

Love and Procreation in Plato's *Symposium* 206b–207a

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There are two types of interpretation of Plato's *Symposium* 206b–207a, one of which takes the procreation explained there to be the male ejaculation, which occurs in sexual intercourse, and the other takes it to be the mother's bearing a baby. I argue for the latter interpretation, understanding διὰ τὸ μεγάλης ὀδίνος ἀπολύειν τὸν ἔχοντα (206e1) as meaning 'because what is beautiful releases from great agony the one who is pregnant with a baby', while interpreters who maintain the former interpretation translate it as, for example, 'the reason ... is that the bearer of beauty releases us from our agony' (Waterfield). What is beautiful, in which procreation occurs, is not the beautiful body of a beautiful person, but whatever is beautiful, including beautiful circumstances, beautiful activities and such a beautiful midwife as Socrates as well as the beautiful partner, in whose presence the lovers want to spend time together and give birth to their child.

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1. *Symposium* 206b–207a

In the *Symposium* Diotima explains the function of love as follows:

(L1) It is procreation in what is beautiful, in body as well as in soul (ἔστι ... τοῦτο τόκος ἐν καλῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν) (206b7–8).

To solve Socrates' perplexity, Diotima explains her meaning:

(L2) All human beings are pregnant ... both in body and in soul, and on reaching a certain age our nature desires to procreate. But it cannot procreate in what is ugly, but only in what is beautiful (206c1–5).

(L3) For the being together of man and woman is procreation (ἡ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν) (206c5–6).

(L4) It is a divine affair, and resides in the mortal being as an immortal element, the pregnancy (κύησις) and the engendering (γέννησις) (206c6–8).

(L5) But these things cannot occur in what is out of harmony. And what is ugly is out of harmony with whatever is divine, whereas what is beautiful is in harmony. That is why Beauty (*Kallonē*) presides over birth, as Fate (*Moirā*) and the goddess of childbirth (*Eileithyia*) (206c8–d3).

(L6) For these reasons whenever what is pregnant (τὸ κυοῦν) approaches what is beautiful (καλῷ), it becomes gracious, and relaxes (διαχεῖται), becoming joyful, and procreates

and engenders (τίκτει τε καὶ γεννᾷ). But when it approaches what is ugly, it contracts (συσπειρᾶται), becoming sullen and feeling pain, and it turns away and curls up (ἀνειλλεται), and does not engender (οὐ γεννᾷ), but having what is conceived in pregnancy (τὸ κῆμα), suffers badly. This is why the vehement emotion for what is beautiful (τὸ καλὸν) visits what is pregnant and already swelling (σπαργῶντι), (L6a) διὰ τὸ μεγάλης ὠδίνος ἀπολύειν τὸν ἔχοντα (d3–e1).

(L7) For what love desires is not what is beautiful, ... but engendering (γεννήσεως) and procreation (τόκου) in what is beautiful, ... and the reason why love desires engendering is that engendering is for our mortal being something ever-existent and immortal. If love desires for what is good to be always one's own, then it necessarily follows from what has been agreed that it desires immortality as well as what is good. It thus necessarily follows from this argument that love desires also immortality (206e2–207a4).

2. Two Types of Interpretation

There are two ways of reading this passage, especially as to how to interpret (L1) and (L3), and how to translate διὰ τὸ μεγάλης ὠδίνος (agony) ἀπολύειν τὸν ἔχοντα (L6a: 206e1). (L3) is excised by some editors (e.g. Ast, Badham, Burnet, Bury). Bury (1932), for example, says, 'Most edd. (except Hommel and Stallb.) agree in excising this clause as a meaningless intrusion' (111). But editors like Lamb (1925), Robin (1970), Dover (1980) and Rowe (1998) keep it in their text. In fact whether one takes it to be meaningless or not depends upon how one understands this passage.

One type of interpretation (Reading A), which I think has recently become a mainstream is typically observable in Waterfield's translation.¹

(L1) Love's purpose is physical and mental procreation in an attractive medium (206b7–8).

(L3) and yes, sex between a man and a woman is a kind of birth (206c5–6).

(L6a) the reason ... is that the bearer of beauty releases us from our agony (206e1).²

Reading A takes καλόν (what is beautiful) in ἐν καλῷ (in what is beautiful), which Waterfield translates as 'an attractive medium' in (L1), to be a beautiful woman, referring to the typical Greek view of childbirth as the male parent engendering his child in the woman as an incubator.³ Dover (1980) thus argues that τόκος (procreation) in τόκος ἐν καλῷ (206b7–8) is 'the ejaculation of semen by the male' (147).⁴ Thus, according to this reading, the pregnancy here in question is the male pregnancy and the engendering is the male engendering, which is in fact the male ejaculation. So although such physical terms as 'relax', 'contract', 'curl up', 'swelling' and 'agony' (ὠδὶς 206e1), employed in (L6), normally suggest female reactions in childbirth, this reading takes them to be male genital reactions rather than, or in addition to, female reactions, both of which are caused by

1 Waterfield (1994), 48–9. The same type of reading is adopted by Morrison (1964) 52; Stokes (1986) 161–163; Halperin (1990) 117; Rowe (1998) 89, 183–184; Gill (1999) 43–44; Hunter (2004) 88; Park (2007) 108–109.

2 As to the translation of this clause, Lamb (1925) 191–192; Anderson (1993) 73; Benardete (1993) 37; Rowe (1998) 89, 183–184; Gill (1999) 44; Hunter (2004) 88; Park (2007) 108; Howatson & Sheffield (2008) 44 also take τὸν ἔχοντα as the subject that releases another from great agony.

3 Waterfield (1994) 86; Hunter (2004) 88.

4 Cf. also Pender (1992) 74.

strong stimulation in sexual intercourse.⁵

However, there is another type of interpretation (Reading B). It takes the subject of ἀπολύειν in (L6a, 206e1) to be τὸ καλόν (206e1), while Reading A takes it to be τὸν ἔχοντα. Reading B takes τὸν ἔχοντα to be the object of ἀπολύειν. As to the object of the verb ἔχοντα, although interpreters adopting Reading A unanimously take it to be τὸ καλόν, some of Reading B supporters take it to be ὠδῖς (agony),⁶ while some take it to be τὸ καλόν.⁷

But Reading B is criticized by those who support Reading A. For example, Rowe (1998) says as follows:

the Greek could also mean ‘because of the fact that it frees from great pain the one who has it (the great pain)’, but ‘the one who has it’ seems in this case lame, even redundant — and Diotima has so far preferred to keep the pregnant subject in the (generalizing) neuter (so at least in d4,⁸ and it is then natural to take *tôi kuounti te kai ... spargônti*, ‘what is pregnant and already full to bursting’, also as neuter).⁹

As to the first criticism, Rowe does not consider the possibility of taking the object of ἔχοντα to be τὸ καλόν, arguing as if it is self-evident that its object is ὠδῖς (agony). But he may be right in excluding this possibility. For if we take it to be τὸ καλόν, the translation of 206e1 will become either (T1) or (T2):

(T1) The beauty releases from great agony the one who acquires the beauty.

(T2) The beauty releases from great agony the one who has been pregnant with the beauty.

But as to (T1), it is difficult to understand ἔχοντα (having) in the sense of ‘acquire’, and as to (T2), although what one is pregnant with may be καλόν in some sense, τὸ καλόν appearing in 206b–207a represents only beautiful things existing outside the pregnant person (206c5, d2, 3, e1, 2, 5).

However, as to the object of ἔχοντα, there is another possibility. In 206d7 Diotima uses the expression ἴσχον τὸ κῆμα (having what is conceived in pregnancy). This suggests that the object of ἔχοντα is τὸ κῆμα (what is conceived in pregnancy). According to this reading, which I adopt, 206e1 (L6a) can be translated as ‘because what is beautiful releases from great agony the one who is pregnant with a baby’.¹⁰

As to Rowe’s second point against Reading B, although Diotima has kept the pregnant subject in the neuter until τὸ κοῦν (206d4), as he points out, the subject was initially ‘all human beings’ (πάντες ἄνθρωποι), when Diotima started talking about the relationship between pregnancy and procreation (206c2), and even at 206c5 she had in mind ‘man and woman’ (ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς).

5 Dover (1980) 147; Stokes (1986) 162–163; Anderson (1993) 73; Waterfield (1994) 87; Rowe (1998) 183; Gill (1999) 78 n. 114.

6 Rowe (1998) 183–184, who criticises Reading B, supposes that for Reading B the object of ἔχοντα is ὠδῖς (agony). Also cf. the translation of Groden (1970) 86, who adopts Reading B.

7 e.g. Hamilton (1951) 87; Robin (1970) 61; Suzuki (1974) 88; Allen (1991) 151. It is unclear what Nehamas and Woodruff (1989) 53 take the object of ἔχοντα to be, but they take anyway the subject of ἀπολύειν to be τὸ καλόν (206e1), and its object to be τὸν ἔχοντα.

8 Though d3 in Rowe’s text, d4 in Burnet’s text.

9 Rowe (1998) 183–184.

10 Totsuka (1969) 166 seems to have adopted this reading. Although I support this reading, it may be also possible to take the object of ἔχοντα to be ὠδῖς, despite Rowe’s claim that it is ‘lame, even redundant’. Lameness or redundancy will not be the definite ground to reject the interpretation.

She began to use the neuter in 206c7, when she enlarged her scope to the animal world (τῷ ζῳῷ 206c7), in order to draw attention to something immortal universally involved in pregnancy and engendering. But still what she originally had in mind was human beings, and this is supposed to have made her return again to the masculine at 206e1, after employing at 206d3 the dative (τῷ κυοῦντί τε καὶ ... σπαργῶντι), which is ambivalent between neuter (animal) and masculine (human being).

According to Reading A, which takes the subject of ἀπολύειν (release) to be the person who has beauty, the release will be naturally understood as taking place in sexual intercourse. So interpreters maintaining Reading A understand ‘relax’, ‘contract’, ‘curl up’, ‘swelling’ and ὄδις (agony) in (L6) as something to do with male ejaculation, even though they themselves admit that the expressions in their normal uses represent female reactions in childbirth. For example, Dover understands σπαργῶντι (206d8) as the description of a reaction of the genitals to sexual stimulus. Morrison (1964) also makes the same claim and refers to *Phaedrus* 256a, where, according to him, Plato is employing σπαργῶν to indicate the disposition of the male lover (52). But the image the word normally arouses is certainly the swelling of the breasts with milk,¹¹ and the swelling of the male lover Morrison takes to be described in the *Phaedrus* 256a is in fact the swelling (excitement) of the soul, basically applicable to women as well as to men, and has nothing to do with the physical swelling of the male genitals. Besides, its position after ‘is pregnant’ (κυοῦντί 206d8) supports the view that what Plato tried to suggest by σπαργῶν was the swelling of the breasts filled with milk, which certainly causes pain when there is no baby to feed, and pleasure when there is.

Also it was believed around Plato’s time that the female also emits semen, and contributes to the formation of the baby in the womb, as interpreters of Reading A themselves admit.¹² In his *De Generatione Animalium* Aristotle refers to the child’s resemblance to both parents as an evidence of the female emission of semen, contributing thus to the nature of the child. Plato himself refers to the resemblance of Eros to his mother as well as to his father (203c–d), which I think indicates that Plato also thought that the mother contributes to the formation of the child, and did not take the mother as a mere incubator.¹³

3. Being Together of Lovers

Thus, as far as the belief in the female contribution and the physical terms of reactions in (L6) are concerned, it is more natural to take 206b–e as the description of childbirth than of sexual intercourse. Then why do interpreters adopt Reading A? It is mainly because they believe that ἡ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία in 206c5–6 is sexual intercourse, as is clear from Waterfield’s translation, ‘and yes, sex between a man and a woman is a kind of birth’. But how is sexual intercourse a kind of birth, and what is born during sex? Generally in sexual intercourse the male

11 Cf. LSJ and its references to Euripides, *Bacchae* 701, *Cyclops* 55; Plato, *Republic* 360c; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.79.6; Plutarch, *De fortuna Romanorum* 320d.

12 *De Generatione Animalium* 1.17.721b6–722a1; 1.19, and Lloyd (1983) 86ff. Cf. also Dover (1980) 147; Halperin (1990) 138–9; Rowe (1998) 183; Hunter (2004) 88; Howatson & Sheffield (2008) 44, though Stokes (1986) 162 and Pender (1992) 74 rather draw attention to the view that the father is the true parent, with the emphasis to male ejaculation.

13 Cf. Kanayama (2016) 251.

is considered to be active, emitting semen, and the female passive, receiving them. Then, 'a kind of birth', which is active and takes place in sexual intercourse, will be naturally identified with male ejaculation.

However, as I argued in Kanayama (2016) 251–252, *συνουσία* (being together) in the *Symposium* is 'being together', and nothing more. Interpreters, seeking for an evidence that *συνουσία* means sexual intercourse, often have recourse to Aristophanes' statement in 192c4–7 that no one will think that it is for the sake of the being together (*συνουσία*) of sexual pleasures that one rejoices in being together with another. But this statement suggests, on the contrary, that even for Aristophanes *συνουσία* is not sexual intercourse, for he had to add *τῶν ἀφροδισίων* (of sexual pleasures) to *συνουσία* (being together) to make it mean 'sexual intercourse'. When Aristophanes said 'one rejoices in being together (*συνῶν*) with another', what he meant by 'being together' was just the being together in which lovers find great joy, spending time together, and although it may eventually lead to sexual intercourse, it is not the object nor indispensable element of spending time together. Then, what is its object? Lovers themselves cannot answer the question why they want to be together (192c). But Aristophanes has his own answer: it is because they desire to return to their original whole (192e–193a). And Plato has a more appropriate answer. As the fact that if any part is bad or evil, we rather have it cut off suggests, what we want is something good (205d–e), and we want it to be our own forever, which reveals our natural desire for immortality, and love is the great help for us to achieve this purpose (207a).

If we take *συνουσία* in 206c5–6 as the being together of lovers, and take *ἡ ... ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν* as meaning 'the being together is the process or the time of procreating',¹⁴ we can understand Diotima's explanation in 206b–207a in the most natural way. To see Diotima's additional explanation at 207a–b, dealing with the animal world, will help us better to understand her message.

In the animal world all the animals are thrown into a strange state, when they desire to beget: they all become sick and are caught by love, so much so that they vehemently try to have intercourse with one another (207a8–b2). In the same way, in the human world, when we have reached a certain age, we go around, trying to find our true lover, just as those who are pregnant in soul become ready and willing to procreate when they have reached a certain age and go around (*περιῶν* 209b3), trying to find what is beautiful in which they are able to engender (209a8–b4). We try to find our partner, because we are all pregnant in body and in soul, but we cannot procreate in what is ugly, but only in what is beautiful (*ἐν τῷ καλῷ*) (206c). In this strange state common to animals as well as to humans the first target of animals is sexual intercourse (*συνμιγῆναι ἀλλήλοις* 207b1–2), but we humans are different. We just want to be together, and we do not know why we want to be together (192c). The goal of human love is not sexual intercourse.

4. Presence of What Is Beautiful

So when Diotima says in (L1) that the function of love is procreation in (*ἐν*) what is beautiful, in body as well as in soul, and in (L2) that our nature cannot procreate in what is ugly, but only

¹⁴ Kanayama (2016) 252.

in (ἐν) what is beautiful, the preposition ‘in’ (ἐν) in ‘in what is beautiful’ should not be taken in the sense of ‘inside’, that is, ‘inside the beautiful body’. It should be taken rather in the wide sense of ‘in the presence of’, to designate something beautiful in which the being together of lovers and the procreation to which it eventually leads take place (206c4–5, 7, e5).¹⁵ It is not inside the body of the beautiful person but in the presence of what is beautiful that procreation as childbirth takes place.

When we fall in love, we want our beautiful partner always to be near us. We want to engage with him or her in beautiful activities in beautiful places. We want a beautiful house as the place in which to live together and to rear our baby. When the baby is coming, we want a beautiful place for procreation. And as the assistant for the birth we want a fine (beautiful) midwife (obstetrician), and want the presence of Beauty (*Kallonē*) as Fate (*Moirā*) and the goddess of childbirth (*Eileithyia*). And the mother in labour wants her beautiful husband to be near, and the husband wants to be near his beautiful wife. Also in the case of spiritual birth, many beautiful and magnificent discourses and thoughts are born in ungrudging philosophy (210d5–6), which is of course beautiful, even though philosophers, who are mortal, are neither beautiful nor ugly, being between the two (201e–202b). And Socrates was a beautiful spiritual midwife whose presence those who were spiritually pregnant sought after. All these beautiful things are represented by ‘what is beautiful’ (καλῶ 206b8, τῷ καλῶ c5) that comes after ‘in’ (ἐν). The use of the neuter (τὸ καλόν) at 206d2 and e1 suggests that Plato intended to make it cover such different kinds of beautiful things. And we desire all these beautiful things, because, as Diotima says, it is possible to procreate only in (in the presence of) what is beautiful.

Thus, (L3) is not a meaningless intrusion, as Bury supposed. By pointing out in (L3) the fact that what we actually want to achieve through living together, which we are eager to do, is to procreate, Diotima explains the fundamental fact of humanity that we are pregnant in body and soul, and that is why we seek for what is beautiful, as is explained in (L2).

5. Rearing of What Was Born

When explaining what happens in the actual birth of a baby in the case of animals, Diotima spends only two words, τοῦ γενομένου (‘of what was born’, 207b2) and moves at once to the explanation of how animals rear their children, saying that even the weakest are ready to fight hard battles against the strongest, and to sacrifice their lives for their children (207b2–6). In the explanation of the birth and rearing in the human world the emphasis is contrary; she explains rather minutely how the mother is affected in childbirth (L6), and as to what happens after the birth of the child she does not stop to give any explanation. But there is certainly such a process in the human world, especially because it takes much more time for human beings to become independent enough to live without the help of parents. And although Diotima does not touch the rearing of physical human children, she certainly refers to the rearing of a spiritual child: it is carried out as the co-work of the lovers (συνεκτρέφει κοινῇ μετ’ ἐκείνου), and the love and friendship secured through it is much stronger than that secured in the rearing of a physical child (209c4–7).

¹⁵ As to the suggestion of ‘in the presence of’ as the meaning of ἐν (in), cf. Nehamas & Woodruff (1989) 53 n. 79; Sheffield (2006) 87 n. 14; Kanayama (2016) 251.

And finally as the culmination of the mystery of love, Diotima says that when a person has given birth to a true virtue, he or she rears it up (θρεψαμένω), and, through this rearing, comes to be loved by the gods, so as finally to become immortal (212a5–7).

But here one may wonder why the singular masculine is employed to designate the subject that becomes immortal. Was it not the case that the lovers together rear their spiritual child? However, we should note that in Diotima's explanation of the final mysteries (210aff.) there are references to the guide and the person who is guided (210a6–7, 211c1). And the whole process that enables one to ascend to the Beautiful itself is described as the right way of boy-loving (παιδεραστειν 211b5–6). In 211b7–c1 Diotima refers to two ways of engaging in the way of love, approaching the goal on one's own and being led by someone else. It would be ideal if we are always accompanied by the person whom we love. But when we rear up our child with that person, it sometimes happens that we cannot help being separated from him or her, and on such an occasion what encourages and helps us in our endeavour of rearing is the memory of that person (209c3–4). The extreme case of separation takes place when that person dies, just as Socrates died in the prison. So Plato could not help rearing on his own the child he gave birth to together with Socrates, but he was in a sense always accompanied by Socrates, who continued to live in his memory. For Plato the writing of Socratic dialogues, recalling his deeds and words, was his attempt to rear the child their love helped them to procreate, so as to achieve immortality.

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