The Evolution of Love: The Concept of True Beauty in Plato’s Symposium and Phaedrus

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The Evolution of Love: The Concept of True Beauty in Plato’s
Symposium and Phaedrus

SUBMITTED TO
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BY
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Love, a concept revered across cultures and time, holds multifaceted meanings and roles in human experience. Plato, in his dialogues *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, offers profound insights into the nature of love. However, Plato’s conception of love has been subject to criticism, with many viewing it as selfish, objectifying, and lacking in interpersonal connections. Central to these criticisms is the question of whether the lover’s affection for the beloved persists after grasping the concept of true beauty. In this thesis, I delve into Plato’s idea of love as presented in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, aiming to demonstrate that Platonic love transcends mere self-interest, encompasses interpersonal love, and the lover’s love for the beloved endures even after grasping the true form of beauty.
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Introduction

Love, in many forms, has been a subject of fascination and inquiry for millennia, captivating the minds of philosophers, poets, and scholars. In the works of Plato, particularly in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, love emerges as one of the central themes. In these works, Plato explores the nature of love, desire, and beauty through the lens of Socratic dialogues, presenting nuanced explorations of the complexities inherent in human relationships.

One intriguing question that arises from Plato’s dialogues is whether the lover still loves the beloved after grasping the concept of true beauty. This question emerges from the dialectical exchanges between characters, particularly in the speeches delivered during the banquet in the *Symposium* and the philosophical discourse in *Phaedrus*. In this thesis, I will lay the groundwork for a deeper exploration of the question at hand by examining Diotima’s ladder of love in the *Symposium* and Socrates’ second speech in *Phaedrus*.

This question holds significant importance on multiple fronts. Firstly, it delves into the fundamental nature of love and desire, providing insights into the dynamics, the significance of these emotions in human experience and the evolution of love throughout the lover’s journey. Secondly, it engages with broader philosophical inquiries concerning the relationship between the physical and metaphysical realms and how love could be seen as a vehicle for humans to reach reality. Furthermore, this question touches upon themes that are central to human flourishing, offering insights into how love shapes one’s emotional well-being, personal growth, and meaningful relationships. Additionally, within the context of Plato’s dialogues, this question contributes to ongoing debates within the Platonic tradition and enriches our understanding of the dialogues’ enduring relevance and significance. Lastly, the question prompts individuals to
engage in personal reflection, fostering self-awareness and understanding of the complexities of their own emotional lives.

It is essential to confront the potential tension between the lover’s pursuit of the ultimate form of beauty and their affection for the beloved. While Plato portrays love as a transformative force guiding individuals towards the contemplation of higher truths and virtues, there exists prima facie evidence suggesting that the lover may cease to love the beloved after grasping the true form of beauty. This challenge to Plato’s idea of love raises significant questions about the nature of Platonic love. Is it merely a selfish pursuit for personal gain? Does it objectify the beloved? Or is it truly a form of interpersonal love, or perhaps merely the lover’s adoration of the form of beauty itself? Therefore, addressing the question of whether the lover will continue to love the beloved is crucial to unraveling these complexities of Plato’s conception of love.

The objective of this thesis consists of three components. In the first section, I aim to provide a thorough overview of Plato’s Symposium and Phaedrus situating these dialogues within their historical context and elucidating their central themes. By examining these characters, settings, and philosophical ideas presented in each dialogue, I will lay the groundwork for a deeper exploration of the question at hand.

In the second part, I will present and defend my interpretation argument regarding the lover’s affection in light of the concept of true beauty. Drawing upon Plato’s dialogues and engaging with the interpretations of other scholars, I will argue that while the lover’s understanding of beauty may transform, their love for the beloved persists in a more enlightened and transcendent form. Through a careful analysis of key passages and philosophical concepts, I will elucidate the complexities of love and desire as portrayed in the two works, focusing on how
the transformation and evolution of love while offering insights into the nature of the human soul and its pursuit of the Good and the Beautiful.

Next, I will engage with alternative interpretations put forth by scholars who have grappled with this question in the past, critically evaluate their arguments and enrich the dialogue surrounding this enduring philosophical inquiry. By considering a range of perspectives, I aim to offer a nuanced understanding of Plato’s works and their implications for our understanding of love, desire, and beauty.

Overall, this thesis seeks to explore the intricate interplay between love, desire, and philosophical understanding in Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. By delving into the nuances of these dialogues and engaging with the interpretations of other scholars, I hope to shed light on the evolution of love throughout one’s journey as they are pursuing truth and beauty.
I. Overview of works

Before it is possible to grapple with the question at hand, it is necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of the arguments Plato makes in the Symposium and Phaedrus. I will start with Diotima’s speech in the Symposium and move on to Socrates’ second speech in Phaedrus.

In the Symposium, Plato delves deeply into the complexities of love, desire, and beauty through a series of speeches delivered by various characters during a dinner party. Each speech offers a unique perspective on the fundamental aspects of human experience, but it is Diotima’s speech that stands out as particularly profound and influential.

Diotima’s teachings are presented within the framework of Socrates’ dialogue with his interlocutors, demonstrating the Socratic method of inquiry and dialectical reasoning. As a result, many scholars argue that Diotima’s speech encapsulates Plato’s own ideas (Nussbaum 1986, 176). Therefore, I will focus mainly on Diotima’s speech.

Through Diotima’s speech, we see that she defines erōs not simply as the desire which drives individuals towards the pursuit of “permanent possession of what is good” that is achieved through the “procreation of beauty” (Plato & Rowe 1998, 206a10-e5). She argues that as humans are mortal beings, their desire for immortality manifests itself through love. By seeking to possess and perpetuate the good, individuals aspire towards a form of eternal existence that transcends the limitations of the material world. Some humans seek to perpetuate themselves

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1 In Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series [Vol. 111 (2011). pp. 251-273] Frisbee Sheffield suggests that the aim of erōs is actually happiness (Sheffield 2011, 252) as “happiness resides in the contemplation of Beauty” as Diotima says “life is worth living for a human being, in contemplation of beauty itself” (Plato & Rowe 1998, 211d3). However, I think though the contemplation of beauty may indeed lead to a sense of fulfillment and joy, I contend that the essence of erōs, is still that grasping true beauty would lead one to immortality (Plato & Rowe 1998, 212a5-7). This understanding of erōs emphasizes its transformative nature and its role in shaping the human soul, ultimately transcending the pursuit of happiness alone.
through the creation of both physical and intellectual offspring, by procreating and passing on their genes or ideas, individuals are able to achieve a form of immortality through their descendants or the enduring legacy of their contributions to society.

Diotima’s definition of love is closely tied to her ladder of love, in which she describes love as a process of ascent, outlining the stages of the lover’s journey towards the contemplation of true beauty. Starting from the love of a boy’s physical beauty and in the end, progressing to the love of wisdom and virtue. As individuals progress through the ladder, their understanding of love and beauty deepens, leading them towards a higher appreciation of the eternal and immutable principles of truth, goodness, and beauty.

At the bottom of the ladder lies the love of physical beauty, where the lover is initially drawn to the external attributes of another (Plato & Rowe 1998, 210a5). During this initial process, the lover realizes that there is beauty in all bodies and becomes a lover of all beautiful bodies, relaxing their love for the one particular body while considering their love for this individual’s body a “slight thing” (Plato & Rowe 1998, 210b5). As the lover ascends, they transition to an appreciation of the individual’s soul. During this transition, the lover begins to recognize that physical beauty alone is insufficient to sustain true and lasting love. Instead, they come to appreciate the inner qualities, virtues, and character of the beloved individuals (Plato & Rowe 1998, 210c1). Diotima emphasizes that the love of the soul is a higher form of love than

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2 In the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* [48:4 October 2010] Suzanne Obdrzalek writes that this isn’t actually immortality but an approximation of the closest we can get. But I believe there is more to Diotima’s perspective on immortality than simply seeking an approximation (Obdrzalek 2010, 420-428). While it’s true that humans may never achieve literal immortality in the sense of eternal physical existence, Diotima’s concept of immortality extends beyond the mere longevity of life. I think it is logical to think of the true immortality she is suggesting here as being attained through the perpetuation of one’s essence, virtues, and contributions. In this sense, the pursuit of immortality would be about leaving a lasting impact on the world and achieving a sense of continuity that transcends the limitations of mortal existence. By striving for intellectual, moral, and spiritual excellence, individuals can attain a form of immortality. Therefore, though the quest for immortality may indeed be an approximation of the closest one can get, Diotima’s conception of immortality offers a profound understanding of human aspiration and enduring the legacy of the human spirit.
the love of the body, as it reflects a deeper connection. As the lover continues to ascend the ladder, their focus shifts from individual souls to a broader appreciation of laws, customs, and institutions (Plato & Rowe 1998, 210c5). This stage reflects an intellectual and societal understanding of love, where the love. As the lover progresses further up this ladder, they move beyond societal structures to engage in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. This stage reflects a profound intellectual transformation, as the lover seeks to uncover the underlying principles that govern existence and the nature of reality itself. Finally, at the last stage of Diotima’s ladder, lies the contemplation of true beauty itself where they are able to “catch sight of the uniformity of divine beauty itself” (Plato & Rowe 1998, 211b8).

The final stage in this ladder represents the culmination of the lover’s journey, where they transcend individual desires and attachments to attain a higher understanding of beauty as an eternal and immutable principle. At this pinnacle, the lover experiences a profound sense of unity with the divine and a deep appreciation for the harmony and order inherent in the universe (Plato & Rowe 1998, 210e5-211d5).

Through Diotima’s ladder of love, Plato invites readers to contemplate the transformative power of love and its ability to elevate the human soul towards higher states of consciousness and understanding. This progression outlined in Diotima’s speech underscores the notion that love is not just an emotion or a passing desire, but a guiding force that can shape human existence and lead individuals towards the highest ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty. This exploration of love and beauty resonates deeply with Phaedrus, where Socrates and Phaedrus engage in a dialogue about the nature of love, rhetoric, and the pursuit of wisdom.

Phaedrus begins with Phaedrus urging Socrates to join him in listening to a speech by Lysias who’s a renowned orator and will not leave Socrates alone unless he listens to the speech.
Lysias’ speech praises the benefits of accepting a non-love rather than a lover for a young boy as the non-lover’s motivations are more rational and self-interested compared to the lover. He argues that the non-lover’s pursuit of the young boy is purely driven by their desire for pleasure rather than genuine affection or commitment (Plato & Rowe 2000, 232a5-8). Therefore, the non-lover is less likely to become possessive or demanding in the relationship as their main goal is to satisfy desires rather than build deeper emotional connections. Furthermore, Lysias suggests that the non-lover is in a better position to offer valuable benefits to the young boy, such as education, guidance, or material support, without being encumbered by the emotional entanglements and obligations that accompany romantic love (Plato & Rowe 2000, 234a3-4). He portrays the non-lover as a rational and pragmatic choice for the young boy, offering stability and practical advantages without the emotional complexities and potential pitfalls associated with romantic relationships.

Socrates listens and follows with his first speech agreeing with everything Lysias suggested. However, after this speech, he feels a sense of unease as he has made an impious speech offending the gods and decides to “render his palinode to love,” and begins his second speech (Plato & Rowe 2000, 243b5).

He begins by praising madness, suggesting that madness can be a positive and transformative force, leading individuals to higher levels of insight and understanding. He introduces the concept of divine madness by attributing its origins to the gods. He explains that certain gods, such as Eros, Dionysus, and the Muses, are responsible for inspiring divine

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3 The relationship between the young boy and either the lover or non-lover is thought of as a purely sexual relationship between a young boy and an older man here. “Granting favors” can be understood as having sex between the two.

4 I will only be focusing on Socrates’ second speech in Phaedrus because his second speech delves deeply into the nature of love, beauty, and the soul’s ascent. From the conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus, it is also reasonable to infer that Socrates’ did not mean what he said in his first speech.
madness in humans – Eros being one of the gods here, Socrates shows that love is a kind of divine madness. According to Socrates, it is through the influence of these divine beings that individuals are granted moments of inspiration and insight that transcend ordinary human understanding.

Socrates then delves into the specific type of divine madness associated with erōs – love. He argues that erōs presents a form of divine madness that compels individuals to pursue beauty and goodness in all aspects of life (Plato & Rowe 2000, 245c1-3). He describes the human soul as being driven by a charioteer, with two horses pulling the chariot. The charioteer represents reason in one’s soul, one of these horses represents the spirit, while the other horse represents irrational desires. These two horses are often pulling in opposite directions – causing internal conflict within the soul. The charioteer must navigate this internal conflict and guide the soul towards their true destination. Souls that possess mastery over their desires, spirits, and reason are able to ascend to the heights of heaven and catch a glimpse of eternal truths. However, most souls are pulled back towards earthly concerns by their irrational desires. The individuals who can recall their souls’ previous encounters with eternal beauty strive continually towards heavenly ideals.

Socrates provides an example of the process the souls have to go through in order to reach its true destination and that is through love. When the lover first sees the beloved, his soul is “filled with tickling and pricks of longing” (Plato & Rowe 2000, 253e7). The horse representing spirit stands still, being held back by shame, while the bad horse – representing desires – immediately springs towards the beloved dragging the good horse and the charioteer with it (Plato & Rowe 2000, 254a5). When the charioteer sees the beloved’s face and beauty, he is reminded of the true beauty he had once seen in heaven and falls back, bringing both horses
with him (Plato & Rowe 2000, 254c1-3). As the one’s desire to see the beloved increases, the bad horse continues pulling them towards the beloved, and the charioteer falls again, taking both horses down with him (Plato & Rowe 2000, 254d-e). This repeats whenever the lover sees the beloved but each time the charioteer falls back more violently, hurting the bad horse more and more each time until the bad horse is so hurt that it no longer pulls towards the beloved but follows the charioteer’s lead (Plato & Rowe 2000, 254e5). Now the soul can follow the beloved without its desires pulling it.

While the lover continues following the beloved, the beloved realizes that he gains much more goodwill from the lover than in any of his other relationships and falls in love, during this process, his desires also align with his reasons with the better elements in the soul leading both the lover and the beloved towards “well-ordered and philosophical life” and ascend to heaven after their death (Plato & Rowe 2000, 255d5-256b5).
II. Interpretation Argument

To begin our exploration of whether the lover’s love for the beloved will endure, it is essential to address the argument suggesting that this love will fade after the lover grasps the true form of beauty. This perspective hinges on the assumption of an inherent incompatibility between the love of true beauty and the love for an individual. However, before delving deeper into this assertion, it is crucial to examine Plato’s conception of love, particularly by analyzing the definition of love, the aim of love, and its transformative nature. By scrutinizing these foundational aspects of Plato’s philosophy of love, we can gain insight into whether such an incompatibility truly exists within his framework, thereby laying the groundwork for a comprehensive evaluation of the lover’s enduring affection for the beloved.

Moving forward, this section will be divided into three parts, each focusing on a distinct aspect of Platonic love as portrayed in the Symposium and Phaedrus. In the first part, I will delve into the Symposium to analyze the conception of love presented therein. Following this, the second party will shift the focus to Phaedrus, where we will explore how Plato expands on his ideas of love and beauty. By examining both dialogues separately, we can discern the nuances of the lover’s journey and the philosophical implications of grasping true beauty. Finally, in the third part, I will synthesize the insights gained from both dialogues to present a comprehensive analysis of the lover’s persistent love for the beloved. By reconciling the themes and concepts explored in the Symposium and Phaedrus, we can illuminate the enduring nature of Platonic love and its implications for the relationship between the lover and the beloved.
1) The Symposium

A) Diotima’s definition of erōs

To start, I will argue that Diotima’s conception of erōs transcends a mere desire for the procreation of beauty; rather, it entails the desire for permanent possession of the good through the procreation of beauty\(^5\) (Plato & Rowe 1998, 206e5). This distinction is crucial as it elucidates the deeper philosophical significance of love within Diotima’s discourse and shows what one really desires.

This is crucial to the issue because while the “procreation of beauty” represents the process it takes for one to reach love, it does not encompass the deeper philosophical significance of love as outlined in Diotima’s speech and its moral or ethical considerations.

My argument is as follows: firstly, individuals driven by love are inherently drawn to beautiful things and aspire to possess them. This desire for possession stems from the pursuit of personal happiness, as acquiring beautiful objects may bring them temporary joy (Plato & Rowe 1998, 204d6-7). However, the lover’s aspiration extends beyond fleeting gratification; they yearn for enduring possession of the good, recognizing that true fulfillment lies in the permanent possession of what is good and beautiful (Plato & Rowe 1998, 206a9-10). Hence, love is fundamentally rooted in the desire for the everlasting possession of goodness and beauty, a journey facilitated by the procreation of beauty (Plato & Rowe 1998, 205b5). Viewing erōs through this lens provides a comprehensive perspective, allowing us to navigate the complexities of Diotima’s teachings and their implications for the lover’s relationship with the beloved.

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\(^5\) In the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* [48:4 October 2010] Suzanne Obdrzalek writes that Diotima “develops a new analysis of erōs, as the desire, not for beauty, but for birth in beauty” (Obdrzalek 2010, 418). I think this definition oversimplifies the concept of erōs. From my readings of Diotima’s speech, erōs is essentially the desire to overcome the mortal nature of being by giving birth in beauty. We do not desire procreation of beauty but simply use it as a means to achieve immortality.
The distinction between the two definitions is crucial because it clarifies the nature of the relationship between the procreation of beauty and love. By establishing that the procreation of beauty serves as a pathway to love rather than being synonymous with love itself, it reinforces the idea that love encompasses deeper philosophical implications beyond mere appreciation of beauty. This distinction highlights that the lover’s journey towards love involves more than just experiencing beauty; it involves a transformative process of understanding and pursuing what is good and beautiful. Therefore, if the procreation of beauty is not equivalent to love but rather a precursor to it, it suggests that the lover’s affection for the beloved can persist even as they ascend towards a deeper understanding of true beauty.

Moreover, the idea that love is the desire for the procreation of beauty is an alternative that needs to be ruled out because it implies a limited and transactional view of love. If erōs were solely about the desire for the procreation of beauty, it would suggest that love is primarily driven by a self-serving pursuit of aesthetic pleasure or reproduction. This perspective reduces love to a mere means to an end, devoid of deeper considerations. Arguing against this notion allows for a more nuanced understanding of love as encompassing the pursuit of what is good and beautiful in a profound and enduring manner. Thus, refuting this alternative strengthens the argument that the lover’s affection for the beloved can persist even as they grasp the true form of beauty.

Some may argue that Diotima clearly says “Love is not of the beautiful.” but it is “of procreation and giving birth in the beautiful” (Plato & Rowe 1998, 206e4). My reading of this is that this is that she is emphasizing and highlighting the process one goes through to reach love as this process is what’s truly transformative. Therefore, this does not contradict her definition of erōs.
As we can see here, Diotima’s conception of *erōs* as the desire for “permanent possession of the good/beautiful” does not imply any inherent contradiction between the lover’s appreciation of true beauty and their affection for the boy. Instead, it suggests that the lover’s love for the boy can coexist harmoniously with their pursuit of true beauty. The lover’s ability to grasp the true form of beauty enriches their understanding and appreciation of beauty as a whole, including the beauty embodied by the boy. Therefore, far from being mutually exclusive, the lover’s love for the boy and their love for true beauty are complementary facets of their affectionate nature.

**B) The aim of *erōs***

Next, let’s consider what Diotima take the aim of *erōs* to be, as it lays the groundwork for understanding the lover’s motivations and aspirations. By exploring the fundamental concept of *erōs* and its ultimate objective, we can better analyze the lover’s actions and decisions regarding their relationship with the beloved, while also providing context for their behavior.

There are many phrases in the *Symposium* pointing us in different directions. However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the overarching goal of *erōs*, according to Diotima, is to transcend the limitations of human mortality and ascend towards the divine.

In the early stages of Diotima’s speech, she provides an account of Eros the god, positioning him as the spirit existing between the realms of Gods and humans. Eros, she asserts, defies simple categorization as neither mortal nor immortal, yet possessing an insatiable thirst for wisdom, which she identifies as among one of the most beautiful aspects of existence (Plato & Rowe 1998, 203d). This characterization is pivotal as it underscores Diotima’s conceptualization of love as a conduit between humanity and the divine, offering a means for individuals to
transcend the confines of their mortal nature. Central to this notion is the idea that the attainment of immortality can only be realized through the procreation of beauty. Diotima elucidates that the act of “giving birth” is imbued with a divine essence, allowing mortal beings to partake in the eternal realm through the creation and perpetuation of beauty (Plato & Rowe 1998, 206c5-8). Thus, she posits that love, in its highest form, serves as a pathway for mortal souls to attain glimpses of immortality and divine truth.

The relation between the definition and the aim of erōs is essential to clarify as they appear to present different perspectives on the nature and purpose of love. While the definition of erōs as the desire for permanent possession of the good through the procreation of beauty emphasizes the enduring pursuit of what is good and beautiful, the aim of erōs, as posited by Diotima, suggests a broader objective of transcending human mortality and ascending towards the divine. To reconcile these seemingly separate views, it is crucial to recognize that they are complementary. The definition of erōs elucidates the inherent desire for love, while the aim underscores what one could achieve through love. The pursuit of the eternal possession of the good serves as a pathway towards the attainment of immortality and divine truth, aligning with Diotima’s conception of erōs as a transformative force guiding individuals towards virtue. Therefore, while the specific manifestations of erōs may vary, they ultimately converge towards a common goal of transcending mortal limitations.

The aim of love also aligns with the notion that the lover’s affection for the boy can persist even after grasping the true form of beauty. Diotima posits that the ultimate goal of erōs is to transcend the limitations of human mortality and ascend towards the divine, implying that the lover’s pursuit of the beloved is driven by a deeper yearning for transcendence and spiritual enlightenment. Far from negating the lover’s love for the boy, this aim enhances it, infusing their
affection with a higher purpose and imbuing their relationship with profound significance. At the lower rungs of the ladder, the lover’s appreciation of beauty may indeed be limited to superficial qualities or physical appearances. However, as they progress towards higher levels of understanding, they begin to grasp the true essence of beauty beyond individual manifestations. When the lover grasps the form of love, they are beholding beauty in its pure and unchanging form, implying that the lover’s perception of the beloved’s beauty transcends mere physical attractiveness. They would come to appreciate the beloved’s participation in the universal form of beauty, recognizing their intrinsic worth and essence. Therefore, the lover’s love for the boy can endure alongside their quest for spiritual fulfillment, with each enriching the other in a harmonious synthesis of earthly and divine love.

C) One’s transformations after grasping the true form of beauty

Now that we have established both the definition and the aim of erōs, the last question is to explore the transformation that occurs within the lover after they have grasped the true form of beauty. By delving into the changes that take place within the lover, we can gain insight into their motivations, priorities, and perceptions, shedding light on whether they will continue to love the beloved after attaining this profound realization.

From Diotima’s speech, it is clear that the lover is now able to see beauty existing beyond the realm of the material world. This transformative realization signifies a shift in the lover’s perception and understanding of beauty and its eternal and immutable principles. Diotima describes true beauty as:

“Being always itself by itself, in its own company, uniform, with all the other beautiful things sharing in it in such a way that when they come to be and perish, it does not in the slightest degree become either greater or less, nor is it affected in the slightest.” (Plato & Rowe 1998, 211b1-5)
Breaking this down, Diotima is essentially saying that true beauty exists independently of the material world, remaining constant and unchanging amidst the transient nature of existence. Moreover, everything beautiful derives its beauty from its participation in the form of beauty itself. This perspective underscores the idea that beauty is not merely subjective or contingent upon individual perceptions, but rather an inherent quality that permeates all things. Therefore, the lover’s newfound ability to perceive beauty beyond the material realm signifies a profound transformation in their understanding and appreciation of the eternal principles underlying beauty.

Therefore, through grasping the true form of beauty, the lover now has an expanded understanding of beauty and instead of seeing beautiful things, the lover now sees things take part in the form of beauty. This distinction highlights a fundamental shift in the lover’s perception. Before this, the lover’s understanding of beauty may have been limited to merely recognizing beautiful objects or individuals, but upon grasping the true form of beauty, the lover now perceives beauty as an abstract and universal concept that permeates all existence. In other words, they come to understand that beauty is not confined to individual objects or beings but is an inherent quality that transcends physical appearances.

We can see that when considering the transformations that occur within the lover upon grasping the true form of beauty, it becomes evident that these changes do not necessitate the abandonment of the beloved. Diotima’s description of true beauty as immutable and eternal underscores the profound shift in the lover’s perception and understanding of beauty. While the lover gains a deeper appreciation for the eternal principles underlying beauty, this newfound understanding does not diminish their affection for the boy. Instead, it enhances it, allowing the lover to see the boy’s participation in the form of beauty more clearly. As the lover ascends the
ladder of love and attains a higher level of philosophical insight, their love for the beloved evolves and becomes more profound and transcendent. Therefore, far from extinguishing their love, the grasping of true beauty only serves to deepen and enrich the lover’s affection for the beloved, imbuing it with a newfound spiritual dimension.

2) Phaedrus

In the second part of this section, I will be turning to Phaedrus, where Plato also explores the nature and purpose of love. This text offers additional insights into the complexities of erōs and by examining the arguments presented in Phaedrus, we can further elucidate Plato’s conception of love and its implications for the lover’s relationship with the beloved.

A) Socrates’ Definition of erōs

While “philia” and “erōs” are both used in Phaedrus, I will be using the term “love” to encompass both of them, as “‘Love’ is the only English word that is robust and versatile enough to cover philia and erōs.” (Vlastos 1981, 4)

In Phaedrus, love is presented as a kind of divine madness that inspires and motivates individuals to seek eternal beauty through the reminders of beauty on earth. This is evident in Socrates’ second speech when the charioteer is reminded of the true beauty he had glimpsed before. This metaphorical charioteer represents the soul, which is driven by love to seek and reunite with the divine and eternal forms of beauty that it once beheld in the realms of the forms. The earthly experiences of beauty serve as reminders or reflections of this higher beauty, prompting the soul to yearn for its lost connection with the divine.

Plato’s depiction of love as a divine madness that drives individuals to seek eternal beauty provides a framework for interpreting the lover’s affection for the beloved within a
broader context. Similar to the *Symposium*, this definition of love also does not imply any contradiction between the lover’s appreciation of true beauty and their affection for the boy. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of earthly reminders of beauty in the lover’s quest for higher truths. Just as the charioteer is spurred on by his longing for the divine, the lover’s affection for the beloved is driven by a similar desire to experience the transcendent beauty that lies beyond the material world.

**B) The aim of erōs**

The aim of love in *Phaedrus* revolves around the journey of the soul from its earthly existence back to its divine origins. In Socrates’ second speech, he suggests that human souls, having fallen to earth due to a lack of nourishment by true beauty, use love as a means to recognize the semblance of beauty in the world and to be reminded of the true beauty they once beheld before their descent. This process of recognizing and being drawn towards beauty triggers internal conflicts within the lover’s soul, particularly between their desires and reason.

These internal conflicts present the soul with an opportunity for growth and development, as it learns to train and control its desires, leading individuals to embrace the philosophical life, where they engage in intellectual pursuits and moral reflection. The aim of love, then, is to guide the soul back to its divine origins by living a philosophical life.

Living a philosophical life entails more than just intellectual pursuits, it involves ethical and moral developments as well. Individuals must align their actions and desires with the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. As Plato describes the bad horse – representing desires, “now humbled it allows the charioteer with his foresight to lead.” This is when the bad horse and the
good horse both align with the charioteer’s lead and through the mastery of this alignment, the soul can ascend towards the heavens (Plato & Rowe 2000, 254e8).

In essence, the aim of love in Phaedrus is to lead individuals on a transformative journey of enlightenment, ultimately guiding them back to their divine origins by living a life dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom and philosophy.

In section 2A, the emphasis of love is placed on its divine madness that drives individuals to seek eternal beauty. This reflects the passionate and transformative nature of love, where individuals are inspired by the pursuit of eternal truths and beauty beyond the material world. In section 2B, the aim of love is defined as guiding individuals on a transformative journey of enlightenment through the pursuit of wisdom and philosophy, emphasizing the practical implications of love in shaping individuals’ lives and behaviors, leading them to live virtuously and align their actions with the pursuit of truth and goodness. Ultimately, both contribute to a comprehensive understanding of Plato’s conception of love in Phaedrus. While the language and emphasis may vary, they ultimately converge on the idea that love serves as a catalyst for personal growth and spiritual enlightenment, whether through seeking eternal beauty or living a life dedicated to wisdom and philosophy.

Given this framework, we can see that this conception of love also does not suggest any inherent contradictions between the lover’s appreciation of true beauty and their affection for the boy. Instead, it underscores the significance of earthly manifestations of beauty in the lover’s quest for higher truths.

C) One’s transformations after grasping the true form of beauty

In Socrates’ discourse in Phaedrus, the lover’s journey is depicted as an ascent towards the true form of beauty, yet the text does not explicitly state whether the lover ultimately
achieves this realization in their lifetime. However, upon a closer examination of Socrates’
teachings, it becomes plausible to infer that the lover does indeed attain the true form of beauty
while alive. This inference stems from the notion that the soul only sprouts wings when it grasps
true knowledge and as Socrates asserts, “when they die, they become winged and light…” (Plato
& Rowe 2000, 256b4), implying that the lover attains enlightenment during their earthly
existence. Furthermore, this interpretation also suggests that the beloved, too, shares in the
attainment of true beauty. This aspect will be explored further in the subsequent section,
shedding light on the mutual pursuit of enlightenment between the lover and the beloved.

Now that we’ve established the lover’s relations with the form of beauty, it is important
that we analyze the transformations which occur within the individual. The lover gains full
control over their irrational desires. As a result, they’re able to live a rational and virtuous life
that is characterized by blessedness and harmony. They attain mastery over themselves,
cultivating inner discipline and orderliness in their behavior. Upon death, the lover’s soul can
ascend to the higher realms.

While the lover gains control over their desires, this newfound mastery does not
contradict their continued affection for the beloved. Rather than eradicating irrational desires
entirely, this control simply directs them towards proper use. As articulated by Socrates, “….now
the soul of the lover follows the beloved in reverence and awe” (Plato & Rowe 2000, 254e10-
255a1), indicating that the soul remains closely connected to the beloved. In Socrates’ allegory
of the soul, the two horses represent the primary driving forces, with the charioteer tasked with
guiding them. Despite gaining control over the unruly horse, it remains a significant force. This
suggests that the lover’s desires persist, albeit now aligned with reason. Therefore, the lover’s
affection for the beloved endures, guided by a newfound harmony between desire and rationality.
In conclusion, though it may seem like one’s mastery over their desires can contradict the notion of their continual love for the beloved, a deeper examination reveals otherwise. As explored through the philosophical teachings in *Phaedrus*, the lover’s journey towards enlightenment entails gaining control over irrational desires while maintaining an enduring affection for the beloved. This transformation does not signify the abandonment of love but rather a refinement of it, guided by reason and virtue. The lover is now able to live a more rational and virtuous life that is marked by harmony and inner discipline while deepening their love for the beloved as their desires are now aligned with a higher purpose.

3) **Lover’s continuous love for their beloved in both *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium***

Having examined both Diotima’s and Socrates’ theory of *erōs*, including their implications for the lovers’ perception of beauty, the aim of love, and the transformative nature of grasping true beauty, it becomes clear that these elements do not preclude the possibility of the lover maintaining their affection for the beloved and that the lover’s appreciation of true beauty can coexist with their affection for the beloved. With this understanding in mind, I argue that the lover will continue to love the beloved even after grasping the true form of beauty.

The idea that once the lover grasps true beauty, they will no longer love the beloved is based on a key assumption that there is an incompatibility between the appreciation of true beauty and the love for the boy. It assumes that once the lover sees beauty in its true form, they can’t love the boy anymore. This assumption fails to consider the possibility that the lover’s appreciation of true beauty can coexist harmoniously with their affection for the beloved. Instead of viewing the two as mutually exclusive, it is more plausible to see them as complementary aspects of the lover’s emotional and philosophical development. Both Diotima’s speech and Socrates’
speech do not provide sufficient evidence to support this assumption. Therefore, it is essential to reevaluate this and consider the nuanced interplay between the lover’s perception of beauty and their affectionate attachment to the beloved. Using an example to demonstrate this false dichotomy here is that just because one wants to strive for justice in one particular case of injustice doesn’t mean that they have lost sense of the form of justice itself and vice versa.

Starting with the *Symposium*, if the lover was initially captivated by the physical beauty of the boy and loved the boy for this, the boy must be beautiful. According to Diotima’s framework, if the boy was loved in the beginning for his beauty, he must embody the true essence of beauty to elicit such admiration. Therefore, even as the lover progresses through the stages of love and gains a deeper understanding of beauty, the inherent beauty of the boy remains unchanged, serving as a foundational element of their affection. Furthermore, Diotima’s concept of *erōs* as the desire for the permanent possession of good and beautiful things implies that the lover’s love for the boy, being rooted in his beauty, persists throughout their journey of philosophical enlightenment. Thus, the lover’s evolving understanding of beauty only serves to enhance and enrich their love for the boy, reinforcing the enduring nature of their affection.

Similarly, in *Phaedrus*, the lover’s continued devotion to the beloved is evident even after gaining control over their desires. It is noteworthy that the beloved also grasps the true form of beauty and gains mastery over their desires while in the company of the lover. This mutual journey towards enlightenment reinforces the notion that the lover’s love for the beloved endures, transcending mere physical attraction and evolving into a profound connection grounded in the pursuit of truth and beauty. As I have mentioned before, Socrates never talks about the eradication of desire as a driving force of the soul but that the lover’s desires are not
able to move in the right direction – hence the lover will be able to love the beloved in the right way.

Moreover, even though Diotima suggests that upon reaching the pinnacle of the ladder of love and beholding the pure essence of beauty, one would perceive all previous stages as insignificant in comparison, this does not suggest their love for the previous stages is gone (Plato & Rowe 1998, 210a-e).

This passage often leads scholars and readers to interpret that the lover would no longer cherish their prior objects of affection, implying that they would cease to love the boy once they grasp the true form of beauty. However, upon closer examination of the text, it becomes apparent that the lover’s sense of “despise” is directed not towards the beloved themselves, but rather towards the manner in which they loved at the earlier stages. In the Symposium 210b5, Diotima describes this sense of despise as “he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and relax this passionate love for one body, despising it and considering it a slight thing.” Here, it is seen that the “it” the lover is “despising” is clearly pointed towards the “passionate love for one body” instead of the body itself. This distinction is crucial, as it suggests that the lover’s evolving perception of beauty does not necessitate the abandonment of their affection for the boy. Instead, it implies a deepening and refining of their love, informed by their newfound understanding of beauty’s true essence. This interpretation aligns with the overarching themes of Diotima’s speech, which emphasize the transformative nature of love and its capacity to elevate the soul towards higher forms of wisdom and enlightenment. Thus, by reframing the lover’s “despise” as a critique of their previous state rather than a rejection of the beloved, this interpretation offers a more nuanced understanding of the lover’s journey through the stages of love and underscores the enduring nature of their attachment to the beloved.
Therefore, the beloved remains an indispensable companion on the lover’s journey towards enlightenment and rather than diminishing the lover’s affection, the perception of true virtue will deepen their appreciation for the beloved as they are seeing true beauty through the beloved.
III. Discussion of other views

While the interpretations of Diotima’s and Socrates’ speeches provide insights into the lover’s enduring love for the beloved, it is essential to consider alternative perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of this issue. Various scholars and philosophers have offered diverse interpretations and critiques of these classical theories, enriching the discourse on the nature of affection and its relationship with the perception of beauty. By exploring these alternative views, we can further illuminate the multifaceted nature of love and its implications for our understanding of true beauty. In this section, we will explore three prominent perspectives. First, we will delve into Vlastos’ objection to Platonic love, arguing that it is conditional and lacks genuine interpersonal connection. Then, we will examine Sheffield’s response to Vlastos, which challenges this notion by emphasizing the inherent value of the beloved’s essential qualities in Platonic love. Finally, we will consider Obdrzalek’s conception of love, which suggests a transformation from love for an individual to love for the eternal forms.

1) Vlastos’ Interpretation of Platonic Love

According to Vlastos’ interpretations of Platonic love, he suggests:

“Plato’s theory is not, and is not meant to be, about personal love for persons – i.e., about the kind of love we can have only for persons and cannot have for things or abstractions. What it is really about is love for placeholders of the predicates “useful” and “beautiful” – of the former when it is only philia, of the latter, when it is erôs.” (Vlastos 1981, 26)

Vlastos’ interpretation of Platonic love challenges the notion that the lover’s affection for the beloved is rooted in a genuine connection with the individual themselves. He argues that the lover’s love is directed towards the perceived qualities of the beloved, such as their beauty or utility, rather than their intrinsic worth as a person. Consequently, he suggests that the lover’s
attachment to the beloved is conditional upon the presence of these desirable qualities and may be easily transferred to another individual who possesses them to a greater degree.

I think Platonic love is quite the opposite. The lover’s love towards the beloved may have started with pure physical attraction that is somewhat limited and objective, but Platonic love offers the lover a path to begin developing a broader understanding of love instead of merely objectifying the beloved as a “placeholder” for the qualities, the lover begins to subjectify them, recognizing and valuing their inherent worth as an individual. This transformation entails a deeper appreciation of the person as it directs love towards the essence of the individual instead of the physical appearance or the qualities they have.

“He may next observe the beauty that belongs to kinds of knowledge, in order that he may next observe the beauty that belongs to kinds of knowledge, and, gazing now towards a beauty which is vast, and no longer slavishly attached to the beauty belonging to a single thing – a young boy, some individual human being, or one kind of activity – may cease to be worthless and petty.” (Plato & Rowe 1998, 210d)

From here, we can see that before the lover grasps the true form of beauty, he wasn’t necessarily in love with the boy, but was “slavishly attached to the beauty belonging” to the boy or other desirable attributes. However, as the lover advances in their philosophical journey, their perception of beauty expands beyond the individual manifestations to encompass more universal and abstract forms of beauty. This transformative journey marks a departure from objectifying the beloved as a mere vessel for desirable qualities towards actually loving them for their intrinsic worth as individuals.

The process of the ascend itself also supports this interpretation as Diotima starts with loving something that is purely pleasant to the senses – the physical beauty of the boy – and moves on to the love of wisdom and knowledge. This ascend emphasizes Plato’s idea of love as
a transformative journey that transcends love by going beyond the love that is purely grounded in sensory perception but in intellectual grasping.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Diotima has suggested several times that once the lover reaches a higher level on the ladder, they would start “despising” the previous stage. This is not because they stopped loving the subject of their love in the previous stage as they’re now able to see something more beautiful, but because the lover’s sense of “despise” is towards their prior objectification of the subject. And just because one has now moved onto a new stage of love, doesn’t mean they abandon the previous stages completely. For example, if one is learning a new language, one would start with the basic spelling of the language as a steppingstone to the harder aspects, just because they have now ascended to more complicated grammar doesn’t mean they have completely forgotten how to spell or that spelling becomes irrelevant to them. In fact, they need their knowledge of spelling in order to learn the language. Therefore, I contend that Platonic love stands in stark contrast to Vlastos’ interpretation.

2) Sheffield’s Response to Vlastos’ Interpretation

While my interpretation challenges Vlastos’ perspective on Platonic love, it is important to recognize that the discourse on this topic is multifaceted, with various scholars offering divergent viewpoints. Another scholar – Sheffield – presents an alternative objection to Vlastos’ interpretation, adding further complexity to the discussion.

Sheffield suggests that loving someone for their own sake inherently involves valuing their essential properties. Thus, loving someone because of their beauty, kindness, or other qualities still constitutes loving them for their own sake. She supports this objection by examining the nature of friendships, distinguishing three types:
1. Pleasure-based.

2. Exchange-based.

3. Friendship based on the recognition of good character.

While the first two types are characterized by reciprocity and utility, the third type is singular and focuses on the nature of the other person. Sheffield contends that within this type of friendship, one recognizes the other’s good nature and values it as something inherently valuable. By making this distinction, Sheffield suggests that the lover’s affection for the beloved must be grounded in the beloved’s nature rather than merely their attributes. Thus, if it is said that the lover loves the beloved for their beautiful soul, their affection must be rooted in the beloved’s nature as the beautiful soul is not an attribute that could change over time or be taken away (Sheffield 2011, 263).

By emphasizing the importance of valuing the essential properties of the beloved, Sheffield highlights the inherent connection between loving someone for their own sake and recognizing their intrinsic qualities. While the last type of friendship focuses on the nature of the other person rather than the reciprocal benefits, Sheffield argues that the lover’s affection for the beloved must be rooted in the beloved’s nature, rather than solely in their external attributes. (Sheffield 2011, 263). Consequently, if the lover is said to love the beloved for their beautiful soul, this affection is grounded in the beloved’s immutable essence, which transcends transient qualities. Thus, Sheffield’s objection reinforces the idea that Platonic love entails valuing the beloved for their intrinsic worth, aligning with the broader themes present in both the Symposium and Phaedrus.

I have chosen to include Sheffield in this section of my work because though we are in agreement that Vlastos’ idea of Platonic love is limited, I disagree with her idea that loving
someone for their essential qualities is equivalent to loving them for their intrinsic worth. Platonic love is portrayed as a transcendent process wherein the lover ascends from merely appreciating the beloved’s qualities to recognizing and valuing their intrinsic worth. While Sheffield emphasizes the importance of valuing the essential properties of the beloved, I believe it is crucial to recognize the transformative journey inherent in Platonic love (Sheffield 2011, 263). This journey entails moving beyond superficial attractions and cultivating a deeper understanding and appreciation of the beloved’s true essence. Therefore, while initial affection may be sparked by the beloved’s qualities, Platonic love enables the lover to transcend these external attributes to develop a profound connection that is rooted in the beloved’s intrinsic worth. Thus, I contend that Platonic love is not a kind of love that objectifies the beloved as “placeholders” for the preferred qualities, nor is it a kind of love that begins with the lover loving the beloved for their intrinsic worth. Instead, it is a transformative process that leads the lover to learn how to love correctly, ultimately recognizing and cherishing the beloved for their inherent value beyond mere qualities and attributes.

3) Obdrzalek’s Interpretation of Platonic Love

Transitioning to another scholar’s viewpoint, it is essential to explore the insights offered by Obdrzalek, who presents another nuanced interpretation of Platonic love. She argues the lover’s passion in Plato’s dialogues undergoes a profound transformation, shifting from love for the boy to a transcendent love for the eternal forms. “The initiate’s passion has therefore transferred from the boy onto the Form” (Obdrzalek 2010, 439). Additionally, she highlights the idea that “Mortal flesh is a source of infection” (Obdrzalek 2010, 439). Suggesting that the
lover’s passion for the beloved will be transcended and redirected towards the contemplation and adoration of the forms and the lover will no longer love the beloved.

Diotima’s inquiry into what it would be like to perceive true beauty, unadulterated by mortal imperfections, presents a thought-provoking scenario for scholars and readers. She describes beauty as “pure, clean, unmixed” and free from infections of human flesh and color are interpreted by many as a direct challenge to the lover’s ongoing affection for the beloved, suggesting that once one beholds true beauty, their attachment to the beloved diminishes. However, a more nuanced interpretation emerges when considering Diotima’s speech in its entirety.

Later in her speech, Diotima writes:

“If a person turns his gaze in that direction and contemplates that beauty with the faculty he should use, and is able to be with it?... that it is under these conditions alone, as he sees beauty with what has the power to see it, that he will succeed in bringing to birth, not phantoms of virtue…” (Plato & Rowe 1998, 212a-b)

In this passage, Diotima emphasizes the essential role of the beloved in the lover’s journey towards understanding true beauty. She portrays the beloved as the indispensable medium through which the lover can grasp the essence of true beauty, highlighting the profound interconnection between love and enlightenment. Throughout her discourse, there is a consistent implication that the lover never ceases to perceive beauty through the presence of the beloved. Initially driven by a purely objective love, the lover’s perception evolves as they progress through the stages of love, discerning the genuine essence of virtue within the beloved’s beauty.

Diotima’s metaphor of the beloved as the “faculty” necessary for understanding true beauty

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6 My thesis advisor Professor Suzanne Obdrzalek has suggested that the Greek text does not explicitly support such an interpretation as it could also be translated as “contemplating the beautiful with that by which one ought to contemplate it.” This translation does not explicitly support my interpretation of referring to the beloved as a medium for perceiving true beauty. However, I would like to offer further explanation for my interpretation. While the phrase “that by which one ought to contemplate it” may not explicitly be referring to the beloved, I believe it can...
underscores the enduring significance of the beloved in the lover’s pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. Ultimately the lover’s love for the beloved serves as a necessary precondition for them to grasp the true form of beauty.

Moreover, this idea of the beloved acting as the medium through which the lover perceives true beauty is also shown in *Phaedrus*.

> “Now they come close to the beloved and see the flashing of his face. As the charioteer sees it, his memory is carried back to the nature of beauty, and again sees it standing together with self-control on a holy pedestal.” (Plato & Rowe 2000, 254b5)

The imagery of the beloved’s beauty evoking memories of true beauty aligns with the idea that the beloved acts as a conduit for the lover’s contemplation of beauty. The charioteer’s vision of the beloved’s face triggers a recollection of the nature of beauty, suggesting a direct connection between the beloved and the perception of true beauty. Furthermore, Socrates later describes the beloved as beauty’s “possessor,” further reinforcing the notion of the beloved as a medium through which the lover apprehends true beauty. This characterization implies that the beloved not only embodies beauty but also possesses it in a way that facilitates the lover’s understanding and appreciation of beauty’s essence. Thus, both in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, the beloved emerges as a central figure in the lover’s quest for enlightenment.

In the culmination of the lover’s ascent through the ladder, their perception of true beauty remains intimately tied to the beloved. However, the nature of this perception undergoes a profound transformation in which the lover is no longer bound by the illusions of beauty but perceives true beauty in its purest form, unadulterated and undiminished. This “pure, clean,
unmixed” beauty is not discovered apart from the beloved, but rather through them. The beloved serves as the conduit through which the lover apprehends the divine essence of beauty, elevating their affection to a transcendent realm beyond mere physicality or illusion. Thus, in the final stage of the lover’s journey, the beloved becomes the embodiment of true beauty itself, guiding the lover towards a deeper understanding and appreciation of the eternal and immutable nature of beauty.

As we have established while the lover’s perception evolves, this transformation occurs through the beloved. Therefore, even as the lover attains a profound comprehension of beauty, their connection to the beloved still remains integral. The beloved is the medium through which the lover has access to the divine essence of beauty. This suggests that the lover’s affection for the boy transcends mere physical attraction and extends to a deeper appreciation of the beloved as an embodiment and a participant in the true form of beauty. Consequently, the lover’s love for the boy persists and even deepens as they come to recognize the sublime beauty inherent within the beloved.
Conclusion

Drawing upon the intricate dialogues of Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, this thesis has embarked on a journey to unravel the complexities surrounding the enduring affection of the lover for the beloved in light of the concept of true beauty. By laying the groundwork for a deeper exploration through an overview of these dialogues, we have delved into the philosophical nuances presented by Diotima’s ladder of love and Socrates’ second speech, each providing unique insights into the nature of love, desire, and beauty. As we navigated through the interpretive landscape, we have scrutinized the foundational aspects of Platonic love, examining its transformative nature and the relationship between the lover and the beloved. Our exploration has led us to a synthesis of insights gained from both dialogues, culminating in an argument asserting the continuous love of the lover for the beloved even after grasping the true form of beauty.

In our quest for deeper understanding, we have engaged with alternative perspectives offered by scholars such as Vlastos, Sheffield, and Obdrzalek. Each viewpoint contributes to the multifaceted discourse on affection and its relationship with the perception of beauty, enriching our understanding of the complexities inherent in Plato’s conception of love. Through critical evaluation and analysis, we have sought to shed light on the enduring relevance and significance of Plato’s works, offering insights into the evolution of love throughout one’s journey towards truth and beauty.

In conclusion, while the question of whether the lover will continue to love the beloved after grasping true beauty may remain open to interpretation, our exploration has illuminated the profound interplay between love, desire, and philosophical understanding in Plato’s dialogues. By confronting the complexities of this inquiry and engaging with diverse perspectives, we have
embarked on a journey of intellectual discovery, inviting further reflection and dialogue on the nature of love and its implications for human experience. As we navigate the intricacies of Plato’s philosophy, may our exploration inspire continued inquiry and contemplation into the mysteries of the human heart and soul.
Works cited


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