

Ultimate Human Happiness as Contemplating the Highest Things

Symposium, 210e, Plato

“‘Try to pay attention to me,’ she said, ‘as best you can. You see, the man who has been thus far educated in matters of Love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is coming now to the goal of Loving: all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labors:

‘First, it always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that....

‘And there is life, Socrates, my friend,’ said the woman from Mantinea, ‘there if anywhere should a person live his life, beholding that Beauty. If you once see that, it won’t occur to you to measure beauty by gold or clothing or beautiful boys and youths—who, if you see them now, strike you out of your senses.... But how would it be, in our view,’ she said, ‘if someone got to see Beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality, but if he could see the divine Beauty itself in its one form? Do you think it would be a poor life for a human being to look there and to behold it by that which he ought, and to be with it?’”