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## Moral Transformation and the Love of Beauty in Plato's *Symposium*

Suzanne Obdrzalek

### 1. Introduction

On the day Eros was conceived, the gods were having a party to celebrate the birth of Aphrodite. His father-to-be, Poros (resource), was having a grand old time, and in fact got so carried away with the nectar that he passed out cold in Zeus' garden. His mother-to-be, Penia (poverty), had not made the guest list, and was skulking around the gates. She was poor but cunning, and on seeing Poros sprawled on the ground, hatched a plot to relieve her poverty. She would sleep with him—after all, Poros was too drunk to know what was going on—and conceive a child who would enable her to escape her penury. The name of this child was Eros.

This is the story of the origins of *erōs* which Diotima offers in her speech in the *Symposium*, and on the face of it, Plato couldn't have come up with a stranger, more startling myth (203b1–204c6). Love, we learn, is born when a scheming, desperate woman who takes advantage of a drunk man who lies passed-out in the dirt. There is no mention of marriage, the wedding-bed, affection, beauty, even lust—no mention of any of the things which one would ordinarily associate with a myth about the origins of love. Plato is focusing on the seamier side of *erōs*; his myth describes just the sort of sexual encounter which might make a man mistrust *erōs*, in which a man is seduced by a cunning woman for the sake of profit. It is therefore an odd tale for Socrates to contribute to a series of encomia to Eros. In the *Phaedrus*, by contrast, Socrates offers the traditional myth, that Eros is the son of Aphrodite (242d9). So the question is, why such a strange story?

This is a question which I hope to answer in this paper. Broadly, I take the myth to be part of an unmasking strategy: Diotima wants to reveal that most of us misunderstand *erōs*; *erōs* is not the selfless love of another, so much as the self-centered love of oneself.<sup>1</sup> Or at least, this is true of ordinary *erōs*. However, it is also possible for *erōs* to be transformed, through philosophy and the love of beauty, into something extraordinary.

The myth is strange, but what comes next is stranger still. Upon hearing this story, Socrates asks Diotima what use is *erōs* for man (204c8)? This question is odd because love is just not the sort of thing that we think of as *useful*; it is, rather, an ineluctable element of human life, and perhaps a key component of happiness.<sup>2</sup> The discussion which follows continues in this strange vein. Diotima rephrases Socrates' question as, "Why is love of beautiful things?" (204d4).<sup>3</sup> Again, it is hard to know how one might go about answering such a question; that love is of beautiful things is just a brute fact about love. Apparently, Diotima takes this question to concern the *point* of loving beautiful things, for she then asks, "The one loving beautiful things loves something; what does he love?" (204d5–6). This question is peculiar, because it seems to contain its own answer: surely one who loves beautiful things loves beautiful things, end of story. However, Socrates responds that the lover loves that they become his own (204d7); for Socrates, *erōs* is the desire to possess. Diotima continues, "That answer demands another question: what will the one who has beautiful things have?" (204d8–9). Again, the obvious answer is that he will have beautiful things. That Diotima puts her question in this manner suggests that, on the current way of thinking of things, the possession of beautiful things is a means to some other end; *erōs* of beauty is not final.

This elenchus is composed of a series of questions which strike us as odd, because Socrates takes the love of beauty to be a dependent desire; we only love beauty because it is a

means to some other end, one which Socrates is as yet unable to articulate.<sup>4</sup> Diotima begins the elenchus by telling Socrates that she will answer him after these things, *meta tauta* (204d1–2), and one might wonder what became of her answer. This paper is about how Socrates comes to see the answer to his question. The answer comes in the ascent passage, and it is that Socrates' initial question, what is the point of loving beauty, was misconceived, since beauty is, itself, a *telos*. For Socrates to understand why beauty matters, and why we should love it, he will have to follow Diotima through a series of difficult arguments. First, he shall have to accompany her in unmasking *erōs*. *Erōs* is not the romantic state the other symposiasts make it out to be, but something darker. Its origins are in the fundamental neediness and imperfection of human nature. *Erōs* is the desire for completion, which arises due to our being mortal and imperfect. Once Socrates has grasped this much, he must prepare himself for a second unmasking: the *erōs* of the many, even of those who are most admired—heroes, poets, legislators—is misguided. It aims not at what is actually good, but at personal immortality, a goal it can never secure. More fundamentally, the problem with *erōs* for immortality is that it is directed at an inferior object, oneself. It is only when one turns outside oneself towards objects which are truly perfect, immortal and divine—the Forms—that one achieves a mortal sort of perfection, but at this point, one cares about something outside of oneself and the mortal realm, and one's own incompleteness ceases to really matter.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The First Unmasking

Let us begin with the account of human nature and of the *erōs* to which it gives rise. It is an account which is strikingly pessimistic. It begins in the speech of Aristophanes, where we learn that human nature is fundamentally thwarted: we were once torn apart from our other halves, and are now driven by the longing to be made whole again; this longing is *erōs* (192e9–193a1). This

idea of human nature as incomplete, and of *erōs* as the desire for completion, is retained in Socrates' speech. We see it in his elenchus with Agathon, where Socrates argues for a need-based model of desire: we only desire what we lack, and if we desire something we already possess, this is because we are not guaranteed possession of it in the future (200a2–e9). If humans are desiring creatures, then they must be creatures who are lacking; love is the expression of this lack.

Turn now to the myth of Poros and Penia. Eros, we learn, is the product of desperate need, not of affection or admiration. As such, Eros aims at relieving his neediness: he is in a state of *aporia*, constantly seeking *euporia*. The spirit, Eros, is therefore always chasing after the beautiful, but whenever he gets a hold of it, it slips away. Among the beauties Eros pursues is wisdom (204b2–4). Eros's fate is to be acutely aware of the knowledge he lacks, but unable to secure it. The ignorant, by contrast, are unaware that they are not beautiful, good, or wise; they mistakenly take themselves to be *hikanoi*, self-sufficient. Thus, insofar as we experience *erōs*, we must be aware that we are not self-sufficient or perfect. Eros is to be contrasted with the wise, as well as with the ignorant. The wise—that is to say, gods—are not *philosophoi*; why should the gods love wisdom, given that they are guaranteed possession of it? In the myth, we see a contrast developed between man and god: the gods are wise, perfect, and self-sufficient, and therefore impervious to *erōs*, while to be human is to be aware of what it would be to be perfect and divine, but also to be acutely aware of how far one falls short of that state, and to be incapable of reaching it.

In what follows, Diotima develops a new analysis of *erōs*, as the desire, not for beauty, but for birth in beauty (206e2–5).<sup>6</sup> What motivates the desire for birth in beauty is the desire to become immortal, so as to secure eternal possession of the good. We pursue birth in beauty,

because this is the only form of immortality available to us mortals (207d1–3); again, it emerges that *erōs* is a response to our human imperfection, in this case, our shifting and mortal natures. Our mortality, we learn, is not just a matter of our impending deaths. Even while alive, we are in a constant state of decay (207d4–208b2). Our hair, flesh, bones, and our entire body are constantly perishing and being regenerated. Diotima emphasizes that the same analysis applies to our beliefs and desires and, most surprisingly, to knowledge: every single piece of knowledge that one acquires is liable to perish and be replaced. Our knowledge only seems to be the same, but it is really a chain of memories, the new replacing the old.<sup>7</sup> This characterization of man as a creature in a constant state of flux further establishes an opposition between the mortal and the divine. The divine is immortal by always being the same in every way. Human nature is just the opposite: it is in a constant cycle of depletion and replenishment, and only partakes in the divine through extending this process of generation and decay via offspring.

The mortal quest for immortality is depicted in bleak terms. Plato writes that animals are in a terrible state when they seek to reproduce, sick with *erōs*, *nosounta te panta kai erōtikōs diatithemena* (207a9–b1). In raising their offspring, the weakest animals are willing to battle the strongest and to die, torturing themselves with hunger (207b3–5). In animals, at least, *erōs* is not a happy state, but a sort of sickness which exposes them to suffering. This negative depiction of *erōs* is mirrored at 206c3–6, when Diotima turns to human *erōs*; she notes that one would be amazed at the *alogia* of lovers, unless one recalled what a terrible state they are in (*deinōs diakeintai*) on account of their *erōs* for immortality (208c3–6). This brings us to the second aspect of Plato's dark portrayal of *erōs*: like animals, humans are driven to extremes by *erōs*, and like animals, what they are driven by is not so much love of their partners or offspring, as love of their own immortality. Alcestis, we learn, only sacrificed herself for Admetus, Achilles for

Patroclus, and Codrus for his children, because each hoped to secure immortal glory for himself (208d2–6). Significantly, Alcestis and Achilles were used by Phaedrus in the opening of the *Symposium* as examples of the other-regarding devotion which emerges from *erōs* (179b5–d2, 179e1–180a4). Now Diotima reveals that these heroic tales, as well as the hackneyed example of the mother animal dying to protect her young, are misleading: in each case, the lover only sacrifices himself for his beloved because he takes this to be to his own advantage.

What are we to make of all of this? For starters, Plato emphasizes our mortality as one of our central characteristics. We lack any kind of stable being and are creatures subject to constant flux; we are never able to become truly immortal and unchanging, like the divine, but can only initiate an even longer chain of generation and perishing. As mortal, we are also imperfect: we are not beautiful, good, or wise. Nonetheless, we can become aware of our imperfection, and strive to be other than we are. Were we to become fully beautiful, good, and wise, however, we would cease to be human. Our awareness—perhaps not fully articulated—of our mortality and imperfection gives rise to *erōs*. Plato thus locates human nature and *erōs* between a set of poles: the ignorant, ugly, bad, and mortal on the one side, and the wise, beautiful, good, and immortal on the other.

This account of *erōs* is not without plausibility. It does seem that *erōs* is tied to the urge to reproduce, and that this urge is motivated, for many, by a sense that through reproduction, they will achieve a sort of immortality. More interesting still is the connection that Plato proposes between the urge to reproduce and the drive for fame: both aim at conquering death, at least metaphorically, by leaving something behind. At the same time, this account of *erōs* is counter-intuitive. Many of us wish to see love as an appreciative and other-regarding state.<sup>8</sup> Socrates complained, in opening his speech, that all of the other symposiasts applied the most

flattering terms to Eros, true or not. Agathon certainly piled on the praise, and Phaedrus, earlier, focused on romantic tales of self-sacrificing lovers. Socrates' speech is an unmasking of all of that. In his elenchus with Agathon, he reveals that love is not beautiful, but needy. In retelling the Achilles myth, he proposes that Achilles was motivated by self-love and the desire for glory, not love of Patroclus. And in the myth of Poros and Penia, he offers an anti-romantic tale of love's conception, proposing that love is grounded in neediness. This is a difficult lesson to learn, given our propensity to see love in romantic terms; it is for this reason that Diotima has to slowly lead Socrates through the unmasking of ordinary *erōs*, presenting love in exactly the terms in which we wish to see it—the mother-animal, the self-sacrificing lover—then revealing that something quite different is afoot.

### 3. The Second Unmasking

This unmasking is only the first of two which Socrates undergoes. I turn now to the second. Earlier, we discovered that the *erōs* of the many is not, as they think, the disinterested admiration of the beloved, but is rather the self-serving pursuit of immortality. In what follows, I will argue that Plato indicates, often indirectly, that this *erōs* is misguided: it cannot attain what it seeks, and what it aims at is not worthy of love. According to Diotima's account thus far, the *erōs* of the many is the desire to achieve eternal possession of the good through giving birth in beauty. Birth in beauty is merely a means to achieving what we really want—it offers us the means to immortality, so that we can enjoy eternal possession of the good. The first difficulty is one which I have already emphasized—reproduction does not offer us real immortality. Our form of immortality relies on initiating a never-ending causal sequence of beings like ourselves. However, this clearly falls short of *real* immortality; you still cease to exist when you die, even if you cause people like you to exist after you; Plato thus contrasts reproduction with the mode of

immortality of the divine (208b2–4). In fact, Plato’s language regarding reproductive immortality is quite guarded: reproduction is something eternal *for mortals* (206e7–8); mortals *seek as far as possible* to be immortal (207d1–2). It is revealed that we do not succeed in becoming immortal, but at best approximate it.<sup>9</sup>

Even if reproduction did afford us a kind of immortality—albeit one which fell short of the real thing—a significant problem would remain. This sort of immortality was supposedly sought only as a means to achieving eternal possession of the good; in introducing immortality as an object of *erōs*, Diotima specified that Socrates will have to allow for this *if erōs* is indeed of eternal possession of the good (206e8–207a4). The difficulty is that it is hard to see how reproductive immortality could enable us to possess anything, let alone the good.<sup>10</sup> Plato presents us with two forms of reproduction: somatic (giving birth to children) and psychic (producing poems and laws). Let us start with the simplest case, somatic reproduction. Suppose what I leave behind when I die are my children, who are created by me and are like me. And suppose that I and my children each possess the good. In that case, there is a series of individuals possessing the good—me, my children, their children, and so forth, on into eternity. None of this, however, involves *my* possessing the good forever; when I die, I cannot possess anything. Of course, we’re prone to think in just this way. People often leave heirlooms to their children because it feels as though, through their children, *they* will continue to possess them. This form of continued possession is purely metaphorical, and its pursuit reflects an error of reasoning.

The case of the lovers pregnant in soul, who give birth to poems and laws, is even more problematic. In the first place, they do not give birth to something that is strictly *like themselves*, and Diotima did state at 208b1–2 that the mortal version of immortality is to be achieved by creating something like oneself (*hoion auto ēn*). A human child is of the same sort as me, but not



a poem or a law. Perhaps the poem or law resembles my thoughts, which are the innermost core of my being. However, poems and laws, unlike children, are not the sort of thing to possess anything.<sup>11</sup> One might argue that I can use the poems and laws to make others' souls like my own, and that it is their altered souls which are the offspring that resemble me and which possess the good. The difficulty is that Diotima repeatedly refers to poems and laws, not to the souls they affect, as the offspring of the lovers' psychic pregnancy.<sup>12</sup> Most plausibly, the psychic lovers think that they will become immortal by being remembered for the glorious laws and poems they produce (hence the reference to immortal remembrance at 209d3).<sup>13</sup> Again, even if they live on in the memories of others, after their deaths, these lovers will be unable to possess anything.

To make matters worse, it is not at all clear that either the somatic or the psychic lover really achieves the sort of immortality he seeks. Plato describes the parents of mortal children as achieving immortality, remembrance and happiness for all time to come, *so they think* (208e1–5). The element of doubt perhaps points to that fact that your line can die off, and your descendants can eventually forget you. Poems and laws, too, can be lost or forgotten. In the *Symposium* itself, Plato uses an elaborate framing strategy to set out the speeches about love. This might suggest that Plato, and Socrates and Diotima through him, achieve undying fame—their story is being retold. But Plato deliberately draws attention to the way in which the story is already being forgotten and mis-transmitted. In the beginning of the *Symposium*, we learn that garbled versions of the story are in circulation (172b4–c2); Plato then has Apollodorus warn us that he doesn't remember everything Aristodemus told him, and that Aristodemus himself claimed not to remember what everyone said (178a1–3)—in fact, we learn at 180c1–3 that Aristodemus forgot several of the speeches, and at the close of the dialogue that he fell asleep and missed even more (223b8–c5).

I now turn to what is perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Plato's description of the lower lovers. Supposedly they seek immortality for the sake of eternal possession of the good; however, Plato never actually describes these lovers as pursuing the good, never tells us what the good is that they seek, nor how they set about acquiring it.<sup>14</sup> One might insist that the psychic lovers produce virtue, and virtue is what is good.<sup>15</sup> In what follows, I shall argue that they do not produce true virtue, but for the time being, I wish to emphasize something odd: these lovers appear only to seek virtue for the sake of immortal fame. The virtue which they beget is supposed to be strictly analogous to the babies begotten by somatic lovers; virtue, like children, is intended to confer immortality upon the lover. They thus do not appear to pursue virtue *qua* final good, but, rather, *qua* means to immortality. Plato's description of the psychic lovers bears this out. Everyone admires Homer and Hesiod because their poems are immortal and provide immortal glory to their authors (209d2–4); Lycurgus and Solon are enviable because the laws they crafted have caused temples to be built in their honor (209d4–e4)—in each case, it is emphasized that the lovers' progeny provide them with a sort of immortality, not with the good. It would appear, then, that what these lovers love is simply immortality, and that they do not produce immortality as a means to the possession of some further, separate good.

This is brought out most clearly in the description of the heroic lovers. "Do you think," Diotima asks, "that Alcestis would have died for Admetus, or that Achilles would have died after Patroclus, or that your Codrus would have died before his time so as to preserve the kingship for his children, if they hadn't thought that the memory of their virtue, which we now have, would be immortal? Far from it ... I believe that everyone does everything for the sake of immortal virtue and such a glorious reputation, and the more so better they are, for they love immortality" (208d2–208e1). What the lovers pursue is not simply virtue, but *immortal* virtue, and what they

love is immortality.<sup>16</sup> Diotima's statement, however, should give us pause. Is it really the case that *everyone* does *everything* for the sake of immortality? Perhaps more people are so motivated than would admit as much to themselves, but in the *Symposium*, we have a striking example of someone who cares nothing for fame. This person, of course, is Socrates: in Alcibiades' speech, we learn that he was enthusiastically in favor of the military leaders' conferring honors which were his due onto Alcibiades instead (220d5–e7).

It appears that we have reason to question Socrates' sincerity: can he really mean it when, in repeating Diotima's speech, he praises the lovers pregnant in soul?<sup>17</sup> In fact, there have been hints all along that things may not be as they seem. When Agathon begins his speech, ever the coquette, he avows that he is afraid that Socrates may be trying to poison him, *pharmattein*, so that he will be flustered and perform poorly (194a5–7). This links Socrates to Eros, who, in the myth of Poros and Penia, is called a *pharmakeus*, *goēs kai sophistēs*, a poisoner, sorcerer and sophist (203d4–8). Diotima, in turn, is described by Socrates as a *teleos sophistēs*, a perfect sophist (208c1).<sup>18</sup> There is a rhetorical interweaving of Socrates, Diotima, and Eros: each is depicted as deceptive and sophistical. As Diotima pursues her analysis of *erōs*, we also see Socrates express reservations. It is not clear that he agrees with everything Diotima says; perhaps the reader, too, is meant to join him in his doubts. At 208b8–9, for example, after Diotima argues that all love is for the sake of immortality, Socrates responds with surprise, “Well, O wisest Diotima, are things truly such?” Rowe notes that Socrates' use of *eien*, *well*, parallels ironic uses of the same word in other dialogues (e.g. *Republic*, 350e2–4), and suggests that Socrates is playing along, but is not convinced.<sup>19</sup>

Diotima's speech, it turns out, may not be entirely straightforward.<sup>20</sup> Though she initially appears to offer a positive portrayal of the lower lovers, we are discovering elements of criticism

woven into her account.<sup>21</sup> We have already seen some of these. First of all, the lovers' aim, personal immortality, seems quixotic at best. More significantly, these lovers seem entirely self-absorbed: they care primarily for their own immortality, and only pursue virtue and care for the beloved as a means to securing undying glory for themselves. The critique of the psychic lovers becomes even more pronounced if we turn to the striking and oft-noted parallels to other dialogues.<sup>22</sup> Diotima states that the psychic lovers are pregnant with wisdom and the rest of virtue (209a3–4). All poets beget this, as well as the inventive craftsmen (209a4–5). *All poets?* In the *Republic*, Plato will argue that most poets produce nothing but vice, and should be sent packing from the *kallipolis*. As many have noted, there are also striking references to the *Apology*, *Phaedo* and *Meno*. In the *Apology*, Socrates, on a quest to discover someone truly wise, questions the politicians, then the poets and craftsmen, and discovers that not only are they not wise, but worse still, they are all puffed up with presumed wisdom (22a8–e1). But it is to the craftsmen and all the poets that Diotima attributes wisdom;<sup>23</sup> she goes on to confer it to politicians, such as Solon (209a4–5, 209d4–7). Diotima continues that the greatest part of wisdom deals with the ordering of cities and households, *which is called moderation and justice* (*hēi dē onoma esti sōphrosunē te kai dikaiosunē*, 209a5–8). Note the parallel to the *Phaedo*, where Plato writes of a demotic virtue, *which is called moderation and justice* (*hēn dē kalousi sōphrosunēn te kai dikaiosunēn*, 82a11–b3); this virtue, however, is the result of habit and training, not philosophy or understanding, and therefore falls short of true virtue.<sup>24</sup>

The most intriguing parallel is to the *Meno*. In describing the psychic lovers, Plato writes that when such a lover is pregnant from early youth and divine (*theios*) upon reaching the right age he seeks to give birth (209a8–b3). Editors are puzzled by the description of the psychic lover as *theios*, so much so that many emend the text to *ēitheos*, unmarried.<sup>25</sup> R. G. Bury, however,

points to a parallel to the end of the *Meno*, where, as in the *Symposium*, statesmen are called *theioi*.<sup>26</sup> This provides us with a key to interpretation. The statesmen of the *Meno* lack knowledge, and their virtue is based merely on correct belief. Plato writes that they are rightly called *theioi*, since, lacking wisdom, they must possess their true beliefs through divine inspiration (99c7–d5). However, were there a statesman who could teach others, he would be an *alēthes pragma*, a true thing, in relation to virtue, as compared with shadows, *skiai* (100a1–7). This contrast of true and shadow virtue calls to mind the end of the ascent in the *Symposium*, where we learn that only those who have contact with the Form of Beauty are able to give birth to true virtue, since they are in touch with the real thing (*tou alēthous*), and not mere phantoms of virtue, *eidōla* (212a2–5). Liddel, Scott, and Jones, in fact, give “phantom” as one of the primary meanings of both *skia* and *eidōlon*; the two terms are frequently used synonymously. Plato’s point in the *Symposium* is that true virtue must be grounded in knowledge of the *kalon*. The difficulty with the statesmen of the *Meno* is that, though they mouth the right platitudes about virtue, this is not grounded in wisdom.<sup>27</sup> If the psychic lovers are linked to the statesmen of the *Meno*, then they too lack true wisdom and virtue, despite Diotima’s claim that they give birth to wisdom and all of virtue. In the *Meno*, Plato is ironic in calling the statesmen divine; in the *Symposium*, the irony extends further—not only are they called divine, but they are also said to possess wisdom. What does their supposed wisdom consist in? Plato writes that a psychic lover will try (*epicheirei*) to educate his beloved (209c1–2)—the conative phrasing calls to mind the statesmen of the *Meno*, who wish, but are unable, to teach virtue to their own sons (93b7–94e1)—and he will be full of stories about what customs the good man should practice, *epitēdeuein* (209b8–c1). However, *epitēdeumata*, customs, are among the lower steps of the spiritual ascent, bypassed on the way to the Form (211c5). Surely this cannot be the content of

true wisdom. These lovers, then, are people who are self-important, full of conventional sayings about the virtues, but who lack philosophical knowledge and therefore fall short of true virtue.

Something appears unsatisfactory about the lower lovers; the question is, what? When Diotima first introduces the desire for immortality into her account of *erōs*, she proposes that if *erōs* is of always possessing the good, it must be of immortality as well as the good—immortality is brought in as a means subordinate to the goal of always possessing the good.<sup>28</sup> However, as I've emphasized, the immortality pursued is not of a sort that could facilitate that to which it is supposedly merely a means, eternal possession of the good. Furthermore, Plato never actually describes the lower lovers' pursuit of the good. One might suppose that the virtue which they engender is the good. However, the psychic lovers are said to love *immortal* virtue because they love immortality (208d7–e1); in other words, they only value virtue insofar as it offers them immortality. Thus Diotima concludes at 208b5–6 that “this eagerness, *erōs*, which follows everyone, is for the sake of immortality” (*athanasias charin*). Immortality is treated as an end *hou charin erōs* is felt; the good, by contrast, is no longer explicitly mentioned as a distinct *telos*.<sup>29</sup> One might argue that the good is no longer mentioned because it is taken for granted as the ultimate *telos* of *erōs*, were it not for the fact that, as I have emphasized, Socrates never explains what the good is that the lower lovers seek, nor how they go about seeking it. If this were still part of the account, this omission would be odd, since the nature of the good and the means to securing it are far from obvious.

Suppose that the error of the lower lovers is related to the fact that they aim at immortality. This aim is puzzling, because on Diotima's account it is irrational. According to Diotima's refutation of Aristophanes, no one desires what pertains to himself, what is *oikeion*, unless it is good (205e5–7). In seeking the *oikeion*, what Aristophanes' lovers seek is their other

halves, and what they wish for is to be welded together. One might say that the Aristophanic lovers wish to compensate for their sense of incompleteness by becoming twofold and extending themselves in space. We see an intriguing parallel to the Aristophanic account at 208b4–5, where Diotima states that everyone by nature honors what shoots forth from himself, *to hautou apoblastēma*. This conflicts with her earlier argument against Aristophanes, that we only love what is good, and are willing to cut off our limbs if they are diseased (205e1–5). There would be no conflict if the lower lovers only honored their offshoots if they were good, but there is no such caveat—offspring are loved for the sake of immortality, and only need be good if this serves as a means to immortal glory. It emerges, then, that the lower lovers of Diotima’s speech are not so unlike the Aristophanic lovers she condemns, but instead of extending themselves in space, they wish to extend themselves in time, to become everlasting. In wishing for themselves to last forever, what they love must surely be themselves, the *oikeion*.

Diotima’s critique of the Aristophanic lovers is phrased in a peculiar way: she claims that no one takes joy in the *oikeion* unless he calls the *agathon oikeion*, in other words, unless “my own” is a funny sort of name he uses to refer to what is actually good (205e5–7). My suggestion is that the lower lovers get things backwards: they mistake themselves for the good, and cease to view the good as something distinct from themselves.<sup>30</sup> They are like the people Socrates mentioned who are strong and desire strength—what these types in fact desire is to be strong in the future as well (200c5–d6). The lower lovers of the ascent take their existence to be good as such, and hence take eternal existence to be eternal possession of the good. It is for this reason that there is no separate discussion of how they come to possess the good: for them, immortality is all there is to it. This *erōs* is misguided for two reasons. In the first place, they can never become truly immortal.<sup>31</sup> Second, in aiming at immortality, the lower lovers love themselves and

take themselves to be good. What they do not see is that humans are, by nature, not perfectly good; if we were such, we would be divine. Since we are imperfect, self-love is love misdirected; we are far from the best things in existence, and so not ultimately worthy of love.<sup>32, 33</sup>

#### 4. *Erōs* Transformed—Philosophical Katharsis and the Love of Beauty

In beginning this paper, I promised that, coupled with Plato's critical unmasking of ordinary *erōs*, there would be a revelation of an extraordinary *erōs*, of *erōs* transformed through philosophy and the love of beauty. This transformation is described in the ascent passage, to which I now turn (209e5–212a7). In seeking to understand the shift between the lower forms of *erōs* and the higher, the first thing to recognize is that Plato presents *erōs* in the ascent as the lower *erōtika* done aright. When Diotima begins the transition to the spiritual ascent, she tells Socrates, “Even you, Socrates, could perhaps be initiated into these *erōtika*. But I do not know whether you would be able to be initiated into *ta telea kai eoptika*, which these *erōtika* are for, if one partakes in them correctly” (209e5–210a2). By these *erōtika*, Diotima means the erotic pursuits of the psychic lovers. What about *ta telea kai eoptika*? One natural way to read the Greek is to take *erōtika* to be unexpressed, and to understand Diotima as developing a contrast between the lower *erōtika* and the *erōtika* that are final and highest.<sup>34</sup> These higher *erōtika* would be the amorous ascent which she goes on to describe. However, this interpretation would make little sense. Diotima would then be claiming that one must successfully complete the lower *erōtika* in order to even be able to embark upon the higher. In other words, the lover would first have to love a boy with a fine soul and give birth to *logoi*, and only after that could he undertake the ascent, beginning by loving bodies, then moving on to souls, and to customs. The difficulty is that the lover would appear to be back-pedaling, going from loving a boy for his soul back to loving mere bodies.



Fortunately, there is another way of reading this phrase: we could take *ta telea kai epoptika* substantively, to mean the final mysteries, and we could understand these final mysteries to be the culmination of the ascent, the vision of the Form of Beauty.<sup>35</sup> In this case, Diotima would be proposing that the lower *erōtika* can be pursued correctly; pursued in this way, they constitute the lower levels of the ascent, and lead to apprehension of the Form.<sup>36</sup> Plato's language throughout the ascent, in fact, supports just such an interpretation. After describing the lower levels of the ascent, Diotima claims that when one has beheld beauties correctly and in order, he approaches the *telos* of the *erōtika*, for the sake of which he underwent all of his earlier toils (210e2–4). This *telos* is the initiate's vision of the Form of Beauty (210e4–5)—note the echoing of *ta telea kai epoptika*. Again, when Diotima recapitulates the ascent at 211b7–c1, she states that this is what it is to go about *ta erōtika* correctly. In both passages, Diotima refers to the lower levels of the ascent as *erōtika* engaged in correctly, *orthōs*, the very same phrasing which she uses at 210a1–2, in claiming that the highest mysteries are what the lower *erōtika* aim at, when pursued aright. The psychic lover does not love correctly, and hence cannot reach a philosophical grasp of the Form; in the ascent, we see what it is for ordinary *erōs* to be pursued correctly and transformed into something sublime.

If we understand the opening of the ascent in this way, then this also makes sense of the parallelism between the lower *erōtika* and the higher.<sup>37</sup> In the lower *erōtika*, the psychic lover falls for a beautiful body; he loves the man even more if he has a beautiful soul (209b4–7); and he gives birth to *logoi* about customs and virtue and to laws (209b8–c1, 209d6–7). Though these elements of the lower *erōtika* are not presented as successive steps, they are introduced in the precise order in which they occur in the ascent: first bodies, then souls, then customs and laws.

What we have uncovered is a parallel between the lower and higher *erōtika*, coupled with the suggestion that they differ somehow, the higher being pursued correctly, so that they culminate in the highest mysteries, the sight of Beauty. What, then, distinguishes the higher *erōtika* from the lower? Perhaps if we can locate this feature, we will be able to uncover why the former succeed where the latter fail. What leaps to mind is that in the spiritual ascent, [[beauty]] assumes a starring role—it is no longer a mere facilitator for the lover’s spiritual labor, but resumes its original position, as the object of love. The higher lover loves bodily, psychic, legal and epistemic beauty, and finally just Beauty itself. This in turn raises another question: however did beauty disappear as the object of *erōs*? When Socrates questions Agathon, the starting supposition of his elenchus is that *erōs* is the desire for beauty (201a9–10). In the myth of Poros and Penia, Socrates still maintains that *erōs* is of beauty, but the connection begins to seem tangential: Eros loves beauty because he was conceived on her birthday (203c1–4).<sup>38</sup> Following the myth, things take a strange turn: Socrates asks Diotima what use *erōs* is. In her explanation, she offers to clarify matters by replacing beauty with goodness (204e1–3). No justification is given for the switch; as a result of this argumentative sleight-of-hand, the beautiful disappears as the object of *erōs* and is replaced with the good. At 206e2–5, Diotima emphatically insists on the demotion of beauty: “*Erōs* is not, as you think, of beauty, but of birth in beauty.” Beauty, once the object of *erōs*, has become a mere drug for inducing labor.<sup>39</sup> The shifting in the object of *erōs* does not stop here; the good, too, disappears or, at least, is subsumed within immortality, and immortality is elevated from a mere means to securing the good to the proper object of *erōs*.

This demotion makes beauty’s dramatic reentry in the ascent striking.<sup>40</sup> The entire opening of the ascent is a 28-line long sentence, culminating in the initiate’s sudden vision of Beauty (210e1–6). Beauty, then, has been reintroduced as the proper object of *erōs*; this

constitutes the reply to Socrates' original question.<sup>41</sup> In the beginning of Diotima's speech, Socrates asks her what use *erōs* is; Diotima restates his question as why the lover loves beauty, and what he will possess when he has beauty (204c8–d9). Socrates' error was to suppose that the love of beauty is a dependent desire, to be pursued because its satisfaction is subordinate to some distinct aim—first one gets beauty, then, as a result, one gets something really worthwhile. What Diotima wished for him to see was that the case of beauty is parallel to that of the good; we do not wish to possess the good for the sake of some other end—as Diotima puts it, *telos dokei echein hē apokrisis* (205a3). In the ascent passage, Plato repeatedly refers to the sight of Beauty as a *telos*. Diotima seeks to introduce Socrates to *ta telea kai eoptika*, mysteries which are final (210a1); these mysteries are an end, *ta hōn heneka*, which the lower *erōtika* are for (210a1–2). We learn that these final mysteries are the vision of the Form; as the initiate approaches the Form, Diotima warns that he is reaching the *telos* of the ascent, *to hou heneken* he underwent all his toils (210e5–6). In recapitulating, Diotima says that when the initiate has begun to see the [[Beautiful]], he has begun to grasp the *telos* (211b7); he begins with mortal beauties, but always for the sake of, *heneka*, Beauty itself (211c1–2). Finally, she claims that if a human life is worth living, it is in the presence of Beauty (211d1–3). Diotima's repeated statements that beholding Beauty is a *telos*, and her assertion that it alone makes life worth living, imply that the ascent is intended to answer Socrates' initial question. What he hopefully comes to recognize is that *erōs* does not have a use, and that [[beauty]] is not a tool to some other end; the contemplation of Beauty has intrinsic worth, and should be one's life's pursuit.<sup>42</sup> To see this, Socrates has to radically rethink what beauty is and what our proper relation to it is. The [[beauty]] in question is not mortal, but divine, and it is not something to be possessed, but rather admired.

Socrates' primary error was his inability to recognize that beauty has intrinsic value. This, however, may have stemmed from a further error. Because Socrates focused on corporeal beauty, he thought that the appropriate relation to beauty was possession. Once he began to think of *erōs* as aimed at possession, Diotima introduced the rider that possession should be eternal, and the analysis of *erōs* shifted to the question of how to become immortal. When Diotima introduced immortality as the object of *erōs*, she made this conditional on the possessive model of *erōs*: at 206e8–207a2, she stated that *erōs* must be of immortality *if indeed erōs* is of always possessing the good, and at 207c8–9, she told Socrates that *if he really believes* that *erōs* is of eternal possession, then he shouldn't wonder at its aiming at immortality. Socrates' focus on possession was, however, misconceived. As we learn in Aristophanes' speech, lovers can never hope to fully possess their beloveds—short of having the beloved surgically attached to him, the beloved will always be distinct from, and so not fully possessed by, the lover. In Socrates' speech, we learn that humans are in a state of constant flux (207d4–208b2), and so cannot possess anything in a stable way; at most, a causally linked temporal sequence of selves can be related to another such sequence of objects. Eros himself never gains stable possession of the beautiful, but it always slips away from him (203e1–5). In the ascent, this possession-based model of love becomes eclipsed by one focused on contemplation and admiration. The reason for this is that Forms are not the sorts of objects that can be possessed; it would be like saying you own all the prime numbers.<sup>43</sup>

I have been proposing that Beauty, or the contemplation of Beauty, is reintroduced as the *telos* of *erōs* in the ascent. In what sense is it a *telos*? To answer this, it will help to turn to Plato's description of the Form. The first thing that Plato emphasizes is its eternal nature: it always is, neither comes to be nor perishes, neither increases nor decreases (211a1–2). Next, he

tells us that it is absolutely beautiful (211a2–5). Next, Plato contrasts Beauty with all of the many beautiful things (211a5–b1). Finally, he states that while mortal beauties depend on the Form, it is unaffected by them (211b1–5). We see two primary characterizations of Beauty: it is perfectly beautiful, and it is immortal. The other claims about Beauty concern the gap between Beauty and its participants: they all depend upon it, but it is unaffected by and unlike them. In the beginning of Diotima’s speech, she grouped certain properties together as polar opposites. On the one hand, there is the beautiful, self-sufficient, perfect, complete, and immortal, all of which pertain to the divine. On the other hand, there is the ugly, dependent, imperfect, incomplete, and mortal. The lot of man, insofar as he is erotic, is to lack all of the properties which mark off the divine from the mortal, but to recognize the superiority of the divine, and to long to be like it. We can now see that what fully possesses the properties of the divine is none other than the Form of Beauty itself: it is beautiful, complete, self-sufficient, perfect, and immortal.<sup>44</sup> Plato is explicit on this point, calling the Form *theion* at 211e3. In the beginning of her speech, Diotima claims that *erōs* shuttles between humans and the divine, binding the whole together and making it one (202e3–7). We might wonder how *erōs* links us to the divine Form. Not by enabling us to possess the Form, for the Form is not the sort of thing to be possessed. Not by making us into the Form; that would be impossible. We can, of course, participate in the Form. But particulars can never become fully beautiful without qualification; furthermore, we can never possess any of the ideal attributes of the Form, such as its non-composite, unchanging nature. The way in which we can be linked to the Form is through contemplation. The best life for man is one spent contemplating those objects which are perfect in precisely the ways in which we fall short. To contemplate the Forms does not make us perfect—only Forms are—but by engaging in an activity which ties us to the best objects, we become as perfect as humans can be.<sup>45</sup>

Plato's solution to the problem of *erōs* is, in fact, twofold. On the one hand, his proposal is that we can achieve a mortal sort of perfection and completion by standing in an admiring, contemplative relationship to the Forms. However, there is a further, very significant result of our becoming absorbed in Beauty: not only do we become directed towards something which has value, but in this process, we become directed away from ourselves. As the initiate rises in the ascent, he is engaged in dual processes of generalization and abstraction.<sup>46</sup> In loving objects that are increasingly general and abstract, the lover becomes progressively detached from his particular, situated perspective. What is significant about the Form is that it is absolutely beautiful. By contrast, particular beauties are only such in particular contexts and relations. In focusing on the Form, the lover assumes an increasingly objective world-view, and thereby becomes less and less self-centered. The initiate even comes to recognize the gap between himself and the Form, and to realize that his epistemic relationship to the Form is perspectival, while the Form is absolute: Plato specifies that the Form does not appear to the initiate to be like any knowledge (211a5–7). We might call the initiate's experience one of radical decentralization. Plato captures this when he describes the initiate as gazing at the great sea of beauty: from this perspective, the particular beauties he used to care about and his relation to them cannot help but seem trivial.<sup>47</sup>

In beginning this paper, I proposed that *erōs* arises as a result of our imperfect and incomplete mortal natures. What we learn in Diotima's speech is that the desire for perfection and immortality is not a desire which can be fully satisfied. At best, we can achieve a mortal sort of completion by standing in relation to the Form, but this still falls short of becoming fully perfect and complete. However, satisfaction is not the only way of dealing with desire. An alternative is to shake off the desire, what we might call dissolving it.<sup>48</sup> I believe that this occurs

when the initiate falls for the Form: he becomes absorbed in something outside of himself, and so ceases to focus on his own shortcomings.<sup>49</sup> He assumes a standpoint from which his mortal concerns cease to seem important.<sup>50</sup> This shift is reflected in Plato's language: he describes the initiate's relationship to his love-objects almost exclusively in perceptual terms. The initiate is said to *theasasthai* the beauty of customs and laws (210c3–4); *idein* the beauty of knowledge (210c7); *blepein* beauty in general (210c7–d1); *theōrein* the great sea of beauty (210d3–4); *katidein* some one knowledge (210d7); *katopsesthai* the Form (210e4–5), and so forth. The initiate is focused on observing and admiring [[beauty]], not on possessing it.<sup>51</sup> The result is a kind of self-forgetting: he is no longer aware of his imperfection, because he is caught up in the perfection of the Form. This involves a radical shift in the initiate's priorities, one which is captured by Plato's use of the language of mystical initiation.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, when one is focused on possession, one sees the beloved in terms of his relation to oneself, and remains self-absorbed. Similarly, when one treats the beloved as a means to immortality, one's attention is turned towards one's own defective, mortal nature.<sup>53</sup>

As I understand it, then, Plato's account of and solution to *erōs* is as follows. *Erōs* originates in our needy, incomplete natures, and is, at its most general, the desire for completion. In the lower lovers, this is expressed as the desire for eternal possession of the good, which, in turn, is expressed as the desire for immortality. This form of *erōs* is misguided because immortality, and with it, eternal possession of the good, are not goals which any mortal could hope to attain. However, the fundamental tragedy of the lower lovers' lives is that they are entirely focused on their own imperfect, mortal existences. The solution offered in the ascent is complex. The initiate falls for [[beauty]] and becomes overtaken by the desire to understand and appreciate successive beauties. He therefore no longer aims at completion as such. Paradoxically,

in ceasing to aim at completion, he stands the best chance of achieving it. Though he does not himself become fully complete, he spends his life in relation to objects which are such.

Furthermore, knowing the Forms is, itself, an intrinsically good activity, and therefore offers the initiate some degree of perfection and completion. Finally, insofar as the initiate is absorbed in the Form, he ceases to be aware of and troubled by his own imperfection and incompleteness. It is not that he ceases to feel *erōs* altogether—he still feels it for the beautiful objects—but his *erōs* is transformed into something better, which can achieve real satisfaction: from being the futile and egoistic desire for completion, it becomes the constructive and selfless desire for the contemplation of Beauty.<sup>54</sup>

Is it still fair to call this transformed desire *erōs*? To explain why, and to further illuminate my account, I shall briefly turn to P. A. Railton's discussion of the paradox of hedonism.<sup>55</sup> The paradox of hedonism lies in the fact that if one's sole aim in life is to achieve maximal happiness, one will be thwarted, for there are certain substantial constituents of happiness, such as having altruistic relationships, which can only be achieved if one does not aim at happiness as such. This situation parallels that of Plato's lower lovers: in aiming at completion, they preclude themselves even the limited sort of completion available to mortals, which flows from a selfless, contemplative relationship to the Forms. Railton proposes to dissolve the paradox of hedonism by drawing a distinction between subjective and objective hedonism. The subjective hedonist seeks to maximize happiness, while the objective hedonist adopts whatever end will in fact maximize his happiness, even if this involves ceasing to aim at happiness as such, and learning to aim at other ends. Ultimately, Railton suggests that the happiest person may be the one who does not even adhere to a counterfactual condition in setting his aims; he would choose non-hedonistic ends even if they did not, in fact, maximize happiness.



Applying this to Plato, we might say that the desires of both the lower and the higher lovers share an aim, completion; in virtue of this, both can be called *erōs*. However, in making completion its subjective aim, the lower form of *erōs* is self-defeating, while the higher, in losing this subjective aim, stands the best chance of achieving its objective aim, completion.<sup>56</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In concluding this paper, I would like to briefly set out what I take to be some of the explanatory strengths of my interpretation, by considering three problems which have driven much recent scholarship on the *Symposium*. I call these the problem of asceticism, the problem of unity, and the problem of satisfaction. The first problem is that Plato appears overly ascetic in the *Symposium*; interpreters typically respond by advancing an inclusive reading of the ascent, in which the initiate never ceases to love the boy. The second is that Plato appears not to offer one consistent object of *erōs* throughout Diotima's speech; scholars often react by attempting to render the diverse set of objects unitary, in particular, by arguing that the object of *erōs* remains eternal possession of the good, to be achieved via birth in beauty. The final problem is that Plato does not appear optimistic about the initiate's prospects of satisfying his desire for eternal possession of the good; many address this by attempting to explain how the initiate does, in some sense, become immortal. In brief, my interpretation deals with these seeming difficulties by treating them as merely apparent: I argue that Plato is ascetic; that the object of *erōs* is transformed between the lower *erōtika* and the higher; and that Plato does not believe that we can become immortal, nor, for that matter, truly complete and perfect.

Let us begin by considering the problem of asceticism. On my interpretation, the *Symposium*, despite being a dialogue about *erōs*, advocates a contemplative ideal towards which we should orient our lives. Plato holds that human nature can never be perfected; his solution is

for the initiate to become consumed by something far greater than himself, the Form. Insofar as the initiate is in love with the Form, he ceases to notice the world around him, including his own defective, mortal nature; he also ceases to attend to the very things he used to value, such as bodies, souls, customs and laws. Presumably, the initiate cannot engage in continuous contemplation; when he ceases, he will be forced to engage with particulars, including the boy. But his attitude towards them will be tinged with regret. While particular beauties, in being qualifiedly beautiful, retain some value in the lover's eyes, they also fall short of the Form in all the ways that really matter, in being particular, mortal, relative, as well as deficiently beautiful.<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, while Plato is emphatic about the inferiority of particulars, he does not so much as mention their continued value to the initiate.<sup>58</sup>

Many interpreters argue against such an ascetic reading of the ascent, maintaining that the lover won't abandon his boy, but will continue to love him while loving the Form as well. Their arguments typically assume one of the following three forms: the initiate's grasp of the [[Beautiful]] instills in him a new-found appreciation of the beauty of particulars;<sup>59</sup> the initiate requires the boy as a philosophical discussion-partner,<sup>60</sup> or, perhaps, as a repository for his ideas;<sup>61</sup> the initiate's experience of the Form causes him to give birth to virtue in the boy.<sup>62</sup> If we turn to the text, however, there is so much that weighs against the inclusive reading that its only real appeal lies in making Plato a more comfortable philosopher. In the ascent, when the initiate beholds the great sea of beauty, he is contrasted with slaves, who, being lowly, love particulars—one boy, man, or custom (210c7–d2). In recapitulating, Diotima refers to boys as bodies (211c3–4), and compares them to steps to be climbed over in the ascent to the Form (211c1–d1). Perhaps the lover is not so callous towards souls, but surely if he still loved his boy, he would recognize that the boy is an embodied soul, and not treat his body as a hurdle to be bypassed on the path to

philosophical enlightenment. In painting the joys of the contemplative life, Diotima says that it will no longer occur to one who has seen the Form to measure beauty in terms of boys, youths, clothes, and gold (211d3–5). If the lover still cared for the boy, he would not lump him together with clothes and gold, things which he no longer values. Diotima contrasts the initiate with the lover who, stricken from his senses, longs to spend every moment with his boy (211d5–8); the initiate’s passion has therefore transferred from the boy onto the Form. The [[Beautiful]], Diotima claims, “is pure, clean and unmixed, not infected with human flesh, and colors, and much other mortal nonsense” (211e1–3). Diotima uses three different terms to characterize the purity of the Form—it is *eilikrines*, *katharon* and *ameikton*. This implies that its superiority derives from its separation from this world; mortal flesh—the stuff boys are made of—turns out to be a source of infection. Finally, at the end of the ascent, the lover is described as giving birth to and nurturing (*threpsamenōi*) virtue (212a5–6). The exact same words are used to describe the psychic lover, except that he *sunektrephei*, co-parents, with his beloved (209c2–4). If the boy is still around, then why is he shirking his child-rearing duties? Relatedly, at the end of the ascent, the initiate is described as beholding and knowing Beauty, but not as giving birth to *logoi*, and certainly not as engaging in discussion with the boy.

The second problem, the problem of unity, finds difficulty in the fact that Plato does not appear to offer a consistent object of *erōs*. Plato begins with beauty, then shifts to eternal possession of the good, next turns to birth in beauty, then immortality, and finally returns to beauty in the ascent. This leaves interpreters with two options: they can accept that the objects of *erōs* shift, and provide an account of why this is so, or, alternately, they can try to explain how this range of objects is, in fact, one.<sup>63</sup> My interpretation opts for the former; I maintain that this shifting in the objects of *erōs* is actually part of Diotima’s explanatory strategy. Socrates initially

had the right object—beauty—but failed to recognize its intrinsic value, and focused on possession. Eternal possession of the good, birth in beauty, and immortality are all different characterizations of the love-object of *hoi polloi*: they love themselves and take eternal existence, achieved via reproduction, to constitute eternal possession of the good. Once Socrates comes to see the flaws in their form of *erōs*, Diotima reveals to him that the proper object of *erōs* was beauty all along, but that the appropriate relation to it is one of selfless contemplation.

Interpreters who view the problem of unity as, indeed, a problem, typically seek to demonstrate that there is no shift in the object of *erōs* between the lower and higher *erōtika*; the object in the ascent remains eternal possession of the good, to be achieved via birth in beauty. Some emphasize that the initiate gives birth to good things throughout the ascent—improving *logoi* and virtue—and maintain that these are the good he desires to possess; they treat the initiate's immortality as a separate matter.<sup>64</sup> Others argue that the initiate pursues eternal possession of the good precisely by reproducing the good, virtue, in others.<sup>65</sup> I believe that such approaches are unsatisfactory for three reasons. First, there is the structural problem that I raised in discussing the psychic lovers. If the ascent is indeed continuous with the lower *erōtika*, then the initiate's progeny, *logoi* and virtue, ought to have the same status as those of the lower lovers. However, their progeny are produced as a means to immortality, and are never described as the good such lovers seek to possess. Second, such interpretations face the problem of satisfaction. If the philosophic lover aims at eternal possession of the good, then his *erōs* will be a misguided failure, unless Plato offers him some form of immortality which will enable him to possess the good forever. As I have argued, Plato holds that the lower lovers are incapable of such immortality; in what follows, I shall suggest that the philosophic lover is no different. The

unifying interpretations, then, owe us an explanation of why Plato should make the philosophic lover aim at a goal that he can never secure.

The third, and most significant, problem for the unifying accounts is textual. Plato is quite clear that there is a shift in the object of *erōs*, and that the object of *erōs*, in the ascent, is beauty. Diotima states at 206e2–5 that *erōs* is not of beauty, but of birth in beauty, then claims at 207a3–4, 208b5–6, and 208e1 that *erōs* is of immortality. However, as I have emphasized, in the ascent, it is the vision of Beauty at which the lover's *erōs* aims. When the Form is first introduced, it is described as the *telos* of the *erōtika* (210e3–5) and that *hou heneken* all the earlier toils were (210e5–7). This language echoes 208b5–6, where immortality is said to be that *hou charin erōs* attends every mortal creature. Some interpreters, such as Neumann and White, argue that [[beauty]] never serves as an object of *erōs* in the ascent, but only as a means to inducing labor.<sup>66</sup> Against this, the lover of the ascent is said to love a beautiful body, beautiful bodies, and a beautiful soul (210a7, 210b4–5, 210b6–c1). Neumann stresses that Plato does not state that the lover *loves* the objects to which he subsequently turns—customs, knowledge, and the Form.<sup>67</sup> However, if the lover only loved the good, and valued [[beauty]] solely as a means to securing the good, then he should not have been said to love beautiful bodies or souls. Furthermore, when Diotima initially presents the ascent, and when she later recapitulates it, she treats bodies, souls, customs, knowledge, and the Form as occupying equivalent roles; if the lover loves the lower beauties, then he must love the higher as well. In arguing that object of *erōs* remains eternal possession of the good, White emphasizes that throughout the ascent, the initiate produces objects which are good: for example, the lover loves the boy's soul, then produces improving *logoi* (210c1–3).<sup>68</sup> White proposes that these good objects are what the initiate truly loves. However, were this the case, then surely Plato would refer to these objects as good, and

say that they are what the initiate loves; he does neither. The development of virtue is only mentioned in one sentence at the end of the ascent, and seems almost tacked on as an afterthought.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps Diotima is still aiming to persuade a conventional audience, to show that the initiate can secure for himself everything the lower lovers aimed at. Alternately, she may think that the development of virtue is a good thing as far as it goes, but it is a mortal thing, and the lover has learned to care for immortal things.

In discussing the problem of unity, we saw that many interpreters wish to maintain that the object of *erōs* throughout Diotima's speech remains eternal possession of the good. This demands that they give an account both of how the initiate comes to acquire the good and of how he achieves immortality of a sort which will enable him to possess it forever. It is this second challenge which gives rise to the problem of satisfaction—Plato does not appear to hold that the initiate can achieve such a form of immortality. Most interpreters respond by devising somewhat forced accounts of how the initiate does achieve immortality, though some, in particular Kraut, concede that he is not able to fully satisfy his desire.<sup>70</sup> My interpretation does not face these difficulties for two reasons. First, since I do not take the initiate to aim at eternal possession of the good, I am not required to explain how he achieves immortality. In fact, I take the entire point of Plato's critical discussion of the lower lovers to be that true immortality is not a goal which any human can ever hope to secure.<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, I do maintain that the lower and higher lovers share a goal, completion, and that even the higher lover can only partially achieve this. Here the second aspect of my interpretation comes into play: since the initiate no longer makes completion his subjective aim, but is turned away from himself towards the Form, he does not experience his only partial completion as a source of frustration.

Of the unifying interpretations, those, such as Kraut's, which concede that the initiate's *erōs* cannot achieve full satisfaction strike me as most plausible.<sup>72</sup> However, even these face difficulties. Kraut offers an analogy to painting, claiming that wanting to paint something red is reason to paint it orange if red is unavailable. Similarly, since the initiate cannot possess the good forever, he takes secondary satisfaction in causing a hopefully unending chain of others to possess it instead. However, it is not at all clear that someone else's possessing the good will offer me any satisfaction if what I want is to possess the good myself; indeed, people who are frustrated often take satisfaction in precisely the opposite, preventing others from enjoying goods that they themselves fail to secure.<sup>73</sup> In the painting example, the person, perhaps, has a more general desire to paint the object, which he satisfies by painting it orange. The initiate, similarly, would need some broader desire—perhaps that the good be propagated—for another's possession of the good to satisfy his desire to possess it himself. However, this goes beyond anything Plato actually says; furthermore, the initiate's experience of the Form leads to a devaluation of its instances as mortal rubbish (211d3–e3), which would run counter to a desire to create more such instances.

The more problematic strategy, to my mind, lies in insisting that the initiate does somehow succeed in becoming immortal. In the ascent, the Form is characterized as eternal, perfectly unchanging and unaffected—exactly the characteristics which Plato earlier identifies with genuine immortality, and which he categorically denies to human nature (208a7–b4). Does the philosopher's soul undergo some radical change in kind, such that it becomes capable, now, of true immortality? Furthermore, Plato never explains how the philosopher becomes immortal, nor characterizes this as his *telos*; if immortality remained his goal all along, presumably Plato would have more to say on this count. How, according to these interpreters, does the initiate

become immortal? Some argue that the initiate's contact with the Form, an immortal object, makes him immortal.<sup>74</sup> Apart from being philosophically unfathomable, this suggestion implies that immortality is a selective achievement, a position utterly at odds with the rest of the Platonic corpus.<sup>75</sup> A second option is to maintain that the initiate's immortality consists in the perfection of soul produced by his knowledge of the Form.<sup>76</sup> While this suggestion is not unattractive, it requires an unannounced shift in the sense of *athanatos*, from *everlasting* to *perfect*.

Furthermore, this sort of *athanasia* would do nothing to enable *eternal* possession of the good. A final possibility is that the initiate achieves vicarious immortality by imposing his ideas on others.<sup>77</sup> While this proposal is ingenious, it describes precisely the sort of immortality which Plato contrasts with the real thing at 208a7–b4. It is difficult to see how this could satisfy someone driven by the desire to possess the good forever. Furthermore, there is no evidence that, at the culmination of the ascent, the initiate attempts to propagate his own *logoi*, rather than contemplate the Form.<sup>78</sup>

More generally, what weighs against all three interpretations is just how guarded Diotima's language is. She does not say that the lover becomes immortal; surely if he did, she would proclaim this loud and clear. Instead, she says that he would become immortal, if any human could (212a6–7).<sup>79</sup> This echoes Diotima's earlier, qualified claims about human immortality: reproduction is how humans partake of immortality, but the immortal does so in another way (208b2–4). Diotima's phrasing bears an interesting parallel to the *Timaeus* (90a2–c6). There, Plato writes that a man who devotes himself to philosophy thinks immortal thoughts; should he grasp the truth (*alētheias ephaptētai*—cf. *tou alēthous ephaptomenōi* at *Symposium*, 212a4), then he shall not fall short of partaking in *athanasia*, to the degree that a mortal can (*kath' hoson d' au metaschein anthrōpinēi phusei athanasias endechetai*). As in the *Symposium*,



contact with immortal objects enables the philosopher to approximate their divine nature to the degree possible for a merely mortal being;<sup>80</sup> in both dialogues, however, Plato is emphatic about the unbridgeable gap separating the human from the divine (cf. *Timaeus*, 41b7–c6).<sup>81</sup>

I have argued that the strength of my interpretation lies, in part, in its embracing three problems which confront interpreters of Plato; their attempts to render Plato non-ascetic, to propose a consistent object of *erōs* throughout Diotima's speech, and to demonstrate that the philosophic lover achieves immortality, are unsatisfactory. In accepting these aspects of Plato's position, I bypass their difficulties. However, this leaves me with a final worry. In embracing the problems of asceticism and satisfaction, I make Plato emerge as deeply pessimistic. This is not, I believe, reason to reject my interpretation, but it should cause us to question how far we can endorse Plato's theory. Plato's pessimism manifests itself on two levels. First, there is the question of whether Plato actually thinks it possible for anyone to complete the ascent. Rowe has suggested that he does not.<sup>82</sup> Diotima's language is certainly guarded: note her use of conditional phrasings at the end of the ascent: *if one could see the Form* (211d3–5), and *if one could see the Form itself* (211d8–212a2). This is compounded by her misgivings at 210a1–2 and 210e1–2 concerning whether Socrates can complete the ascent, doubts Plato echoes in the opening of the *Symposium*, when he has Socrates declare his knowledge a mere shadow in a dream (175e2–4; compare this to the phantoms of 212a4).<sup>83</sup> Finally—and this is speculative—perhaps the reason Diotima claims that it would belong to one who has seen the Form to be immortal is because she thinks that a full grasp of the Form is beyond merely human capacities. Maybe, like the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*, the most we can hope for is to gain a partial glimpse, easily lost; we cannot sustain our vision of the Form nor constantly live in its presence (248a1–6).<sup>84</sup>

Suppose, though, that Plato did think it possible for us to complete the ascent. Where would that leave us? Earlier, I argued that in becoming absorbed in the Form, the initiate will cease to focus on himself, and so lose his subjective desire for completion. Maybe. But when the initiate is forced to interact with this world, will not its shortcomings be even more painfully apparent to him? Perhaps the initiate can value particulars for their partial beauty, but if this is so, then why, after describing the vision of the Form, does Plato exclusively emphasize their inferiority? Even if we did find consolation in the limited beauty of this world, Plato's proposed solution to *erōs* lies in the possibility of our escaping this world for a better one, the realm of the Forms. This solution seems alienating, to say the least. Perhaps, though, we can look at matters otherwise. In Plato's defense, there is something elevating, even exhilarating, in his proposal that there is more to life than our merely mortal concerns, and in his exhortation that we abandon these and dedicate ourselves to contemplating the beauty of ideas.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Before proceeding, I should summarize my understanding of the relation between the views of Plato, Socrates, and Diotima. I take Socrates to have constructed the character Diotima, and Plato the character Socrates, in order to express their views on *erōs*. The Socrates of the *Symposium* differs in certain ways from the Socrates of the early dialogues (e.g. in his reference to transcendent Forms); however, I see no decisive evidence of a break in Socrates' speech between the views of the historical Socrates and those of Plato, nor of a Platonic critique of Socrates (as do, e.g. F. M. Cornford, "The Doctrine of *Eros* in Plato's *Symposium*," in *Plato II*, ed. G. Vlastos (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), 119–31, at 125–29; and C. D. C. Reeve, "Telling the Truth About Love: Plato's *Symposium*" ["Telling"], *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1992): 89–114, at 100–101). Similarly, I see no reason to distinguish Diotima's overall position from that of Socrates, nor to take the one to criticize the other (as does, e.g. C. J. Rowe, "Socrates and Diotima: *Eros*, Immortality and Creativity" ["Socrates"],

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*Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 14 (1998): 239–59, at 249–51).

However, we must be sensitive to the distinction between the Socrates who delivers his speech on *erōs* at the symposium and the earlier Socrates, whose conversation with Diotima is being retold. The former cannot be taken to be in full agreement with the latter, since in his speech, Socrates describes how he came to shed some of his earlier views. In Diotima's speech, in turn, we can distinguish between her account of the *erōs* of *hoi polloi* and that of the true philosopher; the former is a purely descriptive account of how *erōs* figures in most people's lives, while the latter is a normative account of *erōs* at its best. That the *erōs* of *hoi polloi* is unsatisfactory is indicated to the reader by indirect criticism that Diotima weaves into her account, as well as by misgivings that Socrates expresses before this account is supplanted by the ascent.

<sup>2</sup> One might argue that this question is not so odd within the context of the *Symposium*; after all, many of the earlier speakers seem to assume, explicitly or implicitly, that an encomium to Eros demands that one state the benefits conferred upon us by the god (see, e.g. 178c1–3 and 197c1–6). However, while it might be appropriate to ask of the god, Eros, what benefits he confers to us, the same is not true of the psychic state, love. Socrates' question about *love* is partially facilitated by the ambiguity of *erōs* in the Greek—while in the passage immediately preceding his question, Diotima focuses on the god, Eros, his question concerns the corresponding psychic state.

<sup>3</sup> In translating Plato, I have consulted the following translations: A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, *Plato: Symposium* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), and C. J. Rowe, *Plato: Symposium* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1998), and at points borrow their phrasings.

<sup>4</sup> An anonymous referee has suggested that the question, why do we wish to possess beauty, need not imply that beauty is a means to some other end. Instead, the possession of beauty could be a constituent of happiness, similarly to how pleasure is a constitutive means to happiness on J. L.

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Ackrill's reading of the *Ethics* ("Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A. Oksenberg Rorty [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980], 15–34). This may be how Plato ultimately conceives of the relationship between [[beauty]] and happiness in the ascent, though it would be the *contemplation* of [[beauty]], not its *possession*, which is a constituent of happiness. However, at this point in Socrates' speech, when he is presenting his former, confused attitude towards the love of beauty, before he is educated by Diotima, it seems plausible that he still considers beauty as a purely instrumental means towards some other good. This is what enables Diotima to get Socrates to later agree to the claim that beauty is not intrinsically desirable, but is only desirable as an instrumental means to immortality.

<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I argue that there is a sharp break between the *erōs* of the many and that of the true initiate. In pursuing this line of argument, I employ the following vocabulary. I contrast the lower lovers (those preceding the spiritual ascent, at 208e1–209e4) with the philosophical lover (the initiate of the ascent, at 209e5–212a7); I separate the lower lovers, in turn, into somatic lovers (who pursue immortality via physical reproduction) and psychic lovers (who fall for beauty of soul, and seek immortality by producing poems and laws). I refer to the pursuits of these lower lovers as the lower *erōtika*, those of the philosophical lovers (leading to and including apprehension of the Form) as the higher *erōtika*. Interpreters tend to refer to these as the lower and higher *mysteries*; however, as I argue in Section Four, Plato in fact uses the term, *ta telea kai eoptika* (210a1), to refer solely to the sight of the Form, not the entire spiritual ascent; the lower levels of the ascent are to be understood as the lower *erōtika* pursued aright.

<sup>6</sup> R. A. Markus proposes that this signals a radical shift in Plato's account of *erōs*, from focusing on completion to focusing on procreation. See "The Dialectic of *Eros* in Plato's *Symposium*" in Vlastos, *Plato II*, 132–43, at 138. It seems to me, rather, that the desire to reproduce is a natural development of our desire to become complete; we seek to reproduce in order to gain eternal possession of the good.

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<sup>7</sup> This is odd, given the earlier parallel with the *Meno*. Earlier, Diotima distinguishes correct belief as a state between knowledge and ignorance, which differs from knowledge because one is unable to give an account (202a8–9). According to the *Meno*, an account serves as a set of bonds, tying down correct belief and making it unable to run away (98a5–8). The *Symposium* thus seems more pessimistic than the *Meno*: even if one can give an account, one’s knowledge is still bound to slip away.

<sup>8</sup> See G. Vlastos’ classic objection (“The Individual as Object of Love in Plato” [“Individual”], in *Platonic Studies* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981], 3–34), as well as L. A. Kosman’s response (“Platonic Love” [“Platonic”], in *Facets of Plato’s Philosophy*, ed. W.H. Werkmeister [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976], 53–69).

<sup>9</sup> At *Laws* 721a3–d6, Plato writes that men should be required to marry between the ages of thirty and thirty-five; the laws will exhort them, claiming that the human race (*genos anthrōpōn*) is a companion to eternity and gets its share of immortality via procreation. Significantly, it is the *human race* which achieves immortality via reproduction, not individual humans. In this passage, as well as at *Timaeus* 37d1–7, Plato appears to hold that it is desirable to approximate immortality to the degree possible. I believe that Plato ultimately values immortality because it is one of the ideal attributes of the Forms, which include their perfection and changelessness, and which collectively constitute their goodness. Approximating immortality is therefore valuable insofar as it is part of an attempt to imitate the best objects. However, as I shall argue, the lower lovers pursue immortality for other, more problematic reasons—out of a desire for continued possession and, ultimately, due to an egoistic love of self. In their case, the pursuit of immortality is wrong-headed. Furthermore, in the *Symposium*, Plato is pessimistic about our ability to approximate divine perfection, and ultimately holds that mortal imitations of the divine lack true value.

<sup>10</sup> F. C. C. Sheffield proposes that we must reproduce because production is the mortal form of possession. See *Plato’s Symposium: the Ethics of Desire* [Plato’s] (Oxford: Oxford University

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Press, 2006), 105, 108–9. While Plato certainly holds that we must regenerate ourselves in order to exist, and hence to possess anything, this falls far short of the claim that we must produce the things that we possess.

<sup>11</sup> In *Republic* III (e.g. at 393a6), Plato writes as though poets continue to speak through their words; however, this should be taken as purely metaphorical. At *Phaedrus* 276e4–277a4, Plato writes that the dialectician produces immortal *logoi*, which make the one possessing them happy, to the degree a mortal can be—while the *logoi* are immortal, the dialectician, it would appear, is not.

<sup>12</sup> See G. R. F. Ferrari, “Moral Fecundity: A Discussion of A.W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*” [“Moral”], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 9 (1991): 169–84, at 180, *contra* A. W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* [*Love*] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 28–29. Sheffield also argues against Price that immortality via proxy cannot be read into the highest levels of the ascent (*Plato*’s, 108).

<sup>13</sup> The following quotation from Isocrates is especially reminiscent of the psychic lovers: “Through being well spoken of and praised and remembered we have a share in immortality, and so ... should be willing to undergo anything” (*Philip* 134, cited in K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974], 229). For a more general discussion of remembrance by others as a form of immortality, see J. Vernant, “*Panta Kala*: from Homer to Simonides,” in *Mortals and Immortals*, ed. F. I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 84–91. The notion of fame as a means to immortality may have been particularly poignant in a sympotic setting, since, as W. Rössler argues, the recitation of poems eulogizing past deeds played a key social role in the symposium (“Mnemosyne in the Symposion,” in *Sympotica*, ed. O. Murray [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999], 230–37).

Plato’s characterization of *hoi polloi* as aiming at virtue for the sake of immortal remembrance is thus most likely a correct and psychologically astute observation regarding his

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contemporaries (though perhaps less applicable to us today). This might leave open the following doubt: if this view of immortality was so prevalent in Plato's time, how clear is it that he has reservations about it? I would respond that Plato specifies that immortality is to be desired for the sake of eternal possession of the good, and remembrance by others is simply not the sort of immortality to secure that end, even if it counts as a genuine sort of immortality. Furthermore, at *Menexenus* 247d4–7, Plato writes that grieving parents of fallen sons should be healed by being told that they never prayed for their sons to become immortal (*athanatous*), but rather good and famous (*eukleais*), a goal which they did secure. This implies that Plato does recognize a gap between achieving fame and immortality.

<sup>14</sup> Sheffield notes this, but proposes that the desire to reproduce and the desire for the good are identical, insofar as reproduction is the fulfillment of a good potential in us (*Plato's*, 84–86). This solution, however, lacks textual support; though Diotima does characterize reproduction as divine (206c6), this is meant to prefigure our attempt to become immortal through reproduction, and falls short of claiming that reproduction is good as such. Diotima's argument that we do not love the *oikeion* unless it is also *agathon* indicates that, *contra* Sheffield (*Plato's*, 86), reproduction is, indeed value-neutral; what makes reproduction good is the goodness of its products.

<sup>15</sup> F. C. White makes a similar proposal ("Love and Beauty in Plato's *Symposium*" ["Love"], *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109 [1989]: 149–57, at 153; and "Virtue in Plato's *Symposium*" ["Virtue"], *Classical Quarterly* 54 [2004]: 366–78, at 369–71). See also Sheffield, *Plato's*, 90–91. Alternately, noting that the psychic lovers pursue virtue for the sake of fame, one might maintain that they take fame to be the good. This is correct, up to a point. For Plato, part of what goes wrong with the psychic lovers is that they value the wrong sorts of things—honor, rather than truth. However, Diotima never presents the psychic lovers as identifying honor with the good; rather, she explicitly treats it as a means to immortality (208c2–e1).

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<sup>16</sup> R. G. Bury raises an interesting point on the pursuit of *aretē athanatos*—he cites numerous passages from Sophocles, Pindar, and others suggesting that *aretē* can mean not only *excellence*, but also its result, *fame* (*The Symposium of Plato* [*Symposium*] [Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1932], 119). This supports the suggestion which I develop below that the psychic lovers are not truly concerned with virtue, but, rather, value it as a means to self-glorification.

<sup>17</sup> Note Alcibiades' description of Socrates as *eirōneuomenos de kai paizōn pros tous anthrōpous* (216e4–5), which conveys an impression of Socrates as playfully deceptive, as well as mock-modest.

<sup>18</sup> See H. Neumann, "Diotima's Concept of Love" ["Diotima's"], *The American Journal of Philology* 86 (1965): 33–59, at 58; and Rowe, *Plato*, 187–88. Dover notes that the phrase, *eu isthi*, which Diotima utters at 208c1, is taken by Plato to be characteristic of sophists (*Plato: Symposium* [*Plato*] [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], 152); see also L. Brisson, *Le Banquet* [*Banquet*] (Paris: Flammarion, 2005), 213. M. J. O'Brien also emphasizes that there are ironic parallels to Socrates' use of *ō sophōtatē Diotima* (208b8) at *Republic* 339e and *Gorgias* 495d, though he does not endorse an ironic reading ("Becoming Immortal in Plato's *Symposium*" ["Becoming"], in *Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, ed. D. Gerber [Chico: Scholars Press, 1984], 185–205, at 186–87).

<sup>19</sup> *Plato*, 187. See also F. Ast, *Lexicon Platonicum sive Vocum Platoniarum Index* (Berlin: Hermann Barsdorf Verlag, 1908); and Bury, *Symposium*, 118. Rowe's note on 205d9 is also to the point (*Plato*, 180).

<sup>20</sup> Rowe comes closest to myself in arguing that we ought not to take Socrates (and Plato) to endorse all of Diotima's claims (*Plato*, 180, 186; "Socrates," 249–51). However, Rowe argues for a rift between Socrates and Diotima; he takes Diotima to maintain throughout her entire speech that all *erōs* is of immortality, and takes Socrates to reject this position (*Plato*, 192; "Socrates," 254–56). On my interpretation, Socrates never rejects Diotima's account. Her account of the *erōs* of the lower lovers is a correct description of the *erōs* of *hoi polloi*; if



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Socrates distances himself from this position, it is because this is not what it is for *erōs* to be pursued aright, a point which he has Diotima indicate indirectly.

<sup>21</sup> This raises the inevitable question of why Plato expresses himself so indirectly. To this, I offer the following, somewhat speculative response. I believe that Plato takes Socrates' audience within the dialogue, as well as his own readers, to largely adhere to the views of the lower lovers. However, there is a difficulty with this audience: while many are not fully aware of what their views are, they are, at the same time, deeply attached to them. This means that Plato's project is twofold: to reveal to his audience what they actually think, while at the same time critiquing them. This lends itself to Diotima's style of exposition, in which much of her critique of the lower lovers is indirect; this forces the reader to discover for himself why these views are unsatisfactory. This method bears important analogies to the elenchus, where, similarly, Socrates' interlocutors are encouraged to discover what their views are, then to uncover why these are untenable; it is often suggested that Plato employs the dialogue form so that his readers can similarly come to see things for themselves. While Socrates and Diotima each employ elenchus to a limited degree in the *Symposium*, a sustained elenchus would be out of place, given that the dialogue represents a series of encomia. See D. E. Anderson, *The Masks of Dionysos* [*Masks*] (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 90–91.

O'Brien offers the following, more literary reason for Diotima's indirection: Diotima is a mystagogue, her speech larded with the language of mystical initiation. Perhaps her gradual disclosure of the mysteries of *erōs* is meant to mimic the secrecy and gradual revelation of the Eleusinian mysteries ("Becoming," 189, 203–4; see also Bury, *Symposium*, xxix). In favor of this proposal, note that Socrates' relation to Agathon and to Diotima exactly resembles that of the initiate to the beautiful boy and the leader of the ascent; just as the initiate gradually comes to reject lower objects of *erōs* for higher, so Socrates' speech as a whole contains a progression from lower forms of *erōs* to higher.

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<sup>22</sup> See, e.g. Bury, *Symposium*, 121; Ferrari, “Platonic Love” [“Platonic”] in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. R. Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 248–76, at 256; T. Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory* [*Plato’s*] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 171–72; O’Brien, “Becoming,” 189; Rowe, *Plato*, 190; Sheffield, *Plato’s*, 140, and “Psychic Pregnancy and Platonic Epistemology” [“Psychic”], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2001): 1–33, at 6; White, “Virtue,” 376.

<sup>23</sup> Rowe suggests that this may also be an ironic reference to Agathon and Aristophanes, on the one hand, and Eryximachus, on the other (*Plato*, 190).

<sup>24</sup> For the suggestion that Diotima has a critical stance to the presumed virtue of the psychic lovers, see, e.g. Ferrari, “Platonic,” 256; O’Brien, “Becoming,” 189; Rowe, *Plato*, 190; and Sheffield, “Psychic,” 6, and *Plato’s*, 140. I differ from these scholars primarily in my assessment of the ground of Plato’s critique of the psychic lovers; while I agree with Ferrari (“Platonic,” 256) and Sheffield (“Psychic,” 10) that they go wrong in their love of fame, I shall argue that this is undergirded by a problematic love of self. (Here I come closest to Neumann [“Diotima’s,” 41–42], though I reject his claim that this love of self is retained in the ascent, and that the initiate is really a fame-seeking sophist.) I also differ from, e.g. Sheffield and White (“Virtue,” 376) because I do not think that Plato’s critique of the psychic lovers is qualified by admiration of their achievements.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), following Parmentier; Dover, *Plato*; Nehamas and Woodruff, *Plato*; R. Waterfield, *Plato: Symposium* [*Plato*] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> *Symposium*, 121. See also Rowe, *Plato*, 190; neither offers a sustained analysis of the reference to the *Meno*. Dover (*Plato*, 153) is too quick to dismiss any reference to the *Meno*; he objects that Plato’s use of *theios* in the *Meno* self-consciously manipulates language, then assumes, without argument, that the same cannot be the case in the *Symposium*.

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<sup>27</sup> See D. Scott, *Recollection and Experience: Plato's Theory of Learning and its Successors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 38–47.

<sup>28</sup> Price makes the illuminating observation that immortality is slipped in as an object of love through a tricky maneuver: Diotima goes from claiming that *erōs* is *always* of possessing the good to claiming that it is of possessing the good *always*; this offers further support for my claim that, when she focuses on immortality as the object of *erōs*, Diotima is arguing in a sophistical manner (*Love*, 17). See also Dover, *Plato*, 144.

<sup>29</sup> Sheffield argues that the aim of *erōs* never shifts to immortality as a distinct object (*Plato's*, 92–93). However, her reading of 208d8–e1 (*hosōi an ameinous ōsi, tosoutōi mallon; tou gar athanaton erōsin*), which takes *tou athanaton* to mean *the immortal thing*, not *immortality*, strikes me as a stretch, particularly in light of 208b5–6, where Diotima claims that *erōs* is *athanasias charin*; *athanasia* cannot be watered down in this way.

<sup>30</sup> See also S. Rosen, *Plato's Symposium [Plato's]* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 243–45.

<sup>31</sup> As J. Annas and D. N. Sedley have demonstrated in recent articles, Plato holds that we should make assimilation to god our *telos*, even if this is not fully achievable (“Becoming Like God: Ethics, Human Nature and the Divine,” in *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*, ed. J. Annas [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press], 52–71; “The Ideal of Godlikeness,” in *Oxford Readings in Plato: Ethics*, ed. G. Fine [Oxford: Oxford University Press], 309–28). In that case, it is not irrational to pursue a goal we cannot hope to fully achieve. However, this only applies to goals whose achievement admits of degrees. As I maintain in “Fleeing the Divine—Plato's Rejection of the Ahedonic Ideal in the *Philebus*” (in *Philebus: Selected Papers from the VIII Symposium Platonicum*, ed. L. Brisson and J. Dillon [Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag], 209–14), Plato proposes two models of assimilation to god in the dialogues—the cultivation of virtue and the development of wisdom. While we cannot, perhaps, achieve perfect virtue and wisdom, we can aim at imitating the gods in these regards to the highest degree possible. In the case of the lower

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lovers, what they want is specifically personal immortality for the sake of eternal possession of the good. This is not a goal which admits of degrees; what would its partial achievement involve—a longer life? Thus, while Plato thinks that the initiate can come to resemble the immortal [[Form]] through making his soul more stable and unified (see n. 81 below), and while he holds that reproductive immortality is a second-best alternative to true immortality (see n. 9 above), neither of these will offer the lower lover what he really wants—eternal possession of the good; in that case, his pursuit of this goal is doomed to failure.

<sup>32</sup> Kosman also proposes that for Plato, *erōs* is fundamentally love of the *oikeion*, though he understands this very differently from myself. While I take love of the *oikeion* to be a misguided form of *erōs*, bypassed by the true initiate, Kosman takes this to be *erōs* at its best, and understands self-love to be love of our true selves, i.e. love of ourselves as we should wish to become (“Platonic,” 60–61). Kosman’s analysis does not do justice to Diotima’s critique of self-love in her response to Aristophanes, nor to her subsequent demotion of beautiful particulars in favor of the Form. In fact, the idea that self-love is a vice comes out quite clearly at *Laws* 731d6–732b4, where Plato claims that *hē sphodra heautou philia* is the greatest evil in a man’s soul, in part because it causes him overvalue himself.

<sup>33</sup> We are now in a position to appreciate all of the reasons why Socrates chooses to use Diotima as his mouthpiece in the dialogue. In the first place, as many have noted, it would be tactless for Socrates to directly lecture his audience at a festive gathering (e.g. G. Calogero, *Il Simposio di Platone [Simposio]* [Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1928], 56–57; Dover, *Plato*, 137–38; O’Brien, “Becoming,” 189; A. E. Taylor *Plato: The Man and His Work [Plato]* [New York: Humanities Press, 1936], 229, 232). This concern is heightened, on my interpretation, because of the need for progressive unmasking—Socrates’ style of exposition requires that he be disabused of a series of erroneous views about *erōs*, and to have Agathon continue to occupy this role would be cruel. More generally, as Sheffield has emphasized, by recounting how he learned from Diotima, rather than simply stating his conclusions, Socrates is able to display the dynamic progression by which

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one gains understanding, the sort of progression which occurs in the ascent (*Plato's*, 66). Finally, one of the conclusions of Socrates' speech will be that one should not express one's erotic tendencies through seeking self-perpetuation—for example, through propagating one's *logoi* in the hope of securing undying fame. Thus, for Socrates to foist his own views upon an imaginary interlocutor, who even gets the better of him argumentatively, is an act of self-effacement which illustrates his very teaching and saves him from self-refutation.

<sup>34</sup> As does, e.g. Rowe (*Plato*, 97), though he claims that Diotima's meaning is that Socrates needs to have understood her account of the lower *erōtika* correctly.

<sup>35</sup> Literally, the phrase, *ta telea kai epoptika*, should be translated as “the final and epoptic things.” Perhaps, then, the ascent passage contains a corresponding distinction between the three stages of the Eleusinian mysteries—the lesser, the *teletē* and the *epopteia* (on this division, see G. E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961], at 238–39). This may, however, press Plato's image too far; as E. des Places notes, Plato does not systematically distinguish between the language pertaining to the lower and higher mysteries (“Platon et la Langue des Mystères” [“Platon”], in *Etudes Platoniciennes 1929–1979* [Leiden: Brill, 1981], 83–98, at 83–84). Nonetheless, one might uncover a division into three stages as follows: the first stage of initiation would contain the steps which Plato also describes in relation to the spiritual lover; the second, the initiate's exploration of knowledge; and the final stage would consist in his apprehension of the Form. Just as the initiates into the Eleusinian mysteries had to wait a year between their initiation into the greater mysteries and the *epopteia*, so the lover pauses after beholding the beauty of knowledge, until he is strong enough to grasp the Form itself (210d6–7).

<sup>36</sup> Waterfield's translation captures this clearly: “I don't know if you're ready for the final grade of Watcher, which is where even the mysteries I've spoken of lead if you go about them properly” (*Plato*, 53).

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<sup>37</sup> See also Sheffield, “Psychic,” 7–9, and *Plato’s*, 138–39. According to Sheffield, the psychic lover shares the same aim as the philosophical, but differs, insofar as his pursuit is non-methodical, and he fails to gain wisdom. By contrast, I take the psychic and philosophical lovers to differ precisely in terms of their goals—while the former aims at immortality, the latter is solely directed towards contemplation of the Form. Ferrari denies this parallelism, arguing that the philosophic initiate begins at a lower level than the psychic lover, since he is focused on bodily beauty (“Platonic,” 256); this ignores that at least some of the psychic lovers are described as solely attracted to a beautiful body (209b2–5).

<sup>38</sup> See S. Benardete, *On Plato’s Symposium [Plato’s]* (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 1994), 75. Rowe notes that Eros is described as a lover *peri to kalon*, not *tou kalou*, which, again, suggests a tangential connection to beauty (*Plato*, 176).

<sup>39</sup> Bury notes this apparent shift in the status of beauty, but argues that immortality remains the ultimate object of *erōs* (*Symposium*, xlvi). He proposes that beauty only appears to constitute an end in the ascent, rather than a mere means to immortality, because the beauty in question is, itself, immortal, and the initiate’s grasp of it makes him immortal. Calogero (*Simposio*, 52–53) and Rosen (*Plato’s*, 240–1, 263, 273) also note the demotion and reintroduction of beauty as the object of love.

<sup>40</sup> See also Ferrari for the suggestion that there is a shift in the object of *erōs* from immortality to the contemplation of beauty (“Moral,” 180–81; “Platonic,” 255–56).

<sup>41</sup> See also Sheffield, *Plato’s*, 142–45. My account differs from Sheffield’s, insofar as she treats both the development of virtue and the contemplation of beauty as ends. According to Sheffield, the philosophical lover is continuous with the psychic lover, insofar as both aim at developing virtue; the two differ because the former treats virtue as an end (and not as a means) to honor, and because only the former gains knowledge of the Form, and hence true virtue. While Sheffield identifies contemplation with virtue, it still strikes me that her account renders contemplation valued for the sake of, and hence subordinate to, the development of virtue, and so

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does not go all the way to treating the Form as an end. Furthermore, Sheffield treats virtue and knowledge of the [[Good]] as possessions, thereby retaining the focus on eternal possession of the good; for example, Sheffield argues that the philosopher's possession of the good is more secure than that of the psychic lover, because his knowledge is of an unchanging object. To my mind, this places excessive emphasis on the Form's relation to oneself. As I shall argue below, the real solution to *erōs* lies in the philosopher's losing his preoccupation with himself, and ceasing to aim at possession (rather than admiration) of the [[Beautiful]].

<sup>42</sup> Plato's analysis of love bears intriguing parallels to Velleman's ("Love as a Moral Emotion," *Ethics* 109 [1999]: 338–74). Velleman is critical of Freudians and contemporary analytic philosophers who reduce love to a conative state; while this analysis may often be experientially correct, it does not do justice to love at its best. Ideally, love is a reverential awareness of the value of the beloved, rather than a drive which treats the beloved as a mere means to the satisfaction of some other aim. Velleman would presumably criticize Plato's emphasis on contemplation of the Form—this, too, treats the beloved as a mere instrument to achieving some other aim, contemplation. However, for Plato, the value of contemplating the Form stems from the value of the Form, not from the value of contemplation *per se*; contemplation is worthwhile because it puts us in relation to the best objects.

<sup>43</sup> Thus, Aristotle critiques the Platonic theory of the Good as impotent, because the Form cannot be possessed or performed by man (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096b32–4). R. Kraut, however, maintains that the sense of *possession* need not be narrowly construed; Forms can be possessed in the sense that one can have an intellectual relation to them ("The defense of justice in Plato's *Republic*" ["Defense"] in Kraut, *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, 311–37, at 320–21). Plato, in fact, uses *ktēsis* for the possession of immaterial, as well as material objects: in the *Theaetetus*, for example, he proposes that knowledge be defined as the *epistēmēs ktēsis* (197a8–b4b). Perhaps in the *Symposium*, the initiate does come to possess the Form of Beauty through knowing it.

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To my mind, however, this stretches the sense of *possession* too far; while I can be said to possess knowledge of the Forms, surely I cannot be said to possess the Forms themselves. In the *Symposium*, Plato writes that the Form does not appear as any one knowledge, which implies a distinction between knowledge of the Form and the Form itself (211a5–7). To say that one possesses the Form would contradict Plato’s emphasis on the separation of Forms from particulars. Though we can be said to *metechein*, have a share in, a Form (211b2–3), we are never said to *echein* the Form *tout court*. Plato insists that our participation has no effect whatsoever on the Form (211b3–5); the Form is not in any animal, but is itself by itself (211a8–b2). Thus, partaking in the Form is not analogous to partaking in an apple pie; it is a purely imitative relationship, and cannot be construed along possessive lines.

While I am in complete agreement with Kraut that one’s relationship to the Forms can make one’s life meaningful, I believe that a contemplative relationship differs sharply from a possessive one. Consider, for example, someone whose life’s focus is to appreciate the paintings of Memling; he would be quite different from (and perhaps superior to) someone who simply wishes to own them.

<sup>44</sup> G. Richardson Lear makes the illuminating observation that, while in the *Phaedrus*, Plato emphasizes the epistemological status of the Form of Beauty, in the *Symposium*, his focus is on its ontological status, its independent and unchanging nature (“Permanent Beauty and Becoming Happy in Plato’s *Symposium*” [“Permanent”], in *Plato’s “Symposium”: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, ed. J. Leshner et al. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006], 96–123, at 115–17).

<sup>45</sup> In his discussion of the rulers’ choice in the *Republic*, Kraut offers a perceptive account of Plato’s commitment to the intrinsic value of contemplation, and, more generally, of standing in relation to something independent of and greater than oneself (“Defense,” 330–31). Kraut, unlike myself, focuses on the contemplation of the set of all Forms (320), and takes their goodness to reside in their constituting a harmonious set (322). Though I do not have the space to pursue this



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issue further, I take the Forms' harmoniousness to amount to their beauty; following Santas (*Goodness and Justice* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001], 182–87), I take their goodness to consist in their ideal attributes, i.e. their being perfect, timeless, unchanging etc. We are attracted to the Form of Beauty under both guises, and it is in part the fact that the higher objects of the ascent are increasingly stable and timeless which drives the initiate's attraction to them.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson (*Masks*, 60) has a helpful discussion of this point. L.C.G. Chen denies that there is such a progression in the objects of *erōs*, proposing that all of the participants in the Form of Beauty, as participants, have a similar status ("Knowledge of Beauty in Plato's *Symposium*" ["Knowledge"], *Classical Quarterly* 33 [1983]: 66–74, at 69–70). Chen's argument strikes me as unpersuasive. For example, he is forced to insist that the initiate does not come to love bodily beauty as such, but only the class of all beautiful bodies; ditto for souls (67). However, the text at 210b3 suggests precisely that the initiate becomes attracted to bodily beauty (*hen te kai t' auton hēgeisthai to epi pasin tois sōmasi kallos*), and at 210b6–7 that he is attracted to psychic beauty (*to en tais psuchais kallos*).

<sup>47</sup> M. C. Nussbaum's discussion of the initiate's radical shift in perspective is particularly insightful ("The speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of the *Symposium*" ["Speech"], in *The Fragility of Goodness* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 165–99, at 180–82).

<sup>48</sup> For contemporary discussion of this distinction see, e.g. H. Frankfurt, "On Caring," in *Necessity, Volition, Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 155–80, at 158; and G. Watson, "Free Agency," *The Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 205–220, at 210–11.

<sup>49</sup> Being absorbed in anything outside oneself could serve this function; that the initiate must love the Form, and not any beautiful object, follows from the first part of Plato's solution, that the Form, being the best and most beautiful object, offers the initiate a sort of completion which mere particulars cannot.

<sup>50</sup> We already see Plato consider these two alternate responses to desire in the *Gorgias*, when he contrasts the man who restrains his desires, rendering the appetitive element of his soul sound,

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with the man who lets his desires grow stronger, and is forced to constantly satisfy them (492d5–493d3). The suggestion that the philosopher might cease to be preoccupied with mortal concerns comes out most famously in the digression of the *Theaetetus* (172c3–177c2), as well as in the *Phaedrus*, where the philosopher is thought mad since he stands outside of human concerns (*anthrōpinōn spoudasmatōn*) because his soul is striving to make contact with the Form of Beauty (249c6–d3). In the *Phaedrus*, we also see an instance of the dissolution of desire. When the charioteer recollects the Form of Beauty next to moderation, awestruck, he falls back on the reins and thereby forcefully subdues the dark horse; when this has occurred many times, the dark horse apparently ceases to desire sex with the boy (254b5–255a1). Non-metaphorically, and on the level of the whole person, what happens is that when the philosopher recollects the Form, he becomes so utterly absorbed in it that he forgets his sexual appetites; denied satisfaction, they lose their hold over him. Plato gives dissolution an explicit analysis in the hydraulic metaphor of the *Republic*, writing that when one’s desires flow to the pleasures of learning, they are thereby weakened for the pleasures of the body (485d6–8). In this passage, we also see the philosopher’s grasp of the Forms produce in him a reduced attachment to and concern with mortal matters—Plato writes that since the philosopher contemplates all eternity, he does not think human life of much worth, and so ceases to fear death (486a8–b1).

<sup>51</sup> C. Osborne proposes a similar shift (*Eros Unveiled* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994], 102–3). Her analysis puzzles me, since she locates the shift in the introduction of birth in beauty at 206b, claiming that here the aim of *erōs* is to gaze forever on beauty and goodness itself, and not to possess good things. However, Plato is clear that birth in beauty is to be understood as a means to immortality and permanent possession of the good—the lower lovers want to *possess* the good, not gaze at it.

This move away from a possessive model of *erōs* is reflected in the sexual undertones of Socrates’ speech. D. M. Halperin has argued that Socrates uses Diotima, a female, as his mouthpiece in order to introduce certain female aspects of sexuality—rather than aiming at

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possession and domination, Socratic *erōs* expresses itself via production (“Why is Diotima a Woman?” in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, ed. D. M. Halperin [New York: Routledge, 1990], 113–51). Similarly, L. Brisson maintains that, in depicting Socrates as subordinating himself to a woman, Plato is engaged in a radical critique of pederasty, replacing the hierarchical pederastic relationship with the feminine image of pregnancy (“Agathon, Pausanias and Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*,” in Leshner et al., *Plato’s Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, 229–51; see also *Banquet*, 62–65). This move away from a hierarchical, possessive and assertive model of sexuality is significant, since it mirrors the fact that the initiate is no longer concerned with imposing himself on the world, so as to secure his own immortality; his *erōs*, instead, is a receptive and admiring state. For further discussion of the interconnection of domination and pederasty, see, e.g. K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980); and Halperin, “One Hundred Years of Homosexuality,” in Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 15–40.

<sup>52</sup> On Plato’s use of the language of the Eleusinian mysteries, see Bury, *Symposium*, 124, 128, and Des Places, “Platon,” 91–92. M. L. McPherran argues that Plato deliberately appropriates the language of the mysteries to develop a new philosophical theology, which supplants traditional depictions of a happy afterlife with contemplation of the Forms (“Medicine, Magic and Religion in Plato’s *Symposium*,” in Leshner et al., *Plato’s Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, 71–95, at 92–93). M. L. Morgan takes the further step of proposing that Plato is deliberately challenging the *polis* tradition and Delphic theology, by supplanting the mysteries with philosophical enquiry; in Socrates’ speech, Eros is a *daimōn* within each of us, representing our universal capacity for direct access to the divine (*Platonic Piety* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990], at 83–84, 98–99).

<sup>53</sup> Here, I think Williams’ criticism of Platonism is somewhat unfair (“The Makropulos Case,” in *Problems of the Self* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973], 82–100, at 96). Williams argues that the Platonist imagines eternal existence to be ideally occupied with purely intellectual

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activity, since it is so engrossing as to cause one to lose oneself, and thereby avoid the problem of boredom; Williams objects that if one's activity leads to a loss of self, then it cannot be genuinely fulfilling, and cannot proffer an attractive form of immortality. What Williams misses is that for Plato, the loss of self is not supposed to make eternal existence satisfying, so much as to make mortal life bearable and even meaningful.

<sup>54</sup> Benardete, like myself, discovers in the ascent a move from the pursuit of self-perpetuation to total absorption in the Form (*Plato's*, 87). Benardete claims that this amounts to the elimination of *erōs*. However, Plato gives no indication that *erōs* has been eradicated; in what follows, I argue that this transformed desire still constitutes *erōs*. Interestingly, though Murdoch is intensely critical of Plato, her treatment of true love closely resembles Plato's: "love is the intensely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love ... is the discovery of reality" ("The Sublime and the Good," *Chicago Review* 13 [1959]: 42–55, at 51). For both, this recognition of the reality of the beloved leads to a kind of moral transformation, a move away from self-absorption and towards objectivity and truth

<sup>55</sup> "Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality," in *Facts, Values, and Norms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 151–86.

<sup>56</sup> An alternate way of making the case that both the low and high forms of *erōs* count as *erōs* is as follows. In her speech, Diotima distinguishes wide and narrow forms of *erōs* (205a5–205d8). In the wide sense, *erōs* is the desire for the good (205d1–3). In this sense, both the lower and the higher lovers experience *erōs*, though their conceptions of the good differ sharply. Their desires count as *erōs* in the narrow sense as well. There is considerable interpretive controversy over how Diotima construes narrow *erōs*, and whether or not she returns to it at 206b1–4 (for the claim that Diotima returns to the narrow sense of *erōs* see, e.g. Ferrari, "Platonic," 254; and Waterfield, *Plato*, 86; for the view that she does not, see Rowe, "Socrates," 244–48, *Plato*, 182; and Sheffield, *Plato's*, 85). Though I do not have the space to pursue this argument, I believe that she does return to narrow *erōs*, and that what distinguishes narrow *erōs* is that it pursues the

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good via beauty. This is true of both the lower and the higher lovers, the difference being that the lower lover uses beauty as a means to reproductive immortality, while the higher treats it as an end in itself.

<sup>57</sup> Here I am in agreement with Vlastos (“Individual”) and Nussbaum (“Speech”). My position comes closest to that which D. Keyt, in discussing Aristotle’s *Ethics*, terms the *absolute priority view* (“Intellectualism in Aristotle,” *Paideia*, Special Issue 2 [1978]: 138–57, at 142). On this view, one should always maximize theoretical activity, but when that is impossible, one should perform moral activity, which has some value, though less than that of theoretical activity.

<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the strongest evidence against my ascetic reading of the *Symposium* lies in the person of Socrates. If we assume that Socrates has completed the ascent, then this raises the question of why he continues to engage with others, and does not confine himself to solitary contemplation. However, Plato’s characterization of Socrates actually cuts both ways. Though he engages with others, there is a sort of impassivity and distance, which Alcibiades comments upon in his speech (for further, illuminating discussion, see J. Lear, “Eros and Unknowing: The Psychoanalytic Significance of Plato’s *Symposium*,” in *Open Minded* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999], 157–61; and Nussbaum, “Speech,” 183–84, 195–96). He is impervious to cold, hunger and sexual desire, and is fearless in the face of death. Furthermore, both in Alcibiades’ speech, and in the opening of the *Symposium* itself, we see Socrates falling into contemplative trances (220c2–d5, 174d4–175b3). Thus, even if Socrates represents the state of the initiate post-ascent, it is quite clear that the initiate is radically altered by the experience, and not at all obvious that he sees deep value in engagement with others.

<sup>59</sup> Notably Kosman, “Platonic,” 66–67; as well as Irwin, *Plato’s*, 169; and Sheffield *Plato’s*, 172–74.

<sup>60</sup> See Anderson, *Masks*, 61, 81; Bury, *Symposium*, xxxviii–ix; and Rowe, *Plato*, 7, 193.

<sup>61</sup> See Price, *Love*, 43.

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<sup>62</sup> See Kraut, “Egoism, Love and Political Office in Plato” [“Egoism”], *Philosophical Review* 82 (1973): 330–44, at 339–40; Rowe *Plato*, 201; and White, “Virtue,” 373. Even those who, like myself, have an ascetic reading of the ascent, typically (and, I maintain, incorrectly) temper this to make it less harsh. See, e.g., J. M. E. Moravcsik, “Reason and Eros in the ‘Ascent’-Passage of the *Symposium*,” in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. J. Anton (Albany: SUNY Press, 1972), 285–302, at 293; Reeve, “Telling,” 110; and Sheffield, *Plato’s*, 174, 225–26.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g. Price (*Love*, 53) and Sheffield (*Plato’s*, 75, 84–86), who both view resolving the problem of unity as a constraint on successful interpretation.

<sup>64</sup> E.g. Irwin, *Plato’s*, 167; Sheffield, *Plato’s*, 138–45; White, “Love,” 153.

<sup>65</sup> E.g. Kraut, “Egoism,” 340; Neumann, “Diotima’s,” 48; Price, *Love*, 33–34; Reeve, “Telling,” 102–3; and Rowe, *Plato*, 192, 201.

<sup>66</sup> Neumann, “Diotima’s,” 42–44; and White, “Love,” 152–55, “Virtue,” 369–75.

<sup>67</sup> “Diotima’s,” 44.

<sup>68</sup> “Love,” 153.

<sup>69</sup> See also see also Ferrari, “Platonic,” 260.

<sup>70</sup> “Egoism,” 340.

<sup>71</sup> One outstanding interpretive puzzle is how to reconcile Diotima’s treatment of the mortal pursuit of immortality with the theory of the immortality of the soul which Plato advocates elsewhere. One option is to follow Hackforth in maintaining that while writing the *Symposium*, Plato temporarily abandoned his commitment to this theory, only to readopt it later (“Immortality,” 44). This strikes me as rather *ad hoc*, so I prefer to follow in the path of compatibilists such as Price; in the *Symposium*, what Plato excludes is personal immortality of a sort which would enable one to enjoy continued possession of the good (*Love*, 30–31—note that Price’s brand of compatibilism differs from mine, in that he proposes that what the initiate seeks is to perpetuate his life, where this is distinct from perpetuating his soul). Plato’s doubts about our prospects of achieving this sort of immortality need not conflict with his commitment to the

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rather different sort of immortality he describes in the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, involving metempsychosis. In fact, in the *Phaedrus*, while insisting that all soul is immortal (245c5), Plato also maintains that humans, as embodied souls, are necessarily mortal (246c5–6). At any rate, however one chooses to address the problem of consistency, in the *Symposium*, Plato never refers to the soul as immortal, and does not take reproductive immortality to constitute full immortality. Some interpreters deny this, maintaining that when Plato says at 208b2–4 that body *and everything else* partake in immortality via reproduction, he is purposefully excluding soul (e.g. Dover, *Plato*, 149; O’Brien, “Becoming,” 195). However, as Sheffield notes, this immediately follows the claim that our beliefs and desires are unstable, requiring constant regeneration, which suggests that Plato’s claim applies to the soul as well (*Plato’s*, 148).

<sup>72</sup> See also Irwin, *Plato’s*, 241; and Reeve, “Telling,” 102–3.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Price, *Love*, 33–34, though his alternate proposal, that one can take satisfaction in one’s life continuing independently of oneself, does not avoid the difficulties which he locates in these concessive accounts.

<sup>74</sup> Bury, *Symposium*, xliv–xlv, who in this follows Horn; P. Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 196; and possibly also C. H. Kahn, “Plato’s Theory of Desire,” *Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1987): 77–103, at 94: “Only the philosopher in contact with the Form can achieve what every human being wants, immortality in possession of the good, since only the Form is itself wholly good and lasting, imperishable (211a–b) and divine (211e3).”

<sup>75</sup> See O’Brien, “Becoming,” 199.

<sup>76</sup> Bury, *Symposium*, xliv–xlv; O’Brien, “Becoming,” 200–201; Sheffield, *Plato’s*, 151.

<sup>77</sup> See Price, *Love*, 21–35, 49–54; M. Warner, “Love, Self and Plato’s *Symposium*,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1979): 329–39, at 336; and possibly Rosen, *Plato’s*, 275–76.

<sup>78</sup> See Ferrari, “Moral,” 181; and Sheffield, *Plato’s*, 108, 164–70.

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<sup>79</sup> Bury (*Symposium*, xliv–xlvi, 133) and especially O’Brien (“Becoming,” 197–98) argue that *eiper tōi allōi* need not mean *if anyone*, but can, rather, mean *especially*. However, the examples they cite of the strengthening use (e.g. *Phaedo*, 66a7–8) do not strike me as decisive. R. Hackforth’s observation, that if the initiate becomes immortal, he only does so through reproduction, i.e. giving birth to virtue (“Immortality in Plato’s *Symposium*” [“Immortality”], *The Classical Review* 64 [1950]: 43–45, at 44), coupled with Plato’s earlier, clearly concessive claims concerning reproductive immortality, support taking the phrasing here to be concessive as well.

<sup>80</sup> Plato, in fact, frequently alludes to the following sequence: first one develops virtue, then, as a result, one secures the friendship of the gods and is rewarded by them (e.g. *Gorgias*, 526c1–5; *Republic*, 612e8–614a8, 621c3–d3; *Timaeus*, 42b2–c1; see O’Brien, “Becoming,” 198–99). Significantly, in every other occurrence, the rewards are blessedness and good fortune, but never personal immortality; as I note above, whatever sort of immortality Plato accords to human soul is part of its intrinsic nature, and not a selective reward.

<sup>81</sup> Why, then, does Diotima end her speech with this reference to immortality? One reason is undoubtedly literary. As O’Brien notes, the ascent is framed in the language of the Eleusinian mysteries, which promised the friendship of the gods and a happy life in the afterworld to the initiate, promises guardedly echoed at the conclusion of Diotima’s speech (“Becoming,” 198; see also W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985], at 277). To bring in a qualified promise of immortality nicely ties together this theme of her speech. Literary reasons aside, Plato’s thought may be that the philosopher, more than anyone else, comes to resemble the immortal objects he apprehends. Through contemplation, his soul becomes unified and stable, like the simple, unchanging Forms (see Richardson Lear, “Permanent,” 119–20). Finally, I believe that in describing the initiate’s merely partial achievement of divine perfection, Plato intends to draw attention both to the tragic imperfectability of human nature and to the fact



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that the initiate's goals have shifted so radically that this imperfectability ceases to really matter for him.

<sup>82</sup> *Plato*, 198–200. Chen, by contrast, argues that the *Symposium* differs from the *Phaedo* precisely because it holds that knowledge is possible in this world (“Knowledge,” 73). See also Sheffield (*Plato's*, 128–31) for the attribution of epistemological optimism to Plato.

<sup>83</sup> See also Calogero, *Simposio*, 56. Bury takes these as merely instances of Socratic mock-modesty (*Symposium*, 124), as do O'Brien, “Becoming,” 189–90; and Taylor, *Plato*, 229, 232. For the suggestion that Socrates has completed the ascent, see P. Friedlander, *Plato 3: The Dialogues, Second and Third Periods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 30; C. Gill, “Platonic love and individuality,” in *Polis and Politics: Essays in Greek Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. A. Loizou and A. Lesser (Aldershot: Gower Publishing, 1990), 69–88, at 80; and White, “Virtue,” 375; for the view *contra*, see Sheffield, *Plato's*, 196, 221.

<sup>84</sup> Here I diverge from Nussbaum (“Speech,” 182), who takes contemplation of Forms to be superior to love of humans insofar as it can be pursued continuously, while sexual intercourse only offers sporadic satisfaction. This may be true of *divine* contemplation, but presumably does not apply to the sort of contemplation of which humans are capable.

<sup>85</sup> Many thanks to Alan Code, John Ferrari and Jay Wallace for their guidance while I was initially formulating my thoughts on the *Symposium*. I am also grateful to Suzie Love for her research assistance; to my anonymous referees; to Paul Hurley and to Alex Rajczi for their invaluable comments; and to Eric Brown for providing me with the initial impetus to write this paper by inviting me to speak on this topic at the 2007 Central Division meeting of the APA. If my comments regarding posthumous possession of the good do not render such a sentiment inapt, I would like to dedicate this paper to the fond memory of my friend and teacher, Julius Moravcsik.