

# EROS AND EXPERIENCES OF BEAUTY IN PLATO'S THEORY OF MORAL PROGRESS

Meredith C. Drees

Kansas Wesleyan University

## Abstract:

Plato speaks of aesthetic experience in different works and in different enough ways that we are led to wonder how or even whether these can all be fit together consistently. In the *Republic*, Plato maintains that aesthetic education is required for justice in a city and in a person's soul, and that proper exposure to beautiful art can teach a person to "become fine and good." However, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, he discusses the relationship between beauty and morality by specifically focusing on erotic experiences of beautiful people. Thus, we are led to wonder: Are there two different kinds of experiences of beauty? If so, what distinguishes them from one another? How are they related to Plato's general theory of moral progress? These questions, surprisingly underappreciated in Plato scholarship, are the focus of this essay.

Ultimately, I argue that beauty plays two roles in Plato's general theory of moral progress: (1) The experience of beauty via art, as described in the *Republic*, has the capacity to influence a person's character and, hence, it can be used in *moral training*, and (2) The erotic experience of a beautiful person invokes an emotional response that has the capacity to facilitate moral *growth*, as is described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

Plato speaks of aesthetic experience in different works and in different enough ways that we are led to wonder how or even whether these can all be fit together consistently. In the *Republic*, Plato maintains that aesthetic education is required for justice in a city and in a person's soul, and that proper exposure to beautiful art can teach a person to "become fine and good" (402).<sup>1</sup> However, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, he discusses the relationship between beauty and morality by specifically focusing on erotic experiences of beautiful people. Thus, we are led to wonder: Are there two different kinds of experiences of beauty? If so, what distinguishes them from

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Complete Works*. Trans. Grube, G.M.A. and rev. C.D.C. Reeve, (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997) All references to Plato are to this translation.

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Ultimately, I shall argue that beauty plays two roles in Plato's general theory of moral progress: (1) The experience of beauty via art, as described in the *Republic*, has the capacity to influence a person's character and, hence, it can be used in *moral training*.<sup>2</sup> This kind of experience is part of the proper education that prepares a person to live a moral life. The orderliness, rhythm, and appreciation of one's response to beauty puts that person in a state that cultivates progress along the path toward virtue. This experience, thus, facilitates the forming of character, and the shaping of one's views. (2) The erotic experience of a beautiful person invokes an emotional response that has the capacity to facilitate moral *growth*,<sup>3</sup> as is described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. By 'moral growth,' I mean that when the soul is directed to the Forms via a certain kind of insight, the soul is transformed in such a way that character development occurs. This kind of moral reformation does not involve training, but rather, a moral transformation and a growing and developing of one's character as the result of an insight into the nature of true value. First, I shall discuss experiences of beautiful art and art education in the *Republic*. Then, I shall examine the erotic experiences of beautiful people that Plato describes in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

### I. Art and Moral Training in The *Republic*

At *Republic* 401d, Socrates explains that all artists must represent good characters in their work. They must pursue "what is fine and graceful" so that something of their works will strike the eyes and ears of the young people "like a breeze that brings health from a good place, leading them unwittingly, from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason (rationale, *logos*)" (401d). Education in music and poetry is most important because "rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else, affecting it most strongly and bringing it grace, so that if someone is properly educated in music and poetry, it makes him graceful, but if not, then the opposite" (402). A person who is properly equipped with an education in music and poetry will be nurtured by fine things, and hence, will, oneself, become fine and good (402).

On Plato's view, art can influence a person's character; for example, character can be both expressed and shaped by poetry. One's character is expressed through words and actions (400d-e), and one's nature gives rise to that person's style of speaking and

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<sup>2</sup> We generally think of training as a systematic set of exercises, procedures, or experiences *externally imposed* on us in order to prepare us to later do something dependably well for ourselves. Although we especially think of children as the proper subjects of training, this is not always so. Training is akin to conditioning, designed to make certain responses automatic.

<sup>3</sup> We generally think of growth as an *inner-driven* transformation toward some higher, more maturely developed mode of being.

acting (397c, 398b). In this case, we encounter a kind of progression from character to the content of the speech to the words that are uttered. Character makes itself manifest in the content and the content is expressed by the words. Furthermore, confronting or imitating the words of other characters can have the effect of re-shaping the actor's already existing character (393c, 395d). When a person imitates the words and actions of other characters, one has a tendency to embrace the nature of those characters.<sup>4</sup> In this case, the aforementioned progression seems to work backwards: The words a person uses in imitating the character give rise to that person taking in the content that the words express, and then – as a result – forming the character that is expressed by that content. Thus, poetry has the power to make a person embrace the behavior of the characters one is imitating.<sup>5</sup> This is the reason that, during the education of the guardians, they “are to perform poetry...[but] only that of good characters” (396c-e & 397d).<sup>6</sup>

In addition, those who experience poetry as listeners tend to imitate the characters in the poems. Poetry plays to the emotions of the listener and the listener is thus attracted to becoming like the characters expressed in the poems. We imitate because it is impossible to “consort with things [we] admire without imitating them” (500c). It is important, then, to be sure that those whom one is educating are able to experience things that allow them to feel wonder at (and thus imitate) “what is ordered and divine” so that they will become “as divine and ordered as a human being can” (500d). In this way, when poetry expresses good characters, it can be used in education. Poetry is a perception-based medium through which someone who is in the beginning stages of education can grasp good character; thus, it can be used as a means to introducing good things to such a person.<sup>7</sup> However, poetry is not the only kind of art that can have

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<sup>4</sup> For more discussion on this point, see Elizabeth Asmis, “Plato and Poetic Creativity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

<sup>5</sup> For more discussion on this point, see G.R.F. Ferrari, “Plato and Poetry,” *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Vol 1: Classical Criticism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990) pp. 92-148

<sup>6</sup> This is also the reason that Plato argues in favor of the censorship of certain kinds of poetry: If poetry comprises bad content and expresses bad characters, since the listeners and actors tend to develop in their own souls the characters in the poem, exposing the guardians to bad poetry is a recipe for the development of bad guardians. However, a thorough discussion of the censorship of poetry and the remarks that Plato makes in Book X is a topic for another paper.

<sup>7</sup> In the *Republic* Plato maintains that the appetite, spirit, and reason play different roles, grasp different things, and are developed at different times (441a). It is important to present the lower parts of the soul with goodness that they can grasp early on so that they do not, by merely experiencing appearances of goodness and becoming devoted to them due to the immediate gratification that they give, miss out on the potential to grasp a higher good. Thus, the beginning stages of recognition of the good will occur within the lower parts of the soul, and if one wants to appeal to these parts of the soul, it must be done through an appropriate medium – one that is perception-based. For the purposes of this essay, I do not have room to give a full analysis of Plato's division of the soul. However, see Jessica Moss, “Appearances and Calculations: Plato's

this kind of influence; for example, songs can cause a person to embrace the right kind of behavior. At this point, I shall turn to a discussion of music and its role in moral education.

Music has the capacity to familiarize a person with good character by expressing a kind of content of good character that the emotions can grasp. For example, it can familiarize a person with temperance and courage. During the discussion concerning appropriate styles of songs and music (398c), Socrates draws attention to two kinds of harmonic modes – the modes of a self-disciplined (or temperate) and courageous life. He explains that these two modes are the ones which will best imitate the voices of those who are moderate and courageous, whether in good fortune or bad” (399c). Music can express these virtues, and hence, one may be put in touch with courage and temperance through music.

Moreover, in Plato's discussions of music a progression (analogous to the one that we have seen in the case of poetry) takes place starting with the character (e.g. temperate or courageous) that is presented in the content of the work. The content is expressed by words and, as Socrates explains, rhythm and mode must conform to those words (398d and 400d). So, beauty is also expressed in a manner in the purely musical aspects. It is in this way that experiencing music allows good content to manifests itself in a person's response to beauty: When one experiences good content in music, one desires to imitate such content in one's own soul. If a person is properly acquainted with the discipline in music, that person will desire to mimic such order and discipline within oneself.

Experiences of both poetry and music, thus, facilitate the forming of character, and the shaping of one's views. The orderliness, rhythm, and appreciation of one's response to the beauty in music and poetry puts one in a state that allows for one to progress along the path toward virtue. This is why experiencing beautiful art is part of the proper education that prepares a person to live a moral life.

Therefore, at this point I have shown that, on Plato's view, there are indeed experiences of beauty via art that produce good character; a person is able to absorb the good character expressed by certain art and act accordingly. Thus, we have reason to believe that an experience of beauty via art is a species of moral training. Notably, however, this kind of experience is not an immediate source of insight into knowledge of the Good itself. In other words, one does not have an experience of beautiful art and then immediately become morally reformed. Instead experiences of beautiful art are a part of a gradual process of education.

Plato argues that good education – education that improves people morally – should create in a person a love (*eros*) of beauty no matter where that person apprehends it, whether it be in buildings or orderly movements of heavenly bodies people, poetry or paintings (*Republic* 401a-d, 529c-530b). All of these kinds of art

can affect one's character and lead them to harmony and friendship "with the beauty of reason" (401cd). Interestingly, not only do these passages support the claim that experiences of beautiful art – in various different forms – shape one's character, but they also illuminate a further element in Plato's theory of beauty in the *Republic*. It becomes apparent that experiences of beautiful art do not only produce good character in a person, but they also create *eros* for beauty. As Socrates puts it, "The right kind of love is by nature the love of order and beauty that has been moderated by education in music and poetry" (403a). Hence, someone who has been educated via experiences of beautiful art will learn to love (*eros*) beauty. We are told that a musical person – presumably, someone who has had experiences of beautiful music (beautiful art) – will love people who have beautiful souls and bodies most of all. Socrates states:

If someone's soul has a fine and beautiful character and his body matches it in beauty and is thus in harmony with it, so that both share in the same pattern, wouldn't that be the most beautiful sight for anyone who has eyes to see it? (401d)

This passage is intended to support Socrates' claim at 401d that what is beautiful is most loveable. The point is that the person who has developed a love (*eros*) of beauty in art will see the order and harmony in a beautiful person, and one will come to properly appreciate and love this person. Hence, the right kind of love – the love of beauty – is the love that is taught via experiences of beautiful art.

However, it is especially interesting that here in the *Republic* (as opposed to the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, which also consider *eros* and its relationship with beauty) the focus is strictly on a nonsexual kind of *eros*. For instance, in the *Republic*, the discussion of *eros* does not at all involve the kind of madness that *eros* occasions in the *Phaedrus*. In the *Republic*, madness is actually dangerous to *eros*, and the sexual part of *eros* is something that can cause a person to be "reproached as untrained in music and poetry and lacking in appreciation for what is fine and beautiful" (403c).<sup>8</sup> If people are to "love in the right way," on the other hand, sexual pleasure must not be involved (403ab). A lover should only treat his beloved "as a father would a son, for the sake of what is fine and beautiful," but it must not go any further than this (403bc). The sexual part of *eros* is, as it were, downplayed when Plato refers to the "right kind of love" in the *Republic*.

On the other hand, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, the sexual part of *eros* is involved in moral reformation. This is, in part, what distinguishes the experiences of beauty that Plato discusses in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* from the experiences of beauty that he describes in the *Republic*. Furthermore, in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Plato specifically discusses erotic experiences of beautiful people, and these experiences involve more emotion than the experiences of beautiful art that we have

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<sup>8</sup> If the sexual part of *eros* is something that can cause a person to be "reproached as untrained in music and poetry," this suggests that the love of beauty that is taught via poetry and music is a nonsexual love.

seen in the *Republic*.<sup>9</sup> Rather than making a person familiar with good character and reason, and gradually training that person to have good moral habits, an erotic experience of a beautiful person provides direct insight into apprehending the Form of Beauty itself. I turn now to an examination of *eros* and experiences of beauty in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

## II. *Eros, Beauty, and Moral Growth in the Symposium*

In both the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* the relationship between beauty and *eros* plays a role in the flourishing of the soul. Both dialogues involve a kind of ascent to the forms that is inspired by an erotic experience of a beautiful person. As a result of such an experience, the lover in the *Symposium* potentially comes to see the Beautiful in itself, and the lover comes to know that there is such a thing as beauty independent of the objects that we find beautiful. Similarly, the lover in the *Phaedrus* is potentially taken by beauty, through having gone from the bodily beauty of a person to the memory of Beauty itself, to see that there is such a thing as Beauty itself. In each case, moral reformation involves a grasp of the superior value of the life lived by those who are able to contemplate the Form of Beauty.

In the *Symposium* an erotic experience of a beautiful person gives rise to a kind of moral reformation that necessarily involves the relationship between *eros* and wisdom. In the *Symposium*, *eros* is honored as being the best ‘collaborator’ (*synergon*) for the task of acquiring the ultimate possession (212b) – the vision of the Beautiful itself. *Eros* is described as a potentially uplifting force that is particularly suited for facilitating an understanding of the Form of Beauty. I shall examine this point more closely in what follows, and it will be helpful to begin by considering the distinction between the lesser and greater Mysteries of love.

The lesser Mysteries can be understood as follows: While everyone possesses love (*eros*) for the good (205a), lovers come in different varieties. In particular, there is a distinction between generic love and specific love. Generic love is the love that everyone possesses for the good. When this general love of the good takes certain forms – that is to say, when desire for the good is focused on the beautiful – generic love becomes specific love (205a-d). Indeed, specific love is love of “begetting and giving birth in the beautiful,” whereby beauty plays the role of “midwife to generation” (206d-e). Among those who beget and give birth in beauty, there are those who are only “pregnant in body” – those who will create biological offspring, and there are those who are “more pregnant in their souls than in their bodies,” – those who will create psychological offspring (209). The latter kind of lover will create “immortal children,” which are honored more than human offspring (209e). Those who create laws and speeches, and those who engage in philosophy, most importantly, but also in

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<sup>9</sup> One might suggest that Plato describes an erotic experience of a beautiful person in a way that is quite similar to certain descriptions and definitions of experiences of the ‘sublime’ in modern aesthetic terminology.

poetry exemplify such lovers (209e).

The greater Mysteries of love, on the other hand, are the Mysteries that not everyone will come to understand. Only those lovers who follow a structured pathway to the Good will understand the final and highest Mystery (210a). It is here, at the level of the greater Mysteries, that a lover is able to reach the highest goal – the vision of Beauty itself, which will be disclosed to only those who respond to beauty appropriately (210a). In order to reach understanding of the greater Mysteries, the lover must achieve a more advanced aspiration than the person who only understands the lower Mysteries. In doing so, one will be able to ascend Diotima's ladder of love and give birth to wisdom and virtue (209b). It is an erotic experience of a beautiful person that begins this ascent up the ladder of love; it is because of this kind of experience, which specifically involves *eros*, that one is even able to begin the climb. Hence, it is a good question as to how, exactly, an erotic experience of beauty can occasion the creation of wisdom and virtue.

Beginning at *Symposium* 209e, Plato describes a sequence of “rising stairs” on a ladder of love, which culminates in the apprehension of Beauty itself. On this ladder of love, Plato distinguishes four general levels of ascension: A lover begins with interest in bodily beauty, and then becomes interested in the beauty of institutions and practices. From there, the lover becomes interested in the beauty of the sciences (knowledge), and finally one ascends to the level on which one is able to apprehend the Form of Beauty. An account of the full process of ascent will involve an analysis that goes beyond these four general levels; as I argue below, *eros*, *logos* and creation all play key roles in the climb.

At the first rung of the ladder, as the lover has an erotic experience of beauty, the lover initially becomes devoted to one beautiful body. Then, because one has loved a single body and begat beautiful discourse with one's beloved, that person should realize that “the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other” (210b). At this level, *eros* is the love of one beautiful body, creation is the engendering of beautiful ideas, and *logos* is involved in the realization that the beauty of one body is akin to the beauty of all others – the realization that the beauty of all bodies is one in the same (210b). Next, one develops a love for beauty in the soul. One seeks to bring into being the discourse that improves one's beloved (210c) and compels one's beloved to gaze “at the beauty of activities and laws.” The lover will then see that all of these belong to the same kind – the lover will realize that they are species of beauty (210cd). Here, *eros* is the love for a beautiful soul, creation is the bringing into being of a certain kind of discourse, and *logos* is involved in the realization that all beautiful activities and laws are species of beauty. Then, the lover will see the beauty in the sciences (the beauty of knowledge), turning to “the great sea of beauty” and giving birth to “many beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom” (210e).<sup>10</sup> Here, *logos* allows the lover

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<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Hinchliffe argues that there is a development in the progression of knowledge that takes place during the ascent: At the lowest level is ignorance, then, there is the level of opinion

to see the beauty in knowledge, and the lover creates the kind of noble discourse that is involved in philosophy (210d). It is the creation of beautiful ideas and theories that finally leads to the lover's apprehension of the Form (210d-e). The lover who has reached this stage will contemplate Beauty itself, and will live a life of great meaning. For this person now has certain understanding of reality itself.<sup>11</sup> In living life, the lover no longer begets images of virtue, but begets real virtue (209b).

One way to describe the successive soul-effects of this process is that, while *eros* and *logos* are both at work, *logos* is bit-at-a-time forcing a reordered hierarchy within the soul. Moral growth through rational self-control is then simply another way to describe this ever-improving hierarchy. As a person climbs the ladder, that person engages in a cognitive process. At each level of the ladder, the lover is stimulated by the object of *eros* to "realize" and "grasp" something about what makes it beautiful. The lover gains rationale (*logos*) for why new objects of beauty are better than the ones on lower rungs of the ladder. The lover is then able to reorient his focus, realizing that "wild gaping" after the initial object of one's *eros* is a despicable and small pursuit (210b).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in order to ascend the ladder, the lover must become more deeply fascinated by beauty than by its object. In other words, the lover must grow to be concerned with the beauty that one's beloved embodies rather than with the beloved.

The levels of the ladder are akin to one another insofar as they are species of beauty (bodily, psychic, intellectual). In order to respond to beauty appropriately, the lover must apprehend the way in which these species of beauty are related – this person must see that bodily, psychic, and intellectual kinds of beauty are all related to their instances or objects, and they are all related to the Form itself. Apprehending this – that these different kinds of beauty all share in Beauty itself – is that which eventually yields knowledge of the Form and allows for the lover's complete understanding of Beauty. This explains why the lover must ascend always for the sake of Beauty, "starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs" (211c). When one "rises by these stages," one's moral development will result from a shaping and improving of one's responses to the beauty of one's beloved.

However, the ascension of the ladder of love does not happen to everyone; some people will not even begin the ascent at all. At 209 Plato argues that psychological offspring is more valuable than biological offspring, or that which is created via sexual

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or belief. Between this realm and the realm of the Forms is knowledge, which is something that can be generated through 'discourses and ideas.' The initial prompting of *eros* is transformed into a love of beauty, as such. This transformation results from a growth of the soul, and it ends in a love of wisdom. For more information on this analogy between the ascent in the *Symposium* and the ascent out of the cave in the *Republic*, see Hinchliffe's "Plato and The Love of Learning."

<sup>11</sup> For more on this point, see F.C. White, "Love and Beauty in Plato's *Symposium*," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, pp. 151.

<sup>12</sup> This is to say that the lover must transcend certain objects as objects that are worthy of being overall-goals of one's love.



union. This means that, for Plato, reaching a level of love that involves a union of souls is more valuable than a level of love that only involves a union of bodies. Furthermore, the whole point of the ladder of love consists in aspiration toward that which is worthy of having its attainment become one's ultimate goal, and on Plato's view, the ultimate goal is much more than sexual union. Thus, the ascent of the ladder cannot occur if one's focus is *only* on sex. Importantly, while Plato's arguments in the *Symposium* show that one should not focus only on sex, sexual desire is in fact acknowledged as a form of *eros* that acceptably involved in one's ascent. Thus, the *Symposium* regards the sexual part of *eros* as acceptable, while the *Republic* seems to guard against it all together. However, the *Symposium* does maintain that focusing only on sexual desire and failing to graduate to higher kinds of love will result in a failure to climb the ladder, and hence, a lack of moral reformation.

Indeed, Plato suggests that some lovers will not make the transition to a higher form of *eros*. It is possible that one might allow the desire for a beautiful object at the primary stages of the ladder to overtake one's ability to turn onward and upward. Though this lover may begin the ascent by loving a beautiful body upon an erotic experience of beauty, this sort of lover will not discover the higher objects of love. This person, in common with the person who never even begins the ascent, will not develop a love of wisdom itself – the lover's desire for understanding will be either absent or it will lie dormant.<sup>13</sup> This means that the ascent will not be made by those who seek bodies as mere sex objects. Rather it will be found by those who love beauty.

There is a second danger that may halt one's progress: It is possible for the lover to mistakenly praise *eros* as itself being something beautiful. This will result in a failure to recognize *eros* as a desire for the beauty it lacks. The problem is that if *eros* is thought to already possess beauty, then this eliminates the possibility for it to seek beauty. This, in turn, eliminates its potential to aid the lover in ascending correctly: Failing to recognize that *eros* in fact desires and lacks beauty will result in a failure to see that – beyond the level of the initial object that incites one's *eros* – there are other things that are beautiful in a superior way, which will draw the lover aloft.

Yet, the higher kind of lover resists these dangers, and hence, is a candidate for moral reformation. We have reason to believe that although many people will never even begin the ascent, there are some who will be morally transformed as a result of an erotic experience of a beautiful person. This experience reforms a person such that one is able to give birth to virtue itself. In this way, an erotic experience of beauty can awaken aspiration to the virtuous life. Thus, an erotic experience of a beautiful person, as it is described in the *Symposium*, is something that may give rise to what I am calling

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<sup>13</sup> See Richard Patterson, "The Ascent in Plato's *Symposium*," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. VII, 1991, pg. 213. He argues that "In lovers attracted simply by the pleasurable bodily aspects of the beloved, or needing but lacking proper guidance, the desire for understanding may be entirely absent or lie forever dormant." But, he argues that this will not be the case regarding the sort of lover capable of initiation into the higher mysteries – this lover will come to understand the object of *eros* as well as praise it.

'moral *growth*,' – a transformation of the soul and a development of character, which results from an insight into the nature of true value.

### III. *Eros, Beauty and Moral Growth in the Phaedrus*

Like the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* gives a description of the way in which *eros* begins the soul's quest for truth, and influences it along the way. However, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato packs into a single vision the whole ascent that was developed through four stages in the *Symposium*. He does this by making use of the famous metaphor of the charioteer. In this metaphor, the soul is represented by a winged chariot, which is drawn by two horses. The charioteer represents the rational part of the soul, while the two horses represent the lower parts, the appetite and spirit. Socrates' aim in this metaphor is to make a point about the effect that an erotic experience of a beautiful person has on one's soul. He explains that when the mortal soul encounters its beloved the soul "fills with the goading of desire" (254a). The charioteer remains controlled, but the black horse (who represents the appetitive part of the soul) "leaps violently forward" (254a). It tries to aggravate the white horse and the charioteer in order to sway the chariot toward the beloved and "suggest to him the pleasures of sex" (254b). Yet, as they approach the beloved, they are "struck by his face as if by a bolt of lightning" (254b). The charioteer then sees a vision of beauty, and, as a result of this vision, the charioteer is able to rein the horses in. I shall examine this phenomenon more closely in what follows.

First of all, the two horses have "opposite sorts of bloodlines," and the black horse is naturally indisposed to serve the charioteer. Hence, the dissension between the horses results in an increased potentiality for discord in the whole soul. This, in turn, presents a serious problem, since (ideally) the parts of the soul will find harmony in hierarchical order. The charioteer must guide the soul and become a proficient "steersman." This means that the direction of the chariot must be given by the charioteer, not by the horses.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, reason must control the desires of the lower parts of the soul.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the charioteer is dependent on the horses in order to move forward and upward.<sup>16</sup> The horses and charioteer are naturally inseparable, but not naturally harmonious. Harmony in the soul requires an ordering of its parts, a certain functioning hierarchy, as it were. This means that all of the desires of the lower parts of the soul cannot always be satisfied. Thus, the charioteer must steer the horses in a direction that they (particularly the black horse) do not necessarily want to go (upward), even though – since they may grow wings – they are capable of the task. The wings represent the possibility of growth and fulfillment and the possibility of an ascent, akin to that of

<sup>14</sup> The charioteer is the appropriate director and "steersman" of the chariot (247d).

<sup>15</sup> While the *Symposium* gives an account of what it means to guide one properly toward the Forms, the *Phaedrus* focuses more specifically on the difficulties that come along with this kind of guidance.

<sup>16</sup> I just mean that the horses play a key role in making possible the motion of the whole soul. (See 247bc)

the *Symposium*, at least in its end goal (246c-e).

Interestingly, the wings seem to have a function that is particularly suited to humans, or fallen souls (246d-e, 248c). The Gods are in control of their desires, as opposed to mortals. While the Gods' chariots are winged (247a), their wings are (and continue to be) nourished by beauty, wisdom, and goodness (246de). The Gods, therefore, do not need assistance – they are already elevated. However, the wings of mortals must be properly cultivated by their souls (248c). Importantly, it is an erotic experience of a beautiful person that begins this process. Thus, the mortal soul is particularly suited for such an experience, whereas the souls of the gods – the ones that are already in proper hierarchical order – are already nourished by beauty. As I argue below, in the case of a mortal, it is an erotic experience of a beautiful person that potentially leads the soul to become more like the souls of the gods. Indeed, Socrates explains that “Beauty enters through [our] eyes, which are its natural route to the soul; there it waters the passages for the wings, and starts the wings growing.” The wings “have the power to raise [things] aloft where all the gods dwell” (246e), and it is beauty that initiates the growth of the wings:

When [a lover] sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time; then he gazes at him with the reverence due to a god, and if he weren't afraid people would think he'd gone completely mad, he'd even sacrifice to his boy as if he were the image of a god. Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the growth of his wings (251b).

This, Socrates explains, is love (252b). Beauty alone has this privilege, to be the most clearly visible and the most loved (250d).<sup>17</sup> This passage shows that an erotic experience of a beautiful person nourishes that which draws the lover aloft – the wings – and that love (*eros*) makes the flight of the chariot (which is dependent in part on the wings) possible. This means that if the chariot is analogous to the soul and if the wings are analogous to that which draws the soul toward knowledge of the Forms, then the metaphor shows that an erotic experience of a beautiful person occasions the lover's

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<sup>17</sup> Notably, Charles Griswold suggests that the wings, which represent a certain kind of *eros* (*eros* that is incited by worldly images, yet allows for the recollection of Forms), facilitate the flight upward to the Forms. For further argumentation for this point, see *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, “The Palinode,” pg. 95. On the other hand, Graeme Nicholson argues that “*Eros* himself is winged, and *Eros* awakens the wings within our soul. But those wings themselves are not *Eros*...*Eros* is not a part of our soul, but a god, a power that awakens this part or this power of our soul.” See *Plato's Phaedrus*, “Love and Beauty,” pp. 201

grasp of the Forms.

However, if *eros* facilitates this ascent, how is it that an erotic experience motivates the black horse to run violently toward the beloved and, thus, leads to a struggle between the charioteer and the horses? Notably, upon the erotic experience of a beautiful person, it is the black horse's response to the experience that leads him off track; the black horse responds by focusing only on the satisfaction sexual desires. On the other hand, the charioteer also clearly possesses *eros*, but the charioteer (reason) does not focus on sexual desire. In fact, the charioteer thinks that the black horse desires something that is "dreadfully wrong" (254b). The black horse possesses only the lower form of *eros*, while the charioteer ultimately seeks something higher. This means that rather than moving onward to higher forms of *eros*, if the appetitive part of the soul takes the lead, one can instead remain stuck, as it were, on lower forms. In other words, if one allows one's sexual desires to become the central and sole focus of the experience, rather than allowing sexual desire to merely facilitate one's growth and love for Beauty itself, one's moral reformation will be inhibited. Hence, one is reminded of the similar point made in the *Symposium*: one will not ascend the ladder of love if one focuses only on lower forms of *eros*. For the purposes of the *Phaedrus*, this point particularly illuminates the importance of the charioteer's command of the horses.

However, it is a good question as to how exactly the charioteer is to master the black horse. Socrates does indicate that the black horse can be trained: (The black horse will impede the chariot's ascent if the charioteer "has failed to train it well." 247b)<sup>18</sup> This is interesting because, undoubtedly, the vision of Beauty that takes the black horse "back on his haunches" is not an act of training, and it is not an intentional attempt to control the horse on behalf of the charioteer. It is an experience that gives rise to a sort of awakening and insight, which *forces* the horses under control. Thus, the insight that results from the erotic experience of a beautiful person is particularly applicable to the soul whose charioteer who has *not* trained the black horse well. Hence, my focus here is on the kind of case in which the black horse remains untrained and is, thus, potentially forced under control as the result of an erotic experience of a beautiful person.

It is noteworthy that when the charioteer encounters the beloved and has a vision of Beauty he is able to pull the disobedient black horse back on its haunches, though it is quite unwilling. The charioteer finally falls violently on the reins, due to having a vision of the Forms – this is not a deliberate act of control or leadership over the other two parts. Both before the vision of Beauty and after it the charioteer seeks control.

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<sup>18</sup> I would argue that that the person with the well-ordered soul probably has a richer experience of beauty – something closer to the way in which the souls of Gods are continually nourished by it (246de). I would suggest that the erotic experience of beauty is something that delivers the unruly soul to perhaps the same place that a properly trained soul would naturally arrive. However, due to the purposes of this project, I cannot give a comprehensive analysis of what it means to "train the black horse" here.

However, after the vision, the charioteer has seen Beauty “where it stands on the sacred pedestal next to Self-control” (254b). It is this that makes the charioteer capable of mastering the black horse.

Since the charioteer is the only one who has the potential to see the Forms (247d, 248a), while all of the parts of the soul glimpse the boy, only the charioteer recalls the Form of Beauty itself. This vision is a memory,<sup>19</sup> and an insight (250e, 254b, 256a). It is a recognition and recollection, since at one time (before being embodied) the soul had a primordial vision of beauty in advance of its empirical experiences of it. The memory, if it is clear, allows the lover to turn away from indulging an unreasonable, bodily desire (250e). Thus, it is this vision of Beauty – a kind of direct insight into the nature of true value – that puts the soul in its proper hierarchical order.

Yet, forcing the black horse under control is only the beginning of the moral reformation that is caused by an erotic experience of a beautiful person, as described in the *Phaedrus*. The “startling” experience of seeing “an image of what [the soul] saw up there” can prompt a particular kind of madness – philosophical madness – as Socrates describes it (250a). This madness is “that which someone shows when he sees the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty” (249d), and when someone is “touched” by it, “he is called a lover” (249e). During the recollection of true Beauty, it will pour into a person through that person’s eyes, and “water the growth of [his] wings” (251b). The wings, as we have seen, draw the soul upward, and it is beauty that cultivates the growth of the wings and awakens and inspires love (*eros*).<sup>20</sup> This initiates his pursuit of wisdom and the Forms: We are told that this kind of lover “gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below – and that is what brings on him the charge that he has gone mad” (249d).

This kind of madness potentially occasions the development of a special, philosophical relationship between the lover and his beloved. This relationship between lovers that Plato describes in the *Phaedrus* brings to mind a passage that I discussed earlier in Section I. Plato argues in the *Republic* that a lover should only treat beloved “as a father would a son, for the sake of what is fine and beautiful.” This relationship between lovers is such that they spend time together and morally influence one another (256ab). Both the relationship between lovers that Plato describes in the *Republic* and the relationship between lovers that he describes in the *Phaedrus* are occasioned by experiences of beauty; in the *Republic* the relationship is made possible via an encounter of beauty in art, and in the *Phaedrus*, the relationship begins with

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<sup>19</sup> Graeme Nicholson calls this “a déjà vu reaction,” which is the reminder of other occasions of seeing this beautiful face, and also other beautiful faces. “It is the awareness that Beauty itself has imprinted my soul, and then, where there is Beauty there is also Justice, Goodness, the vista as a whole.” See *Plato’s Phaedrus*, “The Human Soul,” pp. 174

<sup>20</sup> Beauty awakens and inspires love and wisdom (250de, 252b, 252c). Socrates explains that if we could see wisdom the in the same way that we are able to see beauty, this would awaken an even more powerful love than beauty does (250de).

an erotic experience of a beautiful person. However, in the context of the *Phaedrus*, though the two lovers will have morally rewarding relationship and “live a happy life, bound together by love and persevering in friendship” (253c), room is made in the relationship for the sexual part of *eros* (256a). In other words sexual desire (in its proper place) plays a role in the moral reformation to which beauty gives rise in the *Phaedrus*.

At *Phaedrus* 255a-e Plato describes the interaction between lovers and their beloveds in such a way that particularly brings out its ethical meaning. Ideally, the teacher will come to feel a genuine concern and affection for the younger lover, and the younger lover will come to see the goodness of his beloved and teacher who has achieved the control of his passions. Plato focuses especially on the lover of philosophy – the sort of lover who is able to lead one's beloved in this sort of philosophical friendship – as the sort of person who has had “a view of Reality” (248a, 249cd, 256a). Indeed, this is the sort of lover who has seen a clearer vision, and who is best able to remember it (249cd). One will morally improve “the one he has befriended” but only if one follows one's desire in a specific manner (252e-253c). It is this sort of lover who will help the beloved to be like a god (253c). The teacher is “touched with a God by memory” and the Gods, since their souls are under control, and since their minds are “nourished by pure knowledge” are akin to the Forms themselves. The teacher thus adopts the God's customs and practices, “so far as a human being can share in a God's life” (253a). The teacher will pour inspiration into the soul of the beloved and will “help him take on as much of their own god's qualities as possible” (253b). In this way the lover, through the moral reformation that takes place while the beloved makes him god-like, grows to be like the forms themselves. Importantly, these rewards that one will gain from this kind of relationship are only made possible through an initial erotic experience of a beautiful person.

However, Plato makes clear in the *Phaedrus* that not everyone will gain insight upon an erotic experience of beauty. Not everyone will experience the kind of relationship that I have described above, and not everyone will be thunderstruck (254b), as it were, by Beauty. Therefore, I am arguing that the kind of erotic experience of beauty that is portrayed in the metaphor only potentially has the effects on the soul that are described there. Socrates explains:

Not every soul is easily reminded of the reality there by what it finds here – not souls that got a brief glance at the reality there, not souls who had such bad luck when they fell down here that they were twisted by bad company into the lives of injustice so they forgot the sacred objects they had seen before. Only a few remain whose memory is good enough; and they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there (250ab).

As in the *Symposium*, then, it is evident in the *Phaedrus* that an erotic experience of beauty will not affect everyone in the same manner. Some people will not be moved from an image of beauty to “a vision of Beauty itself.” They might not even have a memory of the Form; they might focus on the mere image of it, surrendering to pleasure and setting out “in the manner of a four-footed beast... wallowing in vice... without a trace of fear or shame” (251). In other words, some may submit to the black horse and focus only on the lower forms of *eros*.

Plato clearly distinguishes this “fallen prisoner of love” from the person “who has seen much in heaven” and who will be able to bear the burden of this “feathered force” of the erotic experience of beauty with dignity (252d). Hence, the erotic experience that beauty evokes gives rise to alternatives – one might be “raised aloft” or one might simply be a “fallen prisoner of love.”

I have shown, then, that the *Phaedrus*, like the *Symposium*, honors the role of *eros* in beauty’s relationship with morality. Both dialogues involve a kind of ascent to the forms that is inspired by an erotic experience of a beautiful person. The lover in the *Symposium* potentially comes to see Beauty in itself, and this lover comes to know that there is such a thing as Beauty independent of the objects that we find beautiful. The lover in the *Phaedrus* is potentially taken by beauty, through having gone from the bodily beauty of a person to the memory of the Beautiful itself, to see that there is such a thing as Beauty itself.

Furthermore, I have shown that, like the lover in the *Symposium*, the lover in the *Phaedrus* can get stuck on a lower form of *eros* and fail to be “raised aloft” to the love of Beauty itself. I have argued that the potential glimpse of the Forms which occurs during an erotic experience of a beautiful person gives rise to order in the soul. As a result of this, a lover is made capable of having a morally rewarding relationship with the beloved. Through this relationship one is made like a god, and thus, like the Forms themselves. It is in this way that an erotic experience of a beautiful person, as described in the *Phaedrus*, gives rise to moral growth – a transformation of the soul and a development of character, which results from an insight into the nature of true value. This kind of moral reformation is not a species of training that teaches a person to appreciate order and harmony, and later to recognize reason. Rather, moral growth is occasioned by an experience in which cognition immediately takes the lead. An erotic experience of a beautiful person is in this case able to draw a lover outside of oneself, as it were. It is a “startling experience” of seeing an image of Beauty itself, and it is through this emotional, abrupt, and almost shocking experience, that a person is morally transformed.

#### IV. Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I have shown that an experience of beautiful art and erotic experiences of beautiful people are two different phenomena, and we have reason to believe that beauty plays two roles in Plato’s general theory of moral progress: (1) The experience of beauty via art has the capacity to facilitate the molding of character and, hence, it can

be used in *moral training*, as is described in the *Republic*, and (2) The erotic experience of a beautiful person evokes a response that has the capacity to facilitate *moral growth*, as is described in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

In the *Republic*, beautiful art must represent beautiful character, harmony, grace, and order. *Eros* for beauty is produced by the moral training to which experiences of beautiful art give rise. The kind of *eros* that is a product of moral training must be nonsexual (403a); yet the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* take up the sexual part of *eros* as something that can be useful. In particular, the erotic experience of a beautiful person will involve sexual desire, and sexual desire – in its proper place – plays a role in the experience that facilitates moral growth in both the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

In the *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*, the love of beauty (occasioned by an experience of beauty) is something that is necessary for moral reformation. In the *Republic*, Plato maintains that the guardians' must learn to love (*eros*) the fine and the beautiful in order to become good (403c). In the *Phaedrus*, a love for beauty makes a lover like a God, and hence, like the Forms themselves. In the *Symposium*, a love for beauty allows a person to give birth to wisdom and the rest of virtue. This brings me to one final point.

As I noted in Section II, poetic activity, like philosophical activity,<sup>21</sup> is presented in the *Symposium* as something that begets “wisdom and the rest of virtue” (209a), and is motivated by love (*eros*).<sup>22</sup> The discussion of poetry here is prior to the discussion of the ascent, and this point from the *Symposium* is consistent with my arguments regarding poetry in the *Republic* in Section I. With this in mind, one might make the following claim: Poetry and other art that imitates good moral habits gives rise to moral training, but the good poet (or artist) – the one whose poetry brings about moral training – must be a person who has learned to love beauty, which is the goal, in the best case scenario, of the lover described in the *Symposium*.

I recognize that I have shown that the love of beauty toward which education aims in the *Republic* involves nonsexual *eros*, while the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* make room for sexual *eros*. However, I have also shown, in both my discussion of the *Symposium* and my discussion of the *Phaedrus*, that one will not reach moral reformation through an erotic experience of a beautiful person if one does not graduate, as it were, to a higher

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<sup>21</sup> Though I draw similarities between philosophy and poetry here, it is important to remember that Plato argues that there is a sort of understanding that is possessed by the philosopher alone, and this is the level to which one ideally ascends. See Patterson, pp. 212 -214 for a thorough treatment of this point.

<sup>22</sup> See Elizabeth Asmis, “Plato on Poetic Creativity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. She argues that “Although Diotima does not assign a place to the poets in this ascent, there are sufficient similarities in her account to suggest that their endeavors may be mapped onto it. By valuing psychic beauty jointly with bodily beauty and concerning themselves with correct practices, the poets appear to be ascending from the first to the second main stage.” Asmis goes on to argue that the poets appear to occupy an “honorable position between the masses and the philosophers.”



form of *eros* than sexual desire. As a result, one might very reasonably suggest that the experiences of beauty via art from the *Republic* and erotic experiences of beautiful people, in certain circumstances, work together in some way. This, however, is a topic for another essay. At the very least, in light of this point and my arguments in this essay, it does not seem reasonable to suggest that the *Republic*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and their respective descriptions of experiences of beauty are at all inconsistent.

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