In several dialogues, Plato has Socrates present the wondering, erotic apprehension of human beauty as a necessary step in moral education. In the *Republic*, for example, he suggests that children who have been fed a diet of good music—songs of good people sung in the narrative voice typical of good people—will, when they grow up, have eyes to see the genuine beauty in the people around them. The beauty he has in mind is specifically human beauty, the beauty of the human body but, more important, the beauty of the virtuous human soul. Since “what is most beautiful is also most loveable,” these musical guardians will fall in love (402d). At this point, Socrates says, his account “has ended where it ought to end, for it ought to end in the love of the beautiful” (403c). Attraction to beauty is not a side effect of the moral-poetic education of the guardians of Kallipolis; it seems to be the very point of it.

We find similar claims in Plato’s erotic dialogues. In the *Symposium*, Socrates says catching sight of a beautiful boy is the first step in a journey of ethical progress culminating in “giving birth to true virtue” (212a). (At least it is the first step if one has the right sort of soul and if one is led by a “leader who leads correctly” (210a).) And in the *Phaedrus*, which will be my focus in this paper, Socrates says that, for certain people, the amazed sight of a beautiful boy sets off an intellectual and emotional revolution: in looking with love at his beautiful beloved, the lover has taken the first step towards a better way of life, one involving right relations to his own body, to other people, and to the cosmos.

Why is it so important to moral development to have eyes to see human beauty? I want to understand both why the recognition of *beauty* is morally significant and also why the recognition of *human* beauty is morally significant. Ultimately, of course, Socrates presents contact with forms, including the form of the beautiful, as a source of virtue. The values which inform the best human life are not themselves specifically human. But in all the dialogues I’ve mentioned, the route to the form of the beautiful begins with an appreciation of human beauty. Why?
In the three dialogues I mentioned above, Socrates strongly suggests that eyes which see human beauty look with the look of love. Because “what is most beautiful is most loveable,” the musical guardians of the Republic will be lovers. This may strike us as unduly restrictive. What about dispassionate appreciation? Or praise? Since erōs tends to be exclusive, does Socrates think that we cannot see the beauty of anyone other than the person we love? That would be implausible and we do not need to attribute it to him. Perhaps his point is simply that human beauty makes an ethical difference only or paradigmatically when we look with the look of love.

So I will need to discuss what Socrates thinks about love. His account(s) of love are extraordinarily rich and I do not intend to offer a complete interpretation of even one of them. Instead, I will be concerned with the anthropology in light of which he makes his claim for the power of gazing with love at a beautiful person. Socrates believes that erōs is a desire for happiness that erupts against a background of essential human imperfection (Phaedrus 251c-252b; cf. Symp). The look of love—the wondering apprehension of beauty in another person—is important both because it excites that desire and because it helps us satisfy it. So we must examine Socrates’ conception of human beings as needy creatures. It is in part because he offers such an extended account of our nature in the Phaedrus that I focus on that dialogue.

I will also need to say a bit about his conception of to kalon or to kallos, which I have been translating as ‘the beautiful’ and ‘beauty’. That will be my topic in the next section of this paper. Notoriously, these terms hover between moral and

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1 The initiates in the Symposium’s “higher mysteries” do indeed move from love of a single body to love of all beautiful bodies (cite). But this move depends on their seeing that the “beauty in all bodies is one and the same” (check quote). Only philosophical souls are capable of this recognition; everyone else is left in the benighted position of loving only one boy and thinking that his beauty is unique.  
2 Paradigmatically: I mean that love may provide an especially clear case of how the sight of human beauty matters.  
3 Socrates explicitly defines erōs as a desire for happiness in the Symposium. In the Phaedrus he adopts the more poetical description of love as a desire to sprout wings and fly back to the divine banquet in which we feast on forms, but the import is the same.
aesthetic excellence. In the *Phaedrus*, I will argue, Socrates emphasizes its aesthetic dimension but in a way that presupposes a rather different conception of the aesthetic than we are used to. To give a brief and no doubt enigmatic preview: *to kallos* is objective splendor, a perfection independent of any particular spectator.

Finally, in the last section of the paper, I will make a suggestion about what it is that the lover gets out of being in love that is so necessary for moral development. And I will argue that the beloved also gets something out of the look of love. Interestingly, Socrates’ explicit account of how the beloved benefits from love is somewhat different from the account suggested implicitly by his speech.

**Plato’s Anthropology**

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that in order to show that love is a blessing, he must first explain the nature of the soul (245c). Human beings are immortal souls, he argues, which we can imagine as being like the union of charioteer, two winged horses, and a chariot. We souls gallop along, pushing around our bodies, heading more or less in the direction commanded by the driver-element of ourselves. I say that we head more or less in the direction our driver commands because, according to Socrates, one of our “horses” is disobedient and disruptive.

Evidently, Socrates’ image must be read allegorically. The image says that our souls are complex. One element—the charioteer—is rational, capable of knowing and of giving rational direction. Two other two elements are non-rational—they never see the forms—but they are motive elements of some sort or other. The fourth element—the wings—are also a motive element, though one that is intrinsically linked to (“nourished by,” to use Socrates’ idiom) the charioteer’s sight of the forms. Whereas the horses (at least ideally) propel the chariot-soul forward to whatever specific place the charioteer directs, the wings lift the soul up in a manner independent of the charioteer’s rational calculation.

It is common to interpret this image in light of the tripartite psychology of the *Republic*, so that the trio of charioteer, good horse, and bad horse stands for reason, spirit, and appetite respectively. (But then how do the wings fit in?) I do not want to deny that interpretation so much as to urge us to look first at the
information Socrates chooses to highlight in the *Phaedrus*. Whereas in the *Republic*, Socrates is primarily interested in the objects of desire peculiar to each part of the soul, in the *Phaedrus* he does not take this approach—no doubt because in the case of the embodied lover, *all* the elements of the soul aim at the same object: the beautiful beloved. Instead, he focuses almost exclusively on the relations the psychic elements bear to each other. The good horse is naturally responsive to the charioteer’s command. Socrates describes it as prone to shame (253d-254a), suggesting perhaps that its obedience to the charioteer is a matter of respect for authority, mastery. The good horse stands for general attraction to whatever it may be that reason commands not *as* reasoned but *as* commanding, masterful. Such an element would be a source of independence in a person who knows his own mind, but also a source of subservience to others in a person who does not. (I mention this to accommodate the description of what happens when a lover sees his beloved for the first time. The charioteer is thrown into confusion and the good horse takes his cues from its sense of shame before the beautiful beloved, rather than from the charioteer. Soon, however, the charioteer is moved to self-restraint by the memory of *sophronsume* and the good horse willingly accepts his command, 254b-c.) By contrast, the bad horse has no natural inclination to obedience. This is not to say that it cannot be disciplined. But there is no intrinsic link between what it goes for and the command of reason. Socrates says that the charioteer disciplines the bad horse with pain...I find it impossible to imagine what this would amount to as a relation between parts of the soul. So I’ll content myself with saying simply that although it can become obedient, this is a source of motivation whose obedience to reason is hard won and precarious. What is it about the bad horse that makes it so deaf to the command of reason? Socrates suggests that this horse is cowardly but also “a companion of *hubris* and false pretense” (253e).⁴ This is a form of desire that seeks to hide one’s inadequacy even from oneself. Note also that the bad horse is the element in the soul that draws it towards the body. Body as such, and beautiful bodies in particular, attract it in the way that a clump of clover distracts a horse

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⁴ According to Yunis (2011: 160), being “blue/grey-eyed” was a sign of cowardice.
from the path his rider wants him to follow. I am inclined to say that the bad horse represents a form of desire experienced concretely as physical emptiness that seeks fullness urgently and haphazardly, from whatever tangible, present source happens to come along. It may not make much sense to imagine this form of desire as operative in a disembodied soul. But worrying about this may be to press the image too far: after all, Socrates’ concern is to explain who we are now. The point would simply be that there is in us a tendency to experience lack and fullness in physical, perceptual terms and that this tendency is, for this reason, insensitive to rational command and prone to disorderliness. It wants to staunch the ache of insufficiency quickly, and willingly pursues the signs of wholeness (“companion to hubris and false pretense”) without regard for their genuine goodness. But I will leave this aside.

Right now, we move our bodies from the inside; that is to say, our souls are embodied. But this is only a contingent and unfortunate circumstance. Ideally, we are disembodied and direct bodies as something external to us and are unaffected by them. Divine souls, whose horses are both obedient and endowed with wings, always live this way. They parade around the cosmos, directing but unentangled with the heavenly bodies. We used to live this way too and would be still, were it not for the disobedience of our bad horse dragging us off course. The natural deformity of our souls has dire consequences. Souls “feed” on the sight of the forms of justice, temperance, wisdom, beauty, and so forth. (Socrates presumably means that we need active knowledge of virtue in order to flourish in our psychic task of governing bodies.) Since forms are not bodily things, souls must “journey” out of the cosmos to find their nourishment. But whereas the gods in the perfection of their souls make this journey without difficulty, for us it is a struggle. Our disobedient horse keeps straining against the bit and sometimes prevents us from catching a glimpse of the forms. Without the nourishment of knowledge, our souls “lose their wings” and become embodied “like an oyster in a shell” (250c).

For my purposes, there are two aspects of the anthropology embedded in this myth that are important. Notice first that Socrates emphasizes a kinship
between divine souls and the souls of mortal, and in particular human, bodies.\textsuperscript{5} Human beings are like the gods in the sense of being members of the same genus: we, like the gods, are complex souls comprised of governing reason and some motive elements. And we, like the gods, have the function of moving bodies. But despite this (and this leads me to my second point), we possess an intrinsic flaw—the disobedience of one of our horses—that prevents us from possessing our good securely or easily. The defect in our nature may be more or less pronounced—the bad horse may be more or less insolent—but that there is some defect is an ineradicable fact. So human beings are not just \textit{another} kind of soul; they are an \textit{inferior} kind of soul.\textsuperscript{6} Socrates expresses the hierarchical relation between human and divine soul in the myth when he figures the gods as leaders of the divine chorus and we human souls are their attendants. We can combine these two points by saying that according to Socrates human beings are by nature deficiently godlike souls.

We should examine this notion of godlikeness a bit more closely. I have said that Socrates presents gods and human beings as belonging to the same genus, soul. Does this mean that they are two species of soul, one better than the other? That human and divine souls are distinct kinds might possibly be suggested by the fact that the difference in their composition (bad horse vs. all good horses) is an eternal fact. If so, then our being godlike would simply be a matter of sharing features with

\textsuperscript{5} What about the souls of animal bodies? Socrates says that human souls may, after their first embodiment in human form, choose to be reincarnated in an animal body, but it is not clear whether all animals are animated by formerly human souls or only some of them (249b).

\textsuperscript{6} This is an important point. It is often noticed that the \textit{Symposium} and \textit{Phaedrus} differ on the question of the immortality of the human soul; in the \textit{Symposium} Socrates says that it is not and in the \textit{Phaedrus}, as we have seen, he says that it is. But this different belies a more fundamental similarity. The immortality which Socrates denies to us in the \textit{Symposium} is not mere eternal life; it is the life of the immortals, i.e., permanent happiness of the sort characteristic of the gods. And Socrates continues to deny this sort of life to us in the \textit{Phaedrus} as well. Human souls are never immortal in Socrates’ anthropology if by “immortal” we mean divine, as it so often does mean in Greek. As Julia Annas and David Sedley, among others, have brought to our attention, it is our nature and good to be divine...insofar as possible.
the gods that are common to the genus. We would be like the gods in certain respects (self-moving; composed of governing and motive elements) and unlike them in other respects (including a bad as well as a good “horse”).

However, although we may loosely say that Socrates postulates human and divine souls as distinct kinds, they may not be distinct kinds according to a proper Platonic division. Socrates figures the moral difference between the two horses in their color: the good horse is white; the bad horse is black. The difference between black and white may not be one of kind but of degree; but if the distinction between black and white is a matter of “more and less,” there would be no “natural joint” along which to cut color into these two kinds. This raises the question whether the black and white horses of Socrates’ myth represent two distinct kinds of motive element in the human soul or whether they, too, differ only in degree, e.g., degree of obedience. Notice, for example, that both motive elements are figured as horses. That is to say, they are represented by animals of the same genus. Socrates’ image at Republic 9.588b-e shows that he is perfectly capable of representing spirit and appetite with different animals—lion and multi-headed beast. But Socrates’ imagery in the Phaedrus seems to draw the sharp line between reason and the two non-rational elements, while highlighting—or at least allowing the implication of—essential sameness of those two non-rational elements to each other. If the horses differ only in degree, then human souls would not have a different kind of motive element, but would rather have a motive element that was somehow lesser (e.g., less obedient) than the other. And divine and human souls would not have distinct natures. Socrates does not say much about the method of dihairesis in the Phaedrus beyond saying that divisions must be “carved at the joints”, but interestingly later in the dialogue he does say (or strongly suggest) that there are different kinds (genē; eidē) of soul (271a-d). However, the different kinds of soul in this passage are all kinds of human soul. And the distinctions it points to seem to hold at the level of divine soul, too. At least, in the myth, Socrates emphasizes that there are twelve gods, all of whom have distinct characters, mirrored by the correspondingly distinct characters of their human followers. Socrates may well believe that there are
distinct kinds of soul, but these distinctions in kind are orthogonal to the distinction between human and divine soul as such.

So let us assume that there is only one kind here, soul, some of whose instances (gods) are better than others (human beings). If this is right, what is Socrates’ point in saying that we are godlike? In talking about our human nature, why make reference to the gods at all? Let me first lay out one possible answer which I think is unlikely to be correct as an interpretation of the *Phaedrus*. According to this (ultimately implausible) interpretation, the point of calling our souls godlike is purely epistemological. Normally, the metaphysical relation of likeness is taken to be symmetrical; if A is like B, then it is equally true that B is like A. In evaluative contexts, however, symmetry often does not hold. Here, when we say that A is like B, B may have the priority of a normative standard.

The idea in calling us godlike would be that there is a single normative standard governing us all as souls which divine souls more perfectly realize and therefore more clearly exemplify. To take a mundane analogy, we sometimes talk about there being a “gold standard” for a kind of thing. And when such an item is particularly well-known, lesser items of the same kind can be called by reference to it. For example, Southerners—or at least Tennesseans...or at least Middle Tennesseans—say that Nashville is the Athens of the South. It has a lot of colleges and universities and is also a home to the arts. It takes itself to be the cultural capital of the South. But there is no sense in which the specific design or civic structure of Nashville is determined by reference to the specific character of the Athens in Greece. Indeed, nothing about its cultural character has been shaped with an eye to the Athens of the past or present. Saying that Nashville is the Athens of the South—saying that it is Athens-like—has merely heuristic value; it is a way of saying what the ideal is to which Nashville aspires, though not quite as well as Athens did in its golden age. But a full specification of that constitutive ideal would make no reference to Athens. Compare, by contrast, a certain landmark in Nashville. The

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7 This may be the point of *Theaetetus* 176a-c, however. There, we are godlike only to the extent that we realize properties—justice, piety (?), wisdom—which the gods instantiate perfectly. See Sedley (1999) 312-314.
civic fathers of that city, believing or at least hoping that their city was the Athens of the South, built a replica of the Parthenon. This was modeled by reference to the original in Greece. And unless you know that, you do not understand what you’re looking at when you look at the Nashville Parthenon. Metaphysically, the being of the Nashville Parthenon depends for its character on the being of the original.

Returning to the *Phaedrus*, if all we knew about the relation between human and divine souls was that the former has a bad horse and the latter does not, then humans would be deficiently godlike in the epistemological sense, measurable against a common standard according to which the gods fare better. But Socrates has another way of talking about human godlikeness which suggests that he has the other, metaphysically robust view of godlikeness in mind. Consider, for example, the way he describes the soon-to-be lover’s first encounter with the beautiful boy:

A recent initiate, one of those who saw a lot then, when he sees a godlike (*theoeides*) face or physique that has imitated (*memimēminon*) beauty well, first he bristles and something like the former fears come over him; then he looks with awe at [the boy] as a god, and if he weren’t afraid of being thought extremely crazy, he would sacrifice to the boy as an idol (*agalma*), a god (*Phaedrus* 251a).

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8 Actually, it isn’t obvious that in this case, the relation between gods and human beings would be exactly the same as the relation between Athens and Nashville. That’s because the relation of species to genus in the two cases is not the same. Athens and Nashville arguably are either what Anton Ford has called “accidental species” of the genus “cultural capitol”—in which case they can be analyzed in terms of a common genus plus independently knowable accidents—or they are what he calls “categorical species” of this genus—in which case there is no way to articulate the difference between these kinds of city that doesn’t presuppose knowledge of the species in question. The *Phaedrus*’ idea that humans differ from gods in the quality of one of their “horses” and, even more clearly, the *Timaeus*’ idea that humans differ from gods in containing some deficient psychic stuff, would suggest that the relation of gods and humans to the genus “soul” is neither that of an accidental species or a categorical species. Rather, gods, by being “pure souls,” would be what Ford calls an “essential species” of the genus soul. In this case, human souls would not be measured deficient against the genus soul, but rather against the species divine soul, whose definition would be the same as the definition of soul itself. See Ford 2011. In my view, the relation Socrates describes between human and divine souls is not this one either, as I explain in footnote ## below.
The crucial word here is *agalma*, a devotional statue. Socrates seems to be saying that the beautiful boy is godlike in the sense of being modeled on a god. (The boy is explicitly called a *mimēma* of beauty. We’ll come back to that issue in a moment.) Although it may be true that images resemble their paradigms in virtue of some common feature, perhaps even necessarily, the two are not metaphysically on a par. The image is determined to be as it is by *reference to* the paradigm; a proper account of what it is must make reference to the paradigm, but not vice versa; its features must be understood as attempts to approximate to something else.

Now we may be inclined to think that there is a complete discontinuity between the two ways of thinking about the relation between gods and human beings which I have described. First, I said that human souls were deficient versions of soul and that divine souls are exemplary versions. Now, I’m saying that human souls are images of divine souls. But, you might complain, an image is not a deficient version of what it represents; it is something entirely different. But of course this is not the way Plato thinks of images and his word *agalma*, idol, is well-chosen to make this clear. A statue of this sort does not simply represent some god—if that were all there were to it, the religions of the Bible would not have had such a problem with them. No, an *agalma* houses the god, the god is supposed somehow to be present in it. To borrow Platonic technical language, an *agalma* “participates in” or “has a share of” the god it images. And this is exactly how the lover experiences the beautiful boy. He is awestruck and wants to make sacrifices to the boy because it seems to him that the god is, somehow, present in him.

What I am arguing is that, in Plato’s view, human beings are by nature images or icons of divine souls. That is what we are.

Plato suggests a similar anthropologies in other dialogues. We find a view of this sort in the *Republic*, for example, when Socrates describes the philosopher-kings shaping the souls of citizens in the ideal city:

Then I think they would often look in each direction as they worked, to the just by nature and the beautiful and the temperate and all things of that sort and also to that thing they make in human beings, mixing and blending the man-image (*andreikelon*) out of practices, fixing their mark by what Homer
called "the divine form (theoeides) and likeness (theoeikelon)" when it occurred in human beings (Republic 501b).

The philosopher-king is a sort of statue-maker and the citizens he fashions are modeled after “the divine form and likeness”. There is some unclarity about just what the paradigm is at which the philosopher-king looks—it is usually interpreted as the forms of justice and temperance and so forth, but in that case why describe these forms as “godlike”? As forms, it is not their nature to be like anything else at all, rather other things are like them. Perhaps, then, Socrates means that the philosopher-kings “fix their mark” by the ideal of human being? Another possibility, recently suggested by Naly Thaler, is that the philosopher-kings are looking to perfectly formed ensouled bodies, i.e., the heavenly bodies, which themselves participate as perfectly as possible in the forms of justice, temperance, and so forth. Either way, Socrates is saying that actual human beings are icons of something godlike.

The Republic and Phaedrus agree in another respect as well. The philosopher-kings imitate the divine model both by fashioning the citizens in its image and by assimilating themselves to the model. As Socrates says there, “There is no way someone could consort with and wonder at another person without imitating him” (500c). Likewise, in the Phaedrus, the lover’s imitation of the god is a matter both of making the beloved more perfectly godlike and of behaving like the

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9 More precisely, Thaler (2015) argues that the philosopher-kings look to the mathematical model which the visible heavens only imperfectly instantiate (##). I think I disagree with Thaler: If philosopher-kings were “looking to” the results of mathematical astronomy, they would be contemplating mathematical objects rather than the visible heavens. (Nb. geometers do not study visible shapes; rather they use visible shapes as images through which to think about a different sort of object, ###.) However, consistent with Thaler’s evidence and more appealing in context, I think, Socrates may be saying that philosopher-kings “look to” the visible cosmos—after all, it is embodied souls and cities they are trying to put in order—but assumes that they do so through the light of mathematical astronomy. (Likewise, a person, say an architect, who has studied geometry, may consider visible shapes in light of that knowledge.)
god himself. Note also that just as the boy is an idol housing a divine presence, so too the lover is “possessed” with divine inspiration. Godlikeness is a feature of all human beings, lovers just as much as beloveds.

The Timaeus takes a more complicated approach. One part of our soul—the rational part—is made by the Demiurge from the very same kind of ingredients from which he made divine souls, only those ingredients are of lesser quality (41d). In this respect, then, gods and human beings are the very same kind of thing, and differ only in degree of “purity”. On the other hand, the other, mortal parts of our soul are made by the gods, who do so by following the Demiurge’s model of soul-craft (41c, 42e, 69c). They fashion our bodies and the non-rational parts of our soul so as to allow our deficiently divine reason to imitate pure, divine soul insofar as that is possible (e.g., 47c). That is to say, human beings are the products of mimesis in two dimensions: the productive activity through which we are created is an imitation of the Demiurge’s creative activity and we, the products of this mimesis, are imitators of the divine beings that made us.

But let’s return to the Phaedrus. For reasons we have yet to explore, the lover’s response to seeing the godlike boy is to start working on him—educating him—so as to draw that image out. This may raise a worry for my interpretation: Isn’t Socrates saying that lovers take a human soul and then, as a subsequent act, mold that material into the shape of a god? If so, then he would not believe that human nature as such is godlikeness. But I think this worry is unfounded. Notice that both the lover’s and the beloved’s similarity to Zeus is a precondition of their relationship. The lover reacts to the beautiful boy as he does because he is already an attendant of Zeus (or of Ares or whoever) and has already assimilated himself to him. And he is struck by the beauty of this boy in particular because the boy is already an image of Zeus. The effect of love is not to transform mortal clay into an image of the god; it is rather to clarify, intensify, make more perfect an image that is

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10 For this reason, we should not adopt Nehamas and Woodruff’s translation of mimoumenos at 252d2 and 253b4 as ‘emulates’. In the first instance, Socrates is saying that the lover emulates (i.e., takes himself as the medium of imitation) the god; in the second instance he is saying that he shapes the beloved through persuasion (i.e., takes the beloved as the medium of imitation).
already there. Plato’s anthropology and the logic of the image allows for the curious claim that moral training makes us more perfectly human, more perfectly what we already are.

Human souls are inevitably deficient. Even when we were disembodied, we are made of worse stuff and lead our lives by attending and molding ourselves in the image of some god or other. Of course, our situation as we are now is necessarily worse than this, since inhabiting bodies prevents us from having any direct access to psychic nourishment—the forms—at all. We human souls here and now are both deficient and deformed with respect to the divine ideal we image. And in fact, most of us are still further removed from happiness. In Socrates’ poetic rendering, falling into a body caused us to forget our disembodied existence and the nourishing forms. So, not only are we not able to attain to the (imperfect) godlikeness possible for us, most of us are so alienated from happiness as to be entirely ignorant of where it lies. Godlike but deficient, deformed, and oblivious to our plight: This is who we are when we are struck with love by the sight of human beauty.

Before I move on to explaining why the sight of beauty is so arresting to people like us, I want to try to bring this rather extravagant account down to the earth we stand on. Can we accept Plato’s anthropology? First, let me translate his claim out of the idiom of godlikeness. In doing so, I do not mean to imply that Plato is not serious about the existence of the gods or that they are ultimately eliminable from his philosophy. My aim is only to locate a standpoint from which we—modern theist and atheist alike—may see the phenomenon Plato describes with the help of his theology.

So instead of asking whether we are icons of the gods, I want to ask whether we can accept the idea that we essentially are beings that aspire to a defining ideal which we cannot in principle achieve? Or to put it as a did just a minute ago: can we accept a view of moral improvement according to which we become ever more like what we already really are? The question cannot be answered affirmatively simply by endorsing that there is a norm by which we are appropriated measured. The idea needs to be that we are human precisely because we are already conforming to that norm to some degree. Now obviously I cannot here argue that we should think
of ourselves this way. I think Plato wants to appeal to the experience of love to show that we do think of ourselves this way. Because, as I will explain in a moment, the look of love—the wondering apprehension of beauty—is precisely this recognition.

But leaving love aside, it seems to me that we—or at least some of us—do think of human beings in these terms. I have in mind the morally relevant sense of humanity, the humanity which we think deserves moral respect, the humanity we honor when we praise someone as humane. Humanity in this sense is not exhausted by biological facts, though it is in some way or other connected to it. In the Kantian tradition, it is a sort of capacity for rational action. But, it seems to me, we cannot think of this as a bare ability possessed by animals like us. The object of respect and honor must be an actuality; so the human rational will deserving respect must already be present in us as a way of actively being rational. Or, to put the point in more Platonic terms, the humanity we respect must at the very least be a form of participating in reason. We respect humanity, we respect rationality, as something actual, not as merely possible. Of course, Kant thinks we cannot know whether we ever do will in accordance with the demands of reason; and indeed I think we all have pretty good reason for doubting that we ever do, at least not purely. Worse, it may be that given what we are, embodied, passionate beings, it is in principle impossible for us ever to act purely in accordance with reason. What I am urging, then, is that the humanity which matters for ethics may well be a matter of a definitive aspiration. That is to say, as moral subjects, we are essentially creatures that strive to be a kind of agent more perfect than anything we can in fact become. Whereas when it comes to action, ought implies can, when it comes to a way of being, no such implication follows.

**Beauty**

I have argued that in Plato’s view human beings are godlike in the sense of being images of divine soul. The lover in some sense recognizes this when he sees the beautiful boy. At first, he sees that this boy is like a god, but Socrates suggests that eventually the lover comes to experience himself as godlike too, through the
influence of the boy. But the beloved is not only an image of the god, he is also an image of beauty:

And they are near him and see the boy’s appearance flashing like lightening, and when the charioteer sees his memory is carried to the nature of beauty and he sees it again standing with temperance on a sacred pedestal.

What does it mean to say that the boy is an image of beauty? And how can he be an image of beauty and of the god? To explain this, I need to say something about what Plato means by *kallos*.

The adjectival form of *kallos* is *kalon*. In the *Symposium*, when Socrates talks about the form which is imaged in the beloved boy, he calls it *to kalon*—the beautiful. Notoriously, *kalon* can in other contexts be equally well translated as ‘good’, ‘noble’, or ‘fine’; and its adverbial form, *kalōs*, often is indistinguishable from the adverbial form of *agathon*, which means good. Given this range of permissible translation, some scholars have argued that *kalon* means something quite generic, like ‘commendable’ or ‘praiseworthy’ which can, depending on context, refer either to what is morally praiseworthy or to what is aesthetically praiseworthy. Now there is no question but that in the *Phaedrus* Socrates is talking about beauty. The form which the beloved images is *kallos*, and as David Konstan has recently shown, the semantic range of *kallos* is almost exactly the same as our word ‘beauty.’ I’ll say more about this in a moment. But first, we should remind ourselves of the very close association Plato draws between goodness and the *kalon* in other dialogues. For example, in the *Republic*, Socrates defines both beauty (*kallos*) and virtue in terms of being functionally well-ordered:

“The virtue, beauty, and correctness of each implement, living creature, and action is related to nothing but the use for which each is made or naturally adapted” (601d, Grube/Reeve, heavily modified).

And he speaks more generally of the form of the Good as being “the cause of all that is correct and beautiful (*kalōn*) in anything” (517c). Finally, in the *Philebus* despite a long argumentative pursuit, he finds that “the power of the good has fled for refuge

11 Irwin 2010.
into the nature of the beautiful (*tou kalou*\(^{12}\))” (64e). He is unable to distinguish the two.

The link between *kallos* and goodness already suggests a reason that human beings *qua* images of god might at the same time be images of beauty. The gods, as we have seen, are perfect souls perfectly performing their task of moving bodies. Since as we saw in *Republic* 601d above functional order is the basis of both goodness and beauty, we should expect the gods to be beautiful too. Socrates affirms this at several points (e.g., *Symposium* 202c). So it is reasonable to suppose that human beings, to the extent that they are godlike, will be both good as souls and beautiful. Interestingly, Socrates says in the *Republic* that the connection to godlikeness is already part of the conventional conception of *to kalon*:

> Should we say that this is the original basis for the conventions about what is *kala* and what is shameful (*aischra*)? *Kala* things are those that subordinate the beastlike parts of our nature to the human—or better, perhaps, to the divine; shameful ones are those that enslave the gentle to the savage? (589c-d, Grube/Reeve modified)

A person who is governed by reason is godlike not only because the divine part of his soul (reason) masters and so transfers its character to the other, beastlike parts but also because the activity of mastering what is naturally subordinate is itself a godlike way of being. Socrates’ point here is that people already have this intuition when they praise someone as *kalon*: they already agree with Socrates that human beings have complex natures hovering between the divine and the bestial and that a *kalon* person is one whose best, divine part is masterful. If they nevertheless disagree with Socrates, it is because they disagree with him about which part of our nature is godlike and which deserve to be subordinate.

Let’s return to the *Phaedrus*. I have been trying to explain why Plato’s typical association between the *kalon* and the good would hold in the case of the beautiful beloved. My claim has been that the anthropology suggested by Socrates’ myth provides the key. Insofar as the beloved appears to be an icon of the god, to that extent he just is appearing to be excellently human. His beautiful appearance just is

\(^{12}\) But a few lines later, he calls *is kallos*, 65a.
an appearance of human goodness. But the sentence I have just written brings into
view a complication. In the Republic passage quoted above, human kallos is a
property of soul—the moral excellence of a soul whose parts are ordered as they
should be. In the Phaedrus, however, Socrates emphasizes a quality that is literally
aesthetic, visible. The beauty that strikes the lover as godlike is the beauty of the
beloved’s body.

It is indeed the case that the beloved, insofar as he looks godlike, looks like
the perfect paradigm which he and his lover “followed” in a previous, disincarnate
life. But in the Phaedrus, Socrates does not emphasize the conceptual connection
between kallos and agathon. Instead, he emphasizes what I will call the splendor of
beauty. That is to say, he emphasizes its aesthetic dimension. Consider the
following description of what it was like to contemplate the forms when we were
disembodied:

None of the splendor (phengos) of justice and temperance and the other
things honored by souls [i.e. Forms] is present in their likenesses
(homoiōmasin) here [i.e. our embodied world]. Rather, through their murky
sense organs, a few people come upon these images (eikonas) and with great
difficulty see the original (genos) of the image (eikasthentos). But back then
beauty (kallos) was brilliant (lampron) to see, when our souls, along with the
happy chorus—we were following Zeus, others were following other gods—
when our souls saw the blessed, spectacular (thean) sight and fulfilled what
is right to call the most blessed of the initiations, which we celebrated with
secret rites, being whole and not suffering the evils which in later times await
us. The revealed objects (phasmata, viz., the forms) were whole and simple
and unmoved and happy; we were initiated and again beholding them in a
pure light (augēi) because we were pure and not buried in this thing which
we now carry around and call a body, shackled to it like an oyster. [...] So
about beauty (kallous), as we said, when it was among those things it was
brilliant [elampen], and coming here we grasp it glistening [stilbon] most
gleamingly [enargestata] through the most gleaming [enargestatēs] of our
senses. For sight is the sharpest of our bodily senses, although it does not see
wisdom (phronēsis). For it would instill terrible love if an image of that
form] entered sight gleaming [enarges] in that sort of way, and the same
goes for the other beloved [forms] too. But now this is the lot of beauty
(kallos) alone, with the result that it is most vividly manifest (ekphanestaton)
and most desired (erasmiōtaton). (Phaedrus 250b-d)

Notice how light-filled this description is: the splendid, brilliant forms gleam in pure
light. Socrates draws our attention to how the forms “look”. Now, all the forms are
splendid, including the form of beauty. But Socrates says that beauty is the only form whose bodily images also shine. We can see wise or just actions, but we cannot see their wisdom or justice. By contrast, the beautiful boy’s face “flashes like lightening” (2504b) precisely because it images the radiant form of beauty. I take this to indicate that to be beautiful just is (at least in part) to be radiant. All the forms shine, but only in the case of beauty does shining (in part) constitute its essence (to use Aristotelian language). Or in other words, beauty is an aesthetic property. This explains why beauty in body is a sensible property. The point is not that kallos is inevitably sensible; Plato must countenance the possibility of intelligible splendor in order to accommodate the kallos of intelligible things such as souls and the forms.13 for a body to have a share of the shining just is for it to be visibly shining.14 In the Phaedrus, then, Socrates casts kallos as the form of intelligibility or more generally (so as to account for its perceptible images) the form of openness to the mind. This is not a passive property of being knowable or perceptible; it is an active property of catching the mind’s attention.

So to return to the question of the anthropology of the Phaedrus, the question is how the beloved boy is both an image of the god and an image of beauty. The

13 Here I part company with Nehamas (2007), who argues that according to the Phaedrus, participation in the form of beauty always manifests itself sensibly. How do we know that, in the Phaedrus, there is such a thing as intelligible beauty/splendor? We can tell by examining Socrates’ description of the way disembodied souls are affected by the form of Kallos. It, like all the forms, is radiant to behold. Since the beholding in question is a disembodied beholding, the radiance in question must be a purely intelligible radiance. Likewise, when we say that the (Platonic) gods are beautiful, we refer to a beauty their souls manifest directly to intellect, not to the senses via whatever body they direct. There are many questions one might raise about the coherence of the idea of “intelligible radiance” or “intelligible appearing.” I try to address some of them in my unpublished paper, “Plato on Forms and Appearances.”

14 Socrates says that if the images of wisdom were as clearly visible as the images of beauty are, it would inspire a “terribly powerful love” (250d). Does this indicate that the form of wisdom is more splendid than the form of beauty (a suggestion which would vitiate my suggestion that beauty just is radiance)? Not necessarily. Socrates’ point may be rather that wisdom is more loveable, more nourishing to the soul and, in particular, to the rational part of the soul. After all, it is the specific virtue of that part of the soul. I thank Rachana Kamtekar for this suggestion.
*Republic* gave us reason to think that *kalon* human beings are functionally well-ordered and in that respect god-like. That is to say, the connection between beauty and godlikeness is established through the fact that the gods, like all *kalon* things, are good. In the *Phaedrus*, however, Socrates emphasizes the splendor of *kalon* things and that means that any connection between godlikeness and beauty in human beings must be established through the fact that the gods, like all *kalon* things, have a certain blazing appearance. It is in fact a commonplace of Greek myth to describe the gods as flashing brilliantly. Our question is whether we can understand Plato’s specific notion of divinity as essentially splendid so that we can understand why the beautiful boy is at once an image of the god and an image of beauty.

At this point, it may help to recall that in the *Republic* Socrates draws an analogy between the form of the good and the sun. Like the sun, the good is a source of intelligibility. It shines in the mind’s eye and lights up other things as well. Echoing the connection we have seen in the *Phaedrus* between *kallos* and light, Glaucon responds to this image by saying that the form of the good must be exceedingly beautiful (509a). This suggests that we should not distinguish goodness and shining appearance as distinct elements of being *kalon*. Shining appearance is rather a dimension of or effect of goodness, its flashing out to the mind as an object of knowledge or perception.

Socrates calls our attention to the splendor of *kallos* in the *Phaedrus* because he is interested in the way *kalon* things grab our attention and (if we are philosophical) remind us of the forms. But if I am right, what grabs our attention is just the (appearing) goodness of the *kalon* thing. To experience something as beautiful is, according to Plato, to be astonished and enthralled by its display of outstanding perfection. Now we have already established that the goodness in human beings is godlikeness. We are images of gods and are more perfect the more perfectly we approximate to the divine standard. So blazing beauty in a human being simply will look like blazing god-likeness. The beautiful beloved is at once an image of the god and an image of beauty.
Still, in insisting that the object of love is beauty rather than goodness, Socrates is able to take into account the passivity of the lover. He does not go looking for goodness in the beloved boy; he does not reason his way towards it or contort his perspective to bring it into view. Rather, in the midst of ordinary life, he is struck by the sight of beauty or, to switch metaphors with Socrates, the stream of beauty flowing from the boy pours into his eyes (251b-d). To put the point more prosaically, the apprehension of beauty in another person is a form of wondering in the human ideal that it is, somehow, actively present in the beloved.

Since the lover is a complex fellow—a charioteer trying with more or less success to keep his now wingless horses under control—this experience has a predictably complex effect: astonished memory (reason); reverential fear (reason); longing to look (reason); shame (good horse); and stiff-necked lust (251a-252a; 253e-254e). All these reactions—the cognitive reorientation, the sense of inadequacy, the insistent drive to intertwine and strengthen ourselves physically—are explained by what the beautiful beloved’s display of godlike perfection means to the different aspects of our soul. The lover’s task is to find a way of being with the beloved without the bad horse’s lust short-circuiting the charioteer’s memory and the regrowth of wings.

The Good of Love

After the initial encounter, the lover begins to adorn the boy and sharpen the divine image in him. Followers of Zeus fall in love with boys who are naturally philosophical and then engage in conversations to draw out that innate ability. Followers of Hera, by contrast, love kingly boys and then do what they can to nurture their ability to rule (252d-253c). Socrates is here elaborating in a remarkable way the conventional belief that lovers benefit their beloveds by educating them. In his telling, loving education is a complex dance of imitating and counter-imitating. The follower of Zeus, for example, sees the image of the philosophical Zeus in the boy and immediately begins to practice philosophy himself, if he does not already. His hope is that by mirroring the divine image in the boy, the boy will in turn mirror the god more faithfully so that the lover may see the
god more clearly. The boy for his part sees the mirror image of himself in the lover—that is to say, he sees the image of the god and of beauty—and is himself struck with love (255c-e). The result is that he too begins to mirror this image. On Socrates’ account, then, the education effected through love is not so much a conscious effort on the part of the lover as the spontaneous effect of the dynamics of imitation. Imitation is both a response to seeing beauty and a way of getting the beautiful boy to show himself more clearly by giving him an image of himself which he in turn will emulate. It is as if Socrates’ lover says to the beloved boy to whom his Palinode is addressed, “Let me show you what you are so that you can more perfectly be and show me what you are and, thereby, that I may see what you are more clearly.” Love is an eye disease, Socrates says, whose happy result is a virtuous cycle of ever more perfect godlikeness.

I want to try to say more plainly why in Socrates’ view the look of love is so important, perhaps necessary, for moral development. Let’s begin with the lover. The more he is doused with the outpouring stream of beauty in the boy, the more he is reminded of and nourished by the sight of the form of beauty which fed him in his prior, disembodied life. The benefit he receives from seeing the beautiful boy, then, is a certain kind of knowledge or more accurately remembering. Could he not be equally benefitted by the image of beauty in anything else? The Phaedrus encourages us to ask this question, since Socrates both responds ecstatically to the beauty of the countryside through which he and Phaedrus walk and insists that it has nothing to teach him (230b-d). Why does this landscape not serve the purpose of reminding him of the forms just as well as a beautiful human being? Immediately before this passage, Socrates has declared that he has no interest in learning about anything else until first he learns what he himself is (230a). Could the idea be that seeing human beauty gives us self-knowledge?

It seems to me that it does, at least according to Socrates’ account. The boy’s beauty is the blazing forth of his likeness to the god and the lover is by his own nature just as much an image of that god as is the boy. So in seeing the boy’s beauty the lover sees the specifically psychic ideal which constitutes his own nature as image. The lover had forgotten that he was a follower of an ideal better than himself.
and had forgotten what that ideal was; in seeing the boy he is reminded. By contrast, a beautiful flowering tree or babbling brook might remind him of the form of beauty, but it would not remind him of the way of participating in beauty or any other virtuous form that is characteristic of soul.

From a practical point of view, this is exceedingly important. Although my soul may swell with longing to imitate the beauty of a flowering tree, I do not have the first idea how to go about doing that. Indeed, I may be at such a loss as to doubt whether it is even appropriate to me to try. Perhaps the splendor I see shining out through a tree is so much better than my own nature that I should hold myself to a lesser ideal. As a matter of practical reason, it is not enough simply to recognize that there is an ideal manner of being. It must be the case that the ideal is mine, one appropriate and conceivable for me to pursue. This is something the lover gains through the apprehension of the beloved’s beauty. He sees that the divine form of life is one which human beings participate in. It is a practical ideal for things like him and it is not utterly mysterious what it takes to live up to it.

Plato’s anthropology according to which we are images is crucial to understanding why he thinks moral development requires recognizing human beauty. In this experience, our natural striving to be better than what we are takes a more specific and practicable direction.

I have offered a suggestion as to why it is so important to see human beauty. But we may wonder whether the good of love could not be achieved equally well by seeing godlike beauty in myself. Could not the look of love be narcissistic? Interestingly, this is the way Plotinus proceeds, when he exhorts us to be like Narcissus and look within ourselves (cite). I am not sure that anything I have said rules out this possibility. But there is a distinct advantage in Socrates’ claim that the lover wonders in the beauty of someone other than himself. The lover gazes at beauty from the standpoint of need. That is to say, although he is an image of god and thus inhabits the bizarre territory of neither being nor not being the god, his love springs from the fact that he falls short of the ideal. (In the Symposium, Socrates makes this point by saying that love is a desire and therefore a lack, 200e.) The ideal is appropriate to him, but he does not yet embody it, at least not fully. This
is precisely what the lover recognizes when he is struck by love: the happy life is something other than the life he is presently leading. This is why lovers look like madmen, altering the ordinary patterns of behavior. The good which love gives to the lover is the knowledge of myself as something other than myself. Less paradoxically stated, the lover sees that the good human life is something other than the life he currently leads. Since the experience of beauty is the experience of the presence of the ideal rather than its absence, it is hard if not impossible to see how contemplating one’s own beauty could ever give the good received through seeing beauty in someone else.

Socrates does find a place for narcissistic looking, however. The beloved falls in love with an image of himself, though allegedly he does not realize this. The narcissistic gaze is invoked to explain the goodness of love not for the lover, but for the beloved. This leads to the question of what the beloved gets out of being looked at with love. Socrates’ official answer to this question is that the beloved gets the very same thing the lover gets. He sees an image of godlike beauty in the lover—the image is an image of his own beauty to be sure, but it is beautiful nonetheless—and so he receives all the benefits of seeing beauty in another. One appealing feature of this account is that it explains why erōs tends to be reciprocal (at least so we think nowadays). The idea would be that loving makes lovers beautiful and thus worthy objects of love. But correct and appealing as this answer may be, it does not really explain why it is good for the beloved as such to be loved. It only explains the goodness of being loved by transforming the beloved into a lover.

I think Socrates does suggest an answer, however, if we take into account the rhetorical context in which the speech is given. Recall that Socrates is trying to persuade a beautiful boy to give his favors to someone who loves him, rather than to the non-lover. It is a seduction speech. Now it is quite unlikely that this speech will succeed if all Socrates has to offer is the promise that soon the boy will fall in love with the lover. The lover in the conventional scheme of things is old and not particularly attractive. It would be embarrassing to end up pouring love in his direction, even if we insist that what the boy loves is an image of himself. If this speech seduces the boy, then it does so for a rather different reason. What the lover
has told the boy is: “I just want to look at you, you are so beautiful! I can see from your face and bearing and mode of life that you used to be an attendant of the gods, indeed an attendant of Zeus! If you share your life with me, I will make you better, but your godlikeness is something I can see is present in you right here and now. That is why the sight of you is driving me crazy!” What seduces the boy, I propose, is simply that he is seen as beautiful. The nonlover may find him sexy, but only the lover sees the blazing presence of the god.

So far as I know, Plato does not ever claim that we need to be recognized as beautiful. Perhaps he is misled by his assumption that insofar as someone is beautiful and an object of love, he is—to that extent—perfect and has no needs. (See the Symposium 202c-d.) Ergo the beautiful beloved as such has no need to be seen as what in fact he is. This line of reasoning may hold for a perfect soul, but we are now considering the beautiful human object of love. The beloved is an image of god, something which by nature falls short of the ideal with reference to which he is constituted. This is so even if his beauty reveals that he participates in that ideal as well. My point is that any human beloved will be lacking; the question is whether being seen as beautiful can in any way fill that lack.

In the Lysis Socrates advises Hippothales to quit writing adulatory love poems and learn the art of refutation. You don’t win a boy by praising him but rather by cutting him down to size (206a; 210e). Sage advice, up to a point. If your beloved already has a healthy sense of his inadequacy, it is less obvious how useful this advice will be. As images, we all discover sooner or later that we are not as good as we pretend or hope to be. Where as the soon-to-be lover’s problem was complacency (he did not yet realize that happiness is a transcendent ideal), this soon-to-be beloved’s problem is despair. He knows that he ought to be better than he is, but the standard is so demanding that he likely will never attain it fully no matter how hard he tries. Why, then, try at all?

This despairing attitude is a failure of self-knowledge as surely as complacency is. If we are images, and especially if we are beautiful images, then we already are succeeding to some degree in being like the divine paradigm. Our being
is already constituted by reference to the ideal. This self-recognition is what the beloved receives when his lover looks at him with the look of love.

The look of love—seeing another person as beautiful—is good both to give and to receive. It is good to give—or rather, to have happen to us—because the human ideal is other than and better than what we currently are. We need to be recalled to the otherness of an ideal properly our own in order to aspire to it. It is good to receive the look of love because the human ideal is also what we most truly are. In fact, to the extent that the word ‘ideal’ suggests a norm that may or may not ever be actual, it is not an ideal at all. The good is already active within us, ordering us and making us (approximately) good. This is what the lover sees in his beloved when he sees him as a beautiful idol. For those of us who have been thrown by the refutation of people or of life itself, the look of love helps us know that we are already something marvelous.

If we adopt Plato’s anthropology or something like it, moral development is a matter of approximating ever more closely an ideal that in fact and perhaps (as Plato seems to think) inevitably transcends us. For this we need both outrageous aspiration and good cheer. We get them out of seeing and being seen as beautiful.

Appendix: Does It Matter Whether Socrates is Talking About What We Call Love?

Is Plato really interested in giving an account of love at all? Many people have found the mythic accounts in the Symposium and Phaedrus to fail egregiously as accounts of love. There are two principal lines of complaint: (1) Plato analyzes love as a response to beauty in the beloved, but some people object to the very idea of defining love as a response to a quality in the beloved that might in principle be instantiated by someone else. (2) Plato spends a great deal of time explaining why love is good for the lover—indeed, in the Symposium love just is a modification of the universal desire for one’s own good. But, some people object, love is essentially a source of altruistic reasons and an account such as Plato’s that ruminates exclusively on what the lover gets out of it is blinded to what is most characteristic of it.
Now, my concern in this paper is to understand why Plato thinks the apprehension of beauty in another human being—the beauty of their body and, more important, the beauty of their character—is crucial for moral development. The explanation I will give is one I could offer without taking a stand on whether he is right about the nature of love or indeed without mentioning love at all. But it seems to me that Socrates’ principal—perhaps his only explicit—argument in favor of his view is that it fits the phenomenon we call love. That is to say, if someone were to ask, “Why think that this is why beauty is morally important?” the answer would be, “Isn’t that what it’s like to love and be loved?”\footnote{Some may question whether I am right to interpret Plato as intending in the \textit{Phaedrus} to offer an answer to the question, “why is beauty morally important?” Isn’t his question in fact, “What is love and why is it beneficial to the beloved?” In my defense: (1) The benefit of seeing and being seen as beautiful is at the core of Socrates’ account of love and its goodness; (2) in addition to discussing love, Socrates spends much of the \textit{Phaedrus} discussing rhetoric. Here again his focus is on what makes for beauty in speech. However we decide to characterize more precisely the unity of the \textit{Phaedrus} (and I am partial to Jessica Moss’s view), the dialogue is throughout concerned with the role of beauty in human life.} For this reason I cannot ultimately sidestep the question of whether Socrates is giving an account of what we call love.

I cannot provide a complete argument on Plato’s behalf in this paper, but I would like at least to loosen the grip of the modern orthodoxy according to which self-interestedness has no part to play in the attitude of love. First, I appeal to your own experience of love. It does not seem like mere good luck when we fall in love with someone and in a manner that improves the quality of our life. This is just what we expect love to be like.\footnote{And so Spinoza, for example, sees no need to defend his definition of love as “______”.} Yes, love hurts sometimes. But this is experienced as a disappointment of love’s initial promise and is generally taken to be a sign that something has gone wrong in the love relation itself. The fact that destructive love calls for special explanation is, I think, an indication of our assumption that love is essentially good for the lover. By contrast, destructive enmity, enmity that harms the hater—or productive enmity, for that matter—needs no special explanation. If this is correct, then it is entirely appropriate for philosophers to ask what the good
is which love provides and whether there is anything special about the way lovers as such pursue it.

In fact, and this is my second effort to loosen the modern orthodoxy, there is great philosophical interest in the question what is special about the way lovers pursue their own good. Although in the *Phaedrus* Socrates emphasizes the fact that the “madness” of love benefits the lover, he plainly believes that it benefits the beloved as well. After all, this speech is presented as a seduction speech intended to persuade a beautiful boy to give his favors to someone who loves him. Like any good deliberative orator, Socrates takes it for granted that he must show the boy how going with the lover will be good for him, the beloved. The reason Socrates spends so much time showing that love benefits the lover is that, in addition to being a piece of seduction, his speech is also part of a contest. He is answering a previous speech given by a non-lover (or by a lover pretending to be a non-lover) who argued that the boy should instead give his favors to someone who does not love him. The non-lover’s argument is interesting for our purposes. His basic point is that the lover is insane; the lover’s lust has made him lose all concern for his own—that is the lover’s—well-being. Such a person is fundamentally untrustworthy; not caring for his own affairs, he has no clear view of the beloved’s true interest either. He may promise his beloved all sorts of things the beloved fancies, but as soon as he snaps out of his erotic madness, he will regret his promises. Notice that Plato presents both non-lover and beautiful boy as assuming that that it is the height of foolishness to enter a relationship with another person unless that other person is motivated by a desire for his own good. Pursuing one’s own good is simply a matter of psychic health. If the lover truly suffers the *disease* of love, as one of the conventional *topoi* would have it, then all things being equal the beautiful boy would be wise to flee. Presumably, beautiful boys did not typically flee their lovers. But that does not belie the point I am making. At least

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17 Socrates’ famous “palinode” is in fact a response to two speeches: a speech by Lysias given in the guise of a non-lover and Socrates’ attempt to do a better job of making the same argument, but this time in the guise of a lover pretending to be a non-lover.

18 See Halperin, “Plato on the Erotics of Reciprocity”.

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among elite circles, it seems to have been taken for granted that all things were not equal. It was supposed that in principle pederasty could perform a socializing and educational function. But the moral-social improvement of the beloved was not so much a goal intrinsic to the very nature of love as an effect that might in the right circumstances be expected. It took some degree of social control—the watchful eye of the boy’s relatives; the threat of shame—to ensure that the crazed attentions of the lover really did benefit his beloved. The conventional view seems to have been that the beloved boy and his relatives could make use of love, but that love itself was not reliably oriented to providing this benefit. The non-lover in the *Phaedrus* is able to make use of the merely contingent relation between erōs and benefit to the beloved. He argues that the benefit isn’t very reliable and that he, the sane and self-controlled non-lover is a better bet.

Socrates’ response is to argue that although, in a way, love is a kind of madness, it is the madness of coming to one’s true senses. In brief, what Socrates’ lover says is: “My love, I don’t want sex. I just want to look at you and to help you become even more beautiful than you already are so that I can go on looking at you! Looking at you drives me wild, but it is the very best thing that could ever have happened to me!” The great innovation of Socrates’ palinode is that it recasts what had traditionally (at least according to one train of thought) been considered an unhealthy (for the lover) but potentially useful (to the boy, to society) obsession as a passion that essentially benefits lover and beloved alike.

From a Platonic point of view, the moral significance of love lies not in its being a source of altruistic reasons. Rather, it is significant because it harmonizes the interests of lover and beloved. Love is a manner of desiring and pursuing my own good that benefits another person too. Although love characteristically leads one to benefit the beloved (or at least to try to give the beloved what he wants), the essence of love is not this desire or disposition so much as it is the desire for or disposition to intercourse with the beloved: spending time together, touching, and in the case of romantic love, sex. Love is, in other words, the desire for community and its moral significance lies in this fact. From this point of view, our modern emphasis on love’s desire to benefit the beloved distorts our vision by showing only
part of the picture. The relevant question for philosophy is not how the lover finds reason to subordinate his own interests to those of his beloved, but rather how their pursuit of the good for themselves is something they undertake in common.

I want to emphasize this point. It is often pointed out that *philia*, friendship, is the Greek name for a relationship of reciprocal loving. *Erōs* by contrast, is not expected to be a reciprocal relation. The *erastēs*, a man in his prime, desires the younger, beautiful *eromenos*, but does not expect to be desired in return (and might even be scandalized if he were). But the fact that *erōs* does not ideally expect to be returned *in kind* does not imply that *erōs* does not aim for contact and relationship. At least as long as his passion persists, the *erastēs* wants to spend his time with the beloved, the good he seeks—sex? something else (as Socrates believes)?—is inherent simply in being together and he understands full well that the beloved will not hang around unless there is something in it for him, too. The harmonization of interests of the lover and beloved may be different in kind from that found in *philia*, but it is a (socially and philosophically) important aspect of the experience nonetheless. Socrates’ famous *Palinode* in the *Phaedrus* is dedicated to explaining precisely this. Through an elaborate myth of the human soul and its place in the cosmos, Socrates tries to show that the good pursued by the lover gives him reason to promote the true well-being of the beloved. Love aligns the interests of lover and beloved essentially, not merely contingently.  

19 Aristotle is interested in a similar point about the nature of *philia*. This comes out most clearly in his argument that genuine self-love finds its greatest expression in love of a friend (*NE* IX.?). Readers often erroneously suppose that when he claims that we wish good to our friends for the friend’s sake, he is claiming that friends benefit each other selflessly. A quick glance at the context of this remark (*NE* VIII.2) shows that this cannot be his point, however. It comes immediately on the heels of his (merely assumed) claim that the object of friendship must be good or pleasant for us; and it is part of an attempt to specify the object of friendship still more precisely by explaining that we can befriend only those who befriend us in return. Although I cannot explain this fully here, I would argue that Aristotle thinks we must benefit our friends for their sakes because it is a condition of reciprocity in a relationship in which each partner is pursuing his own good. (By contrast, the relationship of master and slave is mutually beneficial, but not reciprocal since the good done on each side is always for the master’s sake.)
I have not yet said anything about what is special in the way that love harmonizes the lover’s and beloved’s pursuit of their good. Contractual relations are a way of harmonizing the interests of free people; is that the sort of harmonization characteristic of friendship and love? We might be inclined to think not, though it is worth remarking that in the Bible the exemplary forms of love—God’s love for his people and the love between a husband and wife—centrally involve contracts, though of course there is more to it than that.\(^\text{20}\) I mention this not to advocate for any particular view, but rather to demonstrate that the question how love harmonizes the lover’s and beloved’s pursuit of their own good—whether, indeed, there is only one form of loving harmonization—is a topic of great philosophical and moral significance. But we can take it up only if we first acknowledge that love is good for the lover and that our impulse to love is a manifestation of our more general impulse to what is good for us.

I don’t have anything to say about what the specifically erotic form of harmonization is. My task is the more narrow one of explaining what, in Plato’s view, the lover gets out of seeing the beloved’s beauty; and also why it is good for the beloved to be seen in this way. In a proper treatment of love, the questions of what benefits love provides and the special manner of its doing so would likely be connected. I suspect that Socrates’s palinode is not ultimately adequate as an account of the nature of love. But for my purposes—understanding the moral significance of human beauty—it is enough if we can agree that seeing another person as good for me is not in itself antithetical to the look of love.

Works Cited

\(^{20}\) God wants not only to give Abraham a great family and land of his own but also to be given to through sacrifices and other forms of worship and God seals his relationship with Abraham through all manner of contractual rituals. As a sort of reflected image of this divine love, the human love relation par excellence in the Bible is marriage, which is a sort of love that involves contracts, giving and getting in accordance with previously defined expectation, though this is not all it entails: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, a seal upon your arm, for love is stronger than death, passion fiercer than the grave” (Song of Songs ##).


