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From Desire to Knowledge, the Ascent of Philosophical Eros in Plato's The Symposium

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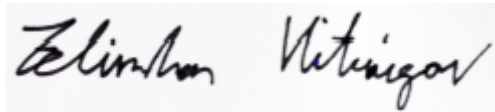
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Declaration

I hereby declare that I created this work independently. All used sources and literature were properly cited. The work has not been used to obtain another or same title.

Prague, 21st June 2022

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light grey background. The signature reads "Zlinda Viteznova" in a cursive script.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to delve into the topic of the eros, particularly as presented by Plato in the *Symposium* and also Lévinas in *Totality and Infinity*, and to grapple with the conception of eros in its difficulties and manifoldness, specifically in its relationship to the Other and to philosophy. The paper deals with two main problems: how does the relationship to the Other create the conditions for knowledge of a transcendent (philosophic) kind. And how to understand the transcendent Idea on the basis of Plato's *Symposium*. The main thesis of this paper is that eros as desire, goes through different stages, starting from the perspective of the "lover", these stages however do not per se correlate to Plato's use of the ladder analogy, this ladder analogy is re-interpreted to include a stage of romantic love, and a stage of self-transcendence / relation to alterity. The first stage is that of what is expressed in Aristophanes' myth, a desire to be re-united with a lost original "second half". The second stage is of self-transcendence and recognition of alterity. The third and final stage being the leap towards loving and grasping the Beautiful itself.

Keywords

Plato, Lévinas, Eros, Love, the Other, Idea, Ethics, the Good, the Beautiful, Pedagogy

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Introduction

Love is a notoriously difficult subject to think or write about, as I have found in the course of writing this paper. The object of love, what the desire aims at, is undefinable. One can say that love aims at what is beautiful and good in itself, such is the suggestion of Plato in the *Symposium*. Yet this aim takes one to the beyond, beyond the sensible and immanent, is language capable of giving it thorough expression? Lévinas takes erotic desire as being the equivocal, to be between being and non-being, something quasi-impossible to grasp – what can one say of such a thing?

Yet love pervades the human experience uniquely, without it, it is hard to imagine the meaning of human life and its motivations. This all-pervading nature of love is reason enough to think of the topic seriously, that is, philosophically. But to think philosophically is often assumed to mean in the abstract, but since human life involves all people, and not only philosophers, such abstraction remains sometimes unsatisfying to the questions which concern concrete individuals.

Plato's "ladder of love" contains a "lower" section, that of romantic or sensible love, and a "higher" section (contemplating the form of the Beautiful), yet some commentators point out that Plato giving sensibility such seemingly low value is characteristic of philosophy's contempt towards the sensible, the immanent, and so on; it remains a slight blind-spot in the *Symposium*'s noble quest for the Idea. To not neglect this aspect of human experience, we decided to look closely at the *meaning* of interpersonal love¹, since its all-pervading reality strikes the very core of human existence. To do so, we will look at Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*. In investigating the details of romantic love, interpreted as the "lower" section of the Platonic ladder,² we shall find that there are key lessons and moments in these encounters which constitute spiritual growth, without which, the continuation of one's "ascent" towards the higher reaches of love is halted. To know how to love other persons precedes love for knowledge. "Platonic love" is commonly

¹ In this case and all future cases, unless stated or in the context clearly used otherwise, meant as a romantic encounter.

² Although to claim that love of individual persons is "lower" for Plato than love of what is beautiful and good in itself is somewhat problematic, since much of Platonic teaching is oriented on encounters with other people, in dialogue for example. Yet Vlastos' essay ("The Individual as Object of Love in Plato") on the subject, argues rather convincingly that if we take the account of the "ascent" rather strictly, it reduces the individual to something good or beautiful only in relation to their participation in the good or beautiful. Of course, the conclusion is far from straightforward, yet it seems such a claim holds some weight and is mentioned by other commentators, who admittedly may have gotten such a notion from Vlastos himself.

understood as love which is not sensible, to love the other's soul and so on, but if one reads the *Symposium* closely, on which this term is based, one would rather think that "Platonic love" has not much to do with loving other persons, instead of regarding them as worthy of love to the extent that they participate in the form of Beauty.

This paper thus deals with some key motifs of the *Symposium*. The paper attempts a kind of reconstruction of the ascent taken from the perspective of the lover, like Alcibiades is to Socrates, who desires, as Aristophanes expresses in his speech, to be complete (again). But we agree with Plato that love is not the desire for a pre-given and lost unity with the Other. And thus, the lover who desires wholeness, must come to recognize that love is not the desire to re-unite with another half, and this in itself, I feel, is a necessary step towards loving the Beautiful itself. The perspective of the lover is elaborated with the help of Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*.

After such recognition, or the recognition of the impossibility to possess the Other, we will discuss how our relationship to the Other, especially guided by eros, leads us closer to the knowledge of a philosophic kind. The idea is that the eros of Plato's *Symposium* expresses a metaphysical desire, and this will be looked at with the help of Lévinas' *Totality and Infinity*. Lévinas understands metaphysical desire as aiming towards absolute alterity, thus our relationship with the other as other is a crucial stage to attaining knowledge of a "transcendent" kind, since through our relationship to the other we are able to self-transcend. We will also discuss Lévinas' relationship to Plato as well as how his conception of eros is distinct and differs from Plato's.

This will lead us, finally, to look more closely at the nature of the form of the Beautiful. In the discussion of how Plato conceives of the Beautiful we will look at the pedagogic strategy Plato employs to guide the student towards the form, and the possible misleading of the so-called "GB equation", which simply stands for the synonymous use of the good and the beautiful in the *Symposium*. Lastly, we will also discuss the difficult relationship of Socrates to Alcibiades, and whether the speech of Alcibiades does not raise pertinent questions of Platonism or Socratism.

The paper thus takes us through three stages, starting from the Aristophanic conception of eros and romantic love, then heading towards understanding alterity and the Other through Lévinas, and finally towards the eidos of Beauty and how it may be achieved. In the first two sections are explicit discussions on the ethics of romantic love,

and the ethics of the Other. Throughout the paper we discuss philosophy as an erotic quest and see some problems with this understanding on the basis of both Aristophanes' and Alcibiades' speeches.

The main theme of the paper is therefore that of eros and knowledge, how the two relate, what are the intermediary stages between desire and knowledge, and it attempts to elaborate the relation in three ways: firstly, how desire for the other in the sense of unity with the other becomes transformed into a desire for alterity without implying unity or totality. Secondly, as this simple desire for unity with the beloved becomes metaphysical desire for alterity or the Idea, we elaborate how eros in its relation to Otherness, in the sense of helping the subject "self-transcend" is guided by alterity, towards the "most-high". Thirdly, how does one, having gone through previous stages of transforming desire, then recognizing alterity, and therefore realizing one's metaphysical desire, attain the form of the Beautiful, if the Idea may be understood as radically other.

Eros and Erotic Desire:

What is love / the Eros?

We will not begin with Diotima's doctrine within the *Symposium* and will instead remain at a more elementary level, to try to get a grasp on the experience of erotic desire, which may, under certain circumstances, help us arrive towards the ultimate object.³ And in so doing we are at the same time trying to demonstrate that within everyday romantic encounters, is already contained (latently) both the possibility to grasp the ultimate object, and also something universal in the topic of erotic desire, love, and the human condition, as Eryximachus says, "Love pervades the bodies of all animals and all that is produced in the earth, which means that Love pervades virtually everything that exists. [...] I know how great and wonderful the god is and how his influence extends over all things both humans and divine."⁴

Roland Barthes' work *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*⁵, brings us the perspective of the lover towards the beloved. The purpose of using this work alongside the *Symposium* is to find parallel lines, contrary views, and sometimes intertwining ones, between the perspective of the lover and parts of the *Symposium* and to investigate whether the symbolic and empiric structure (or, the image-repertoire) demonstrated by Barthes' does not adhere to the Platonic explanation of the *scala amoris*. Whether the experience of the lover, as represented in Barthes' collection of fragments, who is somehow possessed by the eros, does not correspond to the Platonic teaching of love as a philosophical notion, or otherwise said, love as an instrument which under certain conditions guides the lover towards knowledge of the Beautiful and the Good. Which means, that in romantic encounters one goes through certain transformative experiences which have an ethical effect on the lover, who then, recognizing the ethical aspects of love, grows and "ascends".

³ It is, of course, not in advance clear what the ultimate object is, according to the *Symposium* it would be the form of the Beautiful, but to understand and grasp the form is nothing straightforward and perhaps only reserved for a few, yet the suggestion is that, whatever the form may be, to help in our ascent toward it, it is necessary to look at the lessons of romantic encounters, which are crucial for how eros expresses itself in human life.

⁴ Plato. *The Symposium* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008), 186b.

⁵ Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (London, Vintage Classics, 2002).

In order to begin enquiring into the question of love / the eros⁶ we need some working definition, which is provided by Plato in the *Symposium*, described and reinterpreted here by Irigaray:

“For love, or Eros, the demonstration is not so difficult to establish. For, if Eros possessed all that he desired, he would desire no more. He must lack, therefore, in order to desire still. But, if love had nothing at all to do with beautiful and good things, he could not desire them either. Thus, he is an intermediary in a very specific sense. Does he therefore lose his status as a God? Not necessarily. He is neither mortal nor immortal: he is between the one and the other. Which qualifies him as demonic. Love is a demon – his function is to transmit to the gods what comes from men and to men what comes from the gods. Like everything else that is demonic, love is complementary to gods and to men in such a way as to join everything with itself.”⁷

The eros is therefore not something passive and in-itself, completely outside the phenomenal realm, like a God separated from humans. Love is rather that which mediates human desire and the realm of things divine, the Platonic-Socratic-Diotimic definition claims that love is *generative activity*, which gives birth in the beautiful.⁸ The eros is not a totality, nor is it in this case used as a fundamental ‘life instinct’ in contrast to the thanatos, as used by Freud⁹, although it certainly inspires life i.e. giving birth to children, life-loving instinct, etc. Eros is not a totality in the sense that it is something whole and enclosed in-itself, it is a being in-between, not in the sense that human beings are inter-esse (to be between [things]), but a kind daemon which unites opposite terms, mortal-immortal, poverty-plenty, ignorance-wisdom, etc. Through the act of creation (generative activity), which eros inspires, human activity is elevated beyond the merely mortal and can glimpse the divine.

The emphasis on aesthetic creation is very important in the context of the *Symposium*, the generative activity of eros is founded upon Beauty itself, eros is this quest towards ultimate beauty. “It is not possible to give birth in what is ugly, only in the

⁶ Note: the term *eros* and love are used interchangeably, but sometimes it will be more appropriate to refer to the eros whereas at other moments the term ‘love’ will suffice.

⁷ Irigaray, Luce. Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato, *Symposium*, “Diotima’s Speech” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 22.

⁸ Plato. *The Symposium*, 206b.

⁹ Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London, Penguin Books, 2004).

beautiful.”¹⁰ To give birth really means, to create (*poesis*), and thus the question of eros is not only about love in the interpersonal sense, perhaps interpersonal love is rather unimportant in the ladder of Love, but rather that humans beings’ erotic desire is fundamentally regulated by the *eidos* of beauty, and that love is not necessarily about loving individual persons, it is about loving what is both beautiful and good in itself, which individual persons embody and ‘participate’ in, only to the extent that individual persons are partaking in what is both beautiful and good itself are they worthy of love. We will return to the question of the beautiful and the question of individual persons at a later point, it is however worth emphasizing at this stage, since to understand the task of philosophy in relation to eros, as defined by Plato in the *Symposium*, we must understand that philosophical activity is determined by its ability to give birth in the beautiful, to cognize the transcendent notion of Beauty (or Good). But to sublimate and to make things beautiful is not simply about abstraction, this form of philosophical activity is aesthetic in the sense of lived and concrete, pedagogic in the sense that there is a particular notion and understanding about love, not just any kind, which should be taught. However, this is not an attack on abstraction or abstract knowledge, it seems on the other hand that to attain this abstract form of knowledge, knowledge of the Idea, we must begin rather from things which are immanent, without necessarily claiming temporal priority to immanence rather than transcendence, but it would seem illogical to claim that the transcendent Idea is what is first in experience. For this reason alone, we would rather try to reconstruct the ladder of love from one’s involvement in concrete existence, specifically by looking at the perspective of the lover in a romantic encounter.

In the speech of Aristophanes, love is seen as the desire to return to an original whole being, this represents some pre-philosophical understanding of love, but it plays a crucial role in the *Symposium*, which we will discuss in more detail shortly. There are however big issues with understanding love in such a way, yet the commonness of this notion means that there is a certain understanding which is necessary in order to realize the more profound and important notion of love, which does not aim at a return, but aims at loving “higher” things. Most of this section aims to get to the bottom of this desire and show how by realizing its limits one attains another step towards Beauty.

¹⁰ Plato, *The Symposium*, 206c.

Interpersonal love is sometimes evidently pathetic, pitiful, causing despair and pessimism – but if looked at carefully and as a kind of educative process towards maturity, both by individual persons i.e. pedagogues like Diotima, but also by the activity of eros itself in the sense of propelling things to constantly *create* and *become*, this human love which is full of misery may become transformed to be seen as the beginning point of attaining more profound and valuable insights into the question of love.

“All love would be creation, potentially divine, a path between the condition of the mortal and that of the immortal. Love is fecund before all procreation. And it has a *mediumlike, demonic* fecundity. Assuring everyone, male and female, the immortal becoming of the living. But there cannot be procreation of a divine nature in what is not in harmony. And harmony with the divine is not possible for the ugly, but only for the beautiful. [...] The aim of love is to realize the immortality in the mortality between lovers.”¹¹

We would like to show how the language and experience of the lover¹², one undergoes an experience which brings one into a decisive encounter with oneself, and ultimately in these interpersonal experiences comes to know not only something about love and amorous relationships but comes closer to attaining knowledge of the other and potentially even knowledge of a philosophic kind.

I would like to deal with the elementary expression of the desire for unity (with the beloved) and show how in this elementary expression, in the desire for a complete unity with the other, the subject is, perhaps unconsciously, expressing a desire for unity which completely transcends the individual beloved person.¹³ And how the very rules of love, the ethics of love, resist the possession of the beloved.

¹¹ Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 25-6

¹² Phenomenologically this experience is voluptuousness as described in Lévinas' *Totality and Infinity: "Phenomenology of Eros"* where it is a 'pure experience', characterized by impatience, and irreducible to any concept or idea, voluptuousness can be said to be the thing Barthes describes in guiding us through the lover's discourse.

¹³ Yet that unity or 'wholeness' may be problematic too, for perhaps what we desire to unite with is completely other and impossible to appropriate, as we shall see later with Lévinas, thus the whole notion of love as "uniting" with some Other may be completely misleading.

Aristophanes' Myth and Tragedy

Aristophanes, with reference to this desire for unity with the beloved, describes the “third gender” androgynous being, showing the absurd conclusion of the desire for total unity, in the sense of being enveloped in the arms of the beloved,

“Once upon a time our anatomy was quite different from what it is now. In the first place there were not merely two sexes as there are now, male and female, but three, and the third was a combination of the other two. This sex itself has disappeared but its name, androgynous, [...] only the name now exists, and that as a term of insult. ‘Secondly, the form of every person was completely round, with back and sides making a circle, and with four arms, the same number of legs, and two faces exactly alike set on a round neck. There was one head for the two faces (which looked in opposite ways), four ears, two sets of genitals and everything else as you might guess from these particulars. [...] Whenever they wanted to move fast they pushed off from the ground and quickly wheeled over and over in a circle with their eight limbs, like those acrobats who perform cartwheels by whirling round with their legs straight out.’”¹⁴

The myth of the origin elicits some important considerations; the question of the human condition and our longing for the other, the difficulty or impossibility of the fulfillment of this longing, yet a strong underlying idea that at the origin of things we were united. Secondly, that there is a threat and an indictment for philosophy in this origin myth, explained at a later point.

A great amount of melancholy and unfulfillment comes from the popular myth, given by Aristophanes, that there is the other half out there, if one searches long enough, hard enough, believes enough in finding the true other half. And it seems quite unnecessary to suffer for this myth, if, as Plato suggests, this origin myth does not truly represent the desire of eros.

“*to sigh*: [...] the two halves of the androgyne sigh for each other, as if each breath, being incomplete, sought to mingle with the other: the image of the embrace, in that it

¹⁴ Plato, *The Symposium*, 189d – 190a.

melts the two images into a single one: in amorous absence, I am, sadly, an *unglued image* that dries, yellows, shrivels.”¹⁵

Aristophanes offers a tragic mythos at the core of human life, “return is no longer possible”¹⁶ from that original wholeness. Though the tragedy is two-fold, one side of course concerns humans’ separateness despite that original whole, thus defining the human condition as fundamentally tragic, the other concerns the danger in the quest of philosophical eros, against the *hubris* of philosophy, the Aristophanic myth warns that in this state of wholeness humans attempted to challenge the gods, and thus in philosophy’s attempt to return to that state of wholeness¹⁷, we again may face the dangers of mounting such a challenge, McGuirk claims this is in philosophy’s quest for self-sufficiency and independence from the gods, Socrates too can be seen in his insolence towards Alcibiades as being guilty of this.¹⁸

The Aristophanic myth plays a central role in the construction of the *Symposium*, it offers an explanation of human life as tragedy and provides a motive to the erotic quest, to return to that original unity, there is however a danger in that, which Aristophanes mentions as the “threat to the gods” which the whole being poses prior to separation, this can be read as a warning of the zeal of such a complete being, and it is necessary to take it into account when dealing with the question of philosophical eros. But we will return to the question of philosophy in more detail later.

We have established therefore that the very core of human life and its meaning is determined by a longing, and this longing represents a *gap* to be filled, something which may make us feel complete. It offers human life a motive, and this gap or lack, creates the desire to reach outside of oneself and go beyond oneself¹⁹, thus offering not only an existential explanation in terms of what kind of ‘mood’ (Stimmung) this longing is, but also a concrete teleology, to find a real solution to the problem of life posed by erotic

¹⁵ Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 15.

¹⁶ McGuirk, James. *Eros, Otherness, Tyranny: The Indictment and Defense of the Philosophical Life in Plato, Nietzsche, and Lévinas* (Nordhausen, Verlag Traugott Bautz, 2017), p. 19.

¹⁷ It should be clarified that this is not the explicit statement of the text as such or the position of Socrates, McGuirk however reads the speech of Aristophanes as a warning (rather given by Plato) for the aims of philosophical eros, and that the myth he tells promotes a cautious approach in erotic striving.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 20.

¹⁹ It should be noted that this is no longer in reference to Aristophanes’ myth, which aims for what is “same”, this rather foreshadows our discussion of Lévinas and Socrates’ speech where eros, at least more explicitly for Lévinas, aims towards the other rather than the same.

desire. On the other hand, we could dispose of the Aristophanic myth that love is an attempt to return to the original unity, the lack can rather be seen as a positive force to search outwardly for alterity, Plato rejects this myth and claims that instead of returning, eros is fundamentally creative and generative rather than seeking a “lost origin”. But whichever interpretation one prefers, the definitiveness of insufficiency, whether seen as negative or positive, is determinate – and nonetheless Aristophanes’ tragic myth is a compelling way to understand human longing.

Love has an overwhelmingly powerful effect on the amorous subject, when one “falls in love”, is “possessed by love” the entire world appears differently, and it is unclear within the experience of love, why this happens and where it may lead – but what is certain is that one is heavily affected by it, to such an extent that at its most intensive moments it becomes a delirious fixation, hallucinatory, sometimes psychotic – and the intensity of these psychological states, including the profound mourning one experiences at separation, all caused by and in the name of love, forces the amorous subject to try to understand what this means, and I would claim that the meaning becomes imminent in the final instance of the amorous encounter, where one learns something of ethical value, what is the final instance will be discussed shortly.

In the following quotes we see how the subject, being possessed by amorous desire, experiences unusual and extreme psychic states which are otherwise unattainable, and rarely experienced,

“I gladly abandon dreary tasks, rational scruples, reactive undertakings imposed by the world, for the sake of useless task deriving from a dazzling Duty: the lover’s Duty. I perform, discreetly, lunatic chores; I am the sole witness of my lunacy.”²⁰

And,

“Sometimes the world is *unreal* [...] my rejection of reality is pronounced through a *fantasy*: everything around me changes value in relation to a function, which is the Image-repertoire²¹; the lover then cuts himself off from the world, he unrealizes it because

²⁰ Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p 23.

²¹ The image-repertoire refers to the set of images the amorous subjects play over and over which constitute the basis of their experiencing the amorous encounter.

he hallucinates from another aspect the peripeteias or the utopias of his love; he surrenders himself to the Image, in relation to which all “reality” disturbs him.”²²

²²*ibid.* p 90.

The Teaching of Romantic Love

Dmitri's amorous quest in *The Brothers Karamazov*²³, as an example of a universalist struggle in love, which, as Irigaray says, "is fecund"²⁴, demonstrates how in the amorous quest is contained the possibility of a kind a redemption, where Dmitri, being in love with Grushenka all the while she seemingly keeps him at a distance, in his absolute honesty concerning this desire towards her, attains some fulfillment of such a desire. And beyond that, Dmitri having no serious occupations in life besides his amorous quests and squabbles with his father, is erotically involved in life, this brings him into many uncanny situations, but by pursuing the ends of his desires, he attains redemption in his romantic quest as well as in his clear conscience.

Another example of this erotic struggle could be shown in Voltaire's *Zadig; or, The Book of Fate*²⁵. Where the protagonist, Zadig, has several love interests throughout his fateful adventures, and we see how, the intertwined nature of love and life, where life is defined by the struggle to find love (to be whole again), creates a motive for human existence. Not only that, Zadig, being guided by both romantic and philosophic love, having specific love-interests and entanglements, but at the same time being devoted to philosophy and, somewhat against his will, politically, finds a way to overcome his misfortunes, his fateful accidents, his injustices, and in the end achieves some form of redemption – thereby also attaining the redemption of his romantic and lived struggles. This paper attempts to demonstrate that love, in the sense of encompassing love of ... (people, discourses, laws, science, knowledge, and finally Beauty itself), as a fundamental driver of creative activity, helps individuals involved in this activity to attain their heights in whichever form of life, be it philosophical, artistic, political, and so on. But also by being involved in life in an erotic way and pursuing the ends of such desires, one attains the truth of those desires and encounters which are important for resolving one's "fate" in life.

There are however two problems with defining the quest of eros in these terms (the fictional stories of Zadig and Dmitri), they may be erotic in the Platonic sense to some extent, *but*, in Plato's doctrine it is unclear whether the path of philosophical eros should

²³ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York - London, Everyman's Library, 1992).

²⁴ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 25.

²⁵ Voltaire, *Zadig, ou la Destinée* (Paris, Gallimard, 1999).

lead one away from romanticism, away from bodily pleasures, and towards celibacy. It is essentially a question of what kind of asceticism, if any, is required under the rule of philosophical eros. What is practically required in one's erotic quest towards philosophical knowledge. The other problem is that by using these two examples, which are both fictional, we do not want to narrow the possibility of what an erotico-philosophic quest may entail, nor promote a certain archetypal form of life suited for the pursuit of philosophic knowledge which at the same time encompasses a fulfillment of interpersonal relationships.

At a certain stage, the desire may be fulfilled, one is reunited with the beloved in an 'embrace', they feel rapturous and elated, as if this unity, and the unity of the embrace is eternal – and as if the mundanity of everyday reality cannot penetrate the utopia of the embrace. This is, scandalously for the lover, impossible, the rapturous feeling cannot last, nor can the embrace, and at a certain moment the amorous subject must give up, exile themselves from the Image-repertoire and the intensity of their amorous experience. This realization however, that one cannot replicate perpetually the total fulfillment of love (in the romantic sense), which one attains at a certain moment in the amorous adventure, is a cause of misery and suffering, but also of change and a point in maturing thanks to the educative value of eros, there is something of foreshadowing in the wish for continuous possession of the lover.

“Exile from the Image-repertoire. Deciding to give up the amorous condition, the subject sadly discovers himself exiled from his Image-repertoire. In real mourning, it is the “test of reality” which shows me that the loved object has ceased to exist. In amorous mourning, the object is neither dead nor remote. It is I who decide that its image must die. As long as this strange mourning lasts, I will therefore have to undergo two contrary miseries: to suffer from the fact that the other is present and to suffer from the fact that the other is dead (dead at least as I loved him). If exile from the Image-repertoire is the necessary road to “cure,” it must be admitted that such progress is a sad one.”²⁶

Here Barthes' describes the sobering curing from the venomous bite “Lovers, Alcibiades says, are like those a viper has bitten”²⁷. The lover suffers a different kind of withdrawal, not physical, but spiritual, mourning takes place, as if the beloved has died.

²⁶ Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p 106.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 212.

The utopia of union with the beloved dissolves, realizing its impossibility the lover mourns its death. Love is a kind of sickness, and its cure is very heavy, it is like experiencing the loss of a loved one, one endures serious suffering, one may be said to be brought into a tragic situation – there is consolation in this experience however, in that the power and intensity of it really gives way for its subject to be transformed.

Yet why this suffering, why the intense fixation on the beloved. Does it not seem unnecessary to suffer for love of another when there is all the world to know, and all kinds of things that are possible to do in the world. Yet in almost all great stories, fiction or not, an entanglement of love plays an important role. There is something very peculiar about this fact, about the very central role that eros plays in human life, and how almost everyone in one way or another encounters this eros and finds that they are taught crucial lessons by those experiences. In the individuals, who have learnt the tough lessons of love, exists a recognition of an important teaching, which renders the individual a mature one, a mature lover, vs. an immature one.

We can also distinguish the mature and immature love, as Pausanias did, between “Common Love”, and “Heavenly Love”²⁸, where Pausanias emphasizes that “Only if it is done in the right and proper way is it right; if not, it is wrong. Now, the same is true of loving and of Love: not every Love is right and deserves our praise, only the Love who directs us to love in the right way.” Pausanias continues, talking about Common Aphrodite, saying “This is the Love that inferior people experience. In the first place men of this sort love women quite as much as boys, and secondly, their bodies more than their souls, and thirdly, the stupidest people possible, since they have regard only for the act itself and do not care whether it is rightly done or not. Hence their activity is governed by chance, and as likely to be bad as good. The reason is that the Common Aphrodite, with whom this Love is associated, is far younger than the other Aphrodite”.²⁹ Pausanias remarks the importance of maturity in the Heavenly Love, yet for him this consists of loving boys, but the mark of Heavenly love is precisely in loving the maturity of intellect, here we are presenting some different aspect of maturity, but it is clear that mature love is the sort which is preferable and virtuous.

²⁸ Plato, *The Symposium*, 180e.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 181a.

This crucial point concerning maturity for Barthes, is the following, “Realizing that the difficulties of the amorous relationship originate in his ceaseless desire to appropriate the loved being in one way or another, the subject decides to abandon henceforth all “will-to-possess” in his regard.”³⁰ Therefore maturity here consists of a kind of love which no longer wishes to possess, and this overcoming of the will-to-possess is itself the moment of maturation in love.

For Lévinas, the nature of love’s desire differs from all other economic types of desires, where, like with hunger or thirst, satisfaction is attainable,

“Compare eating with loving, which occurs beyond economic activity and the world. For what characterizes love is an essential and insatiable hunger. [...] *The very positivity of love lies in its negativity.* The burning bush that feeds the flames is not consumed. The trouble one feels before the beloved does not only precede what we call, in economic terms, possession, but is felt in the possession too. In the random agitation of caresses there is the admission that access is impossible, violence fails, possession is refused. There is also the ridiculous and tragic simulation of devouring in kissing and love-bites. It is as though one had made a mistake about the nature of one’s desire and had confused it with hunger which aims at something, but which one later found out was a hunger for nothing.”³¹

That love at first appears as a game of possession, to the immature lover, is the crucial lesson of love, possession is not only impossible, but its attempt can be characterized as rather unethical. On the contrary, I would argue, the ethical value of the game of love in its elementary phase, is precisely to be taught to overcome the will-to-possess, to let things be the way they are:

“For the notion of N.W.P. (non-will-to-possess) to be able to break with the system of the Image-repertoire, I must manage to let myself drop somewhere outside of language, into the inert, and in a sense, quite simply, *to sit down* (“As I sit calmly, without doing anything, spring comes and grass grows of its own accord”). And again the Orient: not to try to possess the non-will-to-possess; to let come (from the other) what comes, to let pass

³⁰ Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 232.

³¹ Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Existence and Existents* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 43.

(from the other) what goes; to possess nothing, to repel nothing: to receive, not to keep, to produce without appropriating, etc.”³²

In the final moment then, even before the non-will-to-possess becomes the theme of interpersonal love, there is the moment of the fade-out, “Like a kind of melancholy mirage, the other withdraws into infinity and I wear myself out trying to get there.”³³ The beloved has been let go, the fixation towards the image too, one experienced a kind of “*historical hallucination*”³⁴ in that the Image-repertoire was some kind of illusory fabrication of the amorous subject possessed by eros, this image vanishes like a cloud of smoke, one returns to themselves as if from a reverie.

The violent game of possession, previously understood as love, is certainly not love, love for the other is something else, one must learn to love the other as the other, not under the guise of appropriation nor identity. In the letting go of this impotent amorous quest, a new horizon should open up to the subject possessed by eros, not the horizon of Being per se, the horizon previously preoccupied by the beloved is now left open for something else, and this is the next development we would like to follow in the general quest of philosophical eros, we now would like to open the horizon no longer crazed by the Aristophanic myth, which unconsciously wishes to unite and pose a threat to the gods, in a zealous quest for totality, possession, and identity. Yet we must make an important point here, although on the one hand possession is impossible, the crucial lesson in this resistance to possession is that of otherness presenting itself, and precisely through the knowledge of the other, does love become, as we saw earlier “fecund”, resulting in birth and generation. And these are the two sort of essential values that we can derive from interpersonal love,

“Prior to any procreation, the lovers bestow on each other –life. Love fecundates both of them in turn, through the genesis of their immortality. [...] The mystery of relations between lovers is more terrible but infinitely less deadly than the destruction of submitting to sameness.”³⁵

³² Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*. p. 234.

³³ *ibid.* p. 112.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 197.

³⁵ Irigaray. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 190.

The new horizon therefore, is that of encountering other beings *as they are*, letting them show themselves of their own accord in their own authenticity, making love properly fecund for creation, and this presents us a new morality, not the morality of possession and totality, but contrarily, an ethics of the other as other, and beyond that too. What one would hope to achieve in this encountering of the Other in its authenticity, meaning as other, is to develop a relation which is a necessary step towards “higher” knowledge. In our encounter with the Other, we are not merely engaging in a kind of simple social contact. The encounter with the Other has a much more transcendent element which should lead the lover towards contemplating more “philosophical” matters, or the Idea.

Encountering the Other as Other:

Self-Transcendence

There can be several meanings given to this somewhat ambiguous term “other”, specifically in relation to the aim of this paper. The first can be simply and commonly known as the not-me, that self-consciousness which is not the I but that of the other self-consciousness. The other here can also be meant as not only other as another self-consciousness, but even beyond self-consciousness we might encounter the other as the absolutely other of metaphysics. We can also take the other as the other sex, meaning that we put into work the giving of the feminine/feminist perspective its due place in the discourse on love, Lévinas in his early works equates alterity to the feminine, and Diotima being a primary reference, it is also the encounter with the feminine other which offers the teaching of eros, taking the role of eros the philosopher typically ascribed to Socrates. I will try to say something about each of these others and specifically why philosophical desire, related here to the eros, is related, develops our relation to the other.

First we might want to ask the question of why the other is at all relevant to the question of eros in the quest for its ultimate object. In the previous section we discussed the experience of the lover possessed by eros, whose fixation on the beloved remains a game of appropriation and possession. The other in its alterity, in its refusal to be possessed, creates for this consciousness a way out of itself and its sort of solipsistic totality. A way for the immature lover to realize that the alterity of the other is irreducible. This means that in the gaze of the other one must recognize not merely a reflection of themselves, but something that comes of its own accord, something which cannot be grasped under the concept or under an ontologistic pretense.³⁶ This is relevant for eros because, as Lévinas says, “It [intersubjectivity] is brought about by Eros”³⁷. I do not wish to get into a deep discussion of intersubjectivity, only to the extent that intersubjectivity is created by this recognition of the other whose content is alterity itself. Eros is precisely the force that, due to its nature as *desire*, desire for the other, desire for unity with the beloved, desire for creative expression, etc. forces the subject out of itself and to enter into contact

³⁶ Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 45-6.

³⁷ Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 94.

not only with an authentic other, but to enter society as well, constituted by the plurality of others,

“It is alterity, in the guise of the other, the appeal and the demand of the other that faces, that comes to draw the self-identical existent out of itself – and make it exist, that is transcend itself and be temporal.”³⁸

This is a crucial step in the erotic quest and in our demonstration of philosophical eros’ value, for it presupposes an openness, if not an immanent understanding, to the horizon of other beings showing themselves in their own light, not merely as reflections of our own, and to the horizon of otherness more generally. In our quest for knowledge, stemming from simple desire, recognition of radical alterity is a fecundity for knowledge itself, of eternal things as well as of creation.

The erotic is constituted by alterity, in the previous section we focused more closely on the internal experience of the lover, but in this internal experience was always hidden its outward dimension, that the lover desires the other, is therefore outwardly oriented towards alterity. Yet we also saw that ambiguity and mystery play an important role in the signification of love and desire, and for Lévinas, this ambiguity is the erotic as such,

“An enjoyment of the transcendent almost contradictory in its terms, love is stated with truth neither in erotic talk where it is interpreted as sensation nor in the spiritual language which elevates it to being a desire of the transcendent. The possibility of the Other appearing as an object of a need while retaining his alterity, or again, the possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time beneath and beyond discourse – this position with regard to the interlocutor which at the same time reaches him and goes beyond him, this simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and the unavowable, constitutes the originality of the erotic which, in this sense, is the equivocal par excellence.”³⁹

The above quotation explains that the equivocal which is erotic “par excellence” offers itself by holding onto a sort of contradiction in terms, for example having the need for the other which implies proximity, yet maintaining a definitive distance which respects the alterity of the other. It is expressed in a maintaining of tension. Eros is the realm of

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 12.

³⁹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 255.

ambiguity and tension, that which, when stated, often comes across as awkward, incomplete, because something about erotic relation cannot be said, neither by unconscious bodily expression, nor by language,

“What is presented as the failure of communication in love in fact constitutes the positive character of the relationship; his absence of the other is precisely his presence qua other.”⁴⁰

But the equivocation Lévinas has in mind goes beyond a failure to communicate, it is practically a metaphysical ambivalence in the way eros quasi-reveals itself, in the sense that it is a sort of half-revelation, “Not nothingness – but what is not yet.”⁴¹ This has a lot to do with what the desire of love aims at, as a desire for nothing it cannot wholly seize its object, like the desire for food, and the nothing can never really become something, it therefore stays in the equivocal realm of ‘not yet’, like in the caress of the lover, which “consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form towards a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*”⁴²

Is the beloved not, however, a bodily being, an existent? And cannot this existent being be wholly understood in its spatio-temporal dimension? From a certain perspective it seems reasonable to ask such a question, but the crux of the issue is that eros does not truly desire the other being’s body, their physical being, or to appropriate their otherness, eros desires transcendence *beyond being*, “It *searches*, it forages. It is not an internationality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible.”⁴³

Even in the very sensibility of the caress, “the caress transcends the sensible.” As one tries to touch something untouchable, yet this desire being embodied in an other, in the caress, Lévinas writes, one “seeks *what is not yet*, a “less than nothing,” closed and dormant beyond the *future*”⁴⁴ and further, “The carnal, the tender par excellence correlative of the caress, the beloved, is to be identified neither with the body-thing of the physiologist, [...] nor with the body-expression, or face. In the caress, a relation yet, in one aspect, sensible, the body already denudes itself of its very form, offering itself as erotic nudity. In the carnal given to tenderness, the body quits the status of an existent.”

⁴⁰ Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 95.

⁴¹ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 256.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 257.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 258.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The point is that in the expression of eros, in the caress, one cannot truly reach that “thing” which eros aims at, the sensible aspect of the caress, sensibility is not really at stake, rather the body is already self-transcendent when one touches upon its sensible aspect, it “denudes itself of its form” as Lévinas writes, meaning that, in the expression of erotic desire, one really aims at that which transcends the sensible while retaining the necessity of this transcendence being mediated by the immanent and bodily, thus keeping those two “contradictory” aspects together. This is the pertinent point of Lévinas in his understanding of eros, erotic desire aims at the transcendent, but achieves this through the mediation⁴⁵ of the immanent, or the bodily, yet one never really leaves the immanent for the transcendent, rather maintaining the two together.

In the initial stage of erotic desire as we presented, the lover desires a rather simple unity with the beloved, or desires the Same. In this stage the lover now desires to know the Other as Other. Yet the eros of Lévinas, in its phenomenological dimension, tries to show how the desire for the sensible, which is correlative of needing and desiring the Other, mediates the process of transcending oneself. And this is done precisely because in the caress the sensible touch, touches something which is quasi-transcendent, thus in the pursuit of erotic desire one overcomes the sensible, to some degree.

⁴⁵ Using the term “mediation” seems problematic in relation Lévinas philosophy, it seems that Lévinas is trying to demonstrate the value of unmediated relation with the Other. The way this term is used here however, means that it is not the contact with the Other which is mediated by a third term, but that the direct relation to the Other itself mediates a process of transcendence.

Femininity and Eros

Lévinas places great importance in the phenomenology of eros not only to the caress, which as we saw is far from a sensible affair, there is also the dimension of eros which is essentially feminine which we have not mentioned yet, as well as the experience of voluptuousness. And again, the feminine, as the Other, is mediating erotic desire, the desire of the lover, in the process of achieving transcendence.

Lévinas writes that “Love aims at the Other; it aims at him in his frailty.”⁴⁶ He continues, “To love is to fear for another, to come to the assistance of his frailty. In this frailty as in the dawn rises the Loved, who is the Beloved. [...] The epiphany of the Beloved is but one with her *regime* of tenderness. The *way* of the tender consists in an extreme fragility, a vulnerability.”⁴⁷ A few lines further Lévinas defines femininity, saying: “The simultaneity or the equivocation of this fragility and this weight of non-signifyingness, heavier than the weight of the formless real, we shall term *femininity*.”⁴⁸ This feminine represents that notion which correlates to the erotic experience, because it is the feminine which is the untouchable-touchable, inviolable-violable, both sensible and impossible to grasp – because it completely avoids and refuses to become significant, it is a sort of non-essence which is hard to express, the only terms in which it can be expressed are the terms of equivocation. As mentioned before, it is like something which is *almost* being, but remains always on the threshold between being and non-being. Not entirely insignificant but refusing signification, refusing grasping, totalizing, appropriation and so on. While the male-dominated society struggles for totality the feminine eros is what defends the worth of alterity, in the encounter with the feminine we are brought toward alterity. It is, at the same time, precisely by being this ungraspable-graspable, a constant recommencement, it cannot be fully grasped, one touches its surface but does not quite touch *it*, cannot quite get a hold of *it* – every new encounter with the feminine is a renewed encounter, an inviolate virginity, “future in the present”⁴⁹.

The femininity of Lévinas’ eros goes beyond its phenomenology, it has the clear association to the critical questions of feminist philosophy. Lévinas valorizes the feminine in this chapter, the feminine is more beautiful, more intelligent, and through the feminine

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p.256.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 258.

one comes to experience eros, which means that in approaching it, it seduces in such a way that its clandestinity is revealed without violating its secrecy, “*The essentially hidden throws itself toward the light, without becoming signification.*”⁵⁰ and “Alongside of the night as anonymous rustling of the *there is* extends the night of the erotic, behind the night of insomnia the night of the hidden, the clandestine, the mysterious, land of the virgin, simultaneously uncovered by *Eros* and refusing *Eros* – another way of saying: profanation.”⁵¹

Next to the *Symposium* we have an ambiguous relationship to femininity. Secomb articulates this ambiguity in her book, *Philosophy and love from Plato to popular culture*, writing: “While the homoeroticism of the *Symposium* challenges heterosexual dominance [...]. Nevertheless, within Plato’s text itself the subordination of the feminine is already to some extent reversed by positioning Diotima as the teacher of Socrates. While ancient Greek homoerotics appear to have been founded on a pedagogical relation in which the older man instructed the younger, in the *Symposium* a woman takes the place of the older teacher and it is she who instructs Socrates, now positioned as the pupil. The *Symposium* then contains an internal, implicit and oblique critique of male homoerotic exclusion of the feminine love by recognizing Diotima’s erotic lessons.”⁵² The problem, from the feminist perspective, is that the ‘greater’ creations of the mental kind are associated to men and homoeroticism, through dialogue and love between men, or face-to-face, ‘man-to-man’, Athenian society in its patriarchy has few mention of women anywhere in philosophical spheres, all the members of the drinking party are men, and within the *Symposium* itself is propagated the love of young boys rather than the ‘other’ gender. Yet, as Secomb and others point out, Diotima takes the role of the master-teacher, the one possessing the wisdom of eros, teaching Socrates.

There is also dispute concerning the question of creativity and reproduction in the *Symposium*, the “description of male creative fertility involves a masculine mimicry of feminine reproduction that ultimate displaces and occludes the feminine.”⁵³ Such is one possible interpretation, and seemingly quite feasible, the reproductive effect of eros is seen

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p.259.

⁵² Linnell, Secomb. *Philosophy and Love: From Plato to Popular Culture* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 16.

as on the lower rank of love, making babies, otherwise said, is not correlative to the same extent to the wisdom of the beautiful as the creation of beautiful discourses or other mental procreation, overwhelmingly more attainable in ancient Greek society to men rather than women. On the other hand, we can point out that since the erotic is essentially philosophic in Plato, it is “making female the entire philosophical endeavour”⁵⁴ focused less on agonism and power, and more towards love and procreation. There is certainly more than a hint of proximity to femininity in Platonic eros, it is perhaps, as in Lévinas, embodied most ideally in the feminine, and it seems no coincidence that Diotima is the teacher of eros, in the dialogue presented quasi-mythically, precisely as in Lévinas having this presence which is not exactly being but neither non-being, it resides in this equivocal in-between, immanent-transcendent, touchable-untouchable, divine-mortal, etc.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Lévinas and Plato

Lévinas' analysis of eros is very different to Plato in the sense that Lévinas develops it from a phenomenological perspective, but we see that although in Plato there is not, of course, this phenomenological understanding of eros, dealing with the specificity of subjectivity, experience, and its relation to the 'outside'; what however coincides between Plato and Lévinas here is that eros is basically metaphysical, and Plato is neither exempt or blind to the feminine aspect of eros, yet the relationship is far from straightforward. The eros is metaphysical not in the sense of being a simple being with attributes which can be known and grasped, spatially or temporally, nor that eros is first philosophy or dealing with being qua being – it is precisely metaphysical because eros goes beyond, is transcendent, and it is a question unto itself how this 'beyond' can be known, interpreted, and experienced, but at least for Lévinas it avoids the trappings of ontology since the ontological appropriates alterity into itself, and it is clear that love, the desire itself, aims outwardly towards the other. And as we saw, through the desire of love one comes into relation with the other, becomes more involved with the outwardly, less egoistically-oriented, more attuned to the presence of otherness.

Lévinas considered the Platonic eros as distinct from ethics, but we do not want to get into the complicated ethics of Lévinas, what is crucial is to understand the relation between eros as desire which cannot be satisfied, and metaphysical desire. Lévinas articulates the nature of metaphysical desire in the beginning of *Totality and Infinity* in a way which opens possible lines of interpreting this metaphysical desire, which, being the propelling force towards knowing⁵⁵, coincides with the Platonic eros. It seems that, within the bounds of the argument of this paper, the Platonic eros, being that force, power, or essence, which gives rise to the 'ascent' towards the Good is very much within the same terms as Lévinas' metaphysical desire, although their positions on the question of the Good, Goodness, and ethics differ significantly. And although we are yet to enter into discussion of the nature of the object of our knowing, i.e. what *is* the Good and the Beautiful, we can very much utilize Lévinas' description of metaphysical desire and *what* it desires as a base for dialogue between Lévinas and Plato.

⁵⁵ Although it seems that for Lévinas knowledge of the Good is somewhat unattainable in the Platonic sense, and in fact Lévinas seems to want to separate the knowledge aspect from Goodness.

“It is a desire that cannot be satisfied.”⁵⁶ The desire for metaphysics, like the desire for love, are both left without total satisfaction, which does not render either desire ultimately meaningless, essentially flawed, but in the admission that totality is refused in both erotic and metaphysical desire, alterity comes to the fore. As we argued using Barthes that the valuable lesson of love is the impossibility of possession, so too in Lévinas possession of the other is not only impossible, but the ‘ontologism’ of Western philosophy is a constant attempt at possession, which signifies a move away from ethics, away from the infinite distance between self and other, away from the appeal of the face, and towards impersonal power, reducing others to neutrality in order to totalize the other.⁵⁷

The reason to criticize and avoid this game of possession of the other, is that it leads us nowhere in terms of the development of Goodness (the Good). Totality is an ethical and epistemic cul-de-sac. What metaphysical desire aims at is radical alterity, something irreducible to the same or to simple negativity, which again, implies being bound by a neutral third term. Instead what is at stake, at least in Lévinas, and later we shall discuss how it is in Plato, is opening the horizon of infinity, which in its content as absolutely alterity can neither be reduced nor, which amounts to the same, possessed. And since the question of erotic desire means, for Plato, a striving for the ultimacy of the Idea, which is not however to be equated with Lévinasian alterity, it becomes easy to see how erotic desire corresponds to Lévinas’ conception of metaphysical desire, and how the Platonic Idea corresponds to infinity in the sense that there is some development or ascent towards it. But we shall attempt to discuss this in more detail later.

For now there are a few key points to add and summarize from the above:

1. Eros (as a metaphysical desire) brings one out of the egoism of identity and towards the Idea (alterity) through a kind of metaphysical ‘ascent’, “For Desire this alterity, non-adequate to the idea, has a meaning. It is understood as the alterity of the Other and of the Most-High. The very dimension of height is opened up by metaphysical Desire.”⁵⁸ Although equating these two desires is problematic, and Lévinas claims it is not the same as Platonic desire since its object is not immortality per se but the other, nevertheless we would not so much equate these two desires as claim that in the Platonic

⁵⁶ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 34.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p. 34-5.

desire as eros exists more than a hint of ‘metaphysical desire’. However, there is also the question of whether Platonic metaphysics are not part of the critique Lévinas launches against Western philosophy.

2. We discussed the Aristophanic myth earlier in relation to the tragic origin of humanity, and in relation to the suffering induced in romantic relations. Lévinas suggests that metaphysical desire is not a nostalgia for an origin, like the Aristophanic myth suggests, instead, “Has not Plato, rejecting the myth of the androgynous being presented by Aristophanes, caught sight of the non-nostalgic character of Desire and of philosophy, implying autochthonous existence and not exile?”⁵⁹ This implies that the movement of this desire is an outward one towards alterity and the other rather than backwardly towards some ‘given’ origin, and at the same time implying that within this outward movement one feels at home in the world.

3. Both the Platonic and Lévinasian eros have come under criticism for their apparent valorization of masculinity, or ‘othering’ the feminine. But as we saw both in Plato and Lévinas this sexualization of eros is rather complicated and at least from my own perspective there seems no good reason to believe that Lévinas diminishes the worth of femininity but quite contrarily valorizes it, yet in Plato this criticism may hold more ground, however, as we saw the role of Diotima forces us to problematize any simple indictment of Plato in this case.

This section of the paper designates the transition of desire, the simple desiring of love (voluptuousness), into its intermediary stage of recognizing that one does not simply want love per se (in the sense of romantic love), one desires something which transcends existents, but this sort of thing is not possible to possess in the same way that other things are attainable and correspondent to our desires, the question is what sort of thing then, is desired by Eros?⁶⁰

For Lévinas eros does not aim at the absolutely other like metaphysical desire, instead eros does aim towards alterity but does not have the same ethical significance as the appeal of the face, “the erotic relation is characterized as a relation ‘beyond’ or

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 63.

⁶⁰ The simple answer already suggested earlier is that eros desires self-transcendence, yet in its distinct way, which, for Lévinas, distinguishes it from metaphysical desires’ object which has a greater ethical significance, yet it seems that if Plato’s eros also aims at transcendence, it is closer to what Lévinas calls metaphysical desire rather than eros, but we will see later that even such distinctions are hard to maintain.

‘beneath’ the face”⁶¹, the eros is not what corresponds to the Good for Lévinas, unlike for Plato where the eros is clearly, in its ‘philosophical’ ascent, aiming directly for what is good for its own sake. For Lévinas Goodness is to respond to the face, to meet the other in its content as alterity, and this is embodied in metaphysical desire, it seems that Goodness cannot be subsumed into its knowledge-aspect, the appeal of the face is not about knowledge in the sense that one can *know* this type of Goodness like one can know an idea, it is rather experiential and immanent, responding to the face is unequivocal while eros is much more ambiguous, eros does not correspond with Goodness in Lévinas. Whereas for Plato the Good and its knowledge-aspect are harder to distinguish, as is its relation to eros where eros aims at the Good, one comes towards knowledge of the *eidōs* through philosophy. What is however common in Lévinas and Plato is the transcendent element of the Good, yet for Lévinas this amounts to absolute alterity, Lévinas rather “read Platonic eros as ultimately concerned with self rather than alterity.”⁶²

Another key point for Lévinas is related to his critique of Western philosophy altogether, while in Plato knowledge is a virtue, and knowing the Good and doing the Good are found more or less in unison, yet Lévinas finds this problematic, the unity of the thought of being and Goodness, in the sense that Western philosophy’s tendency to ontology reduces otherness which is the source of ethics. Though it seems hard to imagine that Lévinas would agree with the statement that knowing intellectually is a bad thing, but it seems that this kind of abstract knowing does not have the same ethical significance as one’s receptivity to otherness in the appeal of the other.

We attempted to, and I believe justifiably, see the key overlap between Lévinas’ metaphysical desire and Plato’s eros, however Lévinas is rather clear and adamant in *Totality and Infinity* that eros, as Plato conceived, “never escapes the Same and ultimately pursues the fusion of the soul with its other.”⁶³ It is clear in *Totality and Infinity* that Lévinas distances himself from the object of eros in Plato, if it does indeed pursue the Same rather than the Other, since metaphysical desire rather aims at the other absolutely other and eros remains ambivalent and sensuous for Lévinas, being neither too same nor too other. We have nonetheless also seen that despite this problematic difference that

⁶¹ McGuirk, *Eros, Otherness, Tyranny*, p. 196.

⁶² *Ibid.* p. 200.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 202.

Lévinas insists on, it is very compelling to see in Lévinas' metaphysical desire that which Plato describes as eros in the *Symposium*, and to also recognize the fact that metaphysical desire, like Platonic eros, aims at transcendence. So there is certainly a strong element of Platonism in Lévinas' philosophy, despite the key differences that we have demonstrated, "at root Lévinas can still be termed a Platonist and it is around two Platonic insights – the Good beyond Being and desire as the path to Goodness"⁶⁴

Furthermore, these differences seem eased in *Otherwise than Being*, where eros and ethics are less distinct and there are interpretations that claim that "the notions of proximity, of closeness, and of skin caressed. These concepts, so foreign to the description of the ethical relation in *Totality and Infinity*, are now crucial to it."⁶⁵ And again, "Lingis claims insightfully that the "ethical relationship [...] acquires, if not an erotic, a sensuous character"⁶⁶ We see therefore that even for Lévinas, despite his insistence in *Totality and Infinity* that ethics and eros are distinct, that eros does not aim at the Good or Goodness, that it becomes hard to hold that distinction too strictly, eros clearly contains *some* ethical dimension, even for Lévinas. Eros is far from being entirely sexual, and sexuality is not lacking in ethical significance either, but these relations are rather complicated and Lévinas himself seemed to struggle with the Platonic eros and its meaning for ethics and philosophy. Whereas in Plato the ethical significance of eros is undoubted, to the extent that eros goes beyond the merely sensual and it is a question whether the sensual is relegated to insignificance or is appropriated into the higher Good as well. Therefore we either have to admit of eros being completely beyond sensuality and aiming towards the Good and the Beautiful by philosophical practice, or admit of the sensual containing key elements of the ethical as well, and it seems Lévinas comes to take the latter position yet with its own intricacies. It seems rather obvious that sensuality and Goodness are connected, in that through sensuality one expresses care for the other, but in Alcibiades' speech we recognize a criticism of the inhumanity of philosophy which perhaps cares little for the sensual touch of the other.

What we tried to show in this section is that our relation to the Other, being driven by erotic desire, mediates the process of self-transcendence. And thus, coming out of the

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 203.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 210.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 211.

simple desire for unity, is another stage for the subject driven by eros, in attaining something like transcendent knowledge. This occurs in the phenomenological aspect of eros, which, initially aiming at the sensible, finds that in the expression of a sensible desire, in the caress, it is already transcending sensibility. This phenomenology of eros elaborated by Lévinas, helps further to show how in the pre-reflexive understanding of love, as desire for unity with the beloved, and in its full expression, helps the lover, or the subject possessed by eros, to self-transcend, this does not however mean that all lovers attain a love for wisdom, or loving that which is most beautiful in itself, but yet it shows that in the full expression of pre-philosophical understanding of love, one attains an understanding of love which is more akin to a profound and insightful understanding.

At the same time, in this section, we attempted to demonstrate the proximity and distance of Lévinas and Plato in their understanding of eros, its ethical dimension, and the relationship to the feminine. In the following section we will now look at what is the meaning of the philosophical aim of eros, what is the significance and difficulty of the form of the Beautiful, and what are possible criticisms of such an understanding of the aim of philosophy.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ It must be admitted that it is not straightforward or easy to demonstrate how one goes from the self-transcendent aspect of eros in Lévinas towards attaining the form of the Beautiful. And the paper does not elaborate this in great detail, such is a certain limitation of the paper. However, I would suggest that in self-transcending, the subject grasps that which elicits thinking of the *eidōs* of Beauty, in the self-transcendent encounter one would, in my understanding, be *provoked* to think. This is not a strong necessary step for every lover, but for the aim of philosophy it is necessary to contemplate the *eidōs*. Thus we must state that it seems hard to explain how one leaps from the self-transcendence elaborated through Lévinas towards philosophical understanding. And this itself seems a problem in the literature on the *Symposium*, what is the intermediary stage between loving discourses, laws, sciences, etc. and then loving the form of the Beautiful itself? So perhaps we can understand the limitation of my own argument, being unable to exactly demonstrate how from the recognition of and relation to alterity one becomes pregnant with grasping the highest wisdom, as an expression of the difficulty of that leap itself. Instead what the following section tries to do, is to engage with developing an interpretation of the text, what is the meaning of the form of the Beautiful and the Good, its limitations, and of course, what is Plato's suggestion for how to attain and make that leap towards Beauty itself.

The Question of Philosophy and the Idea:

For the rest of this paper we will turn more closely to the *Symposium*, in the current section specifically on the ideal of philosophy which the *Symposium* elicits in its relation to eros. Therefore we raise the question of philosophy on the basis of the *Symposium* but at the same time will look at the criticisms raised against philosophy as hubristic and self-interested. And although it is perhaps necessary that philosophy remains “unsolved”, there is nonetheless much to be said about what kind of activity philosophy is, especially with regards to, and if we accept the thesis that philosophical activity is rooted in, Eros. That thesis raises many questions itself and it will be the goal of this section to attempt to give some preliminary resolution to the question of whether philosophy is an erotic quest or not. It may seem, from the title of this work, that this may be an already foregone conclusion, and although there is strong suggestion from Plato in the *Symposium*, it is a question with many possible answers, it is neither the aim of this paper to presume in advance that this is the case or not – but to look at different viewpoints and what their consequences may mean for philosophy.

At the same time, we would like to keep in mind Lévinas with respect to the *Symposium* and look at whether the idea of philosophy suggested in the *Symposium* doesn't neglect the otherness of the other in its pursuit for virtue and knowledge, such may be a reading of Alcibiades implicit critique of Socrates.

We mentioned the Aristophanic myth earlier in this paper as questioning the interest of philosophical eros, and if in its desire for the rational whole it does not at the same time desire tyranny. In our quest for knowledge we must wonder whether the attainment of this knowledge isn't also a danger, whether in the haughtiness of the ascent, philosophy doesn't lose sight of the ordinary and particular: public life, the political, and as Lévinas points out, receptivity to the other, to concrete persons. Eros tends towards excess, and through careful consideration of the nature of eros, romantic love, our relations to the other, and finally to philosophy and knowledge, one would hopefully like to avoid Eros' tendency for tyranny, but unfortunately it seems that in its excessive nature, eros can become both *Eros Ouranos*, a heavenly eros, and *Eros Turranos*, tyrannical eros.

And if this is the case, then there may be the danger that philosophical eros, too, has this tendency for tyranny. This problem is raised within Plato's corpus itself, and as McGuirk points out: “The trial of Socrates is, in a certain sense, the trial of philosophy.

Socrates is the philosopher *par excellence* and yet he is accused of impiety and corruption, and so the implication is that it is not only Socrates but also philosophy that is impious and corrupt. As apologist, Plato must defend not only Socrates but also Socratic activity; i.e. philosophy.”⁶⁸ The concrete vision of philosophy, as fundamentally erotic, that Plato proposes in the *Symposium* makes it the place where the indictment and defense on philosophy may happen.

It is worth therefore to discuss, first of all, what is philosophy according to the *Symposium*? And to give some basic reasons for why this model may not stand up to criticism levelled against it, as we mentioned, being hubristic, self-interested, and so on. And then further to see if we may find strong counter-arguments which hold the value of philosophical eros firmly against such criticism, or to evaluate which criticism needs to be accounted for seriously, and whether that means that the idea of philosophical eros needs to be reevaluated compared to the original Platonic version.

Philosophy, according to the *Symposium*, is basically erotic.⁶⁹ This raises many problems and questions, all of which in the scope of this paper we cannot possibly try to answer, and within the daunting amount of Platonic literature, its difficulties and manifoldness our analysis of this claim will remain rather superficial, but for the sake of trying to complete the third stage from the lower ranks of love towards beautiful sciences and then towards the transcendent Good – we will try to analyze the meaning of philosophy based in eros.

As we saw earlier, the origin of Eros, as defined by Plato, is being the son of Poros and Penia, both of abundance and poverty. Eros is both lacking and excessive, both rich and poor, and as we wrote earlier, it is the state of in-betweenness which defines eros but always in a way which maintains an ambivalence if not an atopia of Eros. Eros, to some extent, is defined by its ambivalence and escaping definition in the way that an object can be defined by its attributes. What does Eros have in common with the philosopher? The philosopher, too, being neither in possession of knowledge (or the Beautiful), yet not

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 12-3.

⁶⁹ We supported this idea by claiming that in elementary erotic desire, the lover, going to the full end and consequence of this desire, attains an understanding of love which is closer to the expression of Diotima, this is done through the relation to the Other which, allows the lover to transcend towards alterity, thereby not only attaining the end of amorous desire, but also rather expressing and achieving the end of metaphysical desire. Here we discuss in greater detail what is the true object of this metaphysical desire, which is the goal of philosophical eros, the form of Beauty.

content to remain in ignorance (excluded from the form of the Beautiful), is in a constant pursuit of the goal of wisdom. Only gods, Diotima explains, do not strive for wisdom since they are already in possession of it. But human beings, being in the state of in-between, neither in complete ignorance nor in complete possession of wisdom, are always striving for the better end. Not all people recognize the need of this pursuit, not all being aware of their ignorance. Perhaps a crucial element in understanding Platonism is in its pedagogic aspect, as emphasized by Altman in his book *Ascent to the Good*⁷⁰, and helping the one we enter into dialogue with to recognize the need for thinking, or for teachers, “But Diotima, as I said just now, it is precisely because I recognise that I need teachers that I have come to you”⁷¹. In the *Symposium* in particular it isn’t the case per se that Socrates makes his interlocutors aware of their ignorance on various subjects, or on love, since Socrates claims to be an expert and not ignorant only in one thing, and that is the topic of Love, but ignorance itself is central to the upward development of knowing and a key motif of Socratism. Therefore philosophy is exemplified by the movement from ignorance towards wisdom, where knowing one’s own limitations (ignorance) is itself a kind of wisdom.

Since humans are not gods, but are neither like animals, we are like Eros in-between. But whereas Eros is purely daimonic, human beings are more or less condemned to the realm of mortals, yet the soul contains a daimonic activity as well, that of reason, which allows human beings to self-transcend and peek into divine realms. This daimonic activity, represented by Eros, is the activity of philosophy which aims towards knowing that which transcends the sensible. Before it knows where to go, and how to make sure it is not led astray, it becomes expressed in the desire to overcome its lack. A problem is raised by Socrates through Diotima that previous speakers were seemingly unaware of. All the previous speakers regarded Eros as extremely beautiful and wise, whichever characteristics were attributed to it, they were attributed in a way which implies that Eros was already in possession of those things, such as Beauty. But Socrates turns this around, he reminds us that, in fact, this beautiful god is much like a human being, Eros does not possess such things, he merely desires to possess the Beautiful. In this sense Eros is like a philosopher, since the most beautiful thing is wisdom itself.

⁷⁰ Altman, William H. F., *Ascent to the Good* (Maryland, Lexington Books, 2018).

⁷¹ Plato, *The Symposium*, 207c.

There is a great variety of things to discuss within Diotima's speech alone, but we are interested in the ultimate aims of the Eros properly oriented towards the most beautiful thing⁷², which is wisdom⁷³, and therefore at the same time the aim of philosophy. We can distinguish two ultimate aims of philosophical eros, in order of importance: 1. For knowledge of the Good and the Beautiful (which involves a prior 'cognitive step') and 2. for immortality.⁷⁴

In the so-called "cognitive striving"⁷⁵ the lover of beauty recognizes beauty in particular instances. From the beauty of a particular beautiful body he recognizes that "the beauty in this body is akin to the beauty in that body"⁷⁶, but not yet that the "beauty-in-all-bodies as such."⁷⁷ Then comes beauty in the soul, specifically "the beautiful souls of young men and not the beauty-in-all-souls as such, because he creates beautiful discourses to improve these youths in virtue"⁷⁸ After are the beautiful institutions and laws, then beautiful sciences. What Chen emphasizes is that in all this "cognitive striving" the lover loves particular instances of beauty, and this sort of striving is horizontal, "flat and without tiers."⁷⁹ Although it widens one's understanding of beauty it does not yet ascend to the vision of the Idea of beauty. It prepares the way for it, where "the mind is intellectually strengthened by contemplating the vast sea of deindividualized instances which are all akin in being beautiful."⁸⁰ The mind is then prepared for the upward leap. Each step or striving is the movement of the lover's soul. When the lover has "successively cognized instances

⁷² Earlier in the paper we tried to show that the pedagogic value of Eros is not straightforward in any sense. Because if we follow the Diotimic ladder, at every step of the way, and Plato emphasizes this unequivocally, claiming that every ascent needs to be done in the right way, it is possible to be misguided. The aim of philosophy is not like following the whiff of air, or mere opinion (doxa), following wherever our passions lead, and Plato also points out that to "give birth" in the sense of producing wisdom and virtue comes with certain pangs and difficulties. We tried to demonstrate, using the difficulties and sufferings endured in interpersonal love, and then the importance of the dimension of otherness in Eros which is at the same time representing a metaphysical desire, that the climb towards abstract, transcendent knowledge, towards the "pure" and "unmixed" beauty itself, is a process which requires much enduring, discipline, and pedagogy; which, more concretely, is in the *Symposium*, rather, pederasty. In any case, the "truth" of Eros, its revealing of the transcendent Good, is not one that should be easy to achieve, but requires much practice, and a life devoted to "giving birth in the beautiful".

⁷³ Plato, *The Symposium*. 204b

⁷⁴ Chen distinguishes between three different aims: "striving for beauty, for immortality, and for the knowledge of beauty." (Chen, Ludwig C. H.. *Acquiring Knowledge of the Ideas* (Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992).) But for the sake of simplification we will equate the first and the third as the same goal. That of knowing ultimate Beauty.

⁷⁵ Chen, *Acquiring Knowledge of the Ideas*, p. 39.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

of beauty”⁸¹, which form the relation of being alike beautiful, he is ready to proceed to the second relation of the common *genos* of all those instances of beautiful, this is done not through accumulation, claims Chen, but rather by single cognitive act which sees the Idea of Beauty, the term used by Plato is *exhaiphnes*, meaning “the instant” or “suddenly”.⁸²

The nature of this upward leap, and its intermediary stage (if there is such an intermediary stage), is much debated. Chen goes through some possible interpretations of the ascent towards the Idea. First, as ‘generalization and abstraction’, which he rebukes for trying to “read empirical logic into Plato’s theory of Ideas”⁸³. Secondly, as ‘ascent in value’, the idea is that each subsequent “beautiful thing” (body, soul, law, science) is greater in value than each previous instance of beauty which confronts Chen’s notion that this sequence is rather horizontal and flat. Chen however argues that the text “knows no value-relation either between the first two groups or between the second two.”⁸⁴ And does not reach the Idea of Beauty in any case as it stops at beautiful souls. Lastly, Chen discusses the ascent to the Idea as ‘revelation in the mysteries’. This interpretation suggests that such knowledge is *epopteia*⁸⁵, a kind of knowledge which does not go with a *logos*. Yet Chen claims that this would create a “false dichotomy of knowledge into knowledge in the ordinary sense and knowledge as extraordinary.”⁸⁶ Further it only appears once in the text and isn’t mentioned at the highest point of the revelation, for Chen *epopteia* is a literary device. Instead, Chen suggests that the primary way of revelation is neither generalization, value-ascent, nor revelation, but *paidagogia*. Chen refers to *Republic* book VII as well as the *Seventh Epistle* of Plato in which he writes, “the long continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject” leads, suddenly “like light flashing forth when a fire is kindred” towards the vision of the Idea⁸⁷.

Again, this Idea of Beauty or Good is attained by observing the beauty in many things as particulars and then in the vision of the Idea seeing them as particular instances of that corresponding Idea. It occurs suddenly under the right *guidance*, thus pedagogy. To complete the argument in favor of the pedagogic interpretation of the vision of the Idea,

⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 43.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 46.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Initiation into the highest mysteries, perhaps associated to Eleusinian Mysteries.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p. 47.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 48.

Chen claims that in the *Phaedrus*, as well as *Republic* and the *Seventh Epistle* (besides of course the *Symposium*) the notion of the Idea is connected to *paidagogia* rather than *epopteia*, and therefore, despite some textual evidence for a revelation in mystery in the *Symposium*, it seems that what Plato has in mind for the revelation of the Idea is not necessarily, as is hinted in the *Symposium*, done through a kind of Dionysiac intoxication, or through a speaker god-possessed, which is the kind of poetic inspiration hinted at in Socrates' speech, Chen implies the sobriety and lucidity of reason to be generally more congruous with the vision of the Idea.

Though that seems very problematic in relation to the *Symposium*, since on the topic of love all speakers are affected to a degree which heightens the passions, makes one marvel at the thought of beauty and the 'vast sea of the beautiful', perhaps it is more difficult to 'rationalize' love in the same way that one can rationalize justice, courage, knowledge, piety, and so on. Love as desire for the ultimate beauty (and good) evokes some radical implications for philosophy, especially when considered that love is really what sets one on their way towards that of ultimate value, as Plato suggests in the *Symposium*. Philosophy in general perhaps has a prejudice against sensibility, emotions, the pre-rational, the non-rational, and this perhaps explains why love is typically excluded in general considerations on what is fundamental in philosophy, what constitutes philosophical activity and so on.

"Love for knowledge" is a kind of phrase that may make some modern-day logicians or metaphysicians cringe, how can love alone guide one towards knowing? It depends on what the nature of this knowing is, but whatever that may be, the point is that without desire for the Good-Beautiful, which eros is, the value of knowing things of ultimate value is really not the same. Human beings are not machines, human beings as other are humane, vulnerable, frail, philosophy as erotic implies, and here we agree with Lévinas, that philosophy is oriented towards alterity, and this desire for alterity is ethical because one puts themselves aside for the sake of the other. Philosophy as erotic in the Platonic sense is basically promoting a strong humanistic aspect in the activity of philosophy. To know, to attain the greatest wisdom, virtue, etc. is at the same time to have developed one sense of humanity to the greatest degree. For this reason the centrality of love in Platonic philosophy indicates philosophy is irreducible to mere formal categories, philosophy is love for beautiful and good things developed to its highest degree, and this

implies taking into account the lived experience of concrete individuals, concrete others whose otherness remains irreducible.

We've offered therefore some different ways of attaining the Idea of Beauty which is the ultimate object of eros. We would like to conclude the discussion of the Idea simply by recounting the section where Diotima tells Socrates what it would be like, to not only grasp, but have *vision* of the beautiful itself (implying direct cognition),

“What, then, do we suppose it would be like”, she said, “for someone actually to see the beautiful itself, separate, clear and pure, unsullied by the flesh or by colour or by the rest of our mortal dross, but to perceive the Beautiful itself, single in substance and divine? Do you think”, she continued, “that a person who directs his gaze to that object and contemplates it with that faculty by which it has to be viewed, and stays close to it, has a poor life? Do you not reflect”, she went on, “that it is there alone, when he sees the beautiful with that by which it has to be viewed, that he will give birth to true virtue? He will give birth not to mere images of virtue but to true virtue, because it is not an image that he is grasping but the truth. When he has given birth to and nurtured true virtue it is possible for him to be loved by the gods and to become, if any human can, immortal himself”.⁸⁸

This final recollection of Socrates' meeting with Diotima is a great articulation of the Platonic Idea, and at the same time gives the, what Altman calls, 'GB equation' its clearest expression. Perhaps we've already mentioned that *kalon* and *agathon* are given equality and synonymity in the *Symposium*, this is one of the most important thesis of the *Symposium*. The Beautiful isn't merely aesthetic, it's not merely that things are beautiful in their attributes, the Idea of the beautiful is such that, upon its perception, it is necessary that the 'subject' cognizing it becomes radically morally affected. The highest beauty is at the same time the highest good. Diotima says that what is most beautiful is wisdom (*sophia*) itself. This GB equation, as Altman makes clear, is still slightly problematic however.

As compelling as Diotima's account may be, Altman describes that in the ascent towards the Good and the Beautiful, there are three distinct phases, which are not, to be clear, those of Chen who defined three different phases as mentioned earlier. For Altman the first phase occurs when Diotima “effortlessly” substitutes *agathon* for *kalon*, which

⁸⁸ Plato, *The Symposium*. 211e - 212a.

Altman considers a eudaemonist Good, however this is only in preparation for another ascent. Altman further claims that not only is the eudaemonist answer insufficient for Plato himself, he makes purposely plausible such a reading, acutely aware of the pedagogical effect of his dialogues (or perhaps using Socratic irony), Altman claims this is Plato's use of basanistic pedagogy, thus testing his student's true commitment towards the transcendent Good rather than a 'lesser' eudaemonist reading.⁸⁹ The eudaemonist Good cannot be the final aim of eros. It seems too simple and egoistic, the transcendent Good cannot merely be what is good for oneself. Altman explains that attaining the transcendent Good requires sacrifice, "Plato is challenging the student to discover or recollect other-regarding and self-sacrificing Justice *for themselves*"⁹⁰ Altman plausibly defends the argument that this simple replacement of good for beautiful is intentionally done by Plato for the student's benefit of recognizing that the GB equation needs to be transcended as well, "The substitution of the Good for the Beautiful is merely a rung on that ladder, designed to be superseded and the ultimate goal of the ascent is not the Good—at least not the pre-Republic and intrinsically human Good of εὐδαιμονία, attained through mere mirages of virtue in our mortal and all-too-human flesh—but the vision of the Beautiful, and the λόγοι that have been fathered by it".⁹¹

Altman thus explains that the first two phases happen at the point of the *Symposium*, firstly the attainment of the eudaemonist Good, then towards the vision of the Beautiful, and lastly towards the transcendent Good of the *Republic*. And as mentioned before when writing about Chen's interpretation of the ascent, Altman similarly puts the pedagogic aspect of Plato as a central element of the dialogues, "It is not only that Plato is a teacher, and as such concerned with someone else's spiritual growth, but also—by aiming his pedagogy at that student's embrace of something beyond both student and teacher—it must always be student-centered."⁹² Thus Plato wishes to help guide the student in their ascent, "the ultimate power to recognize what it really means "to give birth in the Beautiful" belongs only to those students who recognize Plato himself as midwife to their own ability to reject the egocentrism (or "psychological egoism") that is itself the basanistic antithesis of the primordial altruism—in the most radical sense of "other"—that is the transcendent Idea. But it would be misleading to refer to eudaemonist egocentrism as

⁸⁹ Altman, *Ascent to the Good*. p. 2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 7.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 10.

⁹² *Ibid.* p. 11.

a mere springboard or stepladder to the Idea of the Good: it is rather the necessary ἐπίβασις or ἐπαναβασμός that we will need both to use and overcome on our ascent.”

It is noteworthy that Altman refers to the transcendent Idea as radically “other” and at the same time mentioned the egocentrism of eudaemonist Good. We saw that Lévinas’ conception of metaphysical desire is that its object is absolute alterity, and although in the previous discussion it was suggested that Lévinas’ thought that the Platonic Idea never really escapes the totality of the Same, here we see an antithetical position to that claim. And if indeed the transcendent Idea is “the most radical” Other, than our thesis derived from the *Symposium*, that Platonic eros corresponds to a metaphysical desire, is even more justified, and again, this further reiterates the idea that philosophical activity is based in desire. On the other hand there is the need to understand the risk of egocentrism in the erotic quest, and we will say a little about that as well.

Perhaps egocentrism doesn’t quite cover the whole range of the criticism against the love of an “abstract Idea”, egocentrism doesn’t necessarily even count when talking about love of the Idea, instead egocentrism is at risk with the eudaemonist reading of the Good. But this seems easily avoided by some of the things we said above. What is rather at stake relates to our previous discussion on Lévinas and the other.

Alcibiades accuses Socrates of insolence (*hubrizein*), a lack of care and perhaps contempt for others. And this could very well be a strong point of criticism towards the ladder of love, is there not the possibility that, precisely in contemplating that which is beautiful in and of itself, the most beautiful, contemplating in the abstract, leads one to lose sight of the concrete and immanent, in other words, to lose sight of the needs of the others who surround us? Effectively, it seems that Plato recognizes this limitation and inhumanity of Socrates, hence the importance of Alcibiades’ accusations. Reaching for the beyond, the inhuman, carries its own risks,

“What is more, it promises fulfilment or happiness beyond what any finite object can offer. This seems more than enough to win us over to the life of philosophy. What happens with the appearance and speech of Alcibiades, however, is a warning about the sacrifices entailed by this way of life. As much as the speech of Alcibiades is the story of

his own mistreatment at the hands of Socrates, it is also the story of the inhumanity of philosophy.”⁹³

Is this a fundamental flaw of Socratism? Or a risk necessary for philosophical endeavour? Cannot we reconcile both the contemplation of pure, eternal Ideas and the lived experience of man here and now? Must one be more important than the other?

“For those who know him, then, he has become like the forms he spends his time contemplating; hard, unresponsive, impassive and stone-like. This Socrates is more Cartesian than the later Descartes could ever hope to be. He is pure mind contemplating eternal truths, with all the impassive imperturbability this entails. None of this means that the truth of the ascent of Socrates and Diotima is untrue but only that its truth is other than the truth of the lived experience of the particular.”⁹⁴

It seems then, that the truth of Socrates and Alcibiades is irreconcilable, and this is a sort of choice that Plato puts before us, do we give way to abstract contemplation of the forms despite one’s consequent lack of focus on the concrete experience of others? Or, do we take the message of Alcibiades as a genuine warning towards philosophical activity which orients itself on the mind rather than the body?

As Vlastos points out, Platonic love seems to treat other persons in an instrumental way⁹⁵, “the whole of Plato’s love theory comprises the attempt to overcome affection for particular others and replace it with love for an impersonal object.”⁹⁶

Thus we see that despite the purity of the Idea, the truth of the ascent isn’t that pure and unmixed, human reality and concrete individuals confront Socratic contemplation which has disdain for the bodily, the sensible, the particular, only as secondary offshoots of the purity and goodness of the Idea. Yet the tension between the two remains a constant problem for philosophy, seemingly irreconcilable.

⁹³ McGuirk, *Eros, Otherness, Tyranny*, p.153.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 154.

⁹⁵ Vlastos, Gregory. “The Individual as Object of Love in Plato” in *Platonic Studies* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1981).

⁹⁶ McGuirk, *Eros, Otherness, Tyranny*, p.152.

Conclusion

In this paper we attempted to discuss the question of Platonic eros based on the *Symposium*. To help us along the way we looked at Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, to demonstrate the difficulties of interpersonal love, which as we saw later, has a particularly ambiguous and difficult dimension in Plato's *Symposium*. It was neither the goal to reject Platonism (or rather Socratism) as inhuman and neglecting other persons, treating them with contempt and insolence, or to claim that Plato's version of philosophy is self-interested and so on, there's no intention to undermine the great value of Plato's works, rather it is important to engage in meaningful discussion on the various issues raised by the *Symposium* and let each individual weigh the arguments for themselves. However, the dimension of love brought by Barthes' attention to language and experience demonstrates that despite the beauty of the Idea, concrete amorous encounters with individuals have the power of pedagogy not too dissimilar to a Platonic dialogue, and that in the difficulties of interpersonal love one can attain the knowledge of love in a more abstract term, but concretely this consists of learning the impossibility of possession, thus opening the horizon of the other as other. At the same time, the experiences of amorous desire have impacted people significantly throughout history, and there is a universal value to amorous quests, whether displayed through literature, film, or in the concrete experiences of people past and present.

We argued that at the core of philosophy and ethics are two things, desire and Otherness. Lévinas' *Totality and Infinity* challenges us to treat the other as impassable, as an alterity which remains alterity without the possibility of appropriation under the Same. Thus creating at the same time a distance, a tension, and a sort of infinity between the I and the other. Lévinas' Platonism, as we saw, has an ambiguity and complexity. His understanding of Eros takes much inspiration from Plato but doesn't treat it as an ethical concept (although this too, is rather ambiguous). Lévinas' focus on the other as having the quality of alterity means that it can never be reduced under the totality of the Same (or if we interpret the Idea as the Same), this brings the problematic of Lévinas' relationship to the *Symposium* to light. We tried to discuss the relevant problems of Platonism with regard to Lévinas' philosophical project, placing the Other at the fore of ethics and philosophy, as well as looking at what Lévinas himself understood by the term Eros. The key point of this section is that in erotic desire, specifically in its phenomenology, it helps the lover to self-

transcend, and this is understood as the intermediary stage between the initial, simple desire for unity, towards the desire for metaphysical knowledge.

Lastly, we looked at the notion of philosophy and its corresponding Idea of Beauty as described by Plato in the *Symposium*. We tried to develop what this Idea *is*, what is Plato's pedagogy in relation to it, and how the student may attain the Idea itself. At the same time, there seems a problematic with this notion of philosophy, raised in the speech of Alcibiades, specifically its difficult relationship to the concrete existence of individuals.

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