



Diotima's Dismissal: Sound Argument or Unwarranted Phallacy?

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Background

Who is Diotima?

In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates gives a speech in which he reports what he learned about love from Diotima, a priestess from Mantinea. Although Plato consistently used real people in his dialogues, recent commentators tend to dismiss Diotima as a purely fictional character created by either Plato or Socrates.

The Question

Today's philosophy canon is dominated by male authors. However, historical research continues to uncover work by female authors who were lost or forgotten. Is the dismissal of Diotima as a real historical figure another example of a contribution that has been lost? Is Diotima's fictional status a belief based on sound argumentation or on fallacious reasoning?

The Process

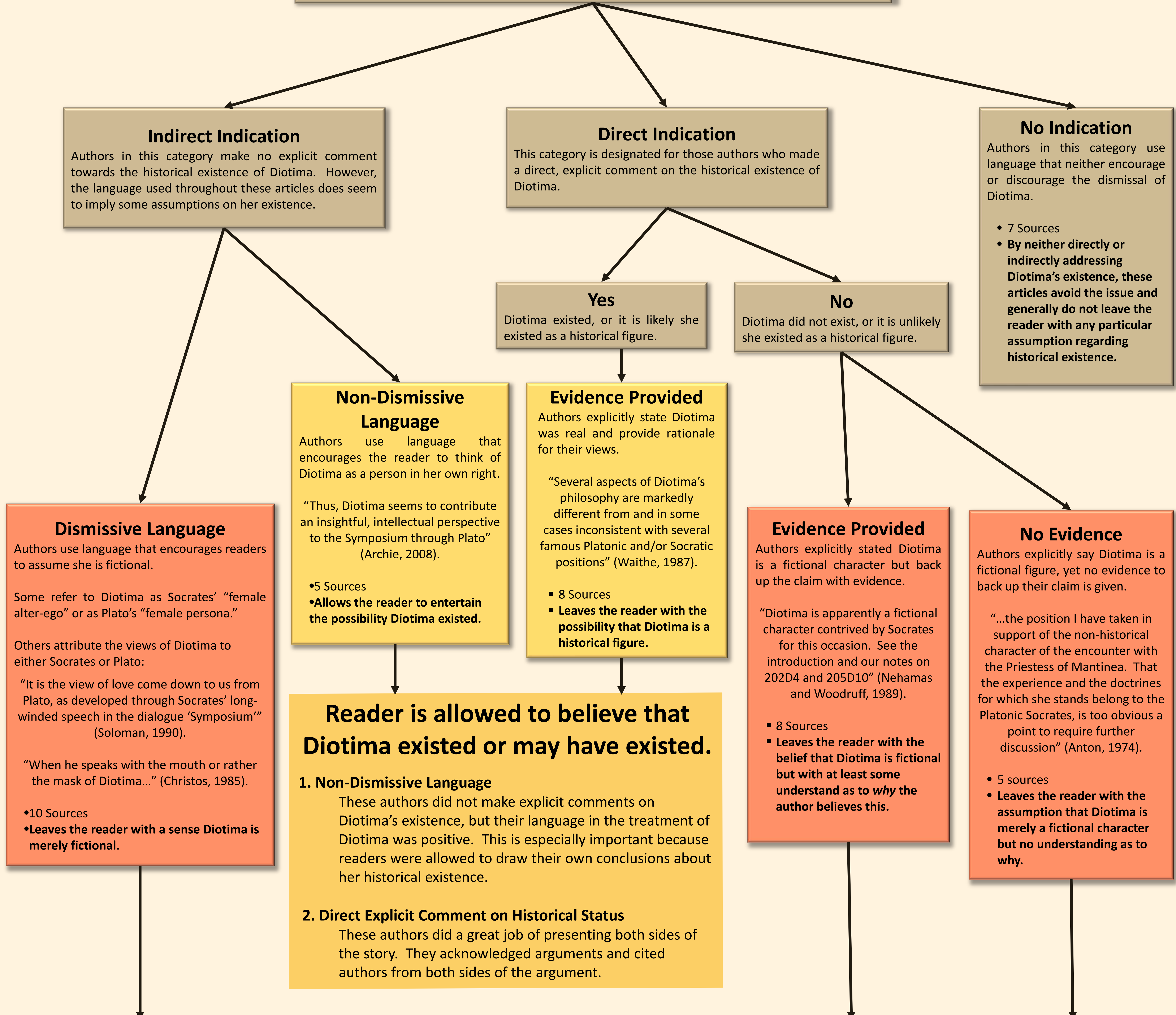
After surveying the philosophy literature on Diotima, we began to see certain trends in the approaches and language of the articles. To set up the chart on the right, we looked at authors on both sides of the issue and asked what impression their articles gave the readers. From here, we noticed a large number of articles left the reader with the assumption that Diotima was fictional, yet failed to provide evidence to support the claim or even acknowledge both sides of the argument.

The Problem

Not only do these practices fail to meet disciplinary standards, but they may also provide a partial answer to rising questions about why female philosophers are struggling to have their voices heard.

Diotima's Historical Existence

Was Diotima an actual historical figure who told a story of love to Socrates?



The Waithe Dilemma:

Background
In 1987, Mary Ellen Waithe wrote a chapter on Diotima of Mantinea in her book, *A History of Woman Philosophers*. Her goal was to question the general assumption that Diotima is a fictitious character. Waithe did this in three parts:
1. Differentiating Diotima's theory from Platonic and Socratic theories
2. Examining the "evidence" against Diotima
3. Analyzing the archeological evidence for Diotima's existence.

The Issue
Given the lack of research regarding Diotima's historical status, one would expect that Waithe's work would be highly valued by the philosophical community. However, most of the literature we surveyed completely ignored Waithe's work. Even articles that mentioned the controversy often omitted any mention of Waithe and rejected her evidence without a hearing.

Models for Scholarship

Dismissing Diotima's existence without sufficient rationale is a failure to meet disciplinary standards. This is particularly insidious when found in texts regularly used in the classroom, where editor or translator expertise is often assumed.

Instead, disciplinary standards dictate that we:
1. Acknowledge both sides of a debate and explain why a position should be accepted or rejected.
2. Where presenting both sides is beyond the scope of project, maintain as neutral a position as possible.
3. Maintain consistency in evaluating or criticizing arguments.
4. Recognize limits of evidence and look for gaps between premises and conclusions.

Applying these to Diotima
Scholars need to acknowledge that experts disagree on Diotima's existence. Avoid using dismissive language without providing explicit justification for views. Watch out for arguments used against Diotima's existence that could be (but are not) used against other characters in Plato's *Symposium*. Check for alignment between conclusions and premises and revise accordingly. For example, differentiating between the following claims could go a long way towards providing a better approach to the controversy:
• Plato's (or Socrates') account of Diotima's teachings is fictionalized.
• Diotima and everything attributed to her is completely fictional.

Reader is left with the belief that Diotima is a completely fictional character.

1. Dismissive Language

These authors did not make explicit comments about Diotima's historical existence, but the language used throughout definitely leaves readers with the assumption that she did not. This is particularly problematic given the number of instances within particular articles and number of articles which did this.

B. Appeal to Authority

Authors supported their dismissal of Diotima by citing the claims of other authors without providing any of the original reasoning. This "if that guy said it, it must be true" approach was particularly problematic when the original author was making an unsupported statement.

D. Biased Citation

Authors cited only those philosophers who agreed with their own claims, often ignoring or omitting admitting any opposing viewpoints or dismissing these as unfounded without providing evidence or argumentation to support the dismissal. This left the reader with the sense that not only is there only one acceptable position, but that that position was unassailable.

2. Evidence Provided

A. One-sided argumentation

Other authors argued against Diotima's existence using aspects of the content or layout of her speech, but ignored similar factors with other characters known to have existed.

C. Insufficient or inconclusive evidence

These authors did not make explicit comments about Diotima's historical existence, but the language used throughout definitely leaves readers with the assumption that she did not. This is particularly problematic given the number of instances within particular articles and number of articles which did this.

3. No evidence

These authors rejected the possibility of Diotima's historical existence, but provided no evidence. This absence of supporting evidence/argumentation is problematic by itself and especially baffling in philosophy.

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