

THE ASCENSION OF PHILOSOPHICAL EROS*

«...Whoever wishes to proceed along the right road in this undertaking [Mysteries of Love]¹ must from early youth go towards beautiful bodies... he must love one body only and generate in it [his self] beautiful talks; then he must realize that beauty in any body whatsoever is sister to the beauty of another body; and ... it would be very foolish not to recognize that one only and identical is the beauty in all bodies... Next he must consider the beauty of souls as being of greater worth than that of bodies, ...so that later he will feel obliged to consider the beauty in the institutions and in the laws, and recognize that it is all of the same kind and thus become persuaded that bodily beauty is but a small thing. And after the institutions let [his guide] lead the disciple onto a higher plane, onto the sciences, so that he may see the beauty of the sciences and, looking at the ample range of the beautiful - no longer becoming infatuated, like a *slave*, by the beauty of any single thing... but turned to the vast sea of beauty and contemplating it - produce many beautiful and uplifting thoughts and arguments in a boundless love for knowledge, until in this having strengthened and grown, he shall rise up to the vision of the sole science, which is the science of such beauty.

...Seeing that he who has been educated so far in amorous things, contemplating beauty step by step and in the right way, once he has come to the end of the pathway of love he will suddenly witness a beauty by its nature stupendous, and precisely that beauty for which... the previous pains were endured, that beauty which is first of all eternal, *which neither becomes nor perishes*, neither grows nor diminishes, and again, is not beautiful in some ways and ugly in others, nor beautiful some-times and not so at other times, nor beautiful compared to one thing and ugly compared to another, nor beautiful here and ugly there, nor beautiful for some and ugly for others. Nor, moreover, will this beauty take in his eyes the form of a face or of a hand or of anything corporeal, nor of a discourse nor of a science nor of anything that is in another... This beauty will appear to him as it is in itself, always uniform to itself; and while all other beautiful things, because they only participate in it, are subject to birth and death, this beauty cannot at all become either smaller or greater nor can it suffer anything. And when someone, having loved ... raising himself up from the things of here below begins to contemplate that beauty, then one may say that he has almost touched the aim... This... if nothing else the guest of Mantinea was saying, is the moment in life worth living for a man, when he can contemplate Beauty in itself...

Do you think that the life of one who can *see* and contemplate that Beauty with the *intellect* and dwell with it should be despised? Or do you not think, said she, that only to him who sees Beauty by that through which it can be seen, it will be possible to give birth, not to images of virtue, *because he is not in touch with images*, but to true virtue, because is in touch with Truth...»².

* Extract, from *Initiation into the Philosophy of Plato*, Raphael (Āśram Vidyā Order). Aurea Vidyā, 2005, New York.

¹ Square bracket and italics are ours.

² Plato, *Symposium*, 210-212.

«Tell us, therefore, what kind of strength is that of dialectics, into which genera is it divided and what are its ways. These ways, if I am not mistaken, ought to be those that lead to where, *whoever reaches it, will find rest from the way and the end of the journey*»³.

...

«And how can one reach this place?

He who is by nature loving can reach it, he who truly, originally and constitutionally has a vocation for philosophy: being a lover as he is, when he contemplates beauty he suffers the pangs of childbirth and not being satisfied with corporeal beauty, he takes flight instead, from it towards the manifold beauty of the soul: virtue, science, customs, conventional ways; and from here he will climb once again towards that which precedes it until he gets to the root of that primordial goal which is Beauty in itself; here indeed, once he arrives, he may cease his striving; before that, never.

But how will he carry out his ascent? And from where will he get the power and what doctrine will inspire and guide this Eros of his?

This one: our earthly beauty which flourishes in bodies is only something that is added to the bodies themselves from without, as these corporeal forms are in bodies as if impressed upon a material; meanwhile the substratum changes and from being beautiful it becomes ugly; therefore - this doctrine concludes - bodies are beautiful only due to *participation*. Now, what is that which makes a body beautiful? On the one hand, it is the presence of beauty, on the other it is the Soul, which has molded and infused in him a certain form. But is the soul [individual soul] a beautiful thing in itself?

No, otherwise there would not be some souls that are wise and beautiful and others that are foolish and ugly. So, it is thanks to wisdom that beauty enters the soul.

And who is it that bestows wisdom on the soul? Necessarily, the Spirit.

But the Spirit - or, so, of the true Spirit - cannot be admitted that at times be Spirit and at times non-Spirit; as a consequence it is Beauty in itself.

And yet, must we stop here at the Spirit as if He were the first, or must we go beyond the Spirit? Only in our human perspective does the Spirit stand before the primordial principle and, nearly at the doorway of Good, holds in itself the message of the universe; He is, as it were, a seal of it impressed rather upon plurality, while it keeps absolutely in unity»⁴.

...Love and Knowledge are means, bridges, instruments and intermediaries to resolve duality: in the first case Lover-Beloved, in the second Knower-Known. If these are means, one must pay attention because these can be directed in a wrong way and ...they can even be degraded, therefore, used wrongly...

If Love and Knowledge are means, then we must know how to direct them towards the proper “object”, otherwise we could have an error of direction, which can be fatal.

Let us stress the following two points:

- 1) The means can be degraded, used wrongly and impoverished;

³ Plato, *Politéia*, 532 e.

⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 9, II.

2) The object towards which Love and Knowledge are directed can be wrong.
In both cases - and it even happens that the two cases are found together - the being or the Lover and the Knower fall into conflict and pain...

«Now, if Love [and knowledge] ... means by which to return to Reality, it seems that [they] must have the same role as a learning exercise for death: Love [and knowledge are] a kind of death the grace of which the Gods concede to us during our mortal existence and in preparation for our immortality»⁵.

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⁵ Léon Robin, *La teoria platonica dell'amore*. Celuc, Milan 1973.