

What is a Philosopher?

An Analogic Study Guide

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It will be shown that there is no question more significant than answering the question, "What is a philosopher?". And, if we can make that clear it is likely that it will be surprising to most people because it is widely believed that if one has any question about what kind of philosopher someone is it can be easily answered by knowing what kind of philosophy the philosopher represents. However, that way of dealing with the question avoids another and more interesting problem. Consider, do we say the same thing about Captains of ships, physicians, and shepherds? When we are asked what is a physician or what is a shepherd, do we hold back from answering until we determine what kind of medicine or what kind of shepherding is being done? For, if each is based upon a knowledge that benefits its subjects then we assign the proper name and title -physician and shepherd-only to those practitioners who possess that knowledge. Now, among the Hellenic, or Ancient Greeks, they called those who possessed that kind of knowledge "possessors of an art".

Platonic philosophy has such knowledge, it is a knowledge that benefits those who practice it and, therefore, the assignment of the name philosopher is only assigned to those who can exhibit that art and to those who contribute to the development of that art. But, before we ask if there can be other philosophies than the Platonic, we should ask what kind of benefit follows from this art of philosophy and if it *alone* can confer that benefit. Clearly, we must explore this idea of art before we answer such questions and that means we must turn to Plato to see how this idea of *art* and *benefit* are developed.

Plato's *Symposium* is one of the key dialogues that explores the idea of art and defines the idea of philosophy; indeed, he explores this idea of art in all the dialogues but chief among them are the *Republic*, *Ion* and *the Parmenides*. However, it is not easy to read Plato and to discover his meaning. It has been said that to learn to read Plato one is already learning the first steps of philosophy. In the pursuit of philosophy we all start out ignorant and have to learn the right opinions about philosophy, then we risk getting into it more deeply as we proceed to understanding and, if we accept the challenge of being a philosopher, we take those steps that leads to an intuition into the nature of Beauty itself.

But, we are getting ahead of ourselves. We will make all of this clear as we take you through these guided steps into the world of Platonic thought. We shall take just one of the speeches on Love in Plato's *Symposium* and bring you along a curious route that will allow you to learn how to read a Platonic dialogue and, hopefully, show you what is involved in being a philosopher.

The Structure of Socrates' Speech in the Symposium

As we consider the structure of Socrates' speech in Plato's Symposium, we find several themes developed that merge into a unity which provides a basis for gaining an insight into the nature of the Platonic philosopher. We shall see how each of these themes is organized, how the elements of these themes can be separated, how they combine, and how they come together so that we can pass from opinion to understanding, and, possibly to knowledge.

Using the Rouse translation of the Symposium, notice which paragraphs start with a series of questions and end with either answers which in turn generate other questions. We can ask each of these questions and since your answers will be based upon the text we can expect a general agreement with these answers.

Consider the following questions that appear in paragraphs:

- 1.) paragraph #2 "Then what could love be?"
- 2.) paragraph #3 "Who was his father and who his mother?"
- 3.) paragraph #4 "...of what use is he (love) to mankind?"
- 4.) paragraph #5 "Now if love is the love of having this always what is the way men pursue it and in what actions would their intense earnestness be expressed so as to be called love?"
- 5.) paragraph #9 "Is that really and truly so?"

As you reflect on these questions do you see that they are interrelated? Do you notice that love is personified -- and that is when one treats an idea as if it were a person? Do you see, then, that the second question asks if love has parents? However, wouldn't you agree that is a way of referring to the origin of love? Again, notice the fourth item in our list and you will see that the way love is being described that it can have things and can have them always? Curious way of talking isn't it? Yet, all these points fit together, don't they?

When you consider them as a whole it does reveal a structure to the speech, doesn't it? Now, what of those paragraphs that don't start with questions. What do you notice about them?

Since we shall refer to certain paragraphs in this speech by number it might be advisable for you to note this in your own text starting with the first paragraph on page 97 that starts, "And, now you shall have peace from me;".

The Study of the Mythology

Now, you might ask what kinds of questions or issues are represented in mythology? And, is there any advantage in presenting these issues in mythological terms? But before we explore that question we need to inquire how such myths were understood by the

cultures that produced them and, if possible, how those most interested in them understood their own myths. The reason we should know this is because when we speak about myths today we often ignore how they were used and who used them. It may be that they asked questions we don't ask and they frame their answers in terms of a mythology we neither relate to nor can we appreciate; that is until we find a way to comprehend them. Let us take one of their questions and turn it about to see it more clearly: They ask, what is beauty? and behind that question are the following puzzling questions:

Among the things judged as beautiful, is there something common to them all?

What is that which is being called beautiful?

Is there such a thing as beauty in itself, apart from its manifestation in particular beautiful things?

Among beautiful things are there any that are so significant that we should do everything we can to experience it and come to know it?

How do you account for the existence of beauty?

How did beauty ever come into existence?

How is beauty related to our reality, is it merely ornamental or does it play a key role in the very nature of ultimate reality?

And, in what way can it be said that wisdom is one of the most beautiful things?

Does the love experienced in everyday life, in the family, among lovers and among those seeking wealth and fame have anything to do with the idea of wisdom and beauty?

Are wealth and fame sought after because they are regarded as beautiful things to possess or through which beautiful things can be had?

There is a way to answer all of these questions as well as the issues we raised about mythology. In Plato's *Symposium* we find Socrates relating the myth about how the Gods held a banquet in honor of the birth of Aphrodite and as we explore his speech we can understand how the unfolding of its meaning provides us with a way to grasp why he used mythology to communicate his meaning to us.

Here, then, we have a myth and should be able to see why he uses it and how it can be said to carry meaning to the reader. Before we go further recall that a myth must have at least one divine figure, either a God or Goddess or Son of God or Goddess, a drama or story line, and a setting which can be understood to account for something significant to mankind. In addition, as you will see, you will need both time and an unusual dedication

to accomplish the work that lies ahead but if you take the challenge you will find your noblest efforts justified.

Please list in the table below the terms that describe each of the figures in the myth and indicate which are Divine and which not.

Table 1			
Poverty:	Plenty:	Love:	Aphr
a)	a)	a)	a)
b)	b)	b)	b)
c)	c)	c)	c)
d)	d)	d)	d)
e)	e)	e)	e)
f)	f)	f)	f)
g)	g)	g)	g)
h)	h)	h)	h)

Make a second list of the *functions* of these same figures in the drama of the myth. The way to identify the *function* is to describe what those mythical beings are doing:

(1) either with or to one another OR (2) in or with people, places, or things for this is the action or drama of the myth.

Examples: (1) Plenty drinks the nectar and passes out. (2) Love becomes the follower and servant of Aphrodite.

Congratulations! You've just completed part 1.