Beauty

At the beginning of *Lisa* 1, Lisa is given a birthday gift of a dressing table with a lighted mirror. She resents the gift because she feels it is an insult in that it implies that she needs a great deal of help in order to become beautiful, which seems to corroborate a feeling she has already had; that she thinks she is not beautiful and never will be. By going on to analyze her features one by one and find them unsatisfactory, she confirms what we already suspect; that here she is using beauty in its most physical sense. Her features are (at least in her mind and, she suspects, in her parents' minds) unattractive, therefore she is not beautiful.

This is a fairly typical and realistic teenage reaction, especially when the teenager is alone and in a sulky mood brought on by a perception of her parents' lack of understanding. But Lisa is a thoughtful and intelligent girl, and in other circumstances (such as in an argument with Tony) she would probably rather quickly reach the conclusion that there is more to beauty than the arrangement of facial features.

In Plato's *Symposium,* this conclusion, that love of physical beauty is the lowest form of love, is reached early on and without any help from Socrates, but it takes Socrates, proceeding through a long series of syllogistic reasoning and relating the wisdom of a certain Diotima of Mantineia, to conclude that physical beauty is the lowest form of beauty. He proceeds in this way.

The discussion among friends in the *Symposium* centers on the nature of love, and Socrates begins with this. He says that love is necessarily of something; and further, that since we do not desire that which we already possess, that the object of love is something which it does not possess, a future-oriented goal (or else we desire to retain what we possess eternally, also a future-oriented goal). Since they have already agreed that the object of love is beauty, not deformity, it therefore follows that love does not possess beauty itself; and since they equate the beautiful with the good (an arguable point, but one which they seem to accept as given), it also follows that love is not itself possessed of good.

Socrates goes on by relating a series of conversations he has had with Diotima of Mantineia. She maintains that the reason most people think that love is good and beautiful is that they are confusing the beloved with love. It does not follow, she says, that because love is not good and beautiful it must be evil and foul. Instead, it is a mean between the two extremes, the first of several means which she relates and which are analogous. In the same way through another syllogism, we are shown that because the gods are happy, and because happiness means possession of the good and beautiful, therefore love is not a god, but a mean between the mortal and immortal, an interpreter between them, a bridge over the chasm which divides them. And, since wisdom is a most beautiful thing and love is of the beautiful, therefore love is of wisdom, and the love of wisdom is a mean between ignorance and wisdom.

Then, in an exceptionally lyrical passage, Diostima goes on to explain the actions of men. She shows that since all men desire happiness, and since happiness is the possession of the beautiful and good (which is the object of love), therefore all men desire the good, and there is nothing they love but the good. Thus all men search for the beautiful and "at the touch and presence of the beautiful he brings forth the beautiful which he conceived long before."[1] But because all men desire immortality, and this can be acquired by mortal man only through generation, love is therefore not of the beautiful only, but of "generation and birth in beauty." Love is of the immortal, immortality and eternity come about through birth, then love is of birth. This explains the drive of men and animals for reproduction, and for men capable of nothing better, this is as close to immortality as they can get. But the children of the mind, creations and inventions and works of art, are a higher form of birth, and higher still is the creation of states.

All of these, however, are only the lesser mysteries of love. The greater mysteries involve one of the many manifestations of Plato's Theory of Forms. Diotima asserts that he who would begin rightly to understand beauty should begin in youth at about the level at which Lisa seems to be operating in this section; with the love of the physical beauty of one object. This would inspire the youth to beautiful thoughts which would eventually lead to perceiving the same beauty in other things and thence to perceiving it in all things. The next step would be seeing the beauty of mind as higher than the beauty of form, a step which Lisa is probably ready to take. From there one would go on to understanding the beauty of institutions and laws, then to the beauty of the sciences. All of these "beauties of earth" are steps which lead on ever higher until one reaches the science of beauty, and finally the idea of perfect beauty "which in the first place is everlasting — not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning; in the next place not fair in one point of view and foul in another ... but beauty only, absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting."[2] These steps in their simplest form are from the love of one beautiful form to all beautiful forms to beautiful actions to beautiful notions to absolute beauty.

In *Lisa* 1, Lisa seems mired in the appreciation of only one form of physical beauty. She does not pursue the concept any farther, or even pursue it as a concept. But because she is introspective, empathetic, and a member of a close-knit community of inquiry, we can hope that she is poised to begin following the steps that Diotima and Socrates and Plato have laid out.

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Footnotes

1. Plato, Symposium, p. 48.
2. Ibid, p. 50.

Bibliography

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