

Plato's Ladder of Beauty from his Symposium

Post by “Cassius” of April 22, 2026 at 9:45 PM

I know I am not familiar with this aspect of Plato but it has obvious implications to many aspects of Epicurus, so I am starting my review with this below from Grok. Aside from contrasting it with Epicurus saying that he would spit upon the beautiful if it does not bring pleasure, this ladder analogy apparently illustrates aspects of the Ideal Form theory.

So this is apparently what Jefferson was criticizing in his letter to Peter Carr (see underlined section):

Quote

- [Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787](#) This letter is famous for Jefferson's advice to his nephew on religion, but it also contains much of interest regarding philosophy. As discussed elsewhere on this site, Epicurus held that Nature endows men with the capacity to discern truth through three faculties: (1) the senses, (2) the pain/pleasure mechanism, and (3) the "Anticipations." Epicurus' works describing the third faculty in detail are lost, but here we see Jefferson making a point that is similar to the description of Epicurus' theory of Anticipations as reconstructed by Norman DeWitt. Jefferson wrote: "He who made us would have been a pitiful bungler if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science, there are thousands who are not. What would have become of them? Man was destined for society. His morality, therefore, was to be formed to this object. He was endowed with a sense of right and wrong, merely relative to this. This sense is as much a part of his Nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality, and not the [beautiful], truth, &c., as fanciful writers have imagined. The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree, as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree. It may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body. This sense is submitted, indeed, in some degree, to the guidance of reason; but it is a small stock which is required for this: even a less one than what we call common sense. State a moral case to a plowman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules."

Quote

Plato's Ladder of Beauty (also called the Ascent of Love or the Ladder of Eros) is one of the most famous passages in Plato's dialogue Symposium (written around 385–370 BCE). It appears in Socrates' speech, where he recounts the teachings of the priestess Diotima of Mantinea. Core Idea The "Ladder of Beauty" describes a progressive ascent from the love of physical beauty to the contemplation of Beauty itself—the eternal, perfect, unchanging Form of Beauty. It is a philosophical and spiritual journey of love (eros) that moves from the particular and sensory to the universal and intellectual, ultimately leading to the highest form of wisdom and happiness. The Steps of the Ladder Diotima outlines a clear sequence of stages. The lover begins with the lowest rung and gradually ascends:

1. Love of one beautiful body
The starting point: A person falls in love with the physical beauty of a single individual (usually a young man, in the context of ancient Greek pederastic love).
2. Love of all beautiful bodies
The lover realizes that the beauty in one body is related to beauty in others. Physical beauty is no longer fixated on just one person but appreciated more generally. This step begins to detach love from individual attachment.
3. Love of beautiful souls (or minds/characters)
The lover shifts focus from bodies to inner beauty—virtuous souls, good character, and moral qualities. Physical beauty becomes secondary or even irrelevant.
4. Love of beautiful practices, laws, and institutions
The ascent moves to societal and cultural beauty: noble customs, just laws, harmonious social structures, and virtuous activities that produce beauty and order in human life.
5. Love of beautiful knowledge (sciences and philosophy)
The lover now pursues the beauty found in various branches of knowledge, seeing the interconnectedness and beauty of all learning. This is the realm of intellectual beauty.
6. The vision of Beauty itself (the Form of Beauty)
At the top of the ladder, the lover suddenly (*exaiphnēs*—"suddenly") beholds Beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting. This is not a physical or even intellectual object, but the eternal, unchanging essence of beauty—the Platonic Form (*eidos*) of Beauty. It is described as:
 - Eternal and immortal
 - Not relative or dependent on anything else
 - The source from which all other beauties derive
 - Pure, uncontaminated by human flaws, bodies, or particular instances

Key Quotes from the Symposium (approx. translation) Diotima says the lover who reaches this height:

"... will suddenly perceive a beauty of a wondrous nature, which is the cause of all the previous beauties... This beauty is first of all eternal, neither coming into being nor passing away... It is not beautiful in one respect and ugly in another... but is always beautiful in itself and by itself."

The one who reaches this stage gives birth not to images of virtue, but to true virtue, and becomes dear to the gods, even "immortal" in a philosophical sense. Philosophical Significance

- From particular to universal: It illustrates Plato's theory of Forms—moving from the shadowy, changing world of appearances (sensory beauty) to the real, eternal world of Forms.
- Eros as a daimon: Love is not just desire for sex or possession, but a powerful force (daimon) that drives the soul toward the divine and the good.
- Sublimation of desire: Physical and romantic love is not rejected but transcended and transformed into philosophical contemplation and the pursuit of wisdom.
- Connection to the Good: In Plato's broader philosophy, the Form of Beauty is closely linked (or even identical in some interpretations) with the Form of the Good—the ultimate reality.

Context in the SymposiumThe Symposium is a drinking party where guests give speeches in praise of Eros (Love). Socrates' speech, via Diotima, is the philosophical climax, contrasting with more conventional or comic speeches (like Aristophanes' myth of the divided humans). Alcibiades' drunken interruption later dramatically illustrates someone stuck at the lower rungs—he desires Socrates' soul but cannot fully ascend. Modern RelevanceThe Ladder of Beauty has influenced Western thought deeply:

- Neoplatonism (Plotinus)
- Christian mysticism (e.g., ideas of ascending to God through beauty)
- Romantic poetry and aesthetics (Shelley, Keats)
- Psychoanalysis (Freud's concept of sublimation owes something to it)
- Modern discussions of aesthetic experience and the nature of beauty

In essence, Plato presents the Ladder as the true purpose of love: not to possess a beautiful person, but to use beauty as a stepping-stone to contemplate and participate in the divine order of reality. If you'd like the original Greek text, a more detailed comparison with other Platonic dialogues (Phaedrus also discusses similar themes of beauty and ascent), or how later philosophers interpreted it, let me know!

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