

# Plato's Ladder of Beauty from his Symposium

Post by "Cassius" of April 22, 2026 at 9:53 PM

What does Plato find admirable in Beauty if not the pleasure it brings?

## Quote

Plato does not find the ultimate value of Beauty (especially Beauty itself, the eternal Form) in the fleeting sensory pleasure it might bring to the body or lower soul. In fact, he explicitly contrasts the higher pursuit of Beauty with mere physical or possessive gratification. Lower stages of love might involve pleasure-seeking (e.g., sexual desire for a beautiful body), but the ascent on the Ladder of Beauty in the Symposium transcends that.

## *What Diotima (via Socrates) Emphasizes in the Symposium*

At the pinnacle—contemplating Beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting—the admirer experiences a sudden, transformative vision. This is not described primarily as hedonic enjoyment (pleasure for its own sake). Instead, Plato highlights several deeper, admirable qualities:

- Eternity and stability: Unlike physical beauties that grow, decay, or change depending on context, time, or perspective, Beauty itself "neither comes into being nor passes away," remains "without diminution or increase," and is "imparted to" all lesser beauties without being diminished. It offers contact with what is real and unchanging, in contrast to the unstable world of appearances.
- Purity and simplicity: It is "pure and clear and unalloyed," free from "the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life." It is not mixed with ugliness, relativity, or bodily flaws. Contemplating it means engaging with something divine and uncontaminated.
- Source of all beauty and order: Beauty itself is the cause or ground of every particular beautiful thing (bodies, souls, laws, knowledge). Admiring it reveals the unity and interconnectedness underlying the diverse beauties we encounter, leading to deeper understanding ("the great sea of beauty").
- Birth of true virtue, not images: Most crucially, beholding Beauty itself enables the lover to "give birth not to images of virtue... but to true virtue" because they are in touch with reality itself. This produces genuine moral excellence, wisdom, and "magnificent discourses and ideas" out of a "boundless love of knowledge." The result is a life of authentic goodness and a kind of philosophical immortality—becoming "dear to the gods."

Diotima calls this "that life above all others which man should live." It makes human existence worthwhile in a profound sense, beyond temporary delights.

Connection to the Good and Happiness In Plato's broader thought (including the Symposium).

Beauty is intimately linked to the Good (the highest Form in the Republic). Love (eros) is ultimately the desire for the perpetual possession of the good, which brings true happiness (eudaimonia). Beauty serves as the attractive "guise" or midwife that draws us toward this good. Contemplating Beauty is not passive pleasure-seeking but an active, creative process: it inspires the soul to generate virtue and knowledge in the world. Pleasure from lower beauties can be a starting point (or a distraction), but it is insufficient and often tied to lack, possession, or mortality (e.g., reproduction as a mortal approximation of immortality). Higher Beauty liberates eros from mere bodily appetite, sublimating it into philosophical activity.

Insights from the Phaedrus

Plato develops similar ideas in the Phaedrus, where seeing earthly beauty triggers recollection (anamnēsis) of the Forms beheld by the soul before birth. Beauty is uniquely vivid and "most desired" among the Forms because it shines brightly through the senses (especially vision). This sparks divine madness (mania)—a winged, upward movement of the soul toward the divine realm, truth, and self-mastery (the charioteer reining in the horses of desire). Again, the admiration is not for sensual thrill but for its power to reawaken the soul's divine nature and orient it toward justice, temperance, and wisdom.

Why Not Pleasure?

Plato often critiques pleasure as transient, relative, and potentially enslaving (see also the [Philebus](#) or Gorgias). In the ascent, fixating on pleasure keeps one at lower rungs—chasing shadows. True admiration of Beauty is disinterested in the narrow sense: not for what it can "give" the lover in terms of personal gratification or utility, but for its own inherent excellence. Yet it is deeply fulfilling because it aligns the soul with reality, truth, and the divine, producing lasting virtue rather than ephemeral sensations. In short, what Plato finds admirable in Beauty (especially the Form) is its perfection as a metaphysical and ethical ideal: its unchanging truth, its role as the source of all value and order, and its capacity to transform the lover into a creator of genuine goodness. The pleasure, if any, is secondary and intellectual/spiritual—a byproduct of participating in the divine order, not the goal. This view has influenced later thinkers (e.g., Neoplatonism, Christian mysticism) who see beauty as a pathway to the transcendent rather than an end in itself for hedonistic reasons.

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