

## How to Live Forever: The Pleasure of Immortality *Contemplating the Ethics and Aesthetics of Immortal Pleasure*

Immortality assumes many forms: enduring fame, endless existence, incessant influence. Human beings cannot live forever, but they can nevertheless achieve immortality in other ways; the poets and philosophers of ancient Greece proposed several alternatives. On the one hand, *honor* or *fame* represents one way to be remembered beyond death; according to Simonides of Xenophon's *Hieron*, humans experience pleasure from the thought of being remembered forever. "Our delight in status and prestige is the closest we humans can get to the kind of pleasure the gods experience," Simonides remarks in his dialogue with Hieron (7.4). On the other hand, instead of striving to "please them all," poets like Sappho and Theognis needed no mortal acknowledgment to proclaim their immortality, which they achieved through muse-inspired poetry. Their immortality arises from composition rather than celebration, focusing on aptitude instead of acclaim. How do these two visions of immortality converge? Diotima, speaking about Love in Plato's *Symposium*, incorporates both creation and acknowledgment into immortality; she proposes *reproduction* – the *continued* creation of new beauty – as a way to extend one's influence and pleasure indefinitely: "Reproduction goes on forever; it is what mortals have in place of immortality" (207A). Unlike Simonides, Diotima maintains that true immortality can come only to those who seek beauty in knowledge, not honor; for her, the highest stage of Love coincides with the proliferation of "beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom" (210D), not the accomplishment of lasting glory and fame.

Based solely on the prowess and perfection of their craft, the aesthetic immortality of Sappho and Theognis differs considerably from Simonides' ethical concept of "status and prestige." In this paper, I hope to reconcile these two definitions of immortality by showing that both of them represent essential components of Diotima's consummate immortality. A purely ethical or social immortality – Simonides' ideal – can lift a mortal being into immortal memory but leaves behind

little of the original person himself, whereas a purely aesthetic immortality, acquired through the creation of divine *logoi*, merely grants its creator a sense of personal pride and accomplishment with no mutual recognition or shared and sustained pleasure. Only in the presence of both aesthetics *and* ethics can immortality fulfill its potential, not only disseminating the composer's creations but also provoking their recipients to create indefinitely, sustaining immortality beyond its first iteration and extending its accompanying pleasure beyond one lifetime.

Ethical or social immortality defines our prideful ambition for recognition: victory and honor, or glory and fame. We define *ethics* as the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles and standards of right and wrong;<sup>1</sup> in that sense, *ethical* immortality deals with elevating and commemorating – *immortalizing* – those human beings who set, epitomize, and exemplify rightful and socially admirable virtues and values. For example, the winner of a major athletic event might be immortalized on his or her discipline, resilience, and indefatigability; similarly, a benevolent king could be forever remembered for his just laws, peaceful rule, and overall respectability. Charismatic leadership, athletic accomplishments, and social favor lead to ethical immortality, which often assumes the form of celebratory poetry, physical trophies or plaques, statues, busts, and the everlasting oral tradition. Bacchylides' *Ode 3*, for instance, immortalizes the tyrant Hieron for his victory in the chariot race at the Olympic Games:

However, the luster of accomplishment does not  
waste away along with the flesh of mortals; rather,  
the muse sets it to growing. Hieron, you have  
shown forth to men prosperity's most splendid  
flowers. To one who gains success,  
silence furnishes no adornment. (*Ode 3.90-95*)

Praising Hieron's rule as "the widest kingship of all Greeks" (*Ode 3.12*) and the tyrant's athletic accomplishment as "Victory that excels, and Glory too" (*Ode 3.5*), Bacchylides elevates Hieron to a level nearly commensurate with that of gods: "Blessed is he on whom the gods / bestow a share of

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<sup>1</sup> Definition inspired by entry [2] of 'ethics' (plural noun) in the Oxford American Dictionary.

noble things / and, along with enviable success, / a life passed amid wealth” (*Ode* 5.50-54).

Whatever the case, *ethical* immortality requires the respect and acknowledgment of other mortals in society. Validation based on a system of moral standards and beliefs is integral to positive remembrance and perpetuation of a ruler’s influence.

Even though ethical immortality preserves a mortal’s name and accomplishments, the pleasure that it delivers is variable. Whenever such encomia originate from a commissioned poet, an immortalized ruler could doubt the authenticity and true motives behind the praise. The tyrant Hieron, for example, experiences no pleasure from the praises and paeans dedicated to his strength and accomplishments: “I think even a tyrant’s prestige has much in common with his sex-life, as I described it to you. We agreed that favours granted by people who don’t reciprocate one’s affection are not acts of kindness, and also that sex with an unwilling partner is not enjoyable. By the same token, services rendered by men out of fear are not acts of respect” (7.6). Indeed, as J.M. Bremer notes in “Poets and their Patrons,” “Poets were the only professionals who could provide publicity. They were willing to do so, for a proper payment, and did not beat about the bush: no archaic poet has been more proud than Pindar” (52). Thus, even Pindar, who immortalized Hieron in *Olympian* 1 for winning a horse race, provided praise only when paid, giving Xenophon’s Hieron reason for his skepticism toward commissioned poetry. Despite the feeling of accomplishment and enduring fame that such laudatory poetry granted their contractors, the pleasure of such immortality was not wholly pure, because poets composed such encomia not out of true affection and free will but rather out of “professional pride” and desire for money. “Do you really think this praise gives pleasure, when it looks very much as though its purpose is flattery?” (1.9). As Hieron maintains, this sort of pleasure leaves something to be desired.

Furthermore, praise poetry can never fully perpetuate the ruler’s ideas – only the ruler’s image. Unlike the “beautiful ideas and theories” that continue to provoke debate and generate

discourse, exalting encomia do not inspire further reproduction because they are the end product. After Pindar and Bacchylides have glorified Hieron in their poetry, few generally dare to mimic or modify it. In effect, the ruler's image becomes static over time. As Plato details in *The Republic*, "The artist knows little or nothing about the subjects he represents... The art of representation is something that has no serious value" (X.602b). A commissioned poet like Pindar knows and taps very little of the ruler's actual character and personality when composing encomia; instead, Pindar creates a glorified *image* of Hieron, which, though appealing, preserves only the accomplishment – not the personality or ideas behind it. "At third remove from the truth," the image can deliver only a prideful, superficial pleasure, since few aspects of the praised person actually ring true.

At its extreme, this sort of pleasure – the enjoyment of winning and being forever remembered for it – becomes a *bad* pleasure that can be painful in its absence. Plato issues the warning in *The Republic*, reminding his students that, "when a man seeks his fill of honour or success or ambition without sense of reason... the achievement of satisfaction leads to envy and violence, ambition to discontent" (IX.586d). When an honour-loving ruler obsesses over praise and prestige without seeking wisdom – "honour at any price" (V.475ab) – he loses his ability to think and govern rationally.<sup>2</sup> All in all, the desire for fame and recognition – ethical immortality – without knowledge or ideas – aesthetic immortality – can lead the glory-seeker to false pleasures.

In stark contrast to the socially established ethical immortality, aesthetic immortality comprises the *creation* of beauty, the perpetuation of one's own ideas through composition. We define *aesthetics* as the set of principles governing beauty, artistic taste, and sense of form, independent of any motivations concerning utility, social value, or moral judgment;<sup>3</sup> unlike ethics, *aesthetics* describes experience for its own sake, free from the instrumental, moral, or emotional attitudes that might interfere when grounded in a social system of virtues and values.

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<sup>2</sup> C.D.C. Reeve further explores the ruination of the 'honour-lover' in section 2.4 (p. 49) of *Philosopher-Kings*.

<sup>3</sup> Definition inspired by Dickie and Schopenhauer's definition of 'aesthetic attitude.'

For aesthetic immortality, the acknowledgment of an audience is irrelevant; the poem or painting is perfect and everlasting on its own, and any interactivity or input with outside ideology would close the aesthetic distance and compromise the original work's immortal quality. Sappho epitomizes this sense of immortality in one fragment of her poetry: "Although they are / only breath, words / which I command / are immortal." Sappho considers her poetry immortal not because others will remember and reproduce it but because she considers its undying quality the gift of gods. Sappho even contrasts her own poetic immortality with the mortality of one who lacks the Muses' blessing; addressing the deficient, Sappho writes, "But thou shalt ever lie dead, nor shall there be any remembrance of thee then or thereafter, for thou hast not of the roses of Pieria" (Wharton Fr. 68). The "roses of Pieria" are Sappho's poetry, cultivated in the Muses' own garden north of Mt. Olympus, and they alone grant Sappho "remembrance."<sup>4</sup>

Other poets have also declared their aesthetic immortality through their poetry. For instance, in *Pythian 2*, Pindar proclaims his own indomitability: "For while the rest of the tackle labors in the depths, / I am unsinkable, like a cork above the surface of the salt sea" (*Pythian 2.80-81*).<sup>5</sup> Like Sappho, Pindar needs no acknowledgment from his readers; his poetic gift – "for me the Muse fosters in her reserves of force the mightiest arrow" (*Olympian 1.113*) – alone ensures him immortality. Theognis even asks his lover Cyrnus to lock away his poetry: "When I make verses, Cyrnus, have them locked away – / though if they're stolen, it will always show; / no one will choose the bad where better is to hand, / and all will say, 'This is Theognis' verse'" (*Theognis*, 19-22). Despite others' criticism and his inability to "please them all" (26), Theognis knows his poetry will live forever. Juxtaposing himself with Zeus, Theognis maintains not only that nothing can please everybody, but also that universal acknowledgment is unnecessary for immortality; if Zeus could remain immortal despite his bevy of doubters, why can't Theognis? In brief, several poets in ancient

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<sup>4</sup> An interpretation inspired by Courtney Roby and her reading of Sappho's declaration of immortality.

<sup>5</sup> A declaration of immortality, according to Courtney Roby.

Greece based their claims to immortality on their divinely bestowed eloquence and aesthetic ability; for them, public support and glorification were not crucial elements of the immortality they enjoyed.

Despite the sense of pride and accomplishment that these poets derived from their own creations, this *aesthetic* pleasure falls short of immortality; while it may provide the poet with happiness for the rest of his or her life, the pleasure of Sappho's immortal "words" is mortal. Sappho experiences pleasure, but, without an audience, that pleasure can never be shared with others and perpetuated through the ages no matter how gifted the poet. By the definition of its pristine purity and perfection – "this is Theognis' verse" – it cannot inspire further creation. If a tree falls in a forest, but no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Aesthetically, Sappho would respond affirmatively, as the collapse obviously generates sound waves that diverge from the tree into space. However, Sappho never considers the interaction of these waves with other media; if the waves never impinge on a listening ear, then they will never generate a reaction or reproduction. If Cyrnus had really "locked away" Theognis' verses as instructed, then we may have never recovered them to enjoy as we do today; they would have remained a pleasure peculiar to the poet himself, with no audience to perpetuate the pleasure, either vicariously or intellectually.

Though the work lives forever – in a locked desk drawer or an abandoned forest – the pleasure that it generates fades away. Even Pindar admits so much in declaring, "But future days remain / the wisest witnesses" (*Olympian* 1.33-34). The moment that people stop reading Pindar's works, he would lose his immortality. To this day, scholars still study Sappho, Pindar, and Theognis, so their claim to immortality has not yet faltered, but this immortality has arguably depended on their readers' enjoyment. Whether or not an audience sustains these poets' immortality is a question of aesthetic experience:<sup>6</sup> Can the aesthetic experience exist independent of its viewer or reader? If so, what use is the experience if we cannot participate in its creation or redefine it for ourselves, as

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<sup>6</sup> These are questions that scholars continue to ask, according to Courtney Roby. For example, consider various arguments in Marcia Muelder Eaton's "Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?"

we often do when reading poetry? Who is present to experience and enjoy the aesthetic pleasure after the poet passes away? If the poem stands, pristine and forever preserved in its original perfection, does its pleasure not remain likewise static and unshared, unable to be fully realized by the wealth of scholars who are incapable of fully studying it? Ultimately, as Diotima reiterates, it is our reproduction, renewal, and readership of these “roses of Pieria” – not the pristine beauty of the roses themselves – that render their creators immortal. After all, even the most beautiful flowers require tending.

Whereas *ethical* immortality and *aesthetic* immortality each offers its possessor a pleasurable experience, only their combination can bring immortal pleasure. Consummate immortality comprises not only the production of one’s ideas but also their dissemination and reproduction; only by inspiring others to review, respond, and refresh that piece of our writing do we truly become immortal. Diotima expounds this notion of immortality in Plato’s *Symposium* when she tells Socrates, “Mortal nature seeks so far as possible to live forever and be immortal. And this is possible in one way only: by reproduction, because it always leaves behind a new young one in place of the old” (207D). In the lowest sense, Diotima refers to natural reproduction – begetting children to carry on our legacy. More importantly, in a higher and broader sense, Diotima describes immortality as the contemplation and reproduction of *logoi*, encompassing art and customs as well as ideas and theories:

These [souls] are pregnant with what is fitting for a soul to bear and bring to birth. And what is fitting? Wisdom and the rest of virtue, which all poets beget, as well as all the craftsmen who are said to be creative. But by far the greatest and most beautiful part of wisdom deals with the proper ordering of cities and households, and that is called moderation and justice... the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom. (209A, 210D)

By “gazing” at the beauty in knowledge of the world, the lover creates his own “beautiful ideas and theories,” and it is these children – documents, artistic masterpieces, poetic compositions, and recorded experiences – that persist through all time.

Diotima's consummate immortality incorporates *aesthetic* immortality as a contemplation of the beautiful. Alexander Nehamas explains that "the most beautiful things always seem inexhaustible" because their gazers always find more to understand from them.<sup>7</sup> Like Sappho, Diotima positions the pursuit of knowledge above the pursuit of honor, ranking the beauty of wisdom and production of *logoi* higher in her ladder of Love than the beauty of body and generation of children. For her, the creation of poetry leads to higher immortality than the birth of human children "to preserve the throne" (208D) simply because the contemplation of ideas far surpasses the "gazing" and "wild gaping" over physical beauty. "Everyone would rather have such children than human ones, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind – offspring, which, because they are immortal themselves, provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance" (209D). Just as Sappho, Pindar, and Theognis declared their immortality through their poetry, Diotima extols the enduring quality of intellectual progeny: the aesthetic immortality of inexhaustible beauty and knowledge.

In addition to embracing the aesthetic pleasure of contemplating the beautiful, Diotima describes the resulting immortality as "envy and admiration... glory and remembrance" (209D), "immortal virtue and the glorious fame that follows" (208E), entities that exist only in the presence of an accepting audience – only in the presence of *ethics*. In other words, the parents of intellectual offspring enjoy immortality only as far as their progeny – the poetry, paintings, papers, and laws they create – are immortal; and the progeny remain immortal only if they are read and reread. Thus, the immortality of the parents depends intimately on the social acknowledgment and acclaim that the offspring enjoy. The *ethical* immortality of memory and honor is as important to Diotima's model as the *aesthetic* immortality of "gazing at the beauty" for its own sake. Hence, the "status and prestige"

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<sup>7</sup> "As long as love persists, no answer will ever be complete; as long as something still strikes me as beautiful, the sense that there is something about it that is still worth coming to know and celebrate – that there is more to love – remains" (Nehamas, "Only in the Contemplation of Beauty Is Human Life Worth Living," p. 10).



that constitute Simonides' definition of immortality are integral to Diotima's vision as well, since the sustainability of poetry and philosophy depends on the polis into which they are born. "Only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue" – the result of contemplation – "but to true virtue," relevant to the world at large (212A).

Consummate immortality, as Diotima describes it, inseparably entwines aesthetics and ethics. Even though composing poetry and begetting intellectual progeny seem like solitary affairs, their sustenance relies on interaction, as immortality through reproduction necessarily involves more than one party. Giving birth, in all its forms, is a fundamentally interactive phenomenon, not only because the offspring will mature in a world that reads and responds to it but also because the parent, having previously interacted with the world, will inevitably create with a context in mind.<sup>8</sup> Just as the depth of *aesthetic* response is inextricably intertwined with the social and *ethical* values of the respondents, *logoi* are not valuable if not adopted into the broader community. The aspiring poet must know his or her audience before beginning to write. Nehamas extends this awareness of audience further, calling it a contemplation of the world's beauty, "the contemplation that, instead of being purely abstract and theoretical, enables him to give birth to virtue itself and become dear to the gods and so vitally important to his fellow human beings that he comes as close to being immortal as any human being ever does." In asking themselves, "What is good for *me*? How will *I* be remembered?" creators must also ask, "What is good for *them*? How will *they* remember me?"<sup>9</sup> On the subject of immortality, a question of aesthetic pleasure ineluctably invites a question of ethical pleasure; the parents' enjoyment of immortality depends on the world's enjoyment of the offspring. The two are as difficult to resolve as the "good" and the "beautiful" that Diotima interchangeably introduces into her question of Love.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, poetry like Sappho's

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<sup>8</sup> Compare this to, for example, the context that Nehamas seeks in his contemplation and study of Proust.

<sup>9</sup> Questions proposed by Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi to explain the communal, communicative nature of Greek poetry.

<sup>10</sup> This irresolution is not necessarily a bad problem, according to Peponi. Ethics and aesthetics can function together.

stands alone, the product of Sappho's mind and Muse, but, on the other hand, poetry like Sappho's still stands today only because others have recovered it, translated it, and disseminated it for the world to discuss. The paper on which a poem is initially composed – the sound waves of a collapsing tree – may be transient, but the praise, criticism, translations, interpretations, and replications – the interaction with receptive and responsive media – perpetuate the “beautiful ideas and theories” that, alone, would dissipate.

Our own study of Plato's *Symposium* showcases all these elements of the classic philosopher's immortality. Plato and Agathon, the accomplished tragedian whom the *Symposium* dinner party honors, are no longer present to experience the pleasure of immortality, but the pleasure that their offspring has generated persists as healthily as ever, enrapturing more and more scholars and students. As a result, Plato, the *Symposium*, and the pleasure it generates have all become immortal together: the philosopher because we know his name and embrace his arguments, the text because it has provoked the birth and endless reproduction of new ideas and papers, and the pleasure because generations upon generations of readers continue to enjoy debating and discussing his philosophy.<sup>11</sup> We value not only the “beautiful ideas and theories” – the abstract sort of contemplation that characterizes *aesthetic* pleasure – but also its relevance and applicability to our own lives and scholarly pursuits, an *ethical* pleasure. Beautifully, the very text introducing Diotima's idea of immortality itself serves as evidence to its truth; in reading, contemplating, and writing about ideas presented in the *Symposium*, we are ourselves reproducing toward their immortality. By creating our “new young one” – our own theories in intercourse with those that inspire us – we further proliferate Plato's ideas and perpetuate his immortality. Our reward for participating in Plato's immortalization is that we also experience and extend the immortal pleasure of his philosophy, a pleasure that we can enjoy all our lives... and quite possibly well beyond.

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<sup>11</sup> Sentiments echoed in Alexander Nehamas' conclusion to “Only in the Contemplation of Beauty...” (pp. 14 – 15)

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