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Why Erôs?

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I Introduction

I want you to think back to the first time you fell in love. I'm talking about falling hard, head-over-heels, crazy in love. I want you to remember that feeling: how the whole world seemed transformed, how every moment seemed more intense, how this person seemed to be more wonderful than anyone you had ever met before – to be perfect, almost divine, and how it felt like all meaning derived from being near them, and receded when you were apart. I now want you to take all those vivid emotions and imagine feeling them towards a philosophical theory or concept, towards Gödel's incompleteness theorem or Kantian things-in-themselves. One of the ways in which Plato has captured the popular imagination is with his claim that philosophy is grounded in love, that the philosopher can feel *erôs* (passionate love)¹ for the objects of knowledge. But I want to draw attention to what a startlingly odd claim this is. It is an odd claim to make, first, because for many of us it is hard to imagine what it would be like to direct the sorts of emotions we feel for human love-objects towards abstract, intellectual objects. But Plato's claim is even stranger

Though this chapter is unworthy of its predecessor, I would like to dedicate it to my friend and teacher, John Ferrari. I would also like to express my gratitude to David Ebrey and Richard Kraut for the invitation to write this chapter and to my audience at the Chicago Area Consortium in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy for their thoughtful comments.

¹ As many have noted, the Greek word, *erôs*, does not map precisely onto any English term. In Plato's time, its primary sense is passionate sexual or romantic love, but Plato uses it in an extended sense throughout his corpus to denote the intensity of the philosopher's attraction to the forms. I use the term, "*erôs*," interchangeably with "love" throughout the chapter; though "*philia*" can also be translated as "love," for purposes of clarity, I typically translate it as "friendliness" or "goodwill."

Plato's treatment of interpersonal *erôs* focuses on romantic relationships between older men and adolescent boys. Such relationships were typically asymmetrical: the man felt *erôs* for the boy, whereas the boy typically felt *philia*, affectionate non-sexual love, for the man. Such relationships are assumed to have served an important social and educational function, with the man serving as a mentor to the boy, providing him with political connections and/or moral, philosophical, and athletic training, in exchange for the boy's companionship and, possibly, sexual favors. For further discussion, see, e.g., Dover 1978 and Halperin 1990.

than that. For he is not simply claiming that the best philosophers feel towards intellectual objects whatever it is most of us feel for human love-objects. He also appears to be making a developmental claim: that one path to becoming a Platonic metaphysician is by falling for a really physically beautiful human being, and that this erotic response can then be redirected towards intellectual objects. But how could this redirection occur, how exactly might one extract a beautiful boy from one's affections and swap in a form? The question, then, that I wish to address in this chapter is, why *erôs*? Why should Plato propose that *erôs* – and here I take him to mean precisely passionate interpersonal love² – is an appropriate model and starting-point for philosophical engagement?

In fact, when we consider this question, a parallel question suggests itself: why philosophy? In depicting philosophy as erotic, Plato is seeking to answer the question of why we should do philosophy. This question has been largely ignored among contemporary Anglo-American philosophers: we propose all sorts of philosophical theories but pay surprisingly little attention to the question of what the value or purpose of philosophy itself is. In what follows, I argue that in suggesting that philosophy is potentially erotic, Plato is addressing precisely this question. He is claiming that philosophy can and perhaps should begin with *erôs* because the appropriate response to the forms is not purely cognitive but also desiderative and affective. In short, it is love. This, because the forms are the best of all objects, due to their ideal natures – their perfection, eternity, changelessness, and independence.³ These ideal properties not only make them epistemologically and

² Pace Sheffield 2012; I develop my arguments against her in the final section of this chapter.

³ For the distinction between proper and ideal attributes of forms, see Santas 2001: 182–3. Proper attributes of forms are attributes that the form has in virtue of being the particular form that it is (e.g., beauty is the proper attribute of the form of beauty), whereas ideal attributes of forms are attributes that the form has simply in virtue of being a form (e.g., perfection and changelessness are ideal attributes of the form of beauty and, indeed, of all forms). I also follow Santas in identifying the goodness of the forms with their ideal

metaphysically significant, but also ethically significant; they make the forms worthy of love and awe. As the best objects, they have the potential to transform our lives. As humans, we are by nature mortal and imperfect; our mortality and imperfection give rise to *erôs*, the desire for immortality and perfection. This desire achieves its highest form of satisfaction in the philosopher's contemplation of forms, objects that are truly eternal and perfect. Thus, our yearning for the forms is not simply a desire for understanding; it is a desire to stand in an intimate relation to something greater than ourselves, grounded in a perhaps inchoate sense of our own mortality and imperfection.

Here is one way to frame the puzzle I wish to address in this chapter. Though Plato makes passing reference to the philosopher as erotic throughout his dialogues, he only really makes good on this claim in two, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*.⁴ Elsewhere, he proposes paths to philosophy that appear to be entirely non-erotic. For example, in the *Phaedo*, he describes how one might begin to recollect the form of equality by seeing two equal sticks (74a9–b6). Once one recognizes that they are both equal and unequal, this has the potential to cause one to recollect the form through a purely intellectual process. Likewise, in the *Republic*, he proposes an educational curriculum that appears to be entirely non-erotic, that begins with mathematics and ends with dialectic. In this context, he describes the sorts of things that awaken our interest in philosophy, referring to them as summoners (523a5–4d5). Whereas no one is prompted to philosophical exploration through observing a mere finger, since it is not deficient in being a finger, one's philosophical curiosity might be awakened by observing two fingers, and how one is larger than

attributes (2001: 180–7). Santas argues that the forms are the best objects of their kind in virtue of their ideal attributes; they owe their possession of these ideal attributes to their participation in the form of the good.

For a contrasting position on the goodness of the forms, see Kraut's contribution to this volume (ch. 10).

⁴ Plato's most extensive use of erotic imagery to characterize the philosopher outside of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* occurs in Book VI of the *Republic* (e.g., 485a10–b8, 490a8–b7, 499b2–c2, 501d1–2).

the other. The larger finger will inevitably be found to partake of opposites – perhaps by appearing smaller than some other finger – spurring the would-be philosopher to inquire into the nature of the large itself. But whereas the largeness of fingers and the equality of sticks may prompt philosophical inquiry, they appear to do so in a manner that is entirely non-erotic. And this leads us to my central puzzle. Plato clearly has the conceptual resources to describe non-erotic paths to philosophy. So why should he present us with erotic paths as well? What distinguishes the erotic paths from their de-eroticized cousins?⁵ My exploration centers on Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*; though there are significant differences between these dialogues,⁶ my focus is the story they tell in common, of how we can go from loving a beautiful body to falling for the forms.⁷

I address this puzzle by proposing three ways in which erotic paths to philosophy differ from non-erotic.⁸ First, I consider the source of philosophical *erôs*. I argue that it is grounded in our mortality and imperfection; this gives rise to a desire for immortality and the immortal. Second, I turn to the object of philosophical *erôs*. I suggest that philosophical *erôs* is an arresting response to beauty through which we are brought to recognize and value the ideal properties of the form of

⁵ One might maintain that the erotic and non-erotic paths differ in their intended audiences: the former use beauty as a hook to awaken an interest in truth in those without prior philosophical leanings, whereas the latter are directed at those who are already disposed towards philosophy. But in fact, the erotic ascents in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are aimed at those who are already philosophically inclined. The ascent passage in the *Symposium* is presented as esoteric – Diotima warns that even Socrates may be incapable of partaking in it (210a1–2). Likewise, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato specifies that only those who had the greatest prenatal vision of the forms are capable of recollecting them through their earthly instantiations (250a1–5).

⁶ Among the more significant differences: whereas the *Symposium* treats *erôs* as a species of the more general desire for the good, the *Phaedrus* treats it as a species of *mania*. However, this might simply reflect a difference in focus – whereas Socrates’ speech in the *Symposium* provides an analysis of *erôs* from the outside (as Ferrari [1992: 249–50] and others have observed, the context of the dialogue is strangely de-eroticized), the *Phaedrus* is largely focused on what *erôs* feels like on the inside, on what sort of psychological state it is.

⁷ As my focus in this chapter is Plato’s treatment of philosophical *erôs*, I do not discuss the *Lysis*. Readers interested in Plato’s treatment of *philia* in that dialogue might turn to Vlastos 1981: 3–42, Price 1989: 1–14, Kahn 1996: 258–91, and Penner and Rowe 2005; Obdrzalek 2013 provides a critical overview of much of the literature on the dialogue.

⁸ Cf. Sheffield (2017), who also seeks to explain the connection that Plato develops between philosophy and *erôs* by proposing a set of hallmarks of *erôs*.

beauty and, indeed, of all the forms. Finally, I address the nature of *erôs*. I claim that it is a focusing desire, a desire that overrides other concerns and aims and causes us to overwhelmingly focus on its object.

II Immortality:

Let us begin by considering the source of philosophical *erôs*. There are, after all, many paths to philosophy: In the Socratic dialogues, Plato emphasizes how we are drawn to philosophy by a sense of puzzlement and a desire to explore and eradicate inconsistencies within our beliefs. But in Plato's erotic dialogues, he considers a quite different source for the drive to do philosophy, namely our sense of our own mortality and imperfection and our desire to become or to enter into a relationship with the immortal and perfect. We see this if we consider an initially puzzling feature of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Both are, not just erotic, but also, and strikingly, theological dialogues. The passages that arguably serve as the philosophical core of each – Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* and his second speech in the *Phaedrus* – are addressed to divine beings.⁹ Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* is a paean to the *daimôn* (spiritual being), Erôs; it concludes: "every man must honor Erôs and I myself honor him and especially practice the erotic arts and call on others to do so, and both now and forever I eulogize the power and courage of Erôs to the best of my ability" (212b5–8).¹⁰ Socrates' second speech in the *Phaedrus* is a palinode to the god, Erôs, offered in supplication for having offended him with his earlier speech which exalted the non-lover.

⁹ One complication is that, whereas in the *Symposium*, Socrates is adamant that Erôs is not a god but a *daimôn*, in the *Phaedrus*, he appears to treat him as a god, though 242e2 (*theos ê ti theion*) may signal an attempt to reconcile the two views.

¹⁰ Translations are my own, though at points I borrow the phrasings of Nehamas and Woodruff 1989 and 1995 and of Rowe 1998a and 1986.

This in itself is virtually unique within the Platonic corpus,¹¹ but this religious theme is amplified within the speeches themselves. Both speeches make extensive reference to mystery rites, using both linguistic and structural cues to develop an analogy between mystical initiation and philosophical enlightenment. In the *Symposium*, the ascent to the forms is referred to as the initiation into *ta telea kai eoptika* (the final and eoptic [rites], 210a1); the *epopteia* were the highest grade of initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries. This stage of initiation came to a climax when torchlight broke through the darkness to reveal sacred objects. Bury suggests that the way in which Plato presents the philosopher's vision of the form in the ascent – he beholds it suddenly (*exaiphnês*) and at the culmination of a series of initiatory stages – is meant to develop a parallel to the mystical initiate's sudden vision of the sacred objects.¹² This exact parallel recurs in the *Phaedrus*. At 250b5–c5, Plato describes our prenatal vision of the forms: “Then, beauty was radiant to see, when with a happy chorus they saw the blessed and divine vision, we following Zeus, others other gods, and were inducted into the mysteries that are rightly called most blessed ... we were initiated into whole, simple, stable, and happy visions, and we were initiated (*epopteuontes*) in a pure light, being pure ourselves.” Again, our vision of the forms is likened to the sight of the sacred objects in the *epopteia*; Yunis (2011: 149) draws attention to Plato's extravagant use of imagery associated with illumination that is reminiscent of the use of torchlight to reveal the sacred objects. Though little is known about the Eleusinian mysteries, it seems that their purpose was to bring the initiate into a more intimate relationship with the gods, to purify his soul, and to provide him with a better fate in the afterlife.¹³ It might seem quite odd that these

¹¹ One exception is Critias' speech in the *Timaeus* (21a2–3).

¹² Bury 1932: 128.

¹³ See Burkert 1985: 276–90. For extended analysis of Plato's incorporation of the imagery and structure of the mysteries into his representation of the philosophical life, see Betegh's contribution to this volume (ch. 8); for discussions more narrowly focused on the *Symposium*, see Edmonds 2017, as well as, e.g., Bury 1932: 124, 128; Des Places 1964; Morgan 1990: 80–99; and McPherran 2006.

speeches about *erôs* should be interwoven with religious imagery and couched in the language of mystical initiation. But this feature becomes less surprising once we recognize that Plato takes *erôs* to be, at its heart, a desire to enter into a close relation to the immortal and divine.

Socrates begins his account of *erôs* in the *Symposium* by providing a general analysis of *erôs* as a psychological state: *erôs*, he argues, desires its object; as a species of desire, it necessarily originates in lack (200a2–b1). Embedded in this account of *erôs* is an account of human nature: to the extent that we are desiring, erotic creatures, we are creatures that are lacking. This, in turn, implies a contrast between humans and gods – whereas humans are needy, gods are beings that lack nothing. Socrates goes on to develop this contrast when he shifts his focus from the psychological state, *erôs*, to the spiritual being, Erôs. Erôs, he argues in opposition to Agathon, cannot be a god: gods, by definition, forever possess the beautiful and the good, whereas Erôs desires and hence lacks these (202c6–d7). But this is not to say that Erôs is mortal, nor that he is ugly: Erôs, Socrates proposes, is a *daimôn*, existing between the mortal and the immortal, its function to connect man to god (202d11–3a8). If Plato’s portrayal of the *daimôn*, Erôs, is at once a characterization of the psychological state, *erôs*, then this implies that the deficiencies that give rise to *erôs* are reflective of our status as mortals and express an aspiration to the divine. This suggestion is further developed in the myth of Poros and Penia: Erôs is portrayed as existing in a state of *metaxy*, neither immortal nor mortal. Plato adds that Erôs is a *philosophos*, a lover of wisdom, both because wisdom is beautiful and because he is aware that he lacks this beauty (204a8–b5). Thus, the psychological state, *erôs*, appears to arise in us not simply from a deficiency in our mortal natures, but from a perhaps unarticulated awareness of this deficiency; this gives rise to a desire to overcome that deficiency by seeking to gain the beautiful and good and thereby approach the state of the gods.

In what follows, Plato – temporarily, at least – shifts his focus from the pursuit of beauty to the pursuit of immortality.¹⁴ The means by which he accomplishes this is by proposing that *erôs*, broadly construed, is the desire to possess the good always. But we can only possess the good always if we exist always and hence are immortal. In connecting *erôs* to the pursuit of immortality, Diotima engages in a subtle argumentative legerdemain:¹⁵ until 206e7, immortality is given an implicitly adverbial role – we seek immortality because it enables us to possess the good always, but in itself, immortality is not treated as an object of desire. But at 206e8–207a4, in the context of proposing that *erôs* aims at reproduction, she begins to treat immortality and the good as if they were on all fours: “according to what we agreed, immortality, together with the good, must be desired, if in fact *erôs* is of the good belonging to oneself always. For it is necessary from this account that *erôs* be of immortality as well.” But in what follows, Diotima provides no discussion of how the good is to be acquired; her focus is solely on the pursuit of immortality, *tout court*, and by 208d7–e1, talk of the good has all but disappeared – though *erôs* pursues virtue, it pursues it under the guise of *immortal* virtue and as a means to undying glory: “it is for the sake of immortal virtue and this sort of glorious reputation that everyone does everything, the more so the better they are; for they are in love with immortality.” This slide might be puzzling if we had not already noted the theological focus of the *Symposium*: Plato is able to treat immortality as an end, and not

¹⁴ It is a topic of considerable interpretive controversy whether, in the *Symposium*, Plato takes *erôs* to aim at immortality. Those who claim that he does include Bury 1932: xliii–xlvi; O’Brien 1984; Santas 1988: 47–8, 41–2; Rowe 1998a: 184, 192, 202; Lear 2006; Nightingale 2017; and Price 2017. Sheffield argues that Plato does not take *erôs* to aim at immortality for its own sake, but only as a means to eternal possession of the good (2006: 82–6; see also Price 1989: 17 and White 1989a: 154). In Obdrzalek 2010, I argue that while Plato depicts *erôs* as aiming at immortality prior to the ascent passage, he portrays this form of *erôs* as deeply misguided, since what it aims at, self-perpetuation, is not worthwhile; in the ascent passage, he describes a higher form of *erôs*, that aims at contemplation of forms, but not at immortality. I have since come to reconsider my position, since it does not attend to the possibility which I explore in this chapter, that we might pursue immortality not in order to perpetuate ourselves, but rather, in order to resemble the immortal forms, which are the best objects.

¹⁵ See also Price 1989: 17 and Rowe 1998a: 184 and 1998b: 248–9.

simply as a means to happiness, because immortality is one of the essential features of the gods; in aspiring to be immortal, we aspire to the condition of the gods.¹⁶

At 207c9–208b6, Plato couches our pursuit of immortality, yet again, in terms of a contrast between mortal and divine nature. Whereas the divine is immortal “by always being absolutely the same” (208a8), this is impossible for mortal creatures, as we are subject to constant flux; we must therefore pursue a mortal form of immortality via reproduction. This pursuit is ubiquitous: according to Plato, even the sexual intercourse of irrational animals is driven by an unconscious drive towards immortality. Plato thereby addresses what we might call the homonymy objection: Is he not guilty of taking the name of one phenomenon, sexual desire, and applying it to quite another, the pursuit of immortality? Not so, for Plato’s proposal is that brute sexual desire, conceived of teleologically, is in fact the desire for immortality.¹⁷ But in shifting the focus of *erôs* to immortality, Plato thereby dethrones beauty. Whereas Phaedrus proposed that *Erôs* is beautiful (195a7), Socrates begins by arguing that it is not itself beautiful but rather that it is the desire for the beautiful; he then revises that claim, proposing that it is not the desire for beauty at all, but rather for immortality. Beauty retains a role in Socrates’ account, but it is purely ancillary, its function is to serve as a medium which facilitates reproduction. Diotima thus chastises Socrates: “*Erôs* is not ... as you think, of the beautiful ... It is of generation and birth in the beautiful” (206e2–5). As we shall see in the [next section](#), it is only in the ascent passage that beauty resumes

¹⁶ One might object that Plato cannot take immortality to be desirable in itself, since it is not unconditionally good – as Plato observes in the *Phaedo*, it would be a blessing for the wicked if their souls should perish with their bodies, since they would thereby escape post-mortem punishment (107c5–d2). However, this difficulty can be avoided if we distinguish between the claims that immortality is intrinsically good and that it is unconditionally good. For Plato, immortality is intrinsically good insofar as it is one of the characteristics, such as perfection and changelessness, in virtue of which the forms are the best objects. However, this does not entail that immortality is unconditionally good – indeed, its intrinsic goodness can be overridden should it be conjoined with a significant evil.

¹⁷ Cf. *Laws* 721b6–d8.

its central role as the object of *erôs*; I shall argue that it does so precisely because of its immortality and perfection.

On the face of it, Plato's account of human nature in the *Phaedrus* appears to stand in opposition to that of the *Symposium*: Whereas in the *Symposium*, he emphasizes our current deficiency, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates' second speech begins with an account of our prenatal bliss. Prior to incarnation, each of our souls followed in the chorus of its god, assisting them in ruling the universe and joining them in contemplating forms (246b–8b). But upon closer examination, we can uncover a treatment of human nature in the *Phaedrus* that is not so far removed from that of the *Symposium*. Even in his account of our prenatal state, Plato emphasizes the gap between human and divine soul – our souls, like the gods', are composed of a winged team of a charioteer and horses, but whereas all of the gods' horses are good, one of ours is white, the other black (246a6–b4). This black horse, roughly corresponding to appetite, represents our souls' inbuilt pull towards incarnation. When our souls are winged and perfect, we are each able to follow our god and observe the forms. But the unruly nature of the dark horse leads most souls to shed their wings and fall into a solid, earthy body. And it is once a soul is imprisoned in a body that it becomes part of the composite that is a human. Thus, even as Plato creates a beatific portrayal of our souls' divine potential, he emphasizes that our current state, as embodied humans, is one of fallen-ness.

In the *Symposium*, Plato proposes that *erôs* is the desire for immortality. It might appear that Plato cannot sustain this analysis in the *Phaedrus*: at 245c5, he declares outright, “all soul is immortal.” But as we have seen, Plato also contrasts disembodied and embodied souls: he writes that when a soul has lost its wings, it “is carried along until it takes hold of something solid, and settling there, it takes on an earthy body that seems to move itself on account of the soul's power, and the whole thing is called an animal (*zôon*), the soul and body made fast together, and it has the

name, mortal. Immortal it is not, not on the basis of any account that has been reasoned through” (246c2–7). Thus, to the extent that we are soul–body composites, we are mortal beings. However, our souls never lose their latent capacity to regrow their wings, become disembodied and immortal, and reascend to the forms. When, as incarnate, mortal beings, we encounter something beautiful, this causes the wings of our soul to throb and pulse and itch to grow. The result is a mad desire to regrow our wings, reascend to the heavens, and see the forms. The name of this desire, Plato proposes, is *erôs* (249e3–4, 252b1–3). To the extent that *erôs* is the desire to regrow our wings, it is a desire to escape our incarnate, mortal condition and to regain our blessed, disincarnate, immortal condition.

As in the *Symposium*, so in the *Phaedrus*, Plato’s emphasis on immortality brings with it an implicit demotion of beauty. Though the lover’s *erôs* is sparked by his attraction to a beautiful boy, his ultimate aim does not concern the boy; rather, it is to regrow his wings, reascend to the heavens, and contemplate the forms. Just as, in the *Symposium*, beauty assists in the process of giving birth, a process that aims at immortality, so in the *Phaedrus*, Plato assigns it the role of nourishing the regrowth of the wings of the soul (246d6–e4). However, once he regrows his wings, what the lover ultimately wishes to grasp is not the form of beauty per se, but, rather, the set of all the forms; though beauty plays a special role in prompting recollection, its value lies in the ideal nature that it shares with all the forms.

III Beauty

What we see, then, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, is the proposal that *erôs* is a desire that arises due to an awareness of our deficient, mortal human nature; it is a desire to achieve immortality and to stand in relation to the immortal and divine. This is a radical and ambitious claim for Plato to make. Whereas *erôs* is commonly understood to consist in sexual

desire, Plato proposes that it is, in fact, something quite different. And he is not just taking the term, *erôs*, and using it to describe an entirely different phenomenon; instead, he is claiming that what we mistakenly identify with mere sexual desire is, in fact, a significantly wider phenomenon, that lies at the root of our desire for sex, but also, potentially, at the root of our desire to do philosophy. To return to my original puzzle: What, then, distinguishes *erôs* as a path to philosophy from non-erotic forms of ascent? This desire is more fundamental and ethically significant than mere intellectual curiosity. It arises from an awareness of what sorts of creatures we are and of what we might aspire to become; as such, it concerns what we ought to aim at in life. But granting that *erôs* is a desire for immortality, why should this desire find its ultimate expression in philosophical contemplation? This brings me to my second proposal, that *erôs* is distinguished by the role of beauty. It is an arresting response to beauty that causes us to recognize and value the ideal attributes of the form, which, in turn, promise to address our sense of mortality and imperfection.

Earlier, I observed that in treating *erôs* as the desire for immortality, Plato sidelines beauty; beauty facilitates reproduction and birth, it eases the regrowth of the soul's wings, but it is no longer the primary focus of *erôs*. It is in the ascent passage of the *Symposium* that beauty resumes its status as the object of *erôs*.¹⁸ On its surface, the ascent passage of the *Symposium* appears to conform with Diotima's earlier statement that *erôs* is not of beauty, but of "birth in beauty," as she enigmatically calls it: As the initiate shifts his attention from one kind of beauty to the next, he is thrice depicted as giving birth to ideas (210a7–8, c1–2, d4–5), and the passage culminates with his giving birth to virtue (212a3–5). But at the same time, throughout the ascent, the focus appears to

¹⁸ Neumann (1965: 42–4) and White (1989a: 152–3 and 2004: 373) argue that beauty is not reintroduced as the object of *erôs* in the ascent; for critical response, see Obdrzalek 2010: 440. Even among interpreters who take beauty to reemerge as the object of *erôs* in the ascent, my position in this chapter is somewhat unusual in taking beauty to be the object of *erôs* in light of its ideal attributes.

shift back to the beauty of the beautiful objects as valuable in itself, and as leading to the ultimate goal of *erôs*, the vision of the form of beauty. The ascent passage opens with a twenty-eight-line long sentence, consisting of a series of purpose clauses, which describe how the initiate rises from one level to the next; this syntactic structure serves to emphasize the directionality and even urgency of the ascent. It is broken off with a sudden warning to pay attention, that serves to offset the purpose at which the entire ascent is aiming. Plato next writes: “Whoever is led thus far in erotic matters, contemplating beauties correctly and in the right order, approaching the end (*telos*) of these erotic matters, will suddenly catch sight of a beauty amazing in its nature, and this is the very thing ... that all his earlier toils were for the sake of” (210e2–6). Plato here states outright that the *telos* (goal, end) of *erôs*, at which all the earlier stages aim, is the sight of the form of beauty. He refers to the sight of the form, again, as the *telos* of *erôs* when he recapitulates the ascent at 211b5–d1, and claims at 211d1–3 that to the extent that human life is worth living, it is worth living in the contemplation of the form of beauty. But all of this raises the following question: Why should Plato have been at pains to argue earlier that *erôs* is not of beauty, but rather of birth in beauty, only to vividly and emphatically reintroduce beauty as the proper object of *erôs* in the ascent?

The solution to this puzzle lies in the fact that what has been introduced as the proper object of *erôs* is not simply another beautiful particular; it is the form of beauty. And the form of beauty, *qua* form, fully possesses the eternality and perfection that we lack and that give rise to erotic longing. Thus, when Plato describes the form, he has little to say about what its beauty consists in; instead, his description focuses entirely on its ideal attributes. The first thing that Plato tells us about the form is that “always existing, it neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes” (211a1–2); this represents exactly the condition that Plato earlier identified with true

immortality.¹⁹ Just as the form of beauty serves as the proper object of *erôs* in the ascent *qua* immortal form, so the successive beauties are objects of *erôs* to the extent that they point towards and progressively approximate the ideal nature of beauty. If we look carefully at the stages of the ascent, at no point does Plato describe the higher objects as more beautiful than the lower. It is true that the lover comes to view his attraction to a particular body as a small thing and to look down on it, but this is not to say that he no longer finds the body to be beautiful; indeed, it is his realization that what beauty it has is shared by other bodies that occasions his derision. Later, the lover recognizes that the beauty of souls is more valuable (*timiôteron*, 210b7) than the beauty of bodies, and that bodily beauty is of little worth. But none of this is equivalent to claiming that the higher objects are more beautiful than the lower, only that they are somehow more worthwhile. What makes the higher objects more worthwhile than the lower and thereby causes the lover to ascend? In his description of the form, Plato focuses entirely on its unchanging and perfect nature: it does not come into existence and cease to exist and it is not located in or conditioned upon anything particular. This suggests that, correspondingly, the value of the successive beauties in the ascent is connected, not to their being more beautiful, but to their better approximating the ideal properties of the form. Whereas a body is a concrete, corporeal particular, subject to decay, its beauty lasting a mere moment, a soul is incorporeal and its beauty longer-lasting.²⁰ Customs, laws, and knowledge are progressively less connected to the corporeal world and, correspondingly, longer-lasting. Thus, in the ascent passage, the form of beauty can serve as the ultimate object of

¹⁹ While Plato portrays the forms as *athanata* (immortal) at, e.g., *Phd.* 79d1–2 and 80b1–3, in the *Timaeus*, he introduces an important refinement to his position. Though he describes the forms as *aidia* (eternal), he also claims that the forms do not exist in time (37c6–38c3); their eternality is a matter of their existing timelessly, rather than of their existing forever. Thus, the kind of immortality that we aspire to – endless existence in time – will always be an inferior approximation of that which the forms necessarily possess.

²⁰ This is not to say that souls last longer than bodies – indeed, 207d4–8b2 can be taken to imply that souls are as perishable as bodies. My point is more minimally that, whereas a body’s beauty begins to wane by middle age, a soul’s beauty – i.e., wisdom and virtue – can potentially extend throughout one’s life.

erôs in virtue of its being a form, an object that is fully perfect and immortal;²¹ the successive beauties of the ascent lead us to the form by progressively sharing in its ideal nature.

But if the ascent is driven by the beauties' increasing participation in the ideal nature of the form of beauty, then this raises the question of why the form of beauty in particular should play this role. Why might we not ascend by considering increasingly abstract and unchanging examples of, say, equality? What makes beauty so special? Plato addresses this question in the *Phaedrus*, in one of the most evocative but obscure passages in his corpus:

Now there is no illumination in the likenesses down here of justice and moderation and the other things that are of value to souls, but through dim organs and with difficulty, only a few, approaching their likenesses, behold the original that is imaged in them. But beauty was radiant to see then, when, with a happy chorus, they saw the blessed and divine sight, we following Zeus, others other gods, and were initiated into the mysteries that are rightly called most blessed ... concerning beauty, as we said, it was shining with those things, and now that we have come here, we grasp it through the clearest of our senses, glistening most clearly. For of all the sensations that come to us through the body, sight is the sharpest, but it does not see wisdom, for it would cause terrible feelings of love in us if it allowed some such clear image of itself to approach sight, and so, too, with the other objects of love; but now beauty alone has this privilege, to be most evident and most loved. (250b1–e1)

²¹ Here I oppose, e.g., Vlastos (1981: 24), who argues that the form's loveability resides in its being unqualifiedly beautiful. While I see no reason to deny that beauty in the ascent is narrowly and fully self-predicating, I claim that what makes it loveable are its ideal, not its proper characteristics.

What is Plato trying to say here; what does it mean to say that beauty is “most evident and most loved”? This is not a claim about the form of beauty considered on its own and apart from its instances; when we grasped beauty in our disembodied state it shone with all the other forms and there is no implication that at that time it shone brighter than its brethren. Nor again is it a claim about particular beauties considered in isolation from the form; Plato is not claiming, say, that a beautiful object is more readily identifiable as beautiful than a large object as large.²² Instead, as Lear (2006: 117) has suggested, this is a claim about the relation between the form of beauty and its instances. The unique power of the form of beauty lies in its capacity to shine through its instances and reveal “the original that is imaged in them.” In other words, the form of beauty is somehow distinguished by the manner in which it reveals itself through its instances, prompting recollection. But why should this be the case?

Here, we might return to the comparison I drew earlier between, on the one hand, the erotic ascents of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and, on the other hand, the sticks passage of the *Phaedo* and the summoners passage of the *Republic*.²³ The *Phaedo* passage implies (74b4–75b8) and the summoners passage states outright (523a10–c4) that it is the deficiency of particulars that prompts dialectical investigation into forms. But in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, there is no suggestion that it is the deficiency of particular beauties that spurs philosophical discovery. Indeed, if that were the case, we would be best off falling for a partially ugly boy rather than one who is exceptionally beautiful. What, then, is it about the beautiful boy that inspires the lover to recollect his pre-incarnate vision of the form of beauty? To see the form reflected in a particular is to recognize that, over and above particular beauties, such as the boy one has fallen for, there is

²² In this I am opposing, e.g., Santas (1988: 69), who claims that what distinguishes beauty from the other forms of value properties (e.g., justice, moderation) is that its earthly instances can be directly perceived. Against Santas, it is not clear why one cannot directly perceive that, say, an artifact is good or a warrior brave.

²³ See also Burnyeat 2012: 255–6.

something that it is to be beautiful, a form of beauty that is eternal, changeless, and independent, by approximating which all beautiful particulars come to be beautiful. Thus, to the extent that we see the form of beauty imaged in the boy, we do not just see in him the proper attribute of the form, its beauty, but we also somehow see its ideal attributes, its changelessness, perfection, and eternity, reflected in him.²⁴ It is the fact that we see these ideal attributes reflected in its instances that distinguishes the form of beauty from the other forms.²⁵

But what does it even mean to see the ideal nature of the form reflected in the boy? Plato continues our passage as follows:

the recently initiated, who saw much of the things then, when he sees a godlike face or a bodily form that imitates beauty well, first shivers and undergoes some of his former fears, and then, beholding him, he reveres him like a god, and if he did not fear a reputation of complete madness, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to a divine statue and to a god. (251a1–7)

What we see here is a phenomenon that Freud would later term overvaluation: Through falling in love with the boy, the man sees him as if he were perfect and is even inclined to worship him as a god. Part of the madness of love is a tendency to be so overwhelmed by the beauty of the beloved that we experience his beauty as if it were perfect, timeless, and universal.²⁶ Though this reflects a metaphysical confusion, it also enables us to see the ideal nature of the form reflected in

²⁴ For a similar line of argument, see Lear 2006: 117–18.

²⁵ Is Plato claiming that we see the ideal attributes of the form in the boy or in his beauty? *Phaedrus* 251a1–7 would seem to suggest the former – it is the boy who is worshipped as a god, not the boy's beauty. But perhaps Plato does not intend for us to draw a sharp distinction; perhaps the lover worships the boy as godlike because he possesses godlike beauty.

²⁶ On the role of idealization in *erôs*, see also Lear 2006: 117–18 and Sheffield 2017: 132.

spatiotemporal reality. So long as our memory, and with it our *erôs*, passes from the boy to the form, this offers us a potential path to philosophy.²⁷

Thus, the surprising result is that, even as Plato proposes that *erôs* aims at immortality and perfection rather than at beauty per se, he retains a central role for the form of beauty: It is in virtue of its being a form, and a form that reveals its ideal nature through its instances, that the form of beauty can serve as the ultimate object of *erôs*. Broadly speaking, the object of *erôs* is all of the forms, conceived of as perfect, immortal objects, but it is the form of beauty that first inspires love and that eventually draws the philosopher to all of the forms. But granting that the forms are perfect, eternal objects, how does the sight of the forms address the philosopher's erotic yearning for immortality and perfection? The answer is twofold. First, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato claims that the sight of the forms causes our soul to grow and maintain its wings (248b5–c2); indeed, it is their sight of the forms that serves to make the gods divine (249c5–6). Thus, Plato appears to propose that grasping the forms causes one's soul to approximate the forms' incorporeal, eternal natures. Though this proposal is puzzling, it is one that Plato pursues throughout his corpus – for example, in the *Phaedo*, he claims that contemplating forms makes one's soul assimilate to their unchanging natures (79d1–7), and in the *Timaeus*, that thinking immortal thoughts causes one's soul to partake of immortality (90b6–d8).²⁸ But there is also another possible role played by the philosopher's

²⁷ This still leaves us with the question of why beauty, and not other properties, occasions love, causing us to see the ideal properties of the form in its instances. I take it that Plato views this as a brute psychological fact, not admitting of further explanation: We are just constituted such that, for us, beauty, and not other forms, shines brightest through its instances.

²⁸ Other interpreters who take the philosopher's immortality to result from his grasp of the form include Bury (1932: xlv–xlv), Cornford (1971: 127), O'Brien (1984: 196), and Kahn (1987: 94). For an opposing argument, see Hackforth 1950: 44. A more common strategy is to argue that the spiritual ascent in the *Symposium* is continuous with the discussion that precedes it, and that the philosopher achieves immortality-by-proxy, through giving birth in beauty. This can take the form of his giving birth to virtue in the boy's soul, or to ideas and discourse or constitutions and laws that outlive him. For this strategy see, e.g., Kraut 1973: 339–41; Santas 1988: 41–2; Price 1989: 49–54; Reeve 1992: 102–3, 109; Rowe 1998a: 192, 201; and Nightingale 2017. For opposing arguments, see O'Brien 1984: 196–9, Ferrari 1991: 181–2 and 1992: 260, Sheffield 2006: 106–8, Sedley 2009: 160, and Obdrzalek 2010: 441–3.

grasp of the forms. The *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* both suggest that our erotic longing is not solely a desire to become immortal ourselves, but also to behold that which is fully immortal and divine. Thus, in the *Symposium*, Erôs is a *daimôn* that connects man to god, and in the *Phaedrus*, our longing is not simply to assimilate to our god, but also to follow him. In enabling us to grasp objects that are fully immortal and perfect, philosophy can satisfy *erôs*, conceived of as a desire not simply for becoming immortal and perfect ourselves, but also as a desire for contemplating and admiring that which is greater than ourselves, that which is fully perfect and divine, namely the forms.²⁹

IV Madness

I opened this chapter by asking what distinguishes erotic from non-erotic paths to philosophy. I proposed that philosophical *erôs* originates in our sense of our own mortality and imperfection and aims at our becoming or standing in relation to the immortal and perfect; I then examined how the form of beauty both awakens and fulfills this desire. My final task is to examine the nature of erotic desire – granting that *erôs* is a species of desire and that it is in some way directed towards beauty, what distinguishes it from other forms of desire? Plato raises this question in Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus*: "That *erôs* is some sort of desire is clear to everyone; we also know that men desire what is beautiful even when they do not feel *erôs*. How, then, shall we distinguish the man who feels *erôs* from the one who does not?" (237d3–5). The answer he proposes is that *erôs* is a species of hubris, in which the desire for pleasure overpowers one's judgment about what is best; while hubris takes on many names, the name of *erôs* derives from its forcefulness: "The unreasoning

²⁹ One might wonder whether *erôs* ought to count as a single psychological state, insofar as it can be expressed both via the pursuit of immortality and via the attempt to stand in close relation to the immortal. I maintain that it still counts as a single state, insofar as both forms of expression arise from a common source: our sense of our own mortality and imperfection.

desire that has overpowered the belief that urges one to what is correct, borne towards pleasure in beauty and forcefully reinforced by kindred desires for bodily beauty, overpowering them in its course, and taking its name from this very force (*rhômê*) – this is called *erôs*’ (238b7–c4). In his second speech, Socrates rejects certain aspects of this analysis: its assumptions that the only kind of beauty is corporeal, that the only object of desire is pleasure, and that the pursuit of beauty stands in opposition to reason. But he does not reject the proposal that *erôs* is distinguished by its overriding force; thus, at the conclusion of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates states that his two speeches in fact carved out two species of madness, one the product of human illness, the other the result of divine inspiration (265a2–11). In treating *erôs* as a form of madness (*mania*), Plato is signaling that it is what we might call a focusing desire, a desire that overrides other concerns, causing us to focus overwhelmingly on its object.

Plato depicts this aspect of *erôs* vividly in Socrates’ second speech:

[The lover’s soul] is sorely troubled by this mixture of [pleasure and pain] and it rages, confused by the strangeness of his condition, and maddened, it is unable to sleep by night nor remain in place by day, but it runs to wherever it thinks it will see the one who has the beauty it longs for; and seeing him, it opens the sluiceways of longing, and it frees what was blocked up before, and finding a breathing-space, it leaves off from its stinging birth-pains, and enjoys for the moment the sweetest of all pleasures. This it is not willing to give up, and it does not value anyone more than the beautiful [boy]. (251d7–2a2)

The lover is overwhelmingly focused on his love-object, to the extent that all other aims and interests vanish. As the lover’s recollection begins to turn from the boy to the forms, he even

appears to exit this world and to be out of his mind: “Standing outside of human concerns, and drawing close to the divine, he is admonished by the many for being disturbed, unaware that he is possessed by a god” (249c8–d3); “looking upwards like a bird, ignoring the things down below, he is charged with being mad” (249d7–e1). *Erôs* is a focusing desire in the sense that it commands our attention; the result is not simply that we feel compelled to pursue it, but that other considerations and aims recede, to the point that the agent can even cease to be aware of himself. Though, for Plato, the beautiful and the good are coextensive, to respond to something as beautiful can be quite different from responding to it as good.³⁰ When we respond to something as good, we see it as an end to be pursued, and we deliberate as to how to pursue this good and how to balance its pursuit with other goods that we might wish to obtain as well. By contrast, an erotic response to beauty has a kind of tunneling effect, where all other ends recede, and the beloved object becomes one’s dominant focus.³¹ While Socrates’ second speech provides a striking portrayal of how this erotic response can belong to reason, his first speech does not miss the mark in treating it as opposed to what he later calls “mortal self-control” (256e5), to reason’s prudential functioning.

In opposing “mortal self-control,” philosophical *erôs* presents significant moral risks. Even in Socrates’ second speech, Plato does not shy away from this; he describes how the lover’s soul “forgets mother and father and friends altogether, and it thinks nothing of losing its wealth through neglect, and it looks down on the standards of propriety and decorum in which it once took pride, and is even ready to act the part of a slave” (252a2–7). Plato elaborates on these risks in the *Republic*, when he proposes that a soul becomes tyrannical when *erôs* is implanted within it

³⁰ See also Lear 2006: 97.

³¹ See also Irwin 1977: 240.

(572e4–573a2); in a passage that echoes the *Phaedrus*, he notes that the tyrannical man is even willing to enslave his beloved parents for the sake of some new boyfriend (574b12–c5). It is perhaps due to this socially destructive potential that Plato provides an entirely non-erotic curriculum for the guardians in Book VII.

But in the *Phaedrus*, we see how, provided that it is directed towards beauty and not towards bodily pleasure or mastery over others, the overpowering force of *erôs* also has a significant positive potential. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato appears to claim that we can only fully grasp the forms when we are disembodied; our disembodied condition and capacity to recollect the forms are metaphorically represented as the state when our souls are fully winged. In depicting the philosopher’s recollection of the form of beauty, Plato deftly interweaves imagery of the regrowth of wings, divine possession, and metaphysical insight:

For this reason, it is just that only the mind of the philosopher grows wings.

For he is always as close as possible, through memory, to those things proximity to which makes a god divine. The man who uses such reminders correctly, always completing perfect mysteries, alone becomes truly perfect. Standing outside of human concerns, and drawing close to the divine, he is admonished by the many for being disturbed. (249c4–d2)

Plato later signals that we cannot fully regrow our wings while embodied (249d4–e1);³² thus, to the extent that the philosopher’s soul begins to regrow its wings, it must be achieving some proxy of disembodiment while still embodied, which enables it to at least grasp the forms through memory. Plato goes on to characterize those souls that are capable of recollecting the forms as “struck from their senses and no longer in themselves” (250a6–7). What Plato is describing is how

³² See also 248e5–249a5.

the philosopher's overwhelming attraction to beauty enables his reason to at least temporarily shed its mortal nature, to turn away from its embodied, social existence, from its internal role as ruler of a partite soul and its external role as a member of society. In this moment, his reason solely identifies with its contemplative capacity; the philosopher thereby comes as close as possible to achieving disembodiment while still embodied and he attains a mortal approximation of immortality.

But the intensity of the lover's response to the form of beauty has another aspect that I wish to explore: it opens the possibility of his *erôs* transforming from a self-centered, acquisitive response into a disinterested one. We see this shift within Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*. He begins by treating *erôs* as an acquisitive desire to possess what is beautiful. With his proposal that *erôs* is, in fact, the desire for birth in beauty, it becomes productive, but its focus is still self-directed, at achieving eternal possession of the good for oneself. In the ascent passage, however, we see the lover shift from treating beauty as a means to treating it as an end, to recognizing its intrinsic value, a value that is, in fact, radically independent of human interests and concerns (211a5–b5); he now does not seek to possess it, but rather to contemplate it (211e4–2a2). In focusing on a perfection that is outside of himself, the lover ceases to be self-directed; his *erôs* transforms into a disinterested state of awe. Nehamas has suggested that the disinterested response to beauty is a Kantian invention, and that Platonic *erôs* is not disinterested in Kant's sense (2017: 1–13). To the extent that Plato continues to view the philosopher's response as erotic, Nehamas' observation may be apt, but it is worth noting that *erôs* bridges the senses of desire and of love; inasmuch as the philosopher responds to the forms with a love that borders on religious devotion,

it does not appear to be motivated by self-interested desire.³³ This form of disinterested reverence is precisely what we see in the philosopher's response to beauty in the *Phaedrus*. Plato describes how the charioteer's memory is "carried back to the nature of beauty, and it sees it once again, standing together with moderation on its sacred pedestal; seeing it, he becomes frightened and falls back in sudden reverence" (254b5–8). Though *erôs*, as we see in the case of the tyrant, can give rise to the greatest selfishness, for many of us, falling in love is our first and most significant experience of being arrested by a value that we recognize outside of ourselves and that we may even come to care about more than ourselves. For Plato, this radical shift in value can serve as a first step to philosophy, since it enables us to overcome our limited, self-centered perspectives, and since it mirrors the reverence that we ought to direct towards the forms.

But even if the philosopher's attitude towards the forms is ultimately disinterested, this is not to say that he does not stand to gain from his grasp of the forms. There is, in fact, a significant ambiguity in how Plato understands the philosopher's *erôs*: Does it aim at immortality, in other words at the perfection of the philosopher's soul, or at the immortal, in other words at the contemplation of the immortal forms? In the *Symposium*, immediately after Plato presents the sight of the form of beauty as the *telos* of the philosopher's *erôs*, he surprisingly reverts to the birth-in-beauty model:

in that life alone, looking at the beautiful with that by which it can be seen,
will it be possible for him to give birth, not to images of virtue, because he is not
grasping images, but to true virtue, because he is grasping the truth; and it belongs

³³ Kant's treatment of disinterestedness is admittedly obscure. To the extent that the philosopher's *erôs* for the forms is grounded in his incomplete, needy nature, it would presumably fail to count as disinterested in the Kantian sense. The point I wish to make is simply that for Plato, even if *erôs* arises from and seeks to address our mortal deficiency, it eventually shifts in focus. It transforms from a hunger to acquire something for ourselves or to become a certain way into an appreciative reverence for the forms as objects that are entirely independent of us.

to the one who has given birth to true virtue and nurtured it to become god-loved and, if any human can, immortal. (212a2–7)

A similar puzzle arises in the *Phaedrus* as well, where it is unclear whether the philosopher seeks to grasp the forms in order that he may regrow his wings or to regrow his wings in order that he may behold the forms. On the one hand, Plato claims that “the reason there is so much eagerness to see the plain where the truth is is that the pasturage which is fitting for the best part of the soul comes from the meadow there, and that the nature of the wings, by which the soul is lifted, is nourished by it” (248b5–c2). This would seem to suggest that the primary reason we wish to grasp the truth is in order that we may regrow our souls’ wings. But we wish to regrow our wings in order that, returning to the heavens, we may follow in the path of our god, and the gods’ ultimate aim appears to be to contemplate the forms. What we have then, is a virtuous circle: Our contemplation of the forms sustains our soul’s wings, but the purpose of our wings is to enable us to see the forms. Perhaps Plato’s thought is that, paradoxically, it is only when we cease to focus on our own imperfection, and forcefully recall the forms, that we are fully able to grasp and assimilate to them; in forgetting ourselves and contemplating the perfection of the forms, we stand our best chance of perfecting our human natures.

V Love

Before concluding, I would like to briefly consider a question that has occupied a central place in philosophical responses to Plato’s theory of *erôs* over the past fifty years: What are we to make of this as an account of love, a paradigmatically interpersonal state?³⁴ In his

³⁴ The literature on this topic is vast. Interpreters who advocate an inclusive interpretation of the ascent, according to which the philosopher’s grasp of the form is compatible with his continuing to love his boy, include Kosman (1976), Price (1989: 43–9), Irwin (1991: 169), Reeve (1992: 109), Rowe (1998a: 7, 193, 195, 197, and 1998b: 257), and Kraut (2008). Interpreters who advocate an exclusive or intellectualist interpretation of the ascent, according to which the philosopher’s grasp of the form causes him to devalue, or at least lose interest in, his boy include Moravcsik (1972: 293), Vlastos (1981), Ferrari (1992: 258–60), and

seminal article, "The Individual as Object of Love in Plato," Vlastos develops a powerful critique of Plato: He argues that Plato's theory of love is a failure, because it is incapable of accommodating disinterested love for other persons. This, because love, for Plato, is fundamentally egoistic: "if A loves B, he does so because of some benefit *he* needs from B and for the sake of just that benefit."³⁵ To the extent that Platonic love is ultimately directed at the form of beauty, this entails that we are to treat human love-objects as mere placeholders for the form, to be abandoned once they serve their philosophical function. If I am correct that Platonic *erôs* can result in the disinterested admiration of what is beautiful, as depicted in the lover's worship of the beautiful boy in the *Phaedrus*, then Platonic love is not as egoistic as Vlastos makes out: even if his admiration for the boy serves the purpose of leading him to the form of beauty, it needn't follow that the lover admires the boy for this purpose. But this still leaves us with Vlastos' concerns that the lover objectifies the boy in loving him for his beauty and that he will readily abandon the boy when he encounters something more beautiful still.

In a recent response to Vlastos, Sheffield (2012) has argued that Vlastos' critique misses the mark: Plato's theory of *erôs* is not intended as a theory of interpersonal love at all, but as a theory of the pursuit of happiness; it is thus inappropriate to subject it to the expectations we might have of an account of interpersonal love. Sheffield is certainly correct in observing that Plato takes *erôs* to be a broader phenomenon than mere interpersonal love. But that does not entail that Vlastos' objection misses the mark. First, just because Plato takes *erôs* to be a broader phenomenon than interpersonal love, it does not follow that it does not contain within it a treatment of

Obdrzalek (2010). Nussbaum's interpretation of the ascent falls within the exclusive camp, though she argues that both Alcibiades' speech and the *Phaedrus* express Plato's reservations about the excessive rationalism he attributes to Socrates in the ascent (1986).

³⁵ Vlastos 1981: 8.

interpersonal love, conceived of as a means of pursuing happiness. I have argued that Plato takes *erôs* to be an overwhelming and arresting response to beauty. In this light, it is of the utmost importance to Plato that philosophical *erôs* should begin with interpersonal love: it is because we have an overwhelming response to the beauty of a person and not, say, a pencil, that *erôs* is awoken, that we begin to experience a longing for immortality, to see the divine in our love object and eventually to recollect the form of beauty. But in that case, the person who initially awoke our *erôs* might quite justifiably ask, what about me? A boy might understandably feel abandoned and devalued if his erstwhile lover should throw him over once he grasps the form. Second, to the extent that Plato is offering an account of how we ought best to live our lives, it is reasonable to ask what role, if any, persons should play in providing our lives with meaning. Sheffield claims that “Socrates’ move away from individuals as the focus of a happy human life is laudable” (2012: 127–8). But if Plato is indeed claiming that persons ought not to be a source of meaning in life, and that we should find happiness in philosophical wisdom, but not interpersonal love, then I suspect that many of us would strenuously object.

In order to address Vlastos’ critique, we need to ask what the philosophic lover will be like, once he has grasped the form. Plato’s answer is, in fact, equivocal. On the one hand, in the ascent passage of the *Symposium*, Plato suggests that the philosopher’s grasp of the form will result in an extreme devaluation of all earthly particulars, including his boy. The boy’s body is compared to a step that the lover climbs over in order to reach the form; upon seeing the form he “no longer measures beauty in terms of gold, clothing, beautiful boys or youths” (211d3–5), but recognizes it as “pure, clean, unmixed, and uncontaminated by human flesh, colors, or any other mortal nonsense” (211e1–3). To see the boy’s beauty as being as worthless as that of a fancy cloak, and to see the form’s value as residing, in part, in its being uncontaminated by mortal nonsense, surely

implies that whatever value the boy once had is now eclipsed by that of the form. But at the same time, Plato's portrayal of Socrates in the *Symposium* suggests a quite different picture. It is a matter of controversy whether we should take Socrates to have completed the ascent; his description of himself in the opening of the dialogue as having knowledge of erotic matters (*ta erôtika*, 177d8), suggests that perhaps he has.³⁶ But if he has indeed grasped the form, then his resulting state is complex. On the one hand, he appears to no longer be erotic: Alcibiades describes in excruciating detail how Socrates was utterly impervious to his attempted seduction. But Socrates' state is not one of total interpersonal detachment; indeed, one of the most moving aspects of Alcibiades' speech is the friendly concern that Socrates directs towards him. Perhaps this is due to Socrates' merely mortal nature. In the opening of the dialogue (175b1–2), as well as in Alcibiades' speech (220c3–d5), Plato depicts Socrates as entering into philosophical trances, but these are merely temporary. Perhaps, to the extent that Socrates is unable to sustain his contemplation of forms, he finds value, albeit lesser value, in engagement with particulars, including the beautiful Alcibiades.

But I do not think that this does justice to Plato's portrayal of Socrates. For what Socrates manifests towards Alcibiades and his other companions does not appear to be watered-down *erôs*, but rather, an ironic pretence of *erôs* as a veneer for an attitude of friendly concern, or *philia*. Though the *Symposium* does not have much to say about *philia*, two points in the ascent passage are noteworthy. First, though Socrates earlier claims that the gods, as beings that lack nothing, are beyond *erôs*, at the conclusion of the ascent, in describing the initiate as *theophilês* (god-loved, 212a6), he implies that they are capable of *philia*. Second, he describes the initiate as giving birth to beautiful and glorious ideas *en philosophiai aphthonôi* (in unstinting philosophy, 210d6). His use of *aphthonos* here is picked up in the *Phaedrus*, where the gods are described as allowing all

³⁶ For a contrary view, see Rowe 1998a: 200 and Sheffield 2006: 196 n. 27.

who wish to follow in their chorus, since they are completely lacking in *phthonos* (envy, 247a7). The lover, in turn, is described as training his boy to become godlike, because he manifests no *phthonos* towards the boy (253b7). The lover's unstinting generosity towards the boy is the result of his gratitude towards the boy for causing him to recollect the god (253a5–b1); in adopting this attitude towards the boy, the lover appears to imitate that of the gods towards the mortal souls that follow in their chorus. Later, in the *Timaeus*, Plato describes the demiurge as ordering the universe because he is good, and hence lacking in *phthonos*; being without *phthonos*, he desires that all things should resemble him to the extent possible (29e1–3). It is not clear what should motivate a god who can contemplate forms to order spatiotemporal reality, given that his grasp of the former will reveal the insurmountable inferiority of the latter. In a sense, this is the problem of the return to the cave, writ large.³⁷ But this attitude is the one that we see reflected in the lover of the *Phaedrus* and, for that matter, in Socrates in the *Symposium*. Thus, at the completion of the ascent, the lover will indeed no longer feel *erôs* for the boy, but he may, instead, develop a godlike attitude of beneficent concern.

If this is correct, then the boy is indeed initially loved as an imperfect instantiation of beauty and ceases to be loved once the philosopher grasps the form of beauty. This is not to say that the lover will abandon him altogether, but the boy will cease to be an object of love and become, rather, an object of goodwill. To many, this will seem objectionable – the passionate love we feel for persons can seem like an incomparably valuable part of a good human life, and not something to be bypassed. But I would suggest that to the extent that we find Plato's position objectionable, it is not primarily because we think his account of love is wrong, but because we think his account

³⁷ See *Republic* 516c4–521b10. The problem is that of why the philosophers should agree to rule the city when they are able to engage in an activity they find infinitely more rewarding, contemplating forms.

of value is. For Plato, the forms are the most loveable objects because they alone are unqualifiedly good, where their goodness resides in their ideal natures, in their eternity, changelessness, and unqualified being, properties that humans can never hope fully to instantiate. This is an account of value that many of us might find puzzling. But if we were to share this view of value, then we would surely think it obvious that if we are able, we should spend our lives in relation to objects that fully instantiate it. If we think that we should primarily love humans rather than forms, then this reflects another theory of value – perhaps that subjectivity or the capacity for rational thought give humans special worth. Plato simply does not recognize these as ultimate sources of value; in this regard, the bridge between Plato and us may appear to be insurmountable. But perhaps Plato’s position is not as outlandish as it may initially appear. For many people do seek meaning in something bigger than themselves, something that transcends their merely mortal existence, whether it be art, religion, or a political ideology.³⁸ In proposing that philosophy can, and perhaps should, begin with *erôs*, what Plato is really telling us is that the value of philosophy lies in the path it opens to the contemplation of truths that are timeless and universal.

³⁸ See also, e.g., Vlastos 1981: 27, Nussbaum 1986: 161–3 and Kraut 2017: 246–52, as well as Kraut’s contribution to this volume ([ch. 10](#)).