

Connections with Plato's *Symposium* and Dionysian Rituals within the Context of Imitating God's Immortality*

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Introduction

Longing for immortality is one of the most pronounced themes of ancient religions. This theme is found in the rituals of the Dionysian religion, whose participants believed that their orgiastic rituals enabled the god enter into their souls. In this way, they had the possibility of becoming immortal or a god or at least becoming divine. This was not only an ontological transformation, but also an ethical ideal. Through the religious rituals, they believed that they became divine and an immortal (in a way) for a limited period.

One of my article's main claims is that the ideal of becoming immortal or a god passed from religious rituals into philosophical arguments by transforming itself. I want to point out that the physical atmosphere and main themes of Plato's *Symposium* are related to the Dionysian religious rites within the context of immortality. Thus, this article seeks to read the *Symposium's* main themes with the dialogue's mythological connections and to analyze how Plato handled the imitation of the god's immortality. The relationship between the dialogue and the Dionysian rituals is considered as a background for the article.

The theme of *one-with-God* and Dionysius

Dionysius, the god of wine, ecstasy and madness, was not an immortal god, but rather some kind of entity between the deities and humanity, between the mortal and immortal (Larson, 2007, p. 127). He introduces himself at the very beginning of Euridipes' *Bakkhai* as "I, Dionysius, son of Zeus" and as the son of Semele, a mortal woman (Evans, 1988, p. 206). The god's worshippers tried to reach immortality through the rites held during his festival. There was a huge effort to reach divine immortality in the rites' background, and that effort was one of the most important psychological aspects of the Dionysian myth (Deutsch, 1969, pp. 13-14).

The festivals that allow one to unite with the god were called *theophania* or *katagogia*. In these festivals, worshippers drank so much wine that they passed and engaged in orgiastic rites to become like a god or to unite with a god (Sourvinou-Inwood, 2005, p. 153, Eliade, 2003).

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Dionysius and the Symposium

Philosophy, which is seen as the younger brother of mythology, was, as is widely accepted, born from the competition with myth to determine how one could achieve wisdom (Benitez, 2007, p. 225). Plato used religious materials and traditions, especially the atmosphere of Dionysus, as a part of his philosophical system. From this point, he departed from the Sophists' anthropocentric approach and reshaped the religion of the tragic poets (Anton, 1962, p. 49). His *Symposium*, which is a remarkable example of this new approach, presents a feast during which the dialogue occurs. Dionysius chaired the feast, and *symposium* means to drink together to honor him (Bretlinger, 1970, pp. 1-2).

The dialogue took place in a dinner two days after Agathon won a prize for his tragedy (Bacon, 1959, p. 418). Anderson says that it is normal to see many symbols of Dionysus throughout the dialogue, for as he states, the feast is a Dionysian festival. Therefore, we should read the whole dialogue with the theme of the god's masks: "Dionysus was a God of wine, ecstasy, madness prophecy and drama. And Plato used to all these themes at the different stages of the dialogue" (Anderson, 1993, pp. 7-8).

The Effort to achieve immortality and the Symposium

Greek poets, pre-Socratic philosophers and Plato examined the ideal of becoming like god (Svavarsson, 2015). Plato handled this theme in multiple ways in his dialogues. For example, the ideal of the becoming like a god was examined as an other-worldly ideal in *Theaetetus*. That work's ideal philosopher sought to escape from this world to the other world and from the particulars to the universals. In *Symposium*, the ideal of becoming like a god is examined through its connection with imitating the god's immortality. Additionally, the *Symposium* is accepted as the first of Plato's dialogues that contains this theme (Sedley, 1999, p. 309, Nails, 2008, p. 7, Lannström, 2011, Bradshaw, 1998).

Before philosophy, people sought to unite with a god through rituals and ceremonies. But in the *Symposium*, this theme was considered with the conception of immortality and Eros as an intermediary being. Eros is important because (1) Plato described the relationship between humanity and god with Eros and (2) Eros has a dual structure that is both mortal and immortal.

The *Symposium* can be read in two parts, the main distinctive feature of which is the conception of Eros. In the first part, all of the speakers except Socrates accepted Eros as a god and praised him. The other part of the dialogue, however, was written with the thought of his intermediacy and immortality. Basing himself on Diotima's views, Socrates provided another explanation: Eros is not a full god anymore, but rather a daimon located somewhere between humanity and the deities, an entity who is also mortal and immortal because of its dual structure. In that context, Diotima asked: "What is Eros and what does it look like." The answer was: "Eros is an intermediary being; he is both omnipotent and needy (Sheffield, 2006, p. 45) and "Eros is not beauty and not ugliness, and also is not

ignorance and wisdom, but something between the two (*Symposium*, 202a, Cooper 1997). According to her, “when Eros was born, he was not immortal or mortal” (Nye, 2015, p. 23).

Plato mentioned three types of immortality: immortality through reproduction; immortality through honor, and to try to become immortal through one’s works, like books (Hooper, 2013, p. 549).

According to Cornford, the theme of imitating immortality in the *Symposium* and in the *Phaedo* was symbolized as the soul’s escape from the prison of the physical body due to the wisdom. (Cornford, 1912, p. 68). In the dialogue, Plato explained the sharing of the god’s immortality by the concept of *methexis*, a common term found in both the Dionysian rites and his own system. The god’s worshippers used it to indicate sharing the god’s soul with the group soul (Cornford, 1912, Burkert, 1985).

“Happiness, Socrates will argue, consists in a godlike life of contemplation of the divine form (211d1–3). And one who completes the ascent will successfully communicate with the divine and win the friendship of the gods (212a5). But that is to get ahead of ourselves. How Eros’ intermediate nature enables him to ‘bind the whole together with itself’ and bring such benefit is addressed in the aetiological story which follows this description of Eros” (Sheffield, 2106, pp. 41–42).

“Perhaps it was a similar inference that led David Sedley to mark the *Symposium* as ‘Plato’s probable debut’ on the topic of becoming like god, insofar as a human being can. For centuries after Plato’s death, and increasingly under the influence of Christianity, Platonists of antiquity almost universally considered becoming like god to be the end toward which all the striving of a philosopher properly aimed. Although the issue usually emerges from the *Theaetetus*, where the philosopher of the digression actually uses the expression, Diotima’s religious ascent has evident similarities” (Nails, 2008, p. 7).

Conclusion

In the article, I point out that Plato’s concept of immortality in the *Symposium* is connected with Dionysian rituals and practices. The Greeks of that time believed that they could assimilate into, or to unite with, Dionysus by imitating him through orgiastic rites. Moreover, they believed that they became like gods and goddesses (*enthusiasm*) through these rituals.

These ritualistic deifications were transferred to the *Symposium* by imitating the god’s immortality. The transfer occurred with the conception of Eros’ dual structure, which Socrates held was neither fully god nor fully mortal, but rather an intermediate being. This dual structure, therefore, provides us a background by which we can understand the relationship between humanity and god.

The religion of Dionysus affected the dialogue’s psychical and philosophical aspects, for he was accepted as a speaker with different masks. Moreover, the dinner in question was a ceremony held to honor him.

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