Erotic Virtue

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Abstract: This paper defends an account of how erotic love works to develop virtue. It is argued that love drives moral development by holding the creation of virtue in the individual as the emotion's intentional object. After analyzing the distinction between passive and active accounts of the object of love, this paper demonstrates that a Platonic virtue-ethical understanding of erotic love—far from being consumed with ascetic contemplation—offers a positive treatment of emotion's role in the attainment and social practice of virtue.

1 Introduction

In this paper, I provide a virtue-ethical account of emotion, with a focus on erotic love. The account is built upon a startling claim in Plato's dialogue on love, the *Symposium*:[1] that we develop the virtue of beauty through erotic attraction and creation. To defend this account, I begin by contrasting two understandings of the object of love. The first is the received view, which holds that the object of love is beauty, and that therefore the proper relation to it is ascetic contemplation. Call this the *passive account of love*. I argue, however, that Plato locates the object of love within the individual as the creative process of her own moral development. The defining feature of erotic love is its power to produce. Love drives moral development through holding as its object the bringing into being of new virtue in the individual. Call this the *maker account of love*. By analyzing the distinction between objects of love, I show that the Platonic maker account of love offers marked advantages over traditional Neo-Aristotelian virtue-ethical theories of emotion.

Section 2 begins with a rationale for framing this discussion around emotional objects, before going on to examine the received passive account of love and to demonstrate how it requires revision on the basis of three problems. Section 3 details the maker account of love identified in Socrates's speech. In this section, I argue that love in relation to the beautiful motivates human action, resulting in the lover actively cultivating

[1] All references to the *Symposium* are to Plato 2001.

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and bringing into being new beauty in the world, and in herself. In section 4, I show how we can build from this dialogue a Platonic virtue-ethical account of emotion—and, in particular, of erotic love—that contributes to the philosophic discourse on the intricate relationship between emotions and moral virtue. I defend this account as a valid and uniquely valuable lens through which to examine the mechanism for not only the attainment of virtue, but its active practice as well.

2 The Passive Account of Love

When emotions are considered from a virtue-ethical perspective, there is an understandable tendency to look to Aristotle. However, I want to focus on Plato. One motivation for this attention is the persistent script that Plato held—or was even responsible for—what is deemed a *negative* view of the emotions. The typical charge goes as follows:

> Plato . . . proposed what may be called 'the negative view of emotion'. . . . According to the negative view, emotions usually affect reasoning for the worse. (Evans 2002, 497)

or:

> Plato also took a fairly dim view of the emotions, regarding them as agents of tyranny which enslave the true and rational part of our nature. . . . Underlying the wholly negative view of the emotions we can discern [the claim]: What is emotional is irrational, and conversely, what is rational is not emotional. This is the account offered by Plato. (Harkin 2000, 19)

or:

> The degrading of feelings and emotions to a low status is not just a byproduct of metaphysics; it belongs to metaphysics' essential constitution. The model was set by Plato and has been followed ever since. (Heller 2009, 1)

Even those who deny Plato held an explicitly negative view of emotion distance themselves from the possibility that he held a positive one (Ruckmick 1936, 31–32). The usual texts cited to support this script are the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Phaedo*. However, this is to neglect the compelling contributions made in the only dialogue which specifically addresses itself to explicating a particular emotion: the *Symposium*, which takes as its subject the emotion of erotic love as discussed in seven speeches, of which Socrates's is the sixth. One of the main benefits of considering the *Symposium* in investigations of the role of emotions in moral development is Plato's anticipation of the contemporary attention to *emotional objects*.

We can understand an important distinction between emotions, on the one hand, and moods, feelings, or appetites, on the other, to be that emotions have specific objects, while the others do not (see, e.g., Ben-Ze'ev 2010, 55). This is the basis for an articulation of the *intentionality* of an emotion: what it is the emotion is directed toward or holds as its object. Any analysis of a particular emotion's connection to virtue must first accurately identify the object of the emotion in question. The aim of this paper is to offer an account of how the object of Platonic, erotic love can be understood to link emotional attraction to and engagement with the external world, to the attainment of virtue. In fact, Plato was perhaps the first to assign intentionality to emotions. This runs contrary to the existing narrative regarding the history of emotional intentionality, a narrative that largely follows Nussbaum's analysis of intentionality in Stoic thought (Deonna and Scherer 2010, 44–45; Nussbaum 1994). While the view that emotions exhibit intentionality is indeed rife within the Hellenistic period, and builds on an Aristotelian theory of emotion, we can clearly identify intentionality in Plato's account of erotic love. The framing characteristic of love, Socrates asserts at *Symposium* 199c–200a, is that it is "of something"—just as a father is father of a child so too love is of something, and it "desires that something."[2] Plato's focus on the object of love reveals its essential relational quality. For love to have an object is simply part of its grounding logic, and the identification of this object is thus fundamental to any attempt to define and understand love. In this section, I critically analyze the received view regarding the object of erotic love in the *Symposium*. To do this, I test the account according to the following two standards:

(1) Is it supported by the text?
(2) Does what Plato says deliver what he wants? That is, does the identified object of love allow the emotion to be strong enough to ground moral development?

I argue that any account that holds the object of love to be passive contemplation of beauty or the good, as the received view does, will not satisfy either of these standards.

2.1 Three Problems with the Object of Love

It is commonly claimed in the scholarly literature that the object of love, in the *Symposium* dialogue, is beauty.[3] We can identify in the text three

[2] Socrates's question to Agathon on this point is reminiscent of his similar discussion with Menexenus at *Lysis* 218d regarding whether a friend is the friend of someone or not.

[3] See, generally, F. C. White's survey:

> According to many scholars, the central theme . . . is that the primary or ultimate object of love is the Form of Beauty. Thus among such scholars Beauty is variously described as: love's *primary object* (Irwin); its *final object* (Cornford); its *final goal* (Grube); its *final 'why'* (Morgan); its

reasons for this recurrent interpretation. First, Socrates shocks his interlocutors by proclaiming that Erôs, "god of love,"[4] is, in fact, not a god at all. Rather, Erôs is a dæmon, intermediary between gods and men, and accordingly, *lacks* beauty and spends his days in pursuit of it. Socrates asks Agathon, "So Erôs is in need of and does not have beauty?" and Agathon agrees (201b). This pursuit of beauty becomes an important characteristic of erotic love, and interpretations of the text often take this to be a statement regarding the love's object. Second, Socrates recites a story about Erôs's origin in which we learn that Erôs was conceived at the party celebrating the birth of Aphrodite, goddess of beauty. "It is for this reason that Erôs has been the attendant and servant of Aphrodite, as he was conceived on her birthday; for he is by nature a lover in regard to the beautiful, and Aphrodite is beautiful" (203b–c). Third, in explaining what use love is for human beings, Socrates claims that beauty is necessary for artistic creation. The inspired lover, pictured here metaphorically as one pregnant in soul, "flutters so much around the beautiful" because beauty will offer a release from the labor pains of one teeming with ideas (206c–e).

It is clear that there is a deep and intimate connection between love and beauty in Socrates's speech. After all, Erôs and Aphrodite entered the world together. However, it is precisely because of this connection that the object of love is so often taken to be that beauty, and this has in turn resulted in Platonic love being accused of falling prey to a number of notorious problems. In what follows, I set out three such problems with erotic love identified in the literature, and demonstrate how each problem can be resolved by abandoning the argument that beauty is the object of love.

2.1.1 *Problem One: Love of Beauty or Goodness Entails Possession*

The fact that Plato is at pains to establish that love is *of* something has given rise in the literature to a rather negative conception of erotic love as 'possessive'—that the Platonic lover seeks to possess her beloved. When the beloved is a person, this is argued to be abusive and stifling; when the beloved is the Form, it appears ontologically odd. If love is logically

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> *ultimate objective* (Raven); its *ultimate object* (Teloh); its *ultimate goal* (Grube). Or it is described more simply as *the* object of love (Hamilton); as *the* goal of Eros (Bury) . . . and so on. (1989, 151)

See also Obdrzalek 2010, 416, 440; Nehamas 2007, 123; Gerson 2007, 48, 64, 65; Edmonds 2000, 266, 268–269; Gagarin 1977, 33, 27; Pender 1992, 72, 77–78, 82, 86; Patterson 1993, 198, 207; and Halperin 1985, 180; 1989, 34. Notable exceptions include Neumann 1965, 42–47; Rowe 1998, 184; White 2004, 369–375; and Vlastos 1981, 20–22, who argue that the object of love is not beauty but the possession of the good. While I disagree as well that *the good* is love's object, I will not go into detail here.

[4] In this paper, I refer to both erôs the emotion, and Erôs the dæmon. When speaking specifically of the latter, I will capitalize the proper noun.

and fundamentally *of*, is it possessive? I argue that, yes, Platonic love is possessive, but this attribute is not vicious.

Obdrzalek's interpretation demonstrates the problem of possession when the object of love is beauty:

> [b]ecause Socrates focused on corporeal beauty, he thought that the appropriate relation to beauty was possession. . . . Socrates' focus on possession was, however, misconceived. . . . In the ascent, this possession-based model of love becomes eclipsed by one focused on contemplation and admiration. The reason for this is that the Forms are not the sort of objects that can be possessed: it would be like saying you own all the prime numbers. (2010, 431–432)

Engaging with Kraut's argument that "Forms can be possessed in the sense that one can have an intellectual relation to them" (Kraut 1992, 320–321), Obdrzalek concludes that this "stretches the sense of possession too far," particularly given Diotima's assertion at 211a that the Form will not appear to anyone as a kind of speech or science "which implies a distinction between knowledge of the Form and the Form itself. . . . [A] contemplative relationship differs sharply from a possessive one" (2010, 432, n. 43). The distinction she draws between knowledge of the Form and the Form itself holds, yet I am not convinced that it is as sharp as her argument requires. Obdrzalek's reading of contemplation as being "purely . . . receptive" and passive explains why she cannot see them as being the same (432, 435).

Barney asserts of Plato's theory of erôs that it is "an impulse to attain some object: when we desire, as Socrates says, what we want is for the object of desire to become ours" (2010, 69). In her treatment of Plato's moral psychology, she claims:

> The good is the object of our desire, which seeks, as Plato says in the *Meno*, 'to possess or secure' its object for oneself (77c7–8). But in coming to understand what really is good, we must also ascend to a more refined conception of what its 'possession' amounts to. To understand the real good is, among other things, to grasp that we benefit not from owning it, ruling it, eating it or wearing it, but simply being together with it; which, given the kind of thing the Forms are, can only mean contemplation of it in thought. (2007, 313)

That beholding the beautiful will entail cognitive contemplation cannot be denied. However, this does not make it the passive state Obdrzalek imagines or the purely epistemic state Barney intimates by "only" in the above quotation. It must involve more than simply sitting by oneself,

thinking about the abstract qualities of beauty and goodness, if it is the activity of love alone that can lead one to bringing about true virtue.

If possession is what Plato has in mind for the nature of the relationship the lover is to have with beauty, is it truly possessive in an acquisitive way? Nehamas offers an alternative understanding of possession, one that fits with the view of both love and its object offered in the *Symposium*.

> Possession, though, is not identical with ownership—or, if it is, it is ownership of a different kind: I may possess something as a detachable piece of property, losing which will not affect who I am, or as a genuine part of myself, which I cannot lose without undergoing a serious change of my own. . . . 'Making it mine' means to see it as no one else has seen it before. . . . To the extent that being involved with it has changed my life, that book has come to possess me; to the extent that I have found something new and unusual in it, I have made it mine; and to the extent that I have become new and unusual myself. (2007, 119)

The beholding of beauty Diotima's exhortation implies involves such time and devotion as to effect precisely this kind of change. The possession that may be entailed by erôs involves a serious commitment to coming to know beauty itself, and making it one's own to the extent that it has such an effect on one's life. It is thus not possession or ownership of a kind that can be satisfied; love is not a conclusion, but a forward-looking commitment that promises a life most worth living.

2.1.2 Problem Two: Passive Accounts Entail a Shift in the Object

The second problem with the passive account of love is that it requires a shift in love's object to remain consistent in the text. Obdrzalek, for example, argues that there is here a "problem of unity [. . . in that] Plato does not appear to offer a consistent object of erōs," and then goes on to argue that "this shifting in the objects of Erôs is actually part of Diotima's explanatory strategy" (2010, 439). According to this strategy, Socrates initially perceives the correct object of love (beauty), then goes through three other potential objects of erōs—the eternal possession of the good, giving birth in beauty in terms of the body and soul, and finally, immortality—but then in the end, "Diotima reveals to him that the proper object of erōs was beauty all along, but that the appropriate relationship to it is one of selfless contemplation" (437, 439). Obdrzalek views this as a way around the problem of unity, noting that any interpretation that does not identify a shift in the object of love will require an explanation as to how Plato means to explain setting as the goal of all love an eternal possession no lover can ever accomplish.

However, it is important to note a number of issues that arise in interpreting Plato as shifting his goalposts when it comes to the object of erôs. The first problem is literary: it is well-established that Plato, especially in the so-called 'Socratic' dialogues, often employs the technique of having his interlocutors go through a number of possible definitions before they reach a conclusion (or end in *aporia*). In these cases, however, the rejected definitions are clearly dismissed, and no such dismissal occurs in the treatment of the supposed object(s) of love in the *Symposium*: these ostensibly conflicting objects are interspersed in a developmental fashion, as opposed to the expected suggestion-rejection method employed in other dialogues. The second problem is philosophical: Diotima's description of beauty as "that very thing *for whose sake alone* all the prior labours were undertaken" (210e3–5) is not at all the same thing as asserting beauty is the direct object of love. When I have a sip of tea, the direct object of my drinking (what it is that I drink—tea) is not the same thing as that for whose sake I undertake to drink. It is surely not for the tea's sake. My love may very well be *of* something in particular but *for the sake of* something else. The difference here is between what love is of and what it is for: and Plato gives us no indication that he conflates the two.

Osborne also identifies a shift in the object of love. She asserts, "We start with an analysis of love as desire, or more specifically the desire to possess some class of good things, which happen to be the property of certain individuals" (1994, 102). But, Osborne argues, while erôs at the lower levels may begin with this possession-based erôs,

> this is modified . . . [in the begetting passage] where the emphasis changes from possessing the beautiful to gazing on beauty and goodness itself, while the need to possess is a need to possess immortality in order to gaze forever on the beautiful itself. . . . The ultimate aim of his love is not possession of good things but a vision of unfailing beauty. (1994, 102–103)

While it is true that the visual aspect of erôs's aim is of fundamental import, this is not the goal of erôs entire. That there is no shift and that the original erôs Diotima endorses throughout her speech is always of bringing to birth in beauty is evident from two points. First, the terminology of possession is only employed in Socrates's introductory interlude with Agathon, when discussing erôs's beauty or lack thereof. As soon as Diotima is introduced, erôs's need for beauty is explained as part of his genetic psychology but not his defining feature—possessing the beautiful is never mentioned as erôs's ultimate aim. Second, at 206e, rather than "remark[ing] on the revision of the original analysis" (the shift from desiring to possess the beautiful to desiring to gaze on it), as Osborne argues (1994, 102–103), Diotima is correcting Socrates on this very point. She specifically tells Socrates he was *wrong* to believe erôs was of the beautiful—of possessing

it, or any other way in which the beautiful can be the object of love. The correction Diotima wants Socrates to understand is not that he was wrong that erôs is about possession, but that he was wrong to take the beautiful itself as the object of love.

2.1.3 Problem Three: Passive Love of Beauty Cannot Account for Interpersonal Love

A significant portion of the literature devoted to Platonic erôs concerns itself with a notorious and longstanding controversy regarding Plato's estimation of the value of those physical beauties "use[d] . . . as steps" in the ascent from beautiful things in the world to the abstract Form of beauty (211c).[5] Motivating this debate is what has become known as the *exclusive* view, which holds that the "objects of aspiration [at the lower levels of the ascent, including beautiful souls] are not kept but are totally replaced by the new objects" (Moravcsik 1971, 193). One particular point of contention is the possibility of love for human individuals, and whether in fact Plato's theory of love in the *Symposium* is meant to encompass interpersonal love at all.

The exclusive view has become strongly associated with a seminal essay by Vlastos, who argues that the erotic love championed in the dialogue is not meant to—and indeed does not—admit of love for whole persons, but only the beauty present in them. Vlastos, and those who follow him, find fault with Plato's theory of love thus understood for four reasons:

(1) that erôs is impersonal and selfish, and that it does not do justice to those "essential ingredients of the highest type of interpersonal love," namely, "kindness, tenderness, compassion, concern for the freedom, [and] respect for the integrity of the beloved";
(2) that it is fixated on qualities, that it does not make allowances for love of individuals in their total package, the beautiful, the ugly, and the nondescript;
(3) that even if these first two complaints can be assuaged, erôs cannot account for anything but sexual or romantic love, and thus excludes the love we would normally feel for friends and family; and,
(4) that the erôs of the *Symposium* does not treat individuals as "ends in themselves," taking steam from the Kantian notion of love for one's own sake, and not for any further means. (Vlastos 1981, 30–32; Nakhnikian 1978, 286–317)

These four arguments fuel the exclusivists' view that if the theory encourages the abandonment of beloved beauties in the early stages of the ascent, it must not allow for human love of human individuals. For a theory of love to neglect interpersonal love is disquieting indeed for the scope of influence it seems Plato would be wanting to effect. The majority of the other speeches presented in the *Symposium* deal exclusively with interpersonal

[5] See Sheffield 2012, 117–141 for a critical review of this debate.

love, and that Socrates's speech would depart from this arrangement strikes an odd chord in the unity of the dialogue as a whole. An investigation into the merits of the exclusivist reading of the *Symposium* will set the groundwork for an understanding of the specific role individuals play in the ascent passage of the *Symposium*.

Vlastos's first critique is that the love championed by Socrates does not cover the range of affectionate feelings one would normally experience and express when she loves. In particular, he is concerned that "the fashioner of this utopia has evidently failed to see that what love for our fellows requires of us is, above all, imaginative sympathy and concern for what they themselves think, feel, and want" (1981, 32). However, the emphasis placed on the improvement of the individual's soul and mind in this speech demonstrates the highest form of care and concern. Diotima describes how once the lover has found a beloved with a beautiful soul she "must love and cherish him and engender and seek such speeches as will make the young better" (210c). Vlastos himself asserted that "for Plato, as for Socrates before him, the supreme goal of all human endeavor is the improvement of the soul" (1981, 14). Viewed from Plato's perspective, the relationship of lover to beloved in this sense would constitute a great deal of concern for what the beloved wants and needs, and will further help to develop those desires to encourage the beloved to become the best he can be. Furthermore, this goal extends beyond individual responsibility to the state as well, to legislators and statesmen (209d-e, 210c). Platonic love can thus be seen to admit of a wide range of affectionate concern and romantic devotion suitable to interpersonal love, especially as it relates to an encouragement toward moral improvement.

The second critique offered by the exclusive reading addresses the notion that what the lover loves in the ascent passage is not the beloved himself, but the quality of beauty present in him. Vlastos laments,

> What we are to love in persons is the 'image' of the [Form of Beauty] in them . . . [t]he individual, in the uniqueness and integrity of his or her individuality, will never be the object of our love. This seems to me the cardinal flaw in Plato's theory. It does not provide for love of whole persons, but only for love of that abstract version of persons which consists of the complex of their best qualities. (1981, 31)

The critique here is that the beloveds are not being loved for themselves—which might include various shortcomings—but for their beauty. Authentic love, argues Vlastos, should be for the whole person embodying a unique collection of virtues and flaws, not just a bundle of their best features, or their resemblance to some abstract ideal. Similarly, Kamtekar argues that, according to Plato, when one desires something, she always really desires

the Form:

> As belief aims at the true, so desire aims at the good . . . as the doctrine of recollection attributes to us beliefs other than those we avow, in order to explain our cognitive behaviour, so the attribution to us of a standing want for the good explains some of our conative—and indeed cognitive—behaviour: not only what we try to get, but also what we are satisfied by, and finally, what we want to know, is best explained by our wanting the real good. (2006, 138)

Such a reading is compatible with the exclusive view of Platonic erôs, in that if one loves beauty for the sake of the Form, and loves the beauty in a particular, she loves that beauty for the sake of the Form. This is problematic for Vlastos, who finds it insufferably superficial. Irwin offers an understanding of the compatibility of knowledge with love that may be of use in satisfying both requirements: the need of the beloveds to feel they are being loved for their unique selves, and the goal of the ascent passage to hold the Form in a higher position of real value than the beautiful particular. He suggests, "When someone reaches the Form of Beauty he finds a reliable account of what beauty is. . . . The correct account allows us to love the lower objects to the right extent, and for the right reasons, in so far as they are really beautiful" (1977, 169). Indeed, knowledge of the Form may enable the lover to love the beloved even more deeply for that accuracy. If knowledge is understood as a holistic understanding of a Form in relation to the many particulars that participate in it, and what role both play in the teleological system, then the knowledge of the Form attained in the higher stages of the ascent will offer the lover a truer perception of her human beloved. This knowledge is certainly nothing that precludes her continuing to love the beloved. In fact, the opposite is more likely. One is reminded of the final lines of Lovelace's poem: "I could not love thee, dear, so much, lov'd I not Honour more" (1921, 47).

A third exclusivist complaint is that Platonic erôs appears not to account for anything but sexual or romantic love, and not the love we claim to have for close friends or family. This argument gains support from Socrates's initial interrogation of Agathon, during which Socrates asks,

> [I]s erôs the sort that is of something or of nothing? I am not asking whether he is of a mother or of a father (for the question whether erôs is love of mother or father would be laughable), but just as if I asked about this very word, *father*—is the father father of something or not? (199c–d)

The notion of erôs of parents being laughable is in line with conventional views about erotic love in ancient Athens (Dover 1980, 2–3). However,

what Plato goes on to do in the duration of Socrates's speech is to create a neologism—to expand the domain of erôs to come to bear on his philosophic treatment of human behavior, moral psychology, and aesthetic creation.[6] According to this robust understanding of erôs, erotic love can be thought of as a species of general love—characterized by a passionate and intense commitment to coming to know the beloved better. This passionate element shares certain features with desiderative or acquisitive emotion (and manifests itself as such when wrongly ordered: one's wrongly-ordered love for a beloved might lead to her taking advantage of a friend; or one's wrongly-ordered love for a beautiful soul might lead to her wanting sexually the beautiful body attached to it),[7] but this is simply confusing acquisitive or hedonistic desire with the entirety of erotic love. Furthermore, it is not unusual to develop or even to seek out a friend-like relationship with one's parents or adult children. All it would take here is conceptual categorization: one individual understood as both family and friend, when the latter is a person with whom one would still have the same or a very similar relationship even if the two were not related. In this case, some family members are loved as friends. Can Platonic erôs, however, account for friends? I argue that the development of the lover at 210b4–c leaves open this possibility. At this stage, the lover has moved beyond loving only beautiful bodies, and has come to "believe that the beauty in souls is more honourable than that in the body." The love one has for beautiful souls can include those of one's friends and family—if indeed they are beautiful souls and they are loved as such. The brief aside at 210c1 indicates that these relationships can in fact be distinctly non-sexual. Seen in this light, being able to have erôs—when understood and acted upon appropriately—for one's parents may move beyond being laughable to being, in fact, rather enviable.[8]

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[6] For discussion of this neologism, see Peiwen 2004, 2–3 and n. 3; Plochmann 1983, 332; Naugle Unpublished, 45; Nussbaum 1986, 202–203; Levy 1979, 285; Santas 1979, 70–71; Konstan 2012, 14; and Cairns 2012, 233–250.

[7] Cf. *Symposium*, 218e: "For you are trying to acquire the truth of beautiful things in exchange for the seeming and opinion of beautiful things; and you really have in mind to exchange 'gold for bronze'." This quotation from Homer's *Iliad* (6.236), is reminiscent of the myth of the metals Socrates offers in *Republic* (414c–417b). (All references to the *Republic* are to Plato 1969.)

[8] Perhaps this is exactly what is meant by Alcibiades's intimation at 221e–222a:

> For were one willing to hear Socrates's speeches, they would at first look altogether laughable (γελοῖοι). . . . For he talks of [nonsense] and it looks as if he is always saying the same things through the same things; and hence every inexperienced and foolish human being would laugh at his speeches. But if one sees them opened up and one gets oneself inside them, one will find that they alone of speeches have sense inside.

Two other things besides love directed to one's parents are said to be laughable in the *Symposium*: Socrates's metaphors, and Aristophanes's hiccups. Plato uses Alcibiades to show that, at least sometimes, the only things that have sense are wrapped in the ridiculous. Cf. *Symposium*, 189b, 199b, 215a.

A final exclusivist critique is that Plato's theory would treat human beloveds exploitatively, as means to an end, instead of as ends in themselves with their own aims, feelings, and desires. While Rowe (1998, 194) suggests that Socrates's first use of the phrase "the perfect revelations—for which the others are means" at *Symposium* 210a refers to the first and second types of engendering (human children and soul-children), there is no getting around the similar language at 211c, "always to proceed on up, using these beautiful things here as steps." There is also no denying that Plato's theory requires particulars—including human beings—to be "used" in this way, however unsavory that may sound. Nevertheless, the *way* in which an individual beloved is used is not at all exploitative: rather, I argue, it is decidedly aimed at the interest of the beloved for his own sake. When it comes to human beloveds, the manner in which they are approached is that of, as has been asserted, intellectual edification and moral improvement through speeches and guidance by the lover (210a, 210c–d). Individual beloveds in the *Symposium* do specifically benefit in an important way by the role they play in the ascent. While it may be their beauty that attracts the lover, it is the most unique part of themselves—the soul—that benefits and is the focus of the lover's attention. For the exclusivist to criticize Platonic erôs because the lover herself does benefit from what the beloved can offer her, through conversations and exploring together the world of beauty, would be to advocate a selflessness too far.

Is then Platonic love necessarily exclusive, abandoning human beloveds once a more brilliant beauty is found? No. In the first two stages of the ascent, it is the beauty in bodies that is thought trivial or petty—not the soul. Regard the remarkably overlooked omission of the soul in the summary passage at 211c–d. Keeping in mind the "close attention" Diotima bid the reader pay just prior to the summary of the lover's erotic education in virtue (210e), and the fact that in place of the soul it was again the body thought trivial at 210c (all that was said of the soul at this point was that it was more honorable than the body), this is a further indication that perhaps the lover never gives up the commitments she has to caring for human beloveds. Finally, considering the overarching aim of human flourishing to which Plato enjoins his readers, it would seem rather strange to hold romantic or sexual interpersonal relationships as the ultimate and proper end of that flourishing. Understood in the light of the possibilities of human aspiration and moral development, the knowledge that a beautiful beloved is simply that—a single, qualified beauty—provides no necessary reason not to continue to love that individual. It does, however, offer a reason to reconsider whether there is more to love than can be satisfied by relationships with human individuals alone.

I argue that these three problems with the theory of erotic love presented in the *Symposium*—the problem of possession, shifting objects of love, and the exclusivist's critique—stem from an incorrect reading of the object of love as being beauty or goodness. In particular, what this account

gets wrong in holding abstract qualities as the object of love is that it makes erotic love, at best, a passive and ascetic contemplation. If love is meant to be passive, it is difficult to see how one bridges the gap between *contemplation* of virtue, and the personal *attainment* of virtue. In what follows, I present an alternative account of the object of erotic love: that the object of love is the active creation of new virtue in the soul of the lover.

3 The Maker Account of Love

In this section, I present a reading of Socrates's speech that avoids the problems diagnosed of the received view, and builds a positive account of erotic love in moral development. I argue that love in relation to the beautiful motivates human action, resulting in the lover actively cultivating and bringing into being new beauty in the world, and in herself.

The importance that Plato attributes to the emotion of erotic love for moral development can be identified in Socrates's description of the activity and purpose of the dæmon class to which Erôs belongs. He writes:

> For Erôs is in the middle of both gods and men and fills up the interval so that the whole cosmos itself has been bound together by it. For a god does not mingle with a human being; but through Erôs occurs the whole connection and conversation of gods with men. (202e–203a)

How can love bind together such different realms, the human and the divine? As I interpret Plato, love does this by having as its object not knowledge or passive contemplation, but the *creation of beauty and virtue*. Love quickens the curiosity we have about the beautiful individuals and artforms and ideas we encounter in the world, which inspire us and move us to come to know them better, and to learn about what beauty itself really is. Understood in this way, love is an active engagement with the world that mediates the development of virtue. The maker account of love is built upon two claims found in Socrates speech: first, that love is oriented to knowledge; and second, that love's object is moral self-creation. I discuss these claims in turn.

3.1 Claim One: Erotic Love is Oriented to Knowledge

Constitutive to erotic love is a belief about the beloved that one's life would be better if that beloved were a part of it. Stendhal's famous maxim that beauty is "the promise of happiness" could well be said to be true of the sort of beauty Plato has in mind in the *Symposium* (1857, 34 n. 1). The beauty one experiences in the world constantly beckons her forward to get to know it more intimately. It is sometimes difficult to tell, however, in what way an attachment to the object will impact her. The lover is therefore led to study and come to know the object, so as to learn whether

time spent with it will leave her better or worse. Plato here presents an explanatory bond between all beautiful things in the world and their role in the philosophic life. As one becomes attracted to a beautiful particular, and pursues it with natural curiosity to learn more about it—where does it come from? why does it work the way it does? what makes it different to others of its kind?—she will find herself pursuing other beautiful particulars in ever-expanding circles of beauty. This kind of experience is captured in Proust's description of his Narrator's encounter of Albertine:

> If we thought that the eyes of such a girl were merely two glittering sequins of mica, we should not be athirst to know her and to unite her life to ours. But we sense that what shines in those reflecting discs is not due solely to their material composition; that it is the dark shadows, unknown to us, of the ideas that that person cherishes about the people and places she knows—the turf of race-courses, the sand of cycling tracks over which, pedaling on past fields and woods, she would have drawn me after her . . . and above all that it is she, with her desires, her sympathies, her revulsions, her obscure and incessant will. I knew that I should never possess this young cyclist if I did not possess also what was in her eyes. (1981, 1:851–852)

Beckoned forward by beauty to come to know about one part of the world, the lover will find she must learn about another, its context, its language, its history, and other similar beauties. This is the account of love we find in the ascent passage of Socrates's speech (209e–212a). In this passage, the lover is depicted as being led from one beauty by a desire to know more about it, to come to see the beauty in other related works, and in the culture and laws and sciences that allow such beauty to flourish, and finally to glimpse that absolute beauty that is the source of all beauty experienced in the world: the beholding of which turns out to be that life "most worth living" (211d).

Yet the lover's interest in what is beautiful does not stop there—with a solely cognitive achievement. Instead, in coming to behold the beautiful as closely as she can, the lover is led to create beauty, both in herself and in the wider world: in the form of speeches, poems, political change, philosophic ideas, and even the virtue of beauty in the soul. Whilst love leads the lover to come to know and experience greater and wider realms of beauty in the world, the activity of love is further constituted by the *creation* of beauty.

3.2 Claim Two: Love's Object Is Moral Self-Creation

In contrast to the passive account of love reviewed in section one, I argue that love's object is the creative activity of "bringing to birth in beauty"—to translate precisely the Platonic text. Plato writes at line 206e that the object

of love is decidedly not *beauty*, but rather the creative process of *generating* beauty, both in the individual and in the wider world.[9] Upon experiencing beauty, the lover is led to make herself more like that beauty. In so doing, she brings into being further beauty by generating the virtue of beauty. Thus, love is not purely relational, as emotional intentionality is standardly analysed, but *teleological*—seeking its end. Erotic love taken seriously can be seen to be an instrument of creation. Plato identifies in the human soul a *self-generation principle*: a compass of self-design, externally triggered by beauty. Crucially, however, instead of turning to point toward beauty, the compass turns to point to itself, to design and craft itself. Time spent in pursuit of beauty provides a way for the lover to become beautiful: shaped by the course of her life. Plato thus establishes that the lover will have an inwardly-directed motivation to find ways to achieve this end.

At this point, we may ask whether the cognitive nature of love Plato has in mind here is strong enough to ground such generative activity. I argue that as love regarding the beautiful has led to knowledge, so does knowing about the beautiful lead to assimilation. In the *Symposium*, cognition and contemplation of the beautiful lead to association and assimilation, and hence to being able to produce beauty on earth. This account finds comparison and support in the *Republic*, where training in dialectic leads the young philosopher-kings to become morally virtuous and hence to being able to lead well and produce a good city.

In the course of his educational exposition in Book VII of the *Republic*, Socrates reveals how an understanding of the truth is more than a displacement of ignorance for knowledge, but is intimately tied to bringing about a moral change in the student. The study of dialectic enables one "to attain to each thing itself that *is* . . . [to] grasp the reason for the being of each thing" (532a, 534b), with the result that one will be able to separate decisively the Form of absolute goodness from the many particular instances of goodness that bear a relation to it. Thus grounded in the truth, the philosophers will be in the best position to produce good things—in themselves and in the city. Socrates asserts, "Once they see the good itself, they must be compelled, each in his own turn, to use it as a pattern for ordering the city, private men, and themselves for the rest of their lives" (540a–b). These ruling men are pronounced thoroughly beautiful (540c), and can become "authors of the greatest good" by bringing into being the "well-governed city" (495c; cf. 499b, 520d, 521a).

The method by which the philosopher-king shapes and creates the beautiful city and beautiful citizens (including himself) is described by Socrates as that of the inspired artist:

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[9] Diotima, the Mantenian priestess who, by Socrates's own admission, taught him everything he knows about love, corrects him on exactly this point: "For you are wrong, Socrates, in supposing that love is of the beautiful. . . . It is of engendering and bringing to birth in beauty" (*Symposium*, 206e).

> I suppose that in filling out their work they would look away frequently in both directions, towards the just, beautiful, and moderate by nature and everything of the sort, and again, towards what is in human beings; and thus, mixing and blending the practices as ingredients . . . taking hints from exactly the phenomenon in human beings which Homer too called god-like and the image of god. . . . And I suppose they would rub out one thing and draw in another again, until they made human dispositions as dear to the gods as they admit of being. (501b)

A similar picture of this generative account of virtue formation can be found in Plato's *Timaeus*,[10] in which Socrates asserts:

> Now everything that becomes or is created must of necessity be created by some cause, for without a cause nothing can be created. The work of the maker, whenever he looks to the unchangeable and fashions the form and nature of his work after an unchangeable pattern, must necessarily be made beautiful and virtuous. (28a–b)

The various paths through life on which one is led by erotic engagement with beauty provide a way for the philosopher to become like that beauty, through assimilation. Socrates concludes, "Then it is the philosopher, keeping company with the divine and the orderly who himself becomes orderly and divine, in the measure permitted to man" (*Republic*, 500c–d). What we have here is an account according to which considering the Form, and comparing it to what is in ourselves, compels one to change and mold the self in the attempt to make what is only qualifiedly virtuous more like the unqualifiedly virtuous. There is good in the philosopher-lover, because of her knowledge of and assimilation with the Form, and as a result of this togetherness, she is the best able to produce good things in the city and in the individual citizen. The object of love is therefore its greatest virtue: impelling the lover to shape herself in the image of virtue, and thereby bringing about new virtue in the soul.

4 Virtues of the Maker Account of Love

In this section, I show why the maker account of love is a valid and valuable lens through which to examine the complex relationship between virtue and the emotions.

The first contribution of the account of love identified in the *Symposium* is that it tells a specific narrative about the precise mechanism by which emotions can lead to generating virtue in the soul. A significant aim of the virtue tradition concerns questions of how one should live, and the answers

[10] All references to *Timaeus* are to Plato 1925.

are clear and familiar: justly, wisely, and courageously. But we run into a problem of bridging the gap between these abstract ideals and the temporal particulars of the individual soul. The maker account of erotic love offers an answer in the form of a narrative regarding the production of those virtues: we are led by love, and inspired to pursue beauty with a curiosity that can shape the course of a life. This narrative of character-formation can further inform instruction in virtue and the possibility of educating the emotions.[11] Viewed from this perspective, emotions can become intelligent parts of one's moral character, which can be cultivated through moral education.

Second, an account of love that understands character development as an active and meaningful engagement with one's external world—as being shaped by contact with others—provides a uniquely powerful outlook on the problem of social isolation. The problem is this: there is a widespread loneliness epidemic among young adults and older people alike (Victor and Bowling 2012; Griffin 2010).[12] Cross-disciplinary research has demonstrated that social isolation and loneliness are serious lethal health risk factors, on a par with heavy smoking, obesity, and hypertension, and contribute considerably to premature death, even independently of other physical, psychological, or behavioral factors (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2010; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008; Barth et al. 2010). When this isolation is coupled with an ideological shift that champions competition, rankings, individualism, and the so-called virtue of 'going it alone,' an important part of what makes us human—our connectedness—is extirpated, root and branch. Two tenets of the account of love defended in this paper go some way to clarifying thinking on this issue. First, not simply attaining virtue but actively practicing and creating that virtue is built into the theory of human nature this account of love espouses. It therefore contends with traditional virtue theory in showing that virtues should not be recognized solely as traits. Second, the focus on love, dialogue, and joint creation makes it a distinctly social theory of virtue formation. The aim of erotic love is to bring a single person to widen her gaze, examine her world and her place within that world, and mold herself in terms of the value she experiences with others. Further, as part of the lover's erotic education, she builds an understanding of the social and political environments conducive to human flourishing and so can work to facilitate the creation of such environments (see *Symposium*, 209d, 210c). These distinguishing features of the maker account demonstrate how erotic love offers a way out of the

[11] I explore the maker account of love in a specifically educational context in Ware 2014, 57–73.

[12] Various forms of social isolation, and their relation to the experience of loneliness, have been identified in the literature (on which, see, e.g., York Cornwell and Waite 2009; Nicholson 2012; and Steptoe et al. 2013), but I do not go into these differences here.

modern malaise, by becoming a powerful ally in breaking down barriers to building a community of virtue.[13]

Third, this account anticipates a compelling view in cognitive science regarding emotion-as-information, or what Schwarz and Clore term "affect as information" (Schwarz 1990; Schwarz and Clore 1983). According to this theory, which I can only sketch here in outline, internal emotional experiences supply individuals with information about their external environment. The fear elicited by a snake, for example, signals potential danger. This information can be harnessed in creative ways as it influences the individual's evaluations, decisions, concerns, and further courses of action. What the Platonic maker account of love offers, then, is a framework for emotion's power in tracking moral value. The degree that the lover is led to pursue cognitively and actively the beauty she experiences in the world functions as a marker of potential value: the value to the individual's personal development, as well as to her society. One application of where the emotion-as-information theory is gaining increased attention is in the emerging subfield of law and emotion.[14] Understanding emotions as sources of information about the external world may provide insight into how a jury appraises evidence, testimony, or even the defendant's conduct in court. Now, whether the appraisal is legally relevant or useful remains a separate question. On this point, it is important to remember that just as a harmless garden snake can elicit the emotion of genuine fear, so too could attraction to an object be met or pursued with an inappropriate emotional response. There is thus an element of risk involved in the type of love to which Socrates exhorts his fellow symposiasts, but we may locate in the Platonic theory a solution. Erotic love in the *Symposium* is from the beginning a social act. Even the lover of beautiful bodies is compelled to engage in dialogue with the beloved, and this focus on the production of speeches and reasoning is never abandoned.[15] All experience with a beloved beauty is therefore worth questioning with respect to *what it is* that attracts and thus what it is that makes it beautiful. To this extent, all beauty in the world offers something of value to the lover—however dimly it reflects the Form's light.

5 Conclusion

This paper has introduced an account of erotic love and its role in the development of virtue. By demonstrating that the object of love in Plato's

[13] Indeed, as Socrates asserts at the end of his speech: "I am convinced, and try to persuade others, that for this achievement one could not easily get a better co-worker with human nature than Erôs" (*Symposium*, 212b).

[14] For an overview of this vibrant and interdisciplinary area of study, see Maroney 2006.

[15] Even in beholding the Form of beauty does Socrates say the lover will both generate opinions about it and the previous beautiful particulars (211d), and engage in the value judgment of cherishing that beauty (212a).

Symposium is not a passive contemplation of beauty, but the active creation of new beauty, I have articulated a positive role for emotion in Plato's virtue ethics. This account of love adds to the richness of existing virtue-ethical approaches to understanding the intricate relationship between virtue and emotions. In particular, it offers distinct benefits that contribute to the way we think about the attainment and practice of virtue in a social world.

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