) urges upon us, that Plato is ‘appropriating’ or ‘exploiting’ the female for his own ‘purely masculine philosophical and

²² For example, consider Zeus pregnant with Athena and Dionysus. See Leitao (2012).

²³ Contra Evans (2006: 14): ‘Diotima’s phrase “birth . . . in both body and soul” (206b7) clearly points to a metaphoric usage.’ Rowe (1998: 178): ‘All of human life is seen – for the moment – in terms of a metaphorical (or sometimes, where real sex is involved, actual) process of reproduction.’ Rightly seen by Wardy (2002: 29): ‘It is vital to realize that Diotima is not speaking metaphorically’.

²⁴ Wardy (2002: 46).

reproductive process'²⁵ or that he 'effectively incorporates and allocates to men, the positive dimension of each of these two Greek stereotypes of women'.²⁶ There is nothing distinctly female about procreation, or its accompanying reciprocity and nurture, at all. That, I submit, is the philosophical point exemplified by the ambiguous language. Those who insist that this is no more than male 'appropriation', or 'eclipsing', of the distinctively female reveal themselves either to be stuck in a retrograde essentialism (if this is a biological claim) or to be entrenched in a gender binary (even if socially and historically constructed) that Plato is evidently at pains to resist.

Beyond Binary Thinking

The picture is both more confusing and more promising. Consider Diotima herself. Though introduced as a woman (201d2), her portrayal is muddled by the fact that she exemplifies characteristics of *eros* that were previously associated with a male character. To appreciate this, we need to turn to the story of Eros' parentage, which describes the nature of *eros* (203b1–4a7). According to this story, the gods held a feast to celebrate the birth of Aphrodite. Penia (who becomes Eros' mother) is needy and lacking, uninvited to this feast and associated with the mortal. Being aware of this state, she seeks out the resourceful and divine Poros to fulfil her lack. As a result of this union, Eros was conceived. Though some of this story seems to exploit relatively conventional gender-associations, even here there is disruption: the apparently resourceless Penia schemes, showing the resourcefulness associated with Poros, to make up her lack with an active seduction, while Poros, drunk on nectar, passively sleeps while being taken advantage of by Penia. Such scheming, as it is inherited by Eros in the story, is owed to the father, Poros, and his 'resource'. This mixed parentage enables Eros to be 'a schemer after the beautiful and the good, courageous, impetuous and intense, a clever hunter, always weaving new devices, both passionate for wisdom and resourceful, philosophising throughout his life, a clever magician, sorcerer and sophist' (203d4–8). The central point, though, is that Diotima is described in terms of Eros' father Poros and Socrates in terms of Eros' mother Penia. Socrates sought out Diotima because he was aware of his need (207c1), just as the experience of need motivated Penia to find her Poros in the story; Diotima is presented as 'wise' (201d) and *sophistes* (208c1), like Poros

²⁵ As du Bois argues (1994: 169, 183). ²⁶ Halperin (1990: 130).

(203d6–7, d4), and her Mantinean origins suggests a relationship to the divine, which is the preserve of Poros, invited to dine with the gods. Diotima, in other words, embodies the euporetic aspect of *eros*, which is figured in the story, at least, as coming from the father, even though he falls short of any straightforwardly gendered characteristics by failing to perform the assigned attributes, which are exemplified better by *Penia*'s 'resource' and 'scheming'. If Diotima is a 'woman', and aligned with Poros, it is simply not clear what associations this brings.²⁷

The story, which gives us the tools to appreciate the characteristics of Socrates and Diotima, takes us to the heart of Diotima's concern with the notion of the *metaxu*, from which it takes its lead (202e–3a) and to which it returns immediately after the tale is told (204a–b6). Consider the very first thing that Socrates learnt from Diotima, which was a lesson in how to move beyond binary thinking. Socrates, much like Agathon, had assumed that *eros* is beautiful and good. Diotima refutes this view, on the grounds that *eros* desires what it lacks, either now or in the future. Since *eros* desires what is beautiful and good, *eros* cannot be beautiful nor good (199d–201c). Socrates then wonders whether this commits him to supposing that *eros* is the opposite of these things. Once he has grasped the difference between contraries and contradictories, he sees that something can be not beautiful and good, without being ugly and base. Binary thinking is evidently not helpful when understanding the phenomenon of *eros*. What follows is an elaboration of this point with an account of *eros* as intermediate (*metaxu*) between opposites (201e8–2b5) – for example, beautiful and ugly, good and base, knowledge and ignorance, divine and mortal, which culminates in an account of *eros* as an intermediary *daimon* (202e5–3a8), and which is then given further expression in the story of Poros and *Penia*. Once the story is completed, Diotima returns to her central point about the *metaxu* with the example of those who philosophise (204b1–b5), explaining that it is due to the characteristics inherited from Poros and *Penia* that *Eros* is in this intermediate state (b6–7). Elaborating the *metaxu* structures this entire section.²⁸

²⁷ On such grounds, Wardy concludes that: 'Despite appearances, Diotima is not a woman, and her towering presence in the depths of the interior of the dialogue is no vindication of the female' (2002: 44). He relays various characteristics that are more commonly associated with males that are ascribed to Diotima, as well as pointing out that it seems that Socrates has been 'impregnated' by her.

²⁸ For the importance of this see Irigaray (1989: 10); Frede (1993: 403–7), with Wardy (2002: 39), who argues that 'beyond her speech, intermediaries, intermediates, and liminal characters are salient in the dialogue.'

The notion of the *metaxu* requires unpacking. It could mean that *eros* is a combination of opposite qualities, or it could mean that *eros* oscillates between opposite qualities, such that a desiring agent is never properly determined by either.²⁹ In the story of Poros and Penia, the suggestion is that Eros is intermediate in a *dynamic* sense, which is to say that he fluctuates between a variety of opposite characteristics; *eros* mediates between opposites (201e8–2b5). For example, from his mother Eros has need as his constant companion, but in virtue of his father Eros is a resourceful schemer after the beautiful and the good. Eros' nature is *neither* that of a mortal nor an immortal; rather he lives and flourishes whenever he finds resources but then dies again because those resources are always slipping away from him (203e4–5), though he has the ability to 'come back to life again' (203e3). From this description, it seems that Eros at least temporarily manifests the properties of the one parent, then that of the other, and so on. The story of Eros is evidently designed to explicate human *eros*, and it suggests that *eros* is a dynamic experience. This coheres well with the description of mortal life in a constant state of flux and change (207b5–8c5). According to this, mortal beings are indeterminate creatures, unlike the gods who have a fixed identity that persists through time (208a8). Described as the best helper for human nature (212b4–5), *eros* is the engine, or energy of self-constitution, which assists in the task of self-determination. This occurs through creative effort, which is geared towards reproducing the value seen in the world and to capturing it in a life of one's own, as a parent, poet, legislator, or philosopher, depending on how one conceives of value and the creative efforts one deploys to secure it. This explains the emphasis on stability and fixity at the apex of the ascent (211a1–b7). We are seeking a creative environment – a beauty – which inspires an act of self-creation that speaks not only to our aspiration for the good but for stable determination in a world of flux. This is the world in which *eros* not only operates but brings to our attention in the experience of desire, as we sense that lack and neediness, coupled with a forceful urge to overcome it.

²⁹ Allen argues as follows: 'Plato uses the term intermediate in at least two distinguishable senses. Sometimes intermediates are described as having a share of opposite qualities; if *eros* were intermediate in this sense, it would be both good and bad, ugly, and beautiful, mortal and immortal. In another sense, intermediates instead of possessing both opposites possess neither . . . the intermediate character of *eros* is of this kind' (1991: 49). Compare *Gorgias* 467e3–5: 'Is there anything which is either good nor bad, or what is in between these, neither good nor bad?', which is later elaborated as 'such things partake of the good, sometimes of the bad, and sometimes of neither' (468a1). See also *Lysis* 216c; *Prt.* 351d.

Viewed against the backdrop of the notion of the *metaxu*, the interaction between Socrates and Diotima not only exemplifies the interaction between Poros and Penia but the complexity of *eros*' nature in the delivery of this speech. Any collapse of gendered polarities into a more fluid picture is very much to the point. The upshot is not that desiring agents exhibit a kind of psychic hermaphroditism in the experience of desire but rather that they dynamically fluctuate between any perceived binary, including that between genders.³⁰ Socrates is both the 'beautiful' student who allows Diotima to 'give birth' to wisdom (the speech of which Socrates is the recipient), and Socrates, in turn, due to encountering this 'beautiful' wisdom gives birth to wisdom of his own (dialectical enquiries of which Diotima's theory gives the inspiration). Are these gendered? Not any more than they were earlier, where attention to the language suggests it is decidedly genderqueer (e.g., 206d–e). The lesson from Diotima is that *eros* is a non-binary facilitator and we create ourselves anew as desiring beings who are 'self-determining and fully participate in the development of whatever self-determination we suppose will deliver *eudaimonia*.'³¹ Though the discussion of the *metaxu* is general enough to accommodate gender binaries, notice that they are not explicitly included in this list of beautiful and ugly, good and base, knowledge and ignorance. Perhaps gender categories exist, just as knowledge and ignorance, or beauty and ugliness, but if so, how they are conceived remains an open question. Or it could be the case that they are not included in this list precisely because, unlike the good and the bad, or the mortal and the divine, gendered characteristics are not objective or relevant opposites. Or they might be objective (like 'tall, short') but not relevant, which is the important criterion here (cf. the *Republic* 5. 455d–e). Whatever the answer to that question, *eros*' relationship to (real or perceived) binaries is surely clear; desiring agents will never be determined by them. The genderqueer vocabulary and portrayal of Socrates and Diotima works beautifully to illustrate that point.

The determination eventually advocated in the ascent, where *eros* is envisaged to reach its *telos*, is markedly inclusive (*anthropoi* 211e2, 212a, b7; *thnetes*, 211e3) and beyond gender. The cultural pursuits of the Highest Mysteries are neither shaped nor determined in any significant way by gender. Diotima is not sure whether Socrates can follow them, but

³⁰ The position of psychic hermaphroditism I once entertained, was taken up by Wardy (2002: 47), who rightly raises the question of whether the disparity between genders disappears in this mix.

³¹ I adapt the phrase from Grant (1994: 183), whose humanist vision for feminism argues that 'the aim of feminist politics is the end of gender and the creation of new human beings who are self-determining and fully participate in the development of their own constantly evolving subjectivity'.

that is not because he is a man who has failed to grasp ‘female’ truths but because they are difficult, and it is not clear how far he has come at that point. The ‘entry criteria’ such as they are, concern whether one is willing and able to engage in the reflective activity characteristic of the ascent, which involves a turn away from the body (*kataphronein*, 210b5). Lest we suppose that the denigration of the body brings with it a denigration of the female,³² it should be noted that there is *no* association of the female with the body here: all human beings are pregnant in both body and soul (*pantes anthropoi*, 206c1–2), where that means, on the psychic level, that women no less than men carry ‘wisdom and the rest of virtue’ (209c). Those (presumably men) who are pregnant in body and turn to women to produce children are denigrated not for turning to women but for doing so with the sole purpose of physical reproduction in mind, supposing that this will bring them memory and *eudaimonia* for all time to come (208e5–6). The privileged relationships are not gendered, entered into by gendered beings, on account of their gender difference. It may be true that the disdain for the body shown in Diotima’s speech is indicative of *somatophobia*, as Spelman argues (1982), on the grounds that bodily identity is not indicative of who we are, but this is not (as Spelman argues) tethered to misogyny because there is no association of the female with the bodily here. As she rightly argues later, ‘it doesn’t make any difference, ultimately, whether we have a woman’s body or a man’s body’; or rather, it does not make any difference for these purposes, or for ethical evaluation more generally.³³ That is not to say that Plato was unaware of the disfiguring effects for society as a whole that existing categorisations place

³² See, for example, Spelman (1982: 118): ‘[Plato’s] misogyny is part of his *somatophobia*: the body is seen as the source of all the undesirable traits a human being could have, and women’s lives are spent in manifesting those traits’; ‘[Plato] depicts women’s lives as quintessentially body-directed’ (19). Compare Saxonhouse (1991: 151) on the body in the *Republic*.

³³ Spelman (1982: 117–18):

Plato insists, over and over again in a variety of ways, that our souls are the most important parts of us. Not only is it through our souls that we shall have access to knowledge, reality, goodness, beauty; but also, in effect, we are our souls . . . our bodies are not essential to our identity . . . if we are our souls, and our bodies are not essential to who we are, then it doesn’t make any difference, ultimately, whether we have a woman’s body or a man’s body . . . if the only difference between women and men is that they have different bodies, and if bodies are mere incidental attachments to what constitutes one’s real identity, then there is no important difference between men and women.

It seems unlikely that Plato supposed immortal souls had a gender; in which case, Spelman is surely right that gender differentiation is a facet of embodiment. Notions of metempsychosis prior to Plato do not usually restrict souls to embodiments of just one gender. Empedocles claims to have lived various human and non-human lives and to have been individuals of different genders.

upon those who are physically capable of bearing children; *Republic* 5 is evidence to the contrary. It is to say that in this text at least, only those who are enslaved to the body have to take heed of gender difference (208e5–6). Those who suppose that *eudaimonia* is satisfied in physical reproduction have to adhere to a gender binary, for the simple fact that in this instance at least it is indeed the case that ‘a woman bears and a man begets’; but if we move beyond the body then we are liberated from attaching such relevance to this simple fact; it becomes as relevant as the fact that some people have hair and some are bald (*Rep.* 454c). The body can be played with, along with whatever gender markers others may bring to that: Socrates can ‘beautify’ himself for Agathon (174a7); he can show endurance and hardiness through his body if he chooses (220a); he can use his body to pursue or to be pursued. Do we wish to gender that behaviour? And why? There is little value attached to the body or to any of the gender markers we (or the ancient Greeks) may apply to it. Since the body continues to invite the constraints of gendered categories, this is surely all to the good. If the question is not ‘Does this text reflect female experience in the use of Diotima?’, but ‘Does Diotima assist not just the liberation of women (however conceived), but all those who question the relevance of gendered categories?’ (of which the non-binary movement is now the stellar example), then Diotima is surely an ally.³⁴

Conclusion

It is a curiosity of the age that we are being invited to reflect on whether we can identify with the authors we study. Perhaps this only seems curious from the vantage of a philosophy characterised by strangeness and provocation. If prompted to reflect as a woman (conceived by my culture and time), then I find that identifying with Plato’s dialogues is not difficult. One can find recognition of the experiences our own age continues to gender as female (birth, pregnancy, midwifery). The drive to acknowledge a care-centred component of rationality associated with feminist thinkers (Gilligan [1982]; Kittay and Meyers [1987]) is not news to any reader of Plato, for whom caring interpersonal relationships form a crucial part of his

³⁴ Particularly those in the non-binary movement who identify as genderqueer, on which see, for example, Faucette (2014: 74): ‘Non-binary activism is not about taking away others’ gender identity; rather it’s about questioning the unique pedestal on which gender stands as a system of classification and an identity marker, and especially the heavy use of a classification system that is based on assumptions rather than consent.’

ethical outlook.³⁵ And the ‘morality of responsibility’, associated with Gilligan (1982) is foreshadowed in the ethics of the *Republic*, in which philosophers have responsibilities to others they would otherwise not have had *because* they stand in a relationship of friendship and care for those others.³⁶ Membership of a community plays a constitutive role in self-identity.³⁷ While both Plato and Gilligan value an ethics of care and responsibility to others in our communities, unlike Gilligan, Plato does not take this trait to be gendered. For those who resist attaching such weight to the gendering of these laudable characteristics, it is the provocative Plato with whom one identifies, who provides a liberating dialogical space that recognises the social markers of his time, ‘outs’ them as mere contingent playthings of the age time, shows sensitivity to the political and philosophical dangers their associations can bring, and invites us to conceive new imaginative possibilities.³⁸ Perhaps this overlooks the casual sexism that litters certain dialogues.³⁹ Arguably, this is the price we pay for the acknowledgement that Plato meets interlocutors on their own terms in these ‘situated’ dialogical spaces (*Phdr.* 269d–74b); this means using the language and associations of his time and place. As for philosophical commitments, more persistent are accounts of virtue as gender neutral, a gender-neutral soul, and an inclusive appeal to all human beings to take up philosophy. From that perspective, why there continues to be so much investment in Diotima’s gender is one question Plato invites us to entertain.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ruddick (1980); Gilligan (1982). Compare MacIntyre (1999: 3) who cites feminist thinkers as allies in acknowledging dependence and the importance of social relationships in human development.

³⁶ On this, see Sheffield (2021). ³⁷ See Benhabib (1986/87).

³⁸ For resistance to the vindication of the ‘female’, see Simone de Beauvoir (1949/52: 123): women’s demand is ‘not that they be exalted in their femininity; they wish that in themselves, as in humanity in general, transcendence may prevail over immanence’, cited in Spelman (1982).

³⁹ For the association of women with weakness and emotional incontinence, see *Rep.* 395d–e: ‘A woman, young or old, wrangling with her husband, defying heaven, loudly boasting, fortunate in her own conceit, or involved in misfortune or possessed by grief and lamentation, still less a woman that is sick or in labour.’ Compare *Rep.* 605c–d: ‘When in our lives some affection comes to us you are aware that we pride ourselves . . . on our ability to remain calm and endure, in the belief that this is the conduct of a man and giving in to grief that of a woman.’ Compare the description of the tyrant, who ‘must live for the most part cowering in the recesses of his house like a woman, envying among other citizens anyone who goes abroad and sees any good thing’ (*Rep.* 597c). In the *Timaeus*, incarnation into a woman is a degeneration (*Tim.* 42b–c; 76e; 91a).

⁴⁰ Thanks to Christian Keime and James Warren for comments.