

# 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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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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