

Humor pervades Plato's dialogues. Drawing mainly on the *Symposium*, I argue here that it serves two important ends. First, humor opens the reader up to the existence of deeper meanings in the text and gently leads her to discover them and to engage in philosophical reflection. Puns, word play, urbane banter, and irony turn on recognizing multiple meanings and discontinuities. The drunken Alcibiades' humorous revelation that he had pursued sexual relations with the buffoonishly ugly Socrates, unsuccessfully, provokes readers to wonder what it is that could make Socrates attractive and to consider seriously the seemingly absurd notions that qualities of soul could be more beautiful than a body and that sex may not be the ultimate expression of love. Humor disarms the reader and seduces her into reflecting on ideas she would otherwise dismiss. My second contention is that Plato thinks humor expresses the human condition. The distinction between Being, always the same and knowable, and Becoming, never the same and, thus, merely sensible, appears so often that few readers realize that Plato regards it as a false dichotomy because human beings fall under neither or, perhaps, both heads. By using an inadequate distinction to explain our nature, Plato shows the dimension of unintelligibility and discontinuity intrinsic to our nature. Since discontinuity is, I maintain, the basis of the comic, any adequate treatment of humanity must be comic. Socrates' extravagant speech on the power of love to transform a human soul emphasizes our intermediate state and our capacity, because we lack Beauty itself, to strive for it. It is refuted by Alcibiades' comic encomium on his love for Socrates that shows him, because of it, succumbing to dissipation and disgrace. Alcibiades is comic evidence of a surd in the soul that makes it resist intelligibility, but in a deeper sense, he affirms Socrates' notion of the soul as intermediate. Socrates' failure to make love and soul intelligible ironically succeeds in capturing its essence as a discontinuity and, therefore, as comic. Dialectic expresses well this middle state because it presupposes a plurality of conflicting perspectives while it strives for a single truth. Hence, the dialogues give a rich meaning to Aristotle's notion of man as capable of laughter: it is a claim about our ability to recognize discontinuities in our experience, but also, more profoundly, a claim about our essential human condition as a kind of

discontinuity and, therefore, as humorous.