

[Review of F.C.C. Sheffield, *Plato's Symposium: the Ethics of Desire*, *Classical Review*, 2008 (58), 62-4]

This book offers a sustained examination of the *Symposium* as a central work of Platonic ethics. Particularly illuminating are S.'s examination of *erôs*' intermediacy between *aporia* and *euporia*; her analysis of psychic pregnancy as an alternative to the theory of recollection; and her appendix on the relation of the *Symposium* to Socratic vs Platonic psychology. In the interests of philosophical discourse, however, I shall focus on some points of disagreement. These can be traced to S.'s primary methodological goals: she seeks to resuscitate the *Symposium* as a major ethical treatise (p. 3), which leads her to whitewash Plato at points; relatedly, she is concerned to unify Socrates' account of *erôs* (p. 75), which causes her to give an unsatisfactory treatment of immortality.

In maintaining that Socrates' account of *erôs* is unified, S. opposes those who propose that when Plato introduces birth in beauty as the goal of *erôs*, he moves away from his previous account of *erôs* as aimed at eternal possession of the good and introduces a new aim, immortality (p. 84). According to S., birth in beauty just is how we come to possess the good. In her analysis of 207c–208b, S. rejects the standard interpretation of the passage as claiming that *erôs* aims at immortality via reproduction, proposing instead that its point is to reveal that 'living beings require productive activity in order to possess anything at all. So, if we want the good, this must be produced if it is to be possessed' (p. 109). It is difficult to know what to make of S.'s proposal, since Plato nowhere states that production is the mortal form of possession. I am not even sure what this claim means; it is simply not the case that I can only possess what I produce. If I wish to possess a flat-screen TV (believing, perhaps, that therein lies true happiness), I can produce it myself (if I am very clever and have lots of time on my hands) or, more realistically, I can head to the store and buy one. Perhaps what S. has in mind is that the special nature of the objects Plato discusses – children, laws, fame, virtue, knowledge – is such that one must produce them oneself in order to possess them. However, this is not true of children: does one own a biological child more than an adopted one? Finally, S.'s thought might be that one must regenerate one's possessions for them to persist, since everything is subject to gradual decay; however, most of our possessions take care of this on their own, and do not need *us* to regenerate them. If anything, Plato's claim is that what one must continually regenerate is *oneself*, not the good, and that continued possession requires continued existence. But in this case, the passage *is* about attaining immortality, or the mortal proxy thereof.

What about the conclusion of the ascent, when Plato states that the philosopher, if anyone, is granted immortality? S. denies that the philosopher achieves true immortality (pp. 147–8), maintaining that the philosopher's immortality resides in the perfection of his soul, not in its everlastingness (p. 151). Unfortunately, S. never defends this reading. Perhaps she has O'Brien's argument in mind ('Becoming Immortal in Plato's *Symposium*', in D. Gerber, ed., *Greek Poetry and Philosophy* [Chico, California, 1984], pp. 200–1); he proposes that in certain contexts, *athanatos* can mean *blessed*. However, S. is not at liberty to adopt this analysis, since this use of *athanatos* presupposes that all souls are undying – an assumption which S. denies is operative in the *Symposium* – and seeks to distinguish some as especially fortunate. It is one thing to claim that *athanatos* means *blessed* and (in the background) *undying*, and quite another to maintain that a soul which perishes can be called *athanatos*; the latter seems to do violence to the Greek. Furthermore, if Plato's intention were to draw attention to the quality, and not the length, of the philosopher's existence, then why did he not use a term which would more clearly convey his meaning, such as *makarios*?

In the fifth chapter of her book, S. attempts to defend Plato from the objection famously raised by Vlastos, that Platonic love is directed at persons as placeholders of properties, and therefore falls short of true love, which is loving another for his own sake. In response, S. argues that treating the beloved as a means to the form does not preclude valuing him for his own sake. In so far as the beloved is beautiful, he will possess intrinsic value, even if he falls short of the form (p. 172), and the lover's understanding of true beauty will lead him to value its instantiations (p. 182). This, however, does not do justice to the state of the initiate post-ascent, who has seen the beautiful itself, 'pure, unsoiled, unmixed and uncontaminated by human flesh and colors and other mortal nonsense' (211e). Plato does not depict the initiate as

possessing new-found appreciation for mortal beauties, but rather as looking down on them.

On any monistic system of value, such as that of the ascent, it stands to reason that one should pursue what has maximal value and abandon what has less; this leads to the worry that the lover will discard boys for forms upon completing the ascent. This is particularly pressing for S., since she maintains, *contra* Price et al., that the initiate contemplates the form alone and is primarily concerned with gaining knowledge for himself (p. 175); contemplation, for him, constitutes true happiness (p. 179). S.'s solution is that the initiate, being merely mortal, cannot contemplate all the time; teaching others is a lesser form of philosophical activity, and remains attractive to the initiate (p. 180). S.'s solution resembles what Keyt calls the absolute priority interpretation of Aristotle's *Ethics*, the view that it is always better to contemplate, but that, when one cannot, virtuous engagement with others has secondary value ('Intellectualism in Aristotle', *Paideia* Special Aristotle Issue [1978], 142). Keyt takes this to be an intellectualist, not an inclusive reading of the *Ethics*, and it strikes me that S.'s reading of the ascent is similarly ascetic. S.'s lover is rather like Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, who treats Dorothea as a light diversion from and helpmate in his intellectual pursuits, but not as someone to be taken seriously. Casaubon cannot be said to really love Dorothea, and S.'s lover cannot be said to truly love anything but the form, if we think that loving another means taking that person to be central to one's happiness. I do not take issue with S.'s reading of the ascent, but rather with her insistence that this reading does not preclude love of others. S. insists that Plato's account is 'neither incompatible with, nor fails to accommodate, the kind of care and concern we would hope a flourishing individual to exhibit towards his peers ...' (p. 181). Towards his peers, perhaps, but certainly not towards his beloved, and many of us do think that love, and not mere collegiality, plays a central role in human happiness. S. emphasizes that Socrates' position does not seem so harsh if we allow that his focus is on how to achieve happiness (p. 162); surely, though, the heart of the Vlastosian concern is that for Plato, contemplation displaces care for others as the key to happiness.

As my engagement with S. indicates, I found her book tremendously philosophically stimulating, though I did not agree with all her conclusions. It fills an important gap in the literature on Plato's moral psychology and ethics, and will be a valuable resource for scholars.