

Andrea Nye

Socrates and Diotima: Sexuality, Religion, and the Nature of Divinity
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Andrea Nye's *Socrates and Diotima: Sexuality, Religion, and the Nature of Divinity* is one of a series of books published by Palgrave MacMillan under the title "Breaking Feminist Waves." The series is intended, as the title suggests, as a challenge to the traditional notion of feminism as a series of historical "waves," leaving the space to expand on feminist scholarship, particularly on neglected areas of past academic work. Nye's book is a worthy contribution to this project. In it, she revives Diotima's dialogue with Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, challenging past approaches to Diotima's lessons in love, as well as inviting the reader to rethink these lessons. As Nye describes it, her book is "a fresh reading of an old text" (xi). It is also a book that investigates the history of religious and philosophical thought and one that reconceptualizes eros, divinity, ethics, and even the very being of the human.

The book is divided into three parts of four chapters each. The equal proportions of this book are strangely satisfying, perhaps because each section has been extremely well thought out and arranged. In part I, Nye reinterprets Diotima's lessons in love, using a hypothesis that does not reject the possibility that Diotima actually did exist and teach Socrates. This reading will be a contentious one, as the credibility of Diotima's lessons is consistently questioned by philosophers. However, for some feminist philosophers, Nye's rejection of the usual suspicion of Diotima may prove refreshing and open the way for less conservative readings of Diotima's dialogue in the *Symposium*. Part II examines how Diotima's lessons were obscured and misused in Plato's writings and how this influenced, and continued through, Christian thought. The third and final part returns to Diotima's lessons, where Nye guides us through new conceptions of spirituality and morality based on Diotima's lessons in love.

Nye argues that Diotima's views on love differ from those of Plato and Socrates in three key ways. Plato is known for his "ascent" or "ladder" of love, which hierarchizes lower and higher forms of love. Nye, like numerous other philosophers, views Plato's philosophy of love as a loss of the erotic that is replaced by what Roger Scruton has described as "a bloodless philosophical passion" (Scruton 2009, 102) that is not erotic nor directed at human beings. For Plato and Socrates, erotic love needed to be either controlled or repressed. In contrast, Diotima's philosophy of love requires erotic desire in order to create the movement toward the ethical. Second, Nye argues that in the philosophy of Socrates and Plato, eros is conceptualized as a God and is narrowly defined as sexual love, whereas Diotima's eros is a spirit that can be understood broadly as desire found across human relationships and actions. Rather than a God, Diotima's love is an intermediary spirit. The third key way in which

Diotima's philosophy of love differs from that of Plato and Socrates in how it conceptualizes the idea of immortality. Contrasting the traditional idea of an immortal flight of the soul to heaven, Nye explains that Diotima's transcendence is in life. It is in the continual striving to make better lives, more beautiful lives, that we become immortal. Beauty always transcends us as unfixed, changing, and indefinable, but it is only in life that we know it and it is possible to create beauty through our actions in life. Immortality is therefore not in death or in Plato's rationalized transcendent "forms," but in the regeneration of life.

In her prologue to *Socrates and Diotima*, Nye begins by explaining that the standard academic view of Diotima's dialogue in Plato's *Symposium* is that it is a "fiction" created by either Socrates or Plato (x). She pointedly remarks that "no one is able to explain with much certainty" (x) the reason for this hypothesis. With this wry critique of how Diotima has been dealt with by academics in the past, Nye then expresses her own view on Diotima's lessons in love, which she finds more in tune with aspects of the thought of Parmenides, Empedocles, and with Sappho's writings than with the thought of Plato and Socrates. Her intuition, and indeed her informed opinion as a recognized scholar of the history of philosophy, lead her to the conclusion that it is possible that Diotima's lessons are not a fiction but are important philosophical teachings that have been neglected by the traditional Western philosophical tradition. Interestingly, Nye mentions the work of Luce Irigaray and Martha Nussbaum briefly in the prologue, critiquing each for her treatment of Diotima's lessons. It is true that Irigaray criticizes some of Diotima's lessons (Irigaray 1993), but I think her work is worth more discussion than the brief mention it receives in this text, particularly as Irigaray makes it clear that Diotima's words have been recounted by men and thus are liable to have been interpreted incorrectly. Irigaray is also undoubtedly sympathetic to the project of reclaiming feminine voices even if she does critique Diotima's philosophy of love. Similarly, Nye's rejection of Nussbaum based on Nussbaum's political liberalism seems unfairly dismissive since Nussbaum is in basic agreement with Nye, despite her politics, in that there are many problems with the Western/Christian ascent of love that devalues erotic love (Nussbaum 2001).

Part I, "Lessons in Love," begins with Nye's recounting of the *Symposium*. Nye focuses her attention on the pederastic ideas and practices of Socrates' circle of friends and acquaintances. Her argument here is that, entrenched in a subculture that idolized adolescent boys, this group of men elevated the love of boys to divine status in their philosophies of love. Nye brings our attention to the fact that this group of men was comparatively small and that other thinkers outside of this minority group had reflected on eros in different ways that were more in tune with Diotima. Her intention in illustrating the relative smallness of this elite circle is to show that, though their ideas were highly influential, they were shaped in particular ways and did not reflect everyone's thoughts on love.

Nye continues by describing Diotima's conception of the ethical. Diotima's ethics is founded on understanding the "generative work of love" (41), which, she argues, can guide us in ethical relations. Here, Nye challenges the idea of a divine transcendent form or soul that is immortal after death. She argues that Diotima's love finds immortality within mortality. It is through creative connections with others that we "give birth" to beauty in relationships, management of households, political and social activism, contributing to knowledge, community development, and so on. In creating new and more beautiful ways of being, we contribute to the regeneration of life. This is the work of love that results from Diotima's philosophy of love.

Nye does an excellent job of intertwining history/biography and philosophy in a way that helps the reader contextualize the thought of Diotima, as well as the numerous texts she explores. As in previous works, Nye reminds the reader that the historical context of the thinkers is integral to understanding why they wrote what they did. Nye admits that it is impossible to ascertain exactly how thought has been influenced, but she makes inferences throughout the book as to what is possible based on the things we do know. Nye paints an illuminating picture of the history of philosophical thought that strengthens her argument that it is possible that Diotima existed, but that due to historical and social factors, her lessons have been at best, misunderstood, and at worst, marginalized.

In part II, "Lessons Lost," Nye explores how the teachings of Diotima were lost with the rise of Christian thought. She navigates through a complex interweaving of history, culture, and religious and philosophical thought to make her argument, including examination of the Hebrew bible, Philo's *Timaeus*, the New Testament, the work of Augustine and Plotinus, and the work of contemporary theologians such as Balthasar. At times, the lack of dates for historical information can be somewhat frustrating, but as this is not a historical text *per se* but a philosophical exploration, I think this methodology is in keeping with the author's narrative style.

In chapters 6 and 7, the discussion turns to the nature of divinity. Nye moves through Plato's thought on divinity and that of his Pythagorean contemporaries to show how those intermediary beings of eros, once known as "daimons," became literally demonized as "demons" (111). Nye explores Saint Augustine's thought in detail, leading to the conclusion that in his philosophy, eros becomes something sinful that is to be feared and loathed. Thus, demonic eros became associated with sexuality and sexual desire became a sin.

Numerous theorists, like Nye, have blamed Augustine for the negative views of erotic desire and the body, but others have argued that Augustine has been misread and that his philosophy of love does not deny eros or the flesh. For example, Margaret Miles and Patricia Grosse both argue that there has been widespread misreading of Augustine's *Confessions* that have led to misunderstandings about love (Miles 2005; Grosse 2016). Indeed, Grosse describes the misreading of Augustine on love as "The biggest crime against love in Western thought" (11). Nye obviously views Augustine's thought on love negatively, and this evaluation should be a weak spot in her argument since there is substantial work that challenges her theories. Yet if one reads Nye's work historically—that is, considering her reading of Augustine as the common reading that has informed Western thought—then her reading does not really weaken her argument as her reading of Augustine is the same reading that has been used to inform the Western philosophy of love she is challenging. Thus the book still results in challenging traditional Western/Christian interpretations of such philosophies as Augustine's despite what may be Nye's own shortsightedness concerning Augustine's work.

Chapter 8 contains a crucial argument where Nye casts a shadow over monotheistic religion, particularly the Catholic Church, by arguing that holy wars, tolerance for pederastic abuse, bans on contraception, and stigmatization of homosexuals is an outcome of this conception of beauty that hides ugliness through its abstract and rigid nature. Most important at this stage of her argument, Nye suggests that the religious ethic is one that finds beauty only in the acceptance of the will of God and in death. It is completely at odds with Diotima's concept of beauty, which, she says, engenders creation, regeneration, and goodness in this life.

Part III, entitled "Lessons Gained" is an inspiring work on ethics. Nye continues to critique monotheistic religions as violent and oppressive while presenting Diotima's eros as an antidote to these destructive forms of religion. She does this successfully, incorporating the work of Elizabeth Johnson, who, she asserts, speaks of divinity and the work of eros in ways congruent to Diotima. This incorporation of Johnson's work (and later, the work of Mary Daly) aligns with one of the aims of the series to which this book belongs—and with Nye's own project in her previous books—which is to revive neglected works by women, particularly in philosophy. It is interesting to see how the philosophies of these women resemble Diotima's teachings in important ways; further examination of these resemblances in feminist accounts of eros may prove fruitful for feminist love studies.

In chapter 10, "Social Virtue," Nye argues that moral rules can inhibit rather than uphold justice. She exposes the "evils" of monotheism: holy war, slavery, burning of witches, and so on, that are able to be viewed as "just" despite their violence and ugliness. For her, this violence is what morality looks like without eros. Eros, she explains, responds to ugliness and is attracted to what is beautiful. An ethic that allows ugliness to occur in order to uphold a moral rule is empty and likely to lead to injustice. Nye does not just accuse monotheistic religious thought of this empty morality but also morality based on reason. For Nye, love responds to ugliness and is attracted to what is beautiful. Ethical codes that do not allow this erotic response to ugliness and beauty are, for Nye, codes that are likely to result in injustice.

Moving from Kant to Freud and into contemporary times, Nye explores religious and scientific views of morality. A key argument in the third part of the book is that religion and science share "common ground" (178). She explains that practitioners in both groups strive to understand the overall laws or truths of the universe and both conceptualize the essence of the human as self-interested. Using examples from evolutionary theory and biology, Nye illustrates, to the contrary, that life has its own inherent processes of cooperation and network rather than life being the result of overarching theories of design. Similarly, Nye rejects the common notion that individuals are self-interested, highlighting the fact that humans are inherently social, relational, and form bonds. Nye then contrasts Diotima's moral teachings, which, we see, are strikingly different from both monotheistic and secular ethics. This is a key moment in the book, a moment toward which the rest of Nye's text builds because it challenges essential ideas about what it is to be human. Challenging Platonist divides between body and soul, Freudian accounts of conflicted psyches, and postmodern constructed selves, Nye explains Diotima's position on the human. Diotima's human is a conscious physical being, full of potentialities and responsive to other physical beings. It is this receptive and responsive human being that is the subject of her philosophy of love.

At the end of chapter 10 and into chapter 11, Nye addresses some of the problems of Diotima's conception of eros. The first is the lack of a definitive definition of "beauty" in contrast to traditional ethics that have a clear set of commands, rules, or principles to adhere to. This is not a problem for Nye, as she asserts that this lack of definition is what gives beauty its divinity and moral force. At this point in the book, deep into her discussion of ethics and morality, I found myself asking, "If people are usually repelled by ugliness, why do some engage in violence, hatred, and oppression?" Right on target, in chapter 11, "The Problem of Evil," Nye addresses this question. Nye gives an overview of theological arguments and Freudian theories surrounding the problem of evil, particularly the nature of eros as described by Freud. In a well-argued interpretation of Diotima's thought, Nye suggests that evil results from repeated exposure to ugliness and the resultant "recoiling" from it (188). She argues that this can lead to a permanent state of hostility, resulting in evil.

Here, we again see that beauty (and erotic attraction to beauty) is a key concept in Diotima's philosophy of love.

Nye's book is a journey through history, philosophy, and theology that weaves the strands of each into a harmonious whole. It makes a significant contribution to feminist philosophy by recovering Diotima's lessons in love from traditional, patriarchal Western thought to reinstate Diotima as a credible and independent authority on love. This book holds potential for feminist philosophers and theologians looking for alternative ways of approaching ethical issues and spirituality in contemporary times. Moving away from traditional conceptions of ethics that are wary of erotic desire and that position the "highest" love as that which is most removed from the flesh, Nye develops new ways of thinking about ethics and the divine. Nye's Diotima offers us a concept of love that begins in the attraction to beauty that is erotic desire. Love, according to Nye's Diotima, is a spirit that moves us to be productive in an effort to create more beauty. Beauty is divine because we continue to strive for it even when it eludes us. However, beauty is not divinity that transcends the human world. Beauty is in the human world and it is only through knowing beauty that we experience the urge (eros) to create beauty. Thus, rather than being wary of erotic desire, Nye's Diotima teaches us that desire is the key to creating loving relationships and societies. It is this understanding of the connection between desire and beauty in understanding love that will be of most use in feminist love studies and particularly to those interested in the connection among love, ethics, and social activism.

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