

***Erôs* and Self-Formation: A Platonic Approach**

Didi Dong

2025

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Supervisor: Prof. Vasilis Politis
School of Social Sciences and Philosophy,
Trinity College Dublin

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work. I confirm that the work has been completed in full compliance with relevant university policies, including the Academic Integrity policy, the Trinity Policy on Good Research Practice, and the guidance on AI and GenAI in Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Research.

I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

I consent / ~~do not consent~~ to the examiner retaining a copy of the thesis beyond the examining period, should they so wish (EU GDPR May 2018).

DIDI DONG

.....

SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the place and significance of *erôs* in Plato's theory of self-formation, focusing on its role as the driving force in shaping and developing the self. It addresses a central question: What, for Plato, is the role or function of *erôs* in the formation of oneself or the self? The study analyses the dialogues in which Plato explicitly engages with the relationship between *erôs* and self-formation, primarily the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Alcibiades*, *Lysis*, and selected passages from the *Republic*.

The dissertation advances two main theses, both intended in a descriptive sense. First, on Plato's account, *erôs* is indispensable to self-formation: no genuine process through which the soul acquires a determinate character over time occurs without it. Second, *erôs* shapes the soul on two interconnected levels, by contributing to the establishment of its internal structure and order and by guiding the development of its external, interpersonal relations. In this dual role, *erôs* unites the soul's inner dynamics with its social environment, showing that self-formation is both an inward transformation and an outward engagement with others.

On this basis, the dissertation defends the claim that, for Plato, self-formation occurs only insofar as *erôs* plays some role in the psychic process through which the soul acquires a determinate character over time. *Erôs* is necessary for self-formation as such, not only in virtuous or successful cases but also in disordered and corrupted ones. Within Plato's framework, it functions as a fundamental motivational and orienting force across all character types, structuring desires, sustaining attachments, and directing the soul toward its dominant objects. Even in the most corrupted cases, especially the tyrannical soul, *erôs* remains operative; it is misdirected and excessive, thereby corrupting the soul's internal order. The presence of *erôs* thus marks self-formation itself, rather than its successful realization.

Chapter 1 establishes the significance of *erôs* in Plato's theory of self-formation in two stages. First, it challenges the dominant interpretation that attributes both the necessary and sufficient conditions for self-formation to reason alone, thereby excluding any formative role for other elements, including *erôs*. I demonstrate that, while reason is indeed necessary, it is not sufficient for the complete development of the self. Second, I argue that Plato consistently supplements reason with a coherent conception of *erôs*, whose formative role becomes evident through the conceptual and linguistic continuity of his treatment of *erôs* across the dialogues. The chapter concludes that *erôs* is indispensable to Plato's account of self-formation.

Chapter 2 examines why *erôs* is indispensable to Plato's theory of self-formation, asking in what respect, or by virtue of what feature, it shapes the self. This inquiry proceeds through unpacking Plato's characterization of *erôs* as "the desire to possess the good forever" (*Symp.* 206a11), analyzing its components and engaging with key scholarly interpretations. I argue that: (i) *erôs* is a desire defined by lack and the pursuit of fulfillment, operating as a dynamic motivating force; (ii) it possesses an intermediate nature- neither fully rational nor purely irrational- making it open-ended in its orientation toward good or bad; (iii) this intermediary character renders *erôs* neutral and malleable, capable of guiding the soul toward development or corruption; and (iv) its extraordinary duration and intensity ensure a sustained formative influence.

Collectively, these features establish *erôs* as a central, structuring principle in Plato's account of self-formation.

Chapter 3 analyzes the precise role of *erôs* in Plato's theory of self-formation. It argues that *erôs* functions across two interdependent dimensions: internal and external. Internally, *erôs* shapes the soul's unity and stability, contributing to determining which part of the soul rules and thereby producing a well-ordered or corrupted condition. Externally, *erôs* structures interpersonal relationships, particularly the philosophical bonds between interlocutors, bridging personal self-formation and social engagement. The chapter also examines *erôs* across the primary forms of selfhood in the *Republic*- timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, tyrannical, and philosophical- highlighting its formative influence on each.

Chapter 4 affirms the formative role of *erôs* through the model of the philosopher, demonstrating its essential function in both internal and external dimensions of development. Internally, *erôs* shapes the philosophical soul in two ways: first, by cultivating an affinity for beauty, order, and harmony before reason reaches maturity, thereby laying the groundwork for intellectual growth; and second, by providing the enduring drive to pursue learning and truth, enabling the philosopher to resist competing attractions such as wealth and bodily pleasure. Externally, *erôs* sustains the philosopher's commitment to extended dialectical inquiry, fostering the interpersonal bonds necessary for the collective pursuit of truth and the Good. Through its intensity and enduring influence, *erôs* directs the lover toward a lifelong, joyful pursuit of wisdom and self-discovery. In this way, Plato's depiction of the philosopher as the "lover of wisdom" emerges not as a metaphor but as the inevitable result of *erôs*'s formative power.

Chapter 5 examines the formative role of *erôs* in the model of the tyrant, highlighting its central influence across three stages of the tyrannical character. In each stage, *erôs* undermines the soul both internally and externally: internally, it awakens and legitimates unnecessary, excessive, and lawless pleasures that disrupt the soul's order and permit indulgence without shame or restraint; externally, it drives the person away from good friends and wise counsel, particularly regarding what is truly valuable and virtuous. Consequently, reason becomes constrained and ultimately enslaved to appetite and pleasure. This cumulative distortion collapses the soul's moral and psychological order, making the tyrannical character the most disordered and wretched, occupying the lowest position in Plato's hierarchy of corrupt souls.

Chapter 6 presents the concluding synthesis, highlighting three points: (i) in Platonic self-formation, reason is necessary but not sufficient; *erôs* is indispensable and formative; (ii) *erôs* is intermediate and neutral; its direction depends on the soul's condition, especially the strength of reason, and on the social environment, allowing the same *erôs* to guide the philosophical soul to wisdom and the tyrannical soul to corruption; (iii) *erôs* profoundly influences reason, fostering or undermining its development and the interpersonal relationships needed for the cultivation of rational judgment. Collectively, these points establish *erôs* as the central force linking the soul's internal capacities with its external environment, essential for understanding both human flourishing and corruption in Plato.

Acknowledgements

I offer my deepest thanks to my supervisor, Professor Vasilis Politis. Coming from a different academic background, I found it difficult at first to navigate the world of philosophy. From the very beginning, Professor Politis offered me not only his guidance, but also his kindness, patience, and unwavering support. With his help, I gradually learned how to engage with philosophical texts, to think with greater depth and clarity, and, ultimately, to complete this dissertation. Through him, I came to appreciate the depth and vastness of philosophy- and, more importantly, its power to illuminate both the self and the world around us. What I value most is not only his sharp mind, but the calm and positive spirit with which he approaches every challenge. His careful planning and steadfast determination have inspired me to face difficulties with courage and persistence. In both his scholarship and his character, Professor Politis has been a true model. I feel deeply fortunate to have learned from him and to have had his guidance throughout this journey.

I thank Professor John Dillon for his generous support through the John Dillon Scholarship during my first year of study. I am especially grateful for his warm and thoughtful guidance on the structure and central questions of my dissertation, offered in many delightful conversations in beautiful Howth. I feel truly fortunate to have had the chance to learn from him.

I thank the Trinity Plato Centre and the wonderful people there: Dr. Peter Larsen, Dr. Giulio Di Basilio, Dr. Jun Su, Dr. Liming Jiao, Dr. Jiayu Zhang, and John Nugent. I have greatly appreciated the inspiring discussions in the weekly reading seminars, which have been both intellectually enriching and personally meaningful. Above all, I have always felt a true sense of belonging at the Centre. I am deeply grateful to have found like-minded friends here, whose companionship has made this journey so much more rewarding. I will cherish these friendships for the rest of my life.

I thank the China Government Scholarship Council for their generous support over the past four years. Their assistance has been instrumental in my academic journey, and I will always be deeply thankful for the opportunity they have given me. I am determined to honor their support by continuing to work hard and contribute to my field in meaningful ways.

Finally, I want to express my heartfelt thanks to my family for their unwavering love and support. I am especially grateful to my grandmother, who passed away last spring and didn't have the chance to see this dissertation completed. Grandmom, I hope you are proud of me. I have faced every challenge with the courage you always believed in. Your spirit is always with me.

Contents

1 Introduction	1
1.1 Typical Readings and My Proposal	5
1.2 Methodology and Related Questions	13
2 Erôs Itself	24
2.1 The Nature of <i>Erôs</i>	25
2.1.1 <i>Erôs</i> as a Kind of Desire	25
2.1.2 <i>Erôs</i> as Either Rational or Irrational	27
2.1.3 <i>Erôs</i> as an Intermediate State	40
2.2 <i>Erôs</i> 's Aim and Object	49
2.2.1 <i>Erôs</i> 's Aim: The Good	49
2.2.2 <i>Erôs</i> 's Object: Beauty	53
2.2.3 <i>Erôs</i> 's Mode of Duration	55
3 Erôs in Self-Formation	59
3.1 The Embodied Self	60
3.1.1 The Soul	61
3.1.2 The Body	63
3.1.3 The Unity of Soul and Body	65
3.2 The Formation Process	68
3.2.1 Within the Soul	68
3.2.2 The Role of <i>Erôs</i>	71
3.2.3 Beyond the Soul: The Body	75
3.2.4 Beyond the Soul: The Other Person	80
3.3 The Extreme Moral Characters	88
3.3.1 The Five Types	89
3.3.2 The Formation Model	93
4 Erôs in Shaping the Philosophical Character	99
4.1 The Concept of the Philosopher	99
4.1.1 The Lover of Wisdom	100
4.2 The Role of <i>Erôs</i> in the Philosopher's Formation	102
4.2.1 The First Stage	102
4.2.2 The Second Stage	106
4.2.3 The Third Stage	111
4.2.4 The Fourth Stage	116
4.2.5 The Role of <i>Erôs</i>	120
4.3 Conclusion	125
5 Erôs in Shaping the Tyrannical Character	128
5.1 The Concept of Tyrannical <i>Erôs</i>	128
5.1.1 Tyrannical <i>Erôs</i>	129
5.1.2 The Category of Tyrannical <i>Erôs</i>	131
5.1.3 The Object of Tyrannical <i>Erôs</i>	134
5.2 The Role of <i>Erôs</i> in Shaping the Tyrannical Man	140
5.2.1 The Early Stage	140
5.2.2 The Middle Stage	145
5.2.3 The Late Stage	151
5.3 Conclusion	155
6 Conclusion: <i>Erôs</i> and the Becoming of the Self	157

Chapter 1

Introduction

This dissertation examines the place and significance of *erôs* in Plato's theory of self-formation, focusing especially on its role as the driving force in shaping and developing the self. It addresses a central question: What, for Plato, is the role or function of *erôs* in the formation of oneself or the self? The study analyses the dialogues in which Plato explicitly engages with the relationship between *erôs* and self-formation, primarily the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Alcibiades*, *Lysis*, and selected passages from the *Republic*.

The dissertation advances two main theses. First, for Plato, *erôs* is indispensable to self-formation: no genuine process by which the soul acquires a determinate character over time occurs without it. This claim is descriptive rather than normative and does not concern only good or praiseworthy cases. Second, *erôs* shapes the soul on two interconnected levels, by contributing to the establishment of its internal structure and order and by guiding the development of its external, interpersonal relationships. In this dual role, *erôs* unites the soul's inner dynamics with its social environment, showing that self-formation is both an inward transformation and an outward engagement with others.

My central claim is descriptive. I argue that *erôs* is indispensable and central to self-formation as such, rather than to good, successful, or normatively commendable forms of self-formation. Accordingly, the thesis offers an account of the conditions under which any process of self-formation is possible within a Platonic framework. On this view, self-formation can occur only insofar as *erôs* plays some role in structuring the soul's development, whether that development issues in order or disorder, virtue or corruption.

By self-formation I mean the process through which a soul comes to acquire a relatively stable character, understood in terms of the configuration of its desires, its evaluative outlook, and its practical orientation. I argue that any such process—whether it issues in the philosophical soul or in the democratic, oligarchic, or tyrannical soul described by Plato—presupposes the operation of *erôs*. *Erôs* is not introduced as an ethical ideal or as a marker of correct psychic order, but as a basic psychic power that moves the soul toward what it takes to be good and binding. In Plato's psychology, it is through *erôs* that desires are organized, attachments formed, and priorities fixed; and it is in virtue of this organizing force that the soul comes to be structured in one determinate way rather than another. In this sense, *erôs* functions as a necessary condition of psychic formation as such, underwriting both the ordered orientation of the philosophical soul and the disordered configurations characteristic of its defective counterparts.

Within Plato's psychological framework, most fully articulated in the *Republic* (particularly Books IV and IX), there is no account of a soul acquiring a stable character without the role of some desire that functions erôtically, that is, as a motivating and orienting attachment to what appears good to the agent. In every case of character formation Plato describes, the soul's desires are organized around such an object of attachment, whether this organization is governed by reason, as in the philosophical soul, or takes distorted, intensified, and internally divided forms, as in

the tyrannical soul. In this respect, a genuine process of self-formation is not merely accompanied by *erôs* but is constituted by its operation.

On this view, *erôs* functions as the foundational motivational and orienting power that renders any sustained process of self-formation possible. It binds the soul to objects it perceives as valuable, shapes the formation of practical commitments, and provides continuity and direction to psychic life over time. Without the operation of *erôs*, the soul would lack the unifying focus necessary for its desires, beliefs, and actions to cohere into a determinate character. In this sense, *erôs* is not merely one influence among many within the soul; it constitutes a structural precondition of self-formation itself, underpinning both the organization of the soul's internal hierarchy and the emergence of a coherent, enduring identity.

The distinction between better and worse forms of self-formation, therefore, cannot be understood as a matter of the presence or absence of *erôs*, but rather concerns how it is oriented, regulated, and integrated within the soul. On a descriptive reading, *erôs* operates on two mutually interdependent levels that together account for the development of a determinate character. Internally, it structures the soul by organizing desires, establishing dominant motivations, and stabilizing the overall psychic hierarchy, thereby providing coherence and continuity to the agent's character. Externally, it directs the soul's engagement with others, shaping attachments, guiding practical commitments, and regulating interpersonal relations.

This descriptive framework underpins all normative distinctions between better and worse forms of self-formation. The difference between the philosopher and the tyrant, for instance, does not lie in whether *erôs* is present, but in the manner of its governance: the philosopher's *erôs* is oriented and regulated by reason, producing harmony and order within the soul, whereas the tyrant's *erôs* is misguided, generating conflict and instability. By foregrounding *erôs* as a constitutive condition of self-formation, this approach clarifies that the evaluation of character types presupposes an account of the mechanisms through which the soul's desires, motivations, and attachments are organized and directed. In this sense, *erôs* is both the engine of psychic development and the framework within which normative distinctions acquire intelligibility.

Crucially, this claim is neutral with respect to the normative quality of the resulting self. I explicitly reject the notion that *erôs* is intrinsically ennobling or that its mere presence guarantees good or virtuous self-formation. Rather, one of the central arguments of this thesis is that *erôs* possesses a fundamentally intermediate or neutral character: it can both order and unify the soul, but it can equally corrupt it. In Plato's account, the tyrannical soul is no less a product of *erôs* than the philosophical soul; the difference lies in how *erôs* is directed and regulated. In the tyrant, *erôs* is excessive, misaligned, or insufficiently restrained, producing internal conflict, fragmentation, and disorder. By contrast, in the philosopher, *erôs* is appropriately guided by reason, integrating desires and motivations into a coherent, stable psychic structure. This perspective underscores that *erôs* is a constitutive force in self-formation, whose moral or prudential significance emerges only through the patterns of its orientation, governance, and integration within the soul.

Accordingly, my claim is that *erôs* is descriptively necessary for self-formation, rather than normatively sufficient for good or virtuous self-formation. The ethical evaluation of different forms of self-formation presupposes this descriptive thesis without determining it. The aim of the thesis, therefore, is to establish *erôs* as a fundamental condition of the soul's capacity to form itself into any determinate

character, whether admirable or vicious.

These overarching theses are particularly significant because they challenge the prevailing interpretative paradigm and directly engage with the deeper question of which elements are truly constitutive in Plato's philosophy of self-formation. The dominant scholarly tradition, despite some recent critiques, continues to portray Plato as a thoroughgoing rationalist who locates the sole and decisive principle of self-formation in reason. Within this framework, other forces, including *erôs*, are typically dismissed as negligible, derivative, or even obstructive. This study argues, by contrast, that *erôs* is neither incidental nor subordinate, but an indispensable dynamic force that works in concert with reason to shape and transform the self. By foregrounding *erôs* in this way, the dissertation contests the entrenched assumption of reason's self-sufficiency in Platonic self-formation and brings to light a more integrated, multidimensional, and relational model of the soul's development.

A major aim of this dissertation is to provide a novel and comprehensive account of Platonic self-formation by conceptualizing the extreme moral characters Plato presents, most notably the philosopher and the tyrant, not as isolated or exceptional cases, but as paradigmatic exemplars that embody the broader structural and psychological patterns central to Platonic philosophy. By situating these figures within a unified framework, the study uncovers the underlying dynamics that govern the formation of the self across a broad spectrum of moral character types. Central to this framework is the role of *erôs*, demonstrated as a vital and formative force shaping the soul's development. This function of *erôs* is traced consistently across Plato's key dialogues, the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Alcibiades*, and *Republic*, highlighting its integral presence in the processes that drive self-transformation. The study also pays special attention to a frequently overlooked and marginalized group in Platonic scholarship: the ordinary people, thereby situating them meaningfully within Plato's framework of the self. Through this approach, the dissertation offers a coherent and unified account of how *erôs* operates both in the transformation of character and in the cultivation or corruption of the good life.

This dissertation offers a fresh and significant reexamination of Plato's theory of self-formation by highlighting *erôs* as a vital and dynamic principle that operates in conjunction with reason to shape and transform the soul. It challenges the dominant view that privileges reason alone, presenting a more integrated understanding that emphasizes the interplay between desire, reason, and character in ethical and psychological growth. By encompassing the full spectrum of moral character, from extreme types to ordinary individuals, it constructs a cohesive framework that uncovers the underlying dynamics of their formation. Through close and systematic analysis of key Platonic dialogues, the study demonstrates how *erôs* drives self-transformation and links the individual's inner life with their social environment.

Chapter 1 establishes the significance of *erôs* in Plato's theory of self-formation through two stages. First, it challenges the dominant interpretation that attributes both the necessary and sufficient conditions for self-formation to reason alone, thereby excluding any formative role for other elements, including *erôs*. I demonstrate that while reason is indeed necessary, it is not sufficient for the complete development of the self. Second, I argue that Plato consistently supplements reason with a coherent conception of *erôs*, whose formative role becomes evident through the conceptual and linguistic continuity of his treatment of *erôs* across the dialogues. The central conclusion of this chapter is that *erôs* is indispensable to Plato's account of self-

formation, functioning as a fundamental force that motivates, directs, and completes the self-formation.

Chapter 2 examines why *erôs* is indispensable to Plato's theory of self-formation, asking in what respect, or by virtue of what feature, it shapes the self. This inquiry proceeds through unpacking Plato's characterization of *erôs* as "the desire to possess the good forever" (*Symp.* 206a11), analyzing its constituent elements, and engaging critically with leading scholarly interpretations. I argue that: (i) *erôs* is a form of desire, defined by lack and the pursuit of fulfillment, operating as a dynamic, motivating principle; (ii) it possesses an intermediate nature- neither wholly rational nor simply irrational- rendering it inherently open-ended in its orientation toward good or bad; (iii) this intermediary character makes *erôs* neutral and malleable, able to guide the soul toward either development or corruption; and (iv) it is distinguished by its extraordinary duration and intensity, ensuring a sustained and formative influence. Collectively, these features establish *erôs* as a central, structuring principle in Plato's account of self-formation.

Chapter 3 analyzes the precise role of *erôs* in Plato's theory of self-formation. It argues that *erôs* functions across two essential and interdependent dimensions of Platonic self-formation: internal and external. Internally, *erôs* is pivotal in determining the soul's unity and stability, contributing to determining which part of the soul comes to rule and thereby producing either a well-ordered or a corrupted condition. Externally, *erôs* structures interpersonal relationships, most notably through the philosophical bonds between interlocutors in Plato's dialogues, serving as a bridge between personal self-formation and social engagement. The chapter further provides a systematic interpretation of *erôs* across the primary forms of selfhood in the *Republic*- timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, tyrannical, and philosophical- highlighting its formative influence on the soul's condition and the tensions among reason, spirit, and appetite that determine the moral character and integrity of each soul.

Chapter 4 affirms the formative role of *erôs* through the concrete model of the philosopher. By tracing the process of philosophical formation, it demonstrates *erôs*'s essential function in both the internal and external dimensions of development. Internally, *erôs* shapes the philosophical soul in two ways: first, by cultivating an affinity for beauty, order, and harmony before reason reaches maturity, thereby laying the groundwork for intellectual growth; and second, by providing the enduring drive to pursue learning and truth, enabling the philosopher to resist competing attractions such as wealth and bodily pleasure. Externally, *erôs* sustains the philosopher's commitment to extended dialectical inquiry, fostering the interpersonal bonds necessary for the collective pursuit of truth and the Good. Through its intensity and enduring influence, *erôs* directs the lover toward a lifelong, joyful pursuit of wisdom and self-discovery. In this way, Plato's depiction of the philosopher as the "lover of wisdom" emerges not as a metaphor but as the inevitable result of *erôs*'s formative power.

Chapter 5 further affirms the formative role of *erôs* by examining its influence in the contrasting model of the tyrant. It demonstrates that *erôs* is central to shaping three formative stages of the tyrannical character, with each stage revealing its impact in both the internal and external dimensions. I argue that, in each stage, *erôs* exercises

a powerful destructive force in two ways: first, it awakens and legitimates unnecessary, excessive, and even lawless pleasures, undermining the soul's order and enabling indulgence without shame or restraint; second, it drives the person away from good friends and wise counsel, particularly regarding what is truly valuable and virtuous. As a result, reason becomes constrained and eventually enslaved by appetite and pleasure. This cumulative distortion collapses the soul's moral and psychological order, which is why Plato presents the tyrannical character as the most disordered and wretched type, occupying the lowest position in his hierarchy of corrupt souls.

Chapter 6 offers the concluding synthesis of the thesis, emphasizing three central points: (i) in Platonic self-formation, reason is necessary but not sufficient; *erôs* is indispensable, playing a formative and essential role; (ii) *erôs* is intermediate, neutral, and malleable; it does not direct the soul toward good or bad on its own. Its orientation depends on the soul's condition, particularly the strength of reason, and on the surrounding social environment. This explains how the same *erôs*, consistent in its nature, can guide the philosophical soul toward wisdom while leading the tyrannical soul into corruption; (iii) *erôs* directly and profoundly influences reason, either fostering or undermining its power by shaping the conditions for its development and by supporting or impairing the interpersonal relationships necessary for the cultivation and correction of rational judgment. Collectively, these points establish *erôs* as the pivotal force in the dynamic interplay between the soul's internal capacities and its external environment, rendering it indispensable for understanding both human flourishing and corruption in Plato's thought.

1.1 Typical Readings and My Proposal

Plato's theory of self-formation is typically understood through a rationalist lens, positioning it as a cornerstone of classical rationalism¹. This interpretation emphasizes the supremacy of reason, viewing it as the primary source of knowledge and the guiding force in ethical development. On this account, reason alone is seen as the sole and essential element in shaping the self, with intellectual cultivation regarded as the central task of personal transformation.

By the 'rationalist' view of self-formation, I mean a descriptive rationalist position, rather than a merely normative one². The view I take myself to be opposing

¹The view that Plato's philosophy is fundamentally rationalist- and that Plato himself exemplifies classical rationalism- has had a significant impact on modern Plato scholarship. This perspective centers on the pivotal role of reason: *logos* (λόγος), understood especially as the soul's capacity to deliberate and provide an account, and *nous* (νοῦς), the intellectual faculty that apprehends the Forms. Notable proponents include Julia Annas, who argues that Plato conceives ethical self-formation as the cultivation of rational insight (*An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 1981, pp. 7-15), and Gail Fine, who highlights the primacy of knowledge of the Forms in Plato's epistemology and ethics (*Plato on Knowledge and Forms*, 2003, pp. 45-78). Such interpretations reflect a longstanding tradition of reading Plato as a philosopher for whom reason is both the means and the ultimate goal of philosophical life. For a detailed discussion emphasizing the role of reason in forming the philosophical self, see Susanna Saracco, "The Structure of Rational Engagement in the Reading of Plato," in *Rationality and the Philosophy of Mind* (2017), pp. 98-114.

² By 'Rationalist-Descriptive' I mean an interpretative position that treats rational cognition, deliberation, and self-rule as sufficient to explain the formation of psychic structure and personal identity in Plato. On this reading, non-rational motivations are either reduced to rationally intelligible elements or excluded from the explanatory core of self-formation. Against this, I argue that Plato's texts consistently present self-formation as irreducibly desiderative as well as rational, with *erôs* occupying a distinctive and indispensable role in shaping the soul's orientation, unity, and stability, whether in well-ordered or corrupted forms of selfhood. I do not intend to oppose and my argument does not require rejecting, the distinct normative claim that reason is necessary and sufficient for

is the claim that reason is both necessary and sufficient for self-formation to occur—that is, that the emergence of a determinate character or self can be fully explained by the activity of reason alone. On this account, the soul’s acquisition of a stable structure, orientation, and practical identity is understood primarily in terms of rational deliberation, judgment, and self-rule.

According to this rationalist picture, non-rational psychic forces do not play a constitutive role in self-formation. Desire, affect, and appetite are treated as explanatorily subordinate: either as passive materials upon which reason imposes order, or as phenomena that require explanation only insofar as they fall under rational control³. Even where such forces are acknowledged, they are typically introduced as elements to be regulated once rational authority is in place, rather than as factors that shape the conditions under which rational rule itself emerges.

The argument of this thesis rejects this descriptive rationalism. Plato does not, I contend, present self-formation as a process that can be accounted for by reason operating in isolation. The coming-to-be of a structured soul depends essentially on the configuration of its desires, and in particular on *erôs* as a formative and motivating power. *Erôs* is not merely something that reason subsequently governs; it is a force that precedes, animates, and stabilizes rational activity by binding the soul to its ends and sustaining its orientation over time. Without such desiderative structuring, rational cognition lacks the motivational efficacy required to produce a determinate and enduring form of selfhood.

This claim is descriptive rather than evaluative⁴. The issue is not only whether reason suffices for good or virtuous self-formation, but whether reason alone can explain self-formation as such. Even defective or disordered souls are intelligible, in Plato’s account, only through the way desire organizes their attachments and practical commitments. Reason remains present within these formations, but it does not, by itself, account for their genesis or stability. Plato’s theory of self-formation is therefore non-rationalist in this descriptive sense: reason is indispensable, yet it operates within a deeper economy of desire that *erôs* both animates and, in certain cases, corrupts.

This descriptive claim has important normative implications, but it is not itself a normative thesis. The argument advanced here is not merely that reason fails to suffice for good or successful self-formation, but that Plato does not regard reason as sufficient for self-formation tout court. That is, rational activity alone cannot explain how any determinate form of selfhood—whether ordered or disordered—comes into being. The question at stake is therefore prior to, and more basic than, the evaluation of different forms of character as virtuous or vicious.

Plato’s accounts of defective or distorted souls make this especially clear. In cases such as the tyrannical soul, selfhood is not absent, nor is rationality simply missing; rather, the soul exhibits a highly determinate structure, orientation, and

good or praiseworthy self-formation.

³ Plato does not treat all non-rational psychic elements in the same way or with the same theoretical weight. While appetite and affect are often discussed in terms of their susceptibility to rational regulation, *erôs* receives a distinctive and privileged treatment in Plato’s texts. Unlike other desires, *erôs* is repeatedly presented as a powerful orienting and motivational force that can shape the soul’s overall direction, structure, and attachments and not merely as something awaiting rational control.

⁴ Framing the disagreement in descriptive terms is crucial. The claim at issue is not merely that reason is insufficient for good or successful self-formation, but that reason alone cannot explain how any determinate form of selfhood—whether ordered or disordered—comes to exist.

practical identity. What renders this structure intelligible, however, is not the operation of reason alone, but the way *erôs* organizes the soul's motivations, attachments, and sense of what is worth pursuing. Desire provides the unifying and directing force that binds the soul to its ends, even when those ends are corrupt or destructive. Reason remains operative within such formations- often in a subordinated or instrumental role- but it does not by itself account for their genesis, coherence, or persistence.

By insisting on this descriptive point, the thesis reframes the normative question of how the soul ought to be formed. If reason alone cannot explain how selves are formed at all, then accounts that locate the entire burden of psychic formation in rational insight or deliberation risk mischaracterizing the very phenomenon they aim to evaluate. Normative ideals of rational self-rule must therefore be understood against a background in which desire, and especially *erôs*, plays a constitutive role in shaping the soul's orientation and stability. The normative significance of reason emerges only within this broader economy of desire, rather than independently of it.

The crucial question of this investigation is whether, for Plato, reason alone is both necessary and sufficient for self-formation, that is, whether reason by itself can account for the full development of the person. The rationalist interpretation answers in the affirmative, presenting reason as the essential and exclusive condition for human growth. This view is based on a systematic reading of key dialogues, in which Plato depicts reason as the highest faculty of the soul, uniquely capable of grasping eternal truths and guiding moral judgment⁵. As a result, intellectual cultivation is seen as the singular path to self-realization in Plato's thought, with all other psychological elements regarded as subordinate to or dependent on rational activity. The influence of later rationalist thinkers, from Descartes to Kant, has further reinforced this interpretation, as they drew on Plato's elevation of reason to ground and shape their own philosophical systems.

To fully grasp this rationalist interpretation, we must examine its textual foundation. The metaphysical basis is most clearly articulated in the *Republic*, especially in the analogy of the Sun (*Rep.* 507b-509c), where the Form of the Good is portrayed as the highest object of knowledge- accessible solely through the soul's highest faculty, reason. This epistemological framework establishes intellectual apprehension as the sole means of participating in true reality. The divided line analogy (*Rep.* 509d-511e) further reinforces this idea by showing how reason alone enables the soul to move from opinion and hypothesis to direct, clear intellectual vision, excluding any role for non-rational faculties in this process. These metaphysical commitments thus ground Plato's conception of self-formation as an essentially intellectual enterprise.

The rationalist interpretation finds strong support in the *Protagoras* and *Meno*, where Socrates presents his most unqualified identification of virtue with knowledge. Interpreters in this tradition emphasize these dialogues to argue that, for Plato, human development is fundamentally cognitive. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates systematically rejects the idea that virtue involves anything beyond knowledge, famously claiming that "no one errs willingly" (*Prot.* 352d-358d), thus attributing all moral failure to intellectual error. The dialogue's conclusion, that virtue is knowledge and therefore

⁵The key dialogues emphasized by the rationalist interpretation include the *Republic*, particularly passages IV. 436a-441c, VI. 507b-511e, and VII. 517b-c; the *Phaedo*, especially 64a-67e and 79a-84b; the *Meno* from 81a-86c; and the *Protagoras* between 352b and 361b.

teachable (*Prot.* 361b), suggests that self-improvement consists entirely in the acquisition and refinement of understanding. On this view, moral development is an exclusively rational process, leaving no substantial role for non-rational elements. The *Meno* reinforces this “intellectualist” position through both its epistemological and ethical arguments. The slave boy demonstration (*Men.* 82b-86c) is intended to show that all learning is recollection- a purely rational activity that activates latent knowledge without engaging the emotions or desires. This model, combined with the dialogue’s conclusion that virtue comes through either “right opinion” or knowledge (*Men.* 97b-100b), produces a unified vision of self-formation as the awakening and development of cognitive capacities alone.

In addition, Plato’s tripartite psychology in *Republic* IV (around 435b-441c) provides the structural basis for rational sufficiency by presenting reason as the natural ruler of the soul. The just soul achieves harmony precisely through reason’s unopposed governance, with spirit and appetite becoming fully compliant instruments rather than independent contributors to selfhood. This psychological model suggests that once reason establishes proper rule, the other parts lose their autonomous status, becoming mere extensions of rational will. The rationalist interpretation emphasizes that this hierarchical arrangement makes reason’s development both necessary and sufficient for complete self-mastery.

The strongest support for the rationalist claim of reason’s self-sufficiency appears in the *Phaedo*’s ascetic vision of philosophy as a “practice for dying” (*Phd.* 64a-67e). In this account, the body and its affections are portrayed as obstacles to pure thought, with the ideal state being one in which the soul engages in reasoning free from all sensory interference. This model of purification allows no constructive role for non-rational elements in the process of self-perfection; instead, it presents philosophical development as the progressive liberation of reason from the distractions and impurities of the body. The dialogue’s stark dualism thus provides the rationalist interpretation with its most explicit affirmation of reason’s autonomy and sufficiency in shaping the self. In the *Phaedo*, self-formation is envisioned as a purely rational process, with reason alone serving as both the means and the end of philosophical life.

One of the aims of this project is to challenge the rationalist interpretation of Plato’s theory of self-formation, which, in short, treats reason as the sole and all-important element and reduces human development to an entirely cognitive process. The core difference between my view and the standard rationalist view is this: I argue that reason is necessary but not sufficient for understanding Platonic self-formation, whereas the rationalist claims that reason is both necessary and sufficient. I now turn to a more detailed analysis of the rationalist view and explain why I find it problematic.

The rationalist reading of Plato rests on two fundamental and interrelated claims about the nature of self-formation: first, the complete independence of reason in attaining knowledge of the Forms; and second, the absolute supremacy of reason as the governing principle within the tripartite soul. These two claims mutually reinforce one another within the rationalist framework: reason’s independent access to the Forms justifies its dominant position in the soul, while its supremacy secures the internal conditions necessary for unhindered philosophical contemplation. The result is a closed system in which self-formation is reduced to the cultivation of autonomous rational capacity, with all other psychological elements either subordinated to this aim

or actively suppressed.

This project challenges both of these premises. In response to the first claim- that reason operates independently in attaining knowledge of the Forms- I argue that, although reason alone possesses the unique capacity to grasp the Forms, its actual access to them is consistently mediated by erotic motivation, as Plato compellingly illustrates in the *Republic*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. It is correct that reason alone can apprehend the Forms, while non-rational elements such as appetite and spirit lack this epistemic capacity. However, this does not imply that reason functions autonomously in the lived process of self-formation.

While the power to know the Forms belongs to reason in a strict sense, this power remains latent unless it is activated and sustained by the soul's broader motivational economy. A closer reading of Plato's dialogues reveals that reason's ascent to the Forms is not an isolated or purely cognitive achievement, but one that emerges through the coordinated activity of the entire soul. Most crucially, it depends on the affective and aspirational force of *erôs*, which orients the soul toward beauty and animates the movement toward intelligible reality. Far from transcending the non-rational elements, reason draws upon them, particularly upon *erôs*, to fulfill its highest function. Reason, in this more integrated and dynamic model, is not a sovereign faculty standing apart from the soul's desires, but a power whose realization is inseparable from their structured and philosophical cultivation.

The crucial point is that reason is necessary but not sufficient for one's formation. While it serves as the indispensable architect of self-formation, reason cannot fulfill this role without drawing on the material and motivational resources of the soul's non-rational elements, above all, *erôs*. As the broader dialogues such as the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* make clear, reason's access to the Forms is not autonomous but relies on the animating and aspirational power of *erôs*. It is *erôs* that awakens the soul's longing for the good and sustains its upward movement toward the intelligible realm. Thus, although the act of knowing is exclusive to reason, the impulse that initiates, energizes, and guides this activity originates in *erôs*. This dynamic undermines the rationalist claim that reason functions independently in the process of self-formation. In other words, while only reason can apprehend the Forms, it can do so only when moved and supported by the desire, vitality, and teleological orientation that *erôs* provides.

For example, the *Phaedrus* offers a direct challenge to the supposed autonomy of reason through its account of *anamnesis*. The soul's recollection of the Forms (*Phdr.* 249c-250d) does not arise from spontaneous intellectual activity but is triggered by an external catalyst, the encounter with earthly beauty that "shakes the soul" (*Phdr.* 250d3). This erotic experience provokes a visceral, embodied response ("shuddering, sweating, and strange heat," *Phdr.* 251a-b) that first activates reason's dormant capacity for noetic vision. The implications are significant: reason's highest epistemic function depends on an initial affective disturbance that it neither originates nor controls. The chariot allegory (*Phdr.* 253d-257b) further develops this theme, depicting reason not as an autonomous sovereign but as a charioteer whose success depends on managing the unruly energy of the non-rational horses. Rather than operating in isolation, reason must engage in a constant dynamic of guidance, restraint, and cooperation, revealing that its function in self-formation is inseparable from the erotic and spirited dimensions of the soul.

This interdependence becomes especially clear in the case of a person suffering from deep depression. Such a person may retain the formal capacity for rational

thought, yet that capacity lies dormant, unable to move the soul toward the good. The depressive state vividly illustrates the insufficiency of reason on its own: the intellect may still grasp that certain actions are good or that life has value, but without the affective drive, without *erôs*, those insights fail to generate movement. The soul in depression is frozen not because reason has ceased to operate, but because the erotic energy that animates and directs it toward the good has been extinguished or obscured. This condition exemplifies the Platonic insight that rational power, though necessary, is not self-activating. The recovery of such a soul does not begin with reasoning alone, but with the reawakening of desire, perhaps through a glimpse of beauty, the kindness of another, or a moment of unexpected connection. In such moments, *erôs* stirs, however faintly, and only then can reason begin to reassert its guiding role. Thus, rather than functioning independently, reason depends fundamentally on the very desires and energies the rationalist view seeks to exclude, both in actual operation and throughout the course of one's life.

Moreover, I argue that reason's dependence begins early in a person's development, with *erôs* playing a fundamental role in shaping the self before reason reaches full maturity⁶. This early period, shaped by *erôs*, is crucial for understanding how a person develops. It reveals that reason, though indispensable, is not the starting point of self-formation; rather, it arises from and builds upon prior affective and motivational conditions rooted in *erôs*. This marks a fundamental difference between my view and rationalist accounts. To clarify this point, I develop two claims that illustrate the essential functions of *erôs* in the early stages of personal growth:

First, *erôs* plays a formative role in the early development of the person by cultivating a love of the fine and the beautiful (*philokalon*). Through aesthetic and moral education, especially in music, poetry, dance, as well as physical training, *erôs* shapes the person's sensibilities, desires, and affective orientation⁷. This education instills harmony and rhythm not only in the body but in the soul itself, fostering an emotional attunement to order, beauty, and nobility. At this stage, reason is not yet fully developed, so self-formation proceeds primarily through non-cognitive, affective channels. When properly cultivated, *erôs* aligns the soul's impulses with what is fine and good, laying the essential groundwork for the eventual emergence and exercise of reason. Musicians, poets, and philosophers exemplify this process, as their early immersion in beauty and harmony shapes their souls, preparing them for the rational insight and wisdom that follow.

Second, the early stages of one's development, shaped by *erôs*, establish the fundamental conditions under which reason can properly mature and function effectively. Plato emphasizes in the *Republic* (esp. 376e-412b, 441e-443d) that early education during childhood and adolescence, especially through the cultivation of a love of the fine and the beautiful, not only helps reason more readily recognize the good but also provides the emotional and motivational support necessary for its stable and lasting rule over the soul. Without this foundation, reason's authority remains

⁶Plato emphasizes the early stage of formation because the soul's parts- reason, spirit, and appetite- are most flexible and open to influence at this time. This shaping happens through education, storytelling, and habituation. For detailed discussions on the importance of early education and non-rational training, see Vlastos (1992, p. 248), Burnyeat (1990, pp. 200-201), and Annas (2011, p. 34).

⁷In *Republic* 376e-412b, Plato outlines musical and physical (gymnastic) education as essential preparation for the soul's development, with *Republic* 401b-d focusing specifically on aesthetic education. In *The Laws* (635b-c), he expands this idea by comparing early education to guiding a child's pleasures and pains toward proper objects. What rationalists often dismiss as mere preparation is actually the careful shaping of the desiring soul's fundamental structure- what Aristotle would later describe as forming the "that" (*to hoti*) before understanding the "why" (*to dihoti*).

fragile and easily disrupted. The soul lacks the internal harmony and stability required to consistently pursue the good, even if reason later acquires the capacity to discern it. The oligarchic person exemplifies this failure: disordered attachments within the soul undermine reason's authority, reducing it to a mere instrument of calculation in the service of wealth, rather than a true governing force (*Rep.* 553a-555b).

Therefore, the rationalist view is challenged, as reason's mature functioning depends on pre-rational conditions that it did not create but must continually rely upon. These two claims taken together show that *erôs* is not a mere auxiliary force but a fundamental and indispensable partner in the soul's development, both prior to and after the full emergence of reason. Without the early formation and ongoing support provided by *erôs*, reason lacks the emotional traction and motivational stability necessary to guide the soul effectively. *Erôs* initiates the soul's movement toward the good and sustains its pursuit even once reason is capable of discerning it. In this integrated model, self-formation is not the achievement of reason alone, but the outcome of a deep partnership between reason and the soul's affective energies.

In response to the rationalist's second claim- that reason holds absolute supremacy as the governing principle within the tripartite soul- I argue that this model oversimplifies and distorts Plato's more nuanced and dynamic account, potentially leading to difficulties in fully explaining his theory of self-formation.

A central flaw in the rationalist interpretation of Plato's theory of self-formation is its inability to account for the varied psychological constitutions he presents across his works. According to Plato's tripartite model of the soul, comprising the rational part (*logistikon*), the spirited part (*thumos*), and the appetitive part (*epithumia*), each part contributes actively to the soul's development and the formation of character. The rationalist view, by reducing selfhood to the supremacy of reason, overlooks the complexity of this moral psychology. In the *Republic* (around 430d-441c), Plato identifies a range of character types that emerge from differing configurations of the soul's parts: the philosopher, whose soul is governed by reason; the timocratic individual, shaped by *thumos* and a love of honor; the oligarchic and democratic characters, ruled by different forms of appetite; and the tyrannical person, whose soul is dominated by lawless desires. Each of these types corresponds to a specific internal organization of the soul, showing that selfhood is not simply a function of rational control, but rather the result of dynamic interactions among all three parts. The rationalist view, by focusing narrowly on reason, cannot account for the full range of psychological structures and moral characters that Plato describes.

A further problem for the rationalist interpretation is its failure to explain *akrasia*, or weakness of will, the phenomenon of acting against one's better judgment⁸. If the self were identical with reason, then knowing the good would necessarily entail doing it. Yet Plato clearly recognizes that people often act contrary to what they rationally believe to be right. In *Republic* IV (439e-440a), for example, the figure of Leontius

⁸Scholars who examine this issue include Kenneth Dorter, who in *Weakness and Will in Plato's Republic* (pp. 45-60) argues that Plato offers two seemingly conflicting accounts of *akrasia*. In early dialogues like *Protagoras*, Plato takes an intellectualist stance, claiming that wrongdoing results from ignorance. However, in *Republic* Book IV, he acknowledges that unrestrained desires can cause moral failure. Dorter suggests these views can be reconciled by understanding the later dialogues as reflecting the complex interaction between knowledge and desire in human psychology. Daniel C. Russell, in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Plato* (2013, pp. 150-155), also highlights Plato's recognition that desires can overpower reason, revealing a more nuanced view of human behavior beyond strict rationalism. These analyses highlight the limitations of the rationalist interpretation and call for a more comprehensive approach to the relationship between knowledge, desire, and action in Plato's philosophy.

struggles between his rational disapproval of looking at corpses and his appetitive desire to see them. Although he condemns the act, he ultimately yields to his appetites, revealing that reason does not always govern. Similarly, in the *Phaedrus* (254a-e), Plato represents the soul as a charioteer trying to control two horses: one noble, the other unruly. The charioteer (reason) may be pulled off course when the appetitive horse resists control, again illustrating that reason's authority is contingent and can be undermined by other psychic forces.

These cases demonstrate that Plato does not conceive of the soul as a unified rational agent, but as a complex structure with competing parts, in which moral failure arises from internal discord. His psychology accommodates *akrasia* by recognizing the independent motivational force of *thumos* and *epithumia*. A rationalist interpretation, by contrast, either has to deny the reality of *akrasia* or reduce it to a cognitive error, neither of which adequately reflects Plato's nuanced view. On Plato's account, moral integrity requires not only reason but the proper education and alignment of all three parts of the soul. The rationalist model, in neglecting this interdependence, fails to capture the depth of Plato's theory of self-formation.

In conclusion, I have argued that the descriptive rationalist interpretation fails to capture the depth and complexity of Plato's account of self-formation, insofar as it cannot adequately explain key features of his psychology. First, I demonstrated that reason's epistemological access to the Forms is not autonomous but consistently depends on *erôs*. In the embodied soul, this erotic drive is not an optional supplement to reason, but a necessary condition for its very emergence and pursuit of truth. Second, I showed that Plato does not portray reason as an absolute ruler within the soul, but as one part of a tripartite structure in which the spirited (*thumos*) and appetitive (*epithumia*) elements possess their own motivations and capacities and must be properly educated and aligned. For Plato, moral development does not result from the domination of reason alone, but from the integrated cooperation and harmonization of all three parts of the soul. By overlooking both the formative power of *erôs* and the interdependence of the soul's parts, the rationalist model ultimately distorts Plato's more nuanced and holistic vision of what it means to become a unified and just self.

Building on this, the project firmly rejects the notion that reason alone suffices for self-development in Plato's philosophy, and thereby challenges the common mischaracterization of Plato as a reductive intellectualist. While reason is essential in Plato's account of the soul, it is neither self-sufficient nor capable of bringing about true self-formation on its own. By restoring *erôs* as a foundational and motivating force, this reading uncovers a more complex and dynamic model of self-formation: the proper development of the self requires the coordinated growth and alignment of all parts of the soul, with reason acting not as an isolated ruler but as the conductor of a complex soul-symphony. Human flourishing arises not from cognition alone, but from the harmonious integration of all aspects of our being, an insight that carries significant implications for contemporary ethics, education, and psychology.

My disagreement with the descriptive rationalist position concerns its psychological account of self-formation in Plato. I do not deny that Plato accords reason a privileged normative status, nor that rational self-rule is necessary for good or philosophical self-formation. What I reject is the stronger descriptive claim that reason alone suffices to explain how self-formation actually occurs.

Erôs designates the fundamental motivational and orientational condition of self-formation. It directs the soul toward what it apprehends as worthwhile, generates enduring attachments and commitments, and supplies the affective energy through which rational judgments acquire practical efficacy. In the absence of *erôs*, reason may identify norms or articulate principles, but it lacks the capacity to move the soul in a stable and enduring way, and thus cannot secure the diachronic coherence required for character formation. Self-formation, therefore, is not the product of rational cognition in isolation, but of a dynamic interaction in which reason presupposes *erôs* as its motivational ground.

This account stands in direct opposition to descriptive rationalist views that treat reason as sufficient for the emergence of a formed self. I argue, instead, that reason's efficacy is conditional upon the prior presence and structuring of *erôs*. Even in cases of philosophical self-formation, rational self-rule does not arise spontaneously from reason itself, but depends upon the education, redirection, and stabilization of *erôs*. The philosopher is formed not merely by reasoning correctly, but by learning to desire and love the right objects in the right way.

The disagreement I wish to press is therefore not between a descriptive and a normative thesis, but between two competing descriptive accounts of self-formation. My central claim is that genuine self-formation cannot occur without *erôs*. *Erôs* is not merely an optional accompaniment to rational activity, nor simply a force that reason later disciplines; it is a necessary motivational and orienting principle that initiates, sustains, and shapes the processes through which a soul acquires a determinate structure. Reason alone is thus insufficient to account for the genesis of the self.

Framing the argument in these terms clarifies its scope. There is no tension between my claim and the possibility that Plato also endorses a rationalist-normative ideal: one may consistently hold that reason ought to govern a well-formed soul while denying that reason alone can generate self-formation. The target of my critique is not the normative claim that reason should rule, but the descriptive claim that reason is sufficient for the soul's formation.

To establish this thesis, it is therefore not necessary to provide a full account of how self-formation ought to occur; what must be shown is a more limited but fundamental claim about how self-formation occurs according to Plato. Specifically, I aim to demonstrate that *erôs* constitutes a necessary condition for self-formation as such, whether the outcome is virtuous, deficient, or corrupt. This requires showing that: (i) self-formation presupposes a motivational orientation toward apparent goods; (ii) such orientation is provided by *erôs*; and (iii) reason's role, while indispensable, is primarily regulative rather than self-generating.

The most accurate foil to my position is therefore not the rationalist-normative view, but the stronger descriptive thesis that treats reason as sufficient for self-formation independently of erotic desire. Against this foil, my argument establishes that *erôs* is constitutive of self-formation in Plato: any account that abstracts self-formation from erotic motivation fails to capture the dynamics of the soul as Plato conceives it. In this way, *erôs* is shown to be integral not only to the content and direction of the soul's formation but to the very possibility of achieving a determinate psychic structure at all.

1.2 Methodology and Related Questions

Four methodological questions need to be clarified as the project explores the role of *erôs* in Plato's theory of self-formation.

The first and foremost methodological question concerns whether Plato offers a theory of self-formation or whether such a theory must be constructed through a project that interprets and systematizes his account. The challenge arises because Plato writes in dialogues rather than doctrinal treatises, and thus never presents a single, explicit "theory of self-formation." Instead, his ideas about the soul's structure, education, virtue, and transformation appear across multiple works in varied contexts- sometimes complementing, sometimes complicating one another. The task, therefore, is to balance fidelity to the texts with the demands of systematic reconstruction. This question is crucial for understanding Plato, as it requires deciding whether, and how, scattered passages can be treated as a coherent whole.

To address this question, we must first recognize that Plato's "theory of self-formation" is not a ready-made doctrine but an interpretive construct- one that emerges from the careful synthesis of dispersed and dialogically mediated insights found throughout his works. Unlike later philosophers who offer systematic accounts, Plato examines the formation of the self through multiple lenses- psychological, ethical, epistemological, and political- without ever unifying these perspectives into a single, comprehensive theory.

This means that any coherent account of self-formation in Plato must be reconstructed through sustained critical engagement with his texts. Such a reconstruction must rigorously justify its interpretive choices, maintaining a careful balance between textual fidelity and the philosophical demand for clarity, coherence, and systematic insight. While Plato does not present a fully systematized theory of self-formation, he does provide the essential philosophical foundations, core concepts, and sustained explorations that both invite and enable the construction of such a theory.

More specifically, all the essential components of self-formation are addressed across various dialogues, often through different characters and within distinct contexts. These include the tripartite soul and its proper hierarchy in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*; the transformative power of *erôs* in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*; the soul's purification in the *Phaedo*; the method of dialectical education in the *Theaetetus*; and the role of law and habituation in the *Laws*. Together, these dialogues offer indispensable raw materials: the structured soul, virtue as inner harmony, knowledge (especially of the Forms), as transformative, the shaping power of philosophical education and directed *erôs*, and the necessity of self-mastery. These elements are scattered, sometimes emphasized differently, occasionally exhibiting tensions, and embedded within broader discussions of ethics, politics, metaphysics, and epistemology.

This project will identify the elements of self-formation scattered throughout Plato's corpus, synthesize these insights, reconcile tensions between dialogues, and organize them into a coherent framework that clarifies the process, mechanisms, obstacles, and ultimate goal of self-formation. The resulting theory is not a direct transcription of Plato's words but a philosophically rigorous reconstruction- one that remains faithful to his core principles while making explicit what is often implicit in his work. This approach does not impose foreign categories onto Plato but aims to articulate the underlying coherence of his thought on how the soul is shaped, cultivated, and perfected.

Based on this, the project will challenge scholars who claim that Plato lacks a consistent psychology⁹. It will argue that, despite the dialogical and unsystematic form of his writings, Plato articulates a remarkably coherent psychological framework- one that conceives of the human self as an embodied soul- and that this framework underlies his ethical, epistemological, and political theories. Across key dialogues, Plato consistently presents a structured account of the soul, most notably in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, where he distinguishes reason, spirit, and appetite as distinct faculties, each with its own motives, functions, and forms of pleasure. Far from being ad hoc or contradictory, this tripartite model recurs in varied contexts and serves as the foundation for understanding moral conflict, self-mastery, education, and the soul's orientation toward the good.

The project will show that Plato's psychological theory includes not only a taxonomy of soul-parts but also a sustained account of their dynamic relations- how they become aligned or disordered, how reason can rule or be overthrown, and how the soul can be unified or divided against itself. These psychological dynamics are essential to Plato's conceptions of justice, virtue, philosophical development, and ultimately the good life. Rather than viewing Plato's psychology as fragmented or metaphorical, this project will demonstrate that it forms the systematic basis of his theory of self-formation and supports a unified vision of how the soul is shaped, cultivated, and perfected through education, *erôs*, dialectic, and law.

The second methodological question concerns the project's approach to unity in Plato's treatment of *erôs*. Rather than beginning from an a priori commitment to a unitarian interpretation of Plato's corpus, this study adopts a carefully limited and textually grounded strategy¹⁰. It focuses on a set of dialogues that are non-arbitrarily grouped together in virtue of two features: they are closely connected in dramatic and chronological terms, and they are centrally concerned with *erôs* and its role in shaping the soul. This restriction of scope ensures that any claims about coherence arise from sustained engagement with the texts themselves, rather than from a general thesis about Platonic unity imposed in advance.

The analysis does not presuppose that these dialogues advance a single, fully coherent account of *erôs*. Instead, it asks whether careful and sustained interpretation supports the conclusion that they articulate a consistent understanding of *erôs* as a formative power in psychic life, one capable of ordering the soul but also of corrupting it when misdirected. Each dialogue is examined on its own terms, with attention to the specific argumentative context in which *erôs* appears and to its distinctive psychological and ethical claims. The guiding question is not whether the dialogues can be forced to fit a preconceived doctrinal framework, but whether, when read together, they reveal a shared conception of *erôs* as a fundamental force in the constitution and orientation of the self.

On this approach, any unity that emerges is not assumed as a methodological

⁹Mitchell Miller and scholars in his tradition, such as Victorino Tejera, interpret Plato's dialogues primarily as pedagogical or ironic works that emphasize dramatic and dialectical effects rather than presenting a systematic psychological theory (Tejera 1994).

¹⁰ This methodological caution is motivated in part by Plato's distinctive use of the dialogue form. Plato does not present his philosophical views in the manner of systematic treatises, but stages arguments through dramatic exchanges, characterized by shifts in perspective, context, and interlocutors. As a result, apparent agreements or tensions between dialogues cannot be straightforwardly treated as expressions of a single, fully articulated doctrine without careful interpretative justification. The present study therefore allows questions of coherence and unity to be settled through close textual analysis, rather than presupposing them in advance.

premise, but is the outcome of careful interpretative work. If the arguments developed in the chapters that follow are successful, they will show that the selected dialogues converge on a consistent understanding of *erôs* as a dynamic force that structures the soul by shaping its dominant attachments, priorities, and evaluative orientation. *Erôs* is thus presented as central to the constitution of the self: it orders the soul toward certain objects of value, guiding both practical decision-making and the formation of character. At the same time, the analysis highlights that the same psychic mechanism through which *erôs* educates, stabilizes, and cultivates the soul can also corrupt it when its objects are misidentified, pursued excessively, or allowed to dominate without rational or ethical guidance.

The claim to coherence advanced here is not that Plato offers an invariant or fully systematized theory repeated across all dialogues, but rather that a stable explanatory framework concerning the formative and potentially corrupting power of *erôs* can be discerned. This framework accommodates the natural variation in emphasis, dramatic context, and argumentative strategy across the dialogues, showing that differences in treatment do not undermine the possibility of tracing a continuous philosophical insight. By grounding the claim in careful textual analysis, the thesis allows coherence to emerge as a substantive interpretative result, demonstrating that Plato's depiction of *erôs* is both conceptually robust and practically consequential for understanding the constitution, guidance, and vulnerability of the human soul.

Understood in this way, a unitarian reading is not assumed but earned. It is presented as the conclusion of a cumulative interpretative case: if the dialogues under consideration are best explained by reference to a shared account of *erôs* and self-formation, then this provides reason to attribute to Plato a fundamentally coherent view on this topic, at least within this tightly defined textual domain. The methodological choice, therefore, is not to deny the possibility of development, tension, or refinement within Plato's thought, but to allow the question of unity to be settled by the explanatory success of the interpretation itself. Unitarianism, on this account, is neither a starting point nor a guiding dogma, but a philosophical result that stands or falls with the arguments advanced in the thesis.

The first justification for this approach emerges from the conceptual continuity in Plato's treatment of *erôs*. Martha Nussbaum, in her critique of strict unitarian readings, cautions that reading the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Republic* as expressions of a single, seamless theory risks overlooking important differences in genre, rhetorical strategy, and philosophical emphasis¹¹. Paul Ludwig, however, argues that such differences do not amount to doctrinal rupture. Rather, they reflect distinct perspectives on a unified philosophical project in which *erôs* consistently functions as the animating force of the soul¹². This methodology integrates both perspectives, recognizing dialogue-specific nuances while emphasizing their shared understanding of a coherent conception of *erôs*.

Across the dialogues, *erôs* appears in various registers- its etymological significance in *Cratylus*, its orientation toward beauty in the *Symposium*, its divine madness in the *Phaedrus*, and its political and psychological significance in the *Republic*. Yet these treatments share a central insight: *erôs* propels the soul beyond its present state, shaping its desires, aspirations, and ultimately its identity. This conceptual continuity justifies a unitarian approach that treats *erôs* as a coherent and integral thread running through Plato's theory of self-formation.

¹¹Nussbaum 1994, pp. 200-239.

¹²Ludwig 2007, pp. 202-231.

Structural parallels across dialogues further support this unitarian reading. In each case, *erôs* functions as an intermediary, dynamic force that initiates movement in the soul, whether directing it upward toward the Forms or downward into disorder and excess. This dual potential is dramatized in the *Phaedrus*, where *erôs* propels the soul either toward divine recollection or entrapment in bodily desire. Similarly, in the *Republic*, *erôs* explains both the philosopher's ascent to knowledge and the tyrant's descent into chaos, depending on how it is educated and aligned. Across these texts, *erôs* consistently emerges as the principal source of psychic motion, shaping the soul's trajectory and, ultimately, its formation. These structural parallels reveal a recurring pattern: *erôs* mediates between the soul's present condition and its possible fulfillment, reinforcing the view that Plato treats it as a central mechanism of self-formation throughout his corpus.

This methodological stance consciously rejects developmentalist interpretations that fragment Plato's thought into discrete chronological periods marked by radically divergent conceptions of *erôs*¹³. While scholars such as Gregory Vlastos emphasize apparent doctrinal discontinuities across the dialogues, a rigorous unitarian reading reveals a deeper conceptual unity in Plato's treatment of *erôs* as both a transformative power and a fundamental motivational force. Rather than presenting a series of theoretical ruptures, the dialogues progressively unfold complementary dimensions of a coherent philosophical vision- one in which *erôs* consistently functions as the animating principle of the soul's striving toward moral formation and ultimate fulfillment.

The implications for understanding self-formation are profound. A unitarian approach reveals Plato's *erôs* not as a mere irrational passion or a detached intellectual ideal, but as the dynamic force driving the soul's progression toward unity and fulfillment¹⁴. This interpretation aligns closely with Plato's broader metaphysical framework while capturing the complexity of his moral psychology. Accordingly, the project will trace these conceptual continuities across the dialogues, while carefully considering how different contexts and literary styles influence Plato's presentation of this central concept.

To reinforce this methodological foundation, the analysis will engage with both supportive and critical scholarly views. It acknowledges dialogue-specific differences, such as the mythic narrative style of the *Phaedrus* compared to the more systematic analysis in the *Republic*, but demonstrate that these variations reflect complementary perspectives rather than contradictions. Apparent tensions, like the *Symposium*'s emphasis on interpersonal love versus the *Phaedrus*'s cosmic vision of *erôs*, will be addressed by showing how both serve as transformative forces that reshape the self. This approach promises a richer, more integrated understanding of *erôs* in Plato's theory of self-formation, highlighting the coherence and depth of his philosophical vision across the corpus.

The third methodological question concerns the role of non-rational elements in Plato's theory of self-formation: why does this thesis focus specifically on *erôs*,

¹³Scholars who advocate developmentalist interpretations of Plato's philosophy, viewing his thought as evolving through distinct chronological periods with differing conceptions of *erôs*, include Gregory Vlastos (1942, pp. 421-449), Myles Burnyeat (1977, pp. 7-16), and Julia Annas (1999), Martha Nussbaum (2001).

¹⁴Christopher Rowe supports the unified interpretation of Plato's philosophy. In his book "*Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*" (2007), he discusses Plato's writing style and method, highlighting how Plato uses the dialogue form to convey complex and interconnected philosophical ideas, thereby promoting an overall coherent understanding of his work.

rather than on other non-rational elements discussed in Plato's dialogues, such as fear, pity, or shame? Does *erôs* occupy a privileged position in shaping the self, or is it simply one among several contributing forces? I contend that the centrality of *erôs* is not established by abstractly excluding other emotions¹⁵. Rather, it is grounded in the textual and structural evidence of Plato's dialogues, which consistently present *erôs* as performing a distinctive function that no other affective state occupies.

Across these dialogues, *erôs* operates as a comprehensive, organizing, and transformative force, shaping the development of the soul and the formation of character in ways that Plato does not attribute to other elements. Unlike other non-rational elements, *erôs* functions as an organizing principle of the psyche: it motivates the soul toward higher goods, directs the ordering of desires, and orchestrates the development of character over time. Structurally, in dialogues such as the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*, *erôs* appears as the linchpin around which moral and intellectual development is staged, shaping both the individual's capacities and their orientation toward truth and beauty. Textually, Plato attributes to *erôs* a transformative power: it does not simply accompany the soul, but actively corrupts or refines it, guiding the trajectory of psychic development in a way that no other passion or desire is shown to do. The centrality of *erôs*, therefore, is not asserted by default, but demonstrated through its singular, pervasive, and structuring presence across multiple dialogues, a presence that makes it indispensable to any account of the formation of character and the development of the soul in Platonic thought.

Unlike emotions that arise in response to particular circumstances and quickly fade¹⁶, *erôs* is sustained and long-term: it fixes the soul on what it lacks and drives the pursuit of objects regarded as inherently valuable or fulfilling. This orientation is active rather than passive, structuring the agent's evaluative framework, guiding deliberation, and ordering desires to provide a coherent motivational core around which the soul's character and actions are integrated.

Other non-rational elements of the soul, such as spiritedness (*thumos*), appetitive desire (*epithumia*), and emotions like fear, anger, pity, and shame, play important roles in regulating behavior and shaping immediate responses in Plato's psychology, yet they do not occupy the same structural role as *erôs*. Their influence is primarily situational and reactive. Fear, for example, functions to restrain action in the face of danger (*Leg.* 707c-708a); anger can defend perceived injustices or assert the self against affronts (*Rep.* 439a-b); pity and shame moderate or correct conduct in social contexts (*Gorg.* 474d-475a); and appetitive desires drive the pursuit of bodily

¹⁵This claim does not deny the importance of other non-rational elements in Plato's moral psychology; rather, it maintains that, despite their acknowledged significance, Plato does not accord them the same structurally central and transformative role in psychic development that he assigns to *erôs*. In Plato, emotions such as fear, shame, and pity play important roles in ethical regulation and social formation. Plato explicitly recognizes their significance within moral psychology, particularly in shaping conduct, enforcing social norms, and guiding corrective responses in both the soul and the city. However, he does not treat these affects as structurally central to psychic development in the way he does *erôs*, nor does he ascribe to them a comparable capacity to organize and transform the soul over the course of character formation. This distinction is supported by scholarly work. Julia Pfefferkorn's analysis of shame in the *Laws* (646e4), Laura Candiottio's discussion of shame in the *Sophist* (230b4-e5), and Simon Scott's examination of shame in the *Phaedrus* all emphasize the importance of emotions in Plato's moral psychology. Taken together, these studies show that non-rational elements contribute to the regulation and formation of the self, while also confirming that Plato assigns to *erôs* a uniquely comprehensive and formative role that these other emotions do not assume.

¹⁶Plato often treats emotions (*pathê*) as transient responses that emerge in reaction to specific situations rather than as sustained principles guiding the soul's orientation. While they influence immediate behavior and moral judgment, he generally distinguishes these episodic affects from enduring dispositions or central drives, such as *erôs*, which shape the soul's long-term development (e.g., *Rep.* 439a-b; *Leg.* 707c-708a; *Gorg.* 474d-475a).

pleasures or material goods (*Rep.* 439b-c). These elements are vital for regulating immediate responses, maintaining equilibrium, and contributing to habitual patterns of action, yet their impact is episodic and context-bound.

Unlike *erôs*, these non-rational elements do not provide a sustained, integrative orientation for the soul. They operate in relation to specific stimuli rather than toward the continuous pursuit of a realized good or ideal. They do not unify the soul's disparate parts- reason, spirit, and appetite- around a common evaluative aim, nor do they furnish the long-term motivational framework necessary for deliberate self-formation. In other words, while non-rational emotions and impulses guide immediate behavior and contribute to momentary regulation, they lack the capacity to structure the soul's overarching trajectory or to cultivate a coherent, enduring orientation toward what is truly valuable¹⁷.

Erôs, by contrast, provides the affective and evaluative axis around which other non-rational elements are organized. It channels spiritedness toward worthy ends, regulates appetitive desires by subordinating them to higher goods, and shapes responses to fear, anger, and shame by orienting them toward a conception of what is truly valuable (*Symp.* 210a-212b; *Phdr.* 249d-251e). In this way, *erôs* is both comprehensive and formative: it does not merely react to circumstances, but actively cultivates the soul, enabling the agent to pursue fulfillment, knowledge, and virtue over time. This capacity to unify, direct, and transform the soul distinguishes *erôs* from other non-rational elements and justifies its centrality in an account of Platonic self-formation.

The claim, then, is not that other non-rational emotions are insignificant for ethical life, but that, in Plato's texts, they are not the primary drivers of long-term psychic formation. The case for the centrality of *erôs* does not rest on the elimination of alternative emotions in the abstract, but on the textual and structural fact that Plato does not ascribe to any other affective state the comprehensive, organizing, and transformative role that *erôs* plays in accounts of psychic development and character formation. Plato repeatedly depicts it as the affective engine of psychic ordering, capable of elevating the soul toward philosophical understanding or corrupting it by fastening it onto illusory goods. This dual capacity is not accidental but follows from a distinctive structural feature of *erôs* itself. Unlike other emotions, whose complexity typically takes the form of episodic conflict or psychological ambivalence, *erôs* is defined by an intrinsic tension rooted in its relation to lack. It is oriented toward what the soul does not yet possess but takes to be necessary for its completion. For this reason, *erôs* both motivates self-transformation and exposes the soul to misformation.

Erôs is not merely a basic desire; it embodies a dual nature, functioning both as a primal force of longing and as a transcendent principle that connects the human soul to the divine. This unique combination elevates *erôs* above other elements, making it central rather than incidental to the process of self-formation. Plato portrays *erôs* as the most dynamic, powerful, and comprehensive force engaging with the soul- one that not only initiates movement but also integrates the soul's disparate parts into a unified trajectory toward a *telos*. In the *Symposium*, Diotima defines *erôs* as the "desire to possess the good forever" (*Symp.* 206a11), identifying it as the metaphysical impulse that underlies all human striving. The *Phaedrus* reinforces this by portraying *erôs* as a divine-inspired madness, a great gift from the gods that

¹⁷ Plato's treatment of other spiritual elements, such as curiosity, care, and courage, is discussed in more detail on page 80.

“wings the soul” (*Phdr.* 249d), propelling it beyond its current condition toward a higher reality. Crucially, no other non-rational element possesses this generative and transformative power. Emotions such as fear, pity, or shame are episodic and reactive- fear may paralyze, anger may defend- but they do not sustain a purposive ascent toward the Good. *Erôs*, by contrast, is future-oriented and aspirational: it draws the soul outward and upward (when the good it pursues is rightly aligned with the real Good), making it the necessary condition for any genuine process of self-transcendence. What distinguishes *erôs* is not only its intensity but also its plasticity: its ability, under the guidance of reason and philosophy, to reshape the soul’s desires and align them with truth and beauty.

Thus, *erôs* holds a privileged place in Platonic moral psychology because it is the only non-rational element that is intrinsically open to transformation and capable of aiming at the Good. Unlike other non-rational forces- such as fear, pity, or shame- *erôs* possesses an inherent teleological thrust. Any account of Platonic self-formation that does not place *erôs* at its center misses the very engine of psychic development. It is *erôs*, and not any other affective force, that integrates the soul’s disparate elements into a unified trajectory, drawing it beyond its immediate state toward its ultimate *telos*. Without *erôs*, the soul remains fragmented; with it, it is drawn toward what it is meant to become.

Moreover, a thorough theory of self-formation must address not only the soul’s capacity to grow and ascend toward the Good but also its vulnerability to failure, regression, and corruption. This interplay between progress and failure is crucial for capturing the full depth and complexity of personal development. *Erôs* uniquely offers a framework that encompasses both these dimensions because of its inherent duality, rooted in its distinctive metaphysical origin. According to Diotima’s myth in the *Symposium* (203b-c), *erôs* is born of Resource (*Poros*) and Poverty (*Penia*), embodying simultaneously an insatiable desire for fulfillment and an abiding sense of lack. This paradox imbues *erôs* with a restless dynamism: it perpetually drives the soul onward, either elevating it toward the eternal and perfect Forms or plunging it downward toward their imperfect, shadowy copies. No other element of the psyche carries this profound ambivalence, making *erôs* uniquely capable of illuminating the soul’s complex, often precarious journey between growth and decline.

The intrinsic tension within *erôs*- its power both to corrupt and to elevate- makes it uniquely suited to reveal the dynamic and often precarious nature of Platonic self-formation. *Erôs* is the force that can lead the soul either toward its highest fulfillment or into its deepest disorder. When rightly directed, it appears as what the *Phaedrus* calls “divine madness” (249d-e): a divinely inspired form of recollection in which the soul, awakened through erotic encounter, begins to remember and ascend toward the Forms. This is not merely a psychological event but a metaphysical transformation, as the lover’s vision becomes increasingly attuned to the intelligible structure of reality (*Symp.* 210a-212a). Yet the same *erôs*, when misdirected toward mere images or imitations of the Good, turns into what might be called “divined madness”- the force that drives the tyrannical soul into the “lawless desire” described in *Republic* IX (573b). Crucially, these are not two distinct types of *erôs*, but one and the same force, capable of radically different outcomes depending on its orientation. This structural ambiguity explains why, in Plato’s thought, the philosopher and the tyrant appear as mirror images- each an extreme expression of *erôs* guided toward opposite ends¹⁸.

¹⁸Kraut 1984, pp. 97-110. Here Kraut analyzes the tripartite soul and the role of *erôs*, linking these to different character types, including the tyrant and philosopher as two extremes shaped by the orientation of desire.

This is not to suggest that other non-rational elements play no role in self-formation, but rather that *erôs* offers the most comprehensive framework for understanding the soul's developmental possibilities. Embedded within *erôs*' very structure is a dual potential: the possibility of transcendence that elevates the soul, and the risk of degradation that leads to its corruption. This unique ambivalence makes *erôs* especially suited to account for the full range of the soul's possible trajectories. The pedagogical implications are profound. Because *erôs* underlies both the soul's ascent and its downfall, education must focus not on suppressing desire but on rightly orienting it. The task is not to extinguish *erôs* but to cultivate and guide it, transforming its fixation on fleeting appearances into a sustained love for what is truly Good. To grasp how we become what we are, for better or worse, we must understand what we desire or love, how we desire or love, and toward what ends our love is directed.

The fourth methodological question concerns whether the project addresses all types of self in Plato. I divide this into two parts: first, whether the project discusses all self-types through the analysis of the formation of extreme moral characters; and second, whether this *erôs*-centric approach can adequately account for Plato's diverse depictions of the self. These sub-questions serve to clarify both the scope and depth of the inquiry, ensuring that the project fully engages with the breadth of Platonic psychology while critically assessing the explanatory power of *erôs* as its central framework.

With regard to whether this project addresses all self-types in Plato through the study of extreme moral characters, I offer the following clarification: although figures like the philosopher and the tyrant represent paradigmatic extremes, they do not encompass the full range of Plato's typology of the soul. However, these extremes are especially valuable for this project because they most vividly reveal the structure and dynamics of self-formation. Their sharply defined psychic makeups and distinct developmental paths bring Plato's fundamental psychological principles into the clearest focus. Thus, extreme moral characters serve as philosophical exemplars- they illuminate the processes of psychic ascent and descent and provide a robust conceptual framework that helps us understand the formation of other, more moderate soul types by analogy. I now proceed to a more detailed explanation:

The project's focus on extreme moral characters, such as the philosopher, the tyrant, and the oligarch, does not claim to represent every possible configuration of the self found in Plato's dialogues. Rather, it offers a crucial methodological entry point that allows for a deeper and clearer understanding of Platonic psychology. These figures are not simply outliers or marginal cases; they are paradigmatic in the strongest sense. As paradigmatic examples, they distill and magnify the fundamental principles that govern the soul's structure and development, principles that remain less visible or less sharply defined in more moderate or everyday selves. Because their psychic formations are starkly drawn and their moral trajectories clearly articulated, they reveal the underlying logic of self-formation in its purest form. This clarity makes them especially valuable for analyzing the role of desire (*erôs*) in shaping the soul. Through their vivid depiction, the complex interplay of desires, reason, and moral character becomes accessible, providing a powerful lens through which to comprehend how the soul is constituted and transformed. Ultimately, studying these extreme types offers a foundational framework that can be analogically extended to

interpret the formation and dynamics of more moderate or mixed self-types within Plato's psychological landscape.

For example, the tyrant's descent into lawless appetite (*Republic* IX), the philosopher's ascent toward the Forms (*Symposium*), and the timocrat's oscillation between honor and ambition (*Republic* VIII) each dramatize, in heightened and exaggerated ways, the fundamental forces that shape all human souls- though these forces operate more subtly in less extreme cases. Plato deliberately employs such figures dialectically, contrasting them sharply to expose the mechanisms behind moral corruption and intellectual liberation. By focusing on these vivid examples, the project goes beyond simply cataloguing fixed "types" of selves; it reveals the dynamic, ongoing processes through which any self is formed, transformed, and oriented within the broader psychological and moral landscape Plato describes. This approach uncovers the fluid interplay of desires, reason, and character that underlies all soul formations, offering a deeper understanding of human nature as Plato conceives it.

This approach does not exclude more moderate or mixed selves but instead establishes a conceptual framework through which they can be more clearly understood. Just as a vivid color sharpens our perception of more subtle hues, extreme moral characters illuminate the structural continuities that persist even in less polarized individuals. The democratic soul in *Republic* VIII, for example, lacking a single dominant desire and marked by a fluid plurality of motivations, can still be analyzed in terms of the same psychological forces that shape the tyrant or the philosopher. What differs is not the basic structure of the soul, but the degree of integration or fragmentation within it. Likewise, the ordinary citizen described in the *Laws*, who follows the law from habituation rather than philosophical conviction, exemplifies another point along the spectrum of psychic development. Such figures may not display the same clarity or intensity as the extremes, but their motivational structures remain intelligible when situated in relation to the more sharply defined cases. By illuminating these extremes, the project reveals the architecture of all souls and offers a coherent model for interpreting the full range of possible self-formations in Plato's thought.

In sum, while the project does not attempt an exhaustive taxonomy of every possible self in Plato, its focus on extreme characters is justified by their unparalleled explanatory power. They are not exceptions but concentrated expressions of the principles that govern all selves. By studying them, we gain not only a deeper understanding of Platonic moral psychology but also a methodological tool for analyzing the more ambiguous and intermediate forms of selfhood that populate Plato's dialogues. In this way, analyzing extreme moral characters does not bypass the intermediate self-types but provides a theoretical lens through which they can be interpreted. Their complexity may differ in degree, but not in kind.

Regarding whether this *erôs*-centric approach can adequately account for Plato's diverse depictions of the self, the project makes the following clarifying claims. First, it challenges the common assumption that reason alone is sufficient for self-formation; instead, it demonstrates that *erôs* plays a crucial, irreducible role in shaping the self. Second, the project does not claim that *erôs* is sufficient on its own, nor that it is both necessary and sufficient. Rather, it argues that both *erôs* and reason are necessary for self-formation and that *erôs* provides a uniquely generative framework for understanding the motivational and developmental dynamics of the self. The aim is not to elevate *erôs* above all else, but to reveal its indispensable function within the broader architecture of Platonic moral psychology.

The key to this unifying interpretation lies in recognizing *erôs* in its full Platonic breadth- not merely as one desire among others, but as the fundamental dynamic that structures the soul's very being. *Erôs* is both a human vulnerability, binding us to the fleeting and perishable, and a divine gift, drawing us toward the eternal and intelligible. This dual nature allows *erôs* to function as the unifying thread across Plato's dialogues, making sense of the soul's various states: its internal divisions (*Republic*), its aspirational longing (*Symposium*), and its capacity for transcendence (*Phaedrus*)¹⁹. An *erôs*-centric approach does not reduce the complexity of Plato's psychological portraits; rather, it discloses a fundamental continuity: the self is always in motion, always reaching beyond itself.

The project argues that self-formation cannot be fully understood through reason alone; *erôs* provides the motivational force that animates the soul's development, whether toward virtue or vice. This *erôs*-centric approach does not exclude other dimensions of the self but reveals their interconnectedness. By demonstrating that *erôs* is a necessary condition for self-formation, either as a driving force or as a sublimated absence, it provides a richer account of Platonic psychology than rationalist or purely structural models allow. This approach does not diminish the importance of reason but situates it within a broader economy of desire, showing how the soul's highest achievements and deepest failures are shaped by what it loves. In this way, the project not only clarifies Plato's diverse depictions of the self but also offers a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of moral development in his thought.

By way of clarification, the main argument does not require showing that *erôs* is present at every stage in the development of all characters in Plato. Its purpose is to demonstrate that *erôs* plays a decisive role at key junctures in the formation of the self, shaping the character's orientation, capacities, and overall trajectory.

I trace *erôs* at every stage in the development of the philosophical (Chapter 4) and tyrannical (Chapter 5) characters because they represent extreme cases in Plato's account, where desires are most intense and the influence of *erôs* is most pronounced. In such cases, the formative power of *erôs* is especially visible, making it possible to follow its effects on the soul continuously, from the earliest configurations of the character to its final outcome.

These extreme cases function as paradigms for understanding self-formation more generally. By examining characters at the limits of moral and psychological intensity, we can discern the mechanisms through which *erôs* structures the development of the self and infer how analogous processes operate, in weaker or more fragmented forms, in other character types. This approach brings into view the decisive influence of *erôs* at each stage of character development without committing to the claim that its role is uniform across all forms of character, while clarifying how *erôs* cultivates, or corrupts, the soul in Plato's moral psychology.

¹⁹One possible objection is that some dialogues, like the *Phaedo*, seem to reject bodily *erôs* entirely in favor of pure intellect. Yet even here, the philosopher's longing for wisdom and liberation from the body can be framed as a higher, purified form of *erôs*- a point reinforced by Socrates' own passionate engagement with his students despite his asceticism.

Chapter 2

Erôs Itself

Chapter 2 examines why *erôs* is essential to Plato's account of self-formation, asking in what respect, or by virtue of which feature, it shapes the self. This analysis unfolds by examining Plato's characterization of *erôs* as "the desire to possess the good forever" (*Symp.* 206a11), exploring its constituent elements, and engaging with major scholarly interpretations. I argue that: (i) *erôs* is a desire defined by lack and the pursuit of fulfillment, operating as a dynamic motivating force; (ii) it possesses an intermediate nature- neither fully rational nor purely irrational- making it open-ended in its orientation toward good or bad; (iii) this intermediary character renders *erôs* neutral and malleable, capable of guiding the soul toward development or corruption; and (iv) its extraordinary duration and intensity ensure a sustained formative influence. Collectively, these features establish *erôs* as a central, structuring principle in Plato's account of self-formation.

The chapter proceeds in three sections: "*erôs* as desire" (section 1), "wanting to possess the good" (section 2), and "forever" (section 3).

Section 1 examines the first constitutive element: "*erôs* as desire". I address two key questions concerning its nature: in what sense Plato presents *erôs* as a kind of desire, and whether this desire is rational, irrational, or both. After careful analysis, I conclude that *erôs* possesses an intermediate nature- it is neither purely rational nor simply irrational, but occupies a middle ground, characterized by a dynamic tension between opposites: the good and the bad, the mortal and the divine, ignorance and wisdom. On the basis of this in-between nature, *erôs* reveals a dual potential: it can be directed toward the good, but it also has the capacity to lead in either direction.

Section 2 investigates the second constitutive element of *erôs*: "wanting to possess the good", thereby addressing both its aim and its object. Central to this inquiry is a crucial distinction between two aspects of desire: its ultimate aim (the good) and its immediate object (beauty)- a framework first articulated by Gerasimos Santas and widely debated in Platonic scholarship²⁰.

Building on this structure, I demonstrate that when Plato characterizes "the good" in his formulation that "*erôs* is the desire to possess the good forever", he refers to the ultimate aim of *erôs* (the good, *agathon*); whereas in his dialogues, when he identifies the object of *erôs*, he consistently refers to the beautiful (*kalon*). This distinction deepens our understanding of *erôs*: it is fundamentally oriented toward the good (as its ultimate goal), yet simultaneously phenomenally attached to beautiful things in experience. Guided by this motivational force, the lover's pursuit may lead to divergent outcomes: it can elevate the soul toward true goodness and fulfillment or cause it to descend into chasing mere appearances which bring harm. Through this characterization, Plato reveals the profound complexity of human motivation and behavior²¹.

²⁰Santas (1979, pp. 67-75) and Halperin (1985, pp. 77-80). In this framework, the "object" of desire refers to the intentional description under which something is desired: the specific way the desired thing appears or is represented to the desirer. The "aim", by contrast, is the ultimate goal or end toward which the desire is fundamentally directed, whether or not the object's description fully captures that ultimate end. This distinction has become foundational in Platonic scholarship on *erôs*.

²¹For example, in real life, a person may pursue what they love and believe to be good, yet ultimately suffer harmful consequences. This distinction helps us understand why: some lovers, unable to distinguish beauty from

Section 3 examines the third constitutive element of *erôs*: the desire to possess the good “forever”. This temporal marker does not merely indicate indefinite duration, but rather reveals *erôs* as fundamentally oriented toward eternity- a characteristic that distinguishes it from ordinary appetites and underscores its connection to the soul’s immortal nature. This feature marks *erôs* as uniquely philosophical and spiritual in nature: as the desire for eternal possession, *erôs* plays a crucial role in the human aspiration to participate in the divine.

2.1 The Nature of *Erôs*

This part of the work, consisting of three sections, explores the nature of *erôs* in Plato’s philosophy. Section 1 presents *erôs* as a form of desire characterized by a dual tension between lack and fulfillment, portraying it as a dynamic motivating force that is always in a state of wanting yet continually seeking satisfaction. Section 2 examines competing scholarly interpretations that categorize *erôs* as either fundamentally rational- aligned with reason and the pursuit of the good- or irrational, driven by simple appetite and requiring external regulation to align with the good. Finally, Section 3 considers the possibility that *erôs* occupies a unique intermediate position, neither fully rational nor irrational, but capable of engaging with both in a dynamic and complex way.

2.1.1 *Erôs* as a Kind of Desire

This section examines Plato’s conception of *erôs* as a form of desire. I argue that *erôs* is fundamentally defined as desire in Plato’s philosophy for two key reasons: first, it inherently involves a sense of lack; and second, it functions as a motivating force. These two aspects- lack and motivation- are essential to understanding why *erôs* is characterized as desire within Plato’s framework.

In Plato’s dialogues, *erôs* is fundamentally characterized as a form of desire. The crucial point is that desire, by its very nature, implies a lack (*endeia*). This is evident in the *Symposium* (203b-204c), where Socrates, recounting Diotima’s mythic explanation, illustrates that *erôs* originates from this lack, which is an essential aspect of its nature.

“As the son of Poros and Penia, his lot in life is set to be like theirs... *Erôs* is always poor... far from tender or beautiful, as most believe, but tough, squalid, shoeless, and homeless... yet he is a schemer after the beautiful and good, brave, impetuous, and intense... He (*Erôs*) is always in a state of becoming...now he flourishes and lives, now he dies and is reborn.”
(*Symp.* 203c6-e5, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff)

In this account, Socrates describes *erôs* as the offspring of Penia and Poros. Penia represents lack, while Poros represents resourcefulness. As their child, *erôs* inherits

the good, chase illusory ends, while others, even after recognizing the difference, fail to translate that insight into right action.

contrasting traits from both parents: from Penia, it takes on poverty, meaning it is born from absence and incompleteness; from Poros, it gains ingenuity, giving it the ability to pursue fulfillment.

Lack is not an accidental or contingent condition of *erôs*; it is an essential and defining feature of his nature, inherited from his mother, Penia. Socrates emphasizes that *erôs* exists in a state of perpetual poverty- always in need, never attaining full possession of what it desires. Described as “far from tender or beautiful” but instead “tough, squalid, shoeless, and homeless,” *erôs* embodies ceaseless deprivation. Unlike the gods, such as his father Poros, who exist in self-sufficiency, *erôs* is defined by an enduring sense of incompleteness that drives it to strive. Its very existence is marked by this relentless pursuit of fulfillment.

However, *erôs* is not constrained by lack but actively pursues what it lacks. It is described as a state of “becoming”- constantly “flourishing”, “perishing”, and “being reborn” (*Symp.* 203e1-2). This dynamic cycle reflects *erôs*’s restless nature in its state of deprivation, which is never fully satisfied but always in motion, seeking what it does not possess. While its lack originates from its mother, Penia, its ability to seek, strive, and devise ways to attain its desires comes from its father, Poros. This resourcefulness ensures that *erôs* is not merely defined by deprivation but is also propelled toward fulfillment, continuously pursuing the beautiful and the good.

Erôs exhibits a dual nature of lack and fulfillment, occupying an intermediate position shaped by the contrasting inheritances of its parents. From Penia, it inherits poverty and perpetual lack, making it restless and constantly in need. From Poros, it gains resourcefulness and the ability to seek fulfillment, ensuring that its desire is not static but actively striving. This fundamental tension between deprivation and ingenuity defines *erôs* as a force of continual pursuit, neither fully mortal nor fully divine. As Diotima describes it (*Symp.* 203e1-5), its mid-between status keeps it in constant flux: it “flourishes” when it attains temporary satisfaction, “perishes” as that satisfaction fades, and is continually “reborn” in the pursuit of new desires.

Another key point in Plato’s characterization of *erôs* as a form of desire is that desire itself is inherently motivational. *Erôs* is not merely about wanting; it compels one to take action in order to possess the object of desire. This motivational nature appears in many of Plato’s dialogues.

One key piece of evidence for the motivational nature of *erôs* comes from the *Symposium* 203b-204c, as I have shown. The drive inherent in *erôs* arises from the dynamic tension between lack and the relentless pursuit of what is missing. This tension sustains *erôs* as an active force rather than a passive state. Born from incompleteness, *erôs* is nevertheless defined by an unceasing striving for fulfillment. Its very nature ensures that it is never static; it constantly reaches beyond itself, propelled by the desire to attain what it does not yet possess. This perpetual striving is what makes *erôs* not merely a condition of deficiency but a fundamental source of movement and action.

This view is further illustrated in the *Republic* (437b5-438e10), where Plato presents desire as inherently motivational by analyzing its structure and showing that it operates as a force that actively compels a person to pursue what is desirable in order to fulfill what is lacking:

“Wouldn’t you say that the soul of someone **who has an appetite for a thing** wants what he has an appetite for and **takes to himself** what it is his will to have, and that insofar **as he wishes something to be given to him**, his soul, since **it desires this to come about**, **nods assent to it** as if in answer to a question?”

I would.” (*Rep.* 437b5-c7)

In this passage, Socrates argues that an appetite (“*epithumia*”)²² not only identifies a deficiency but also actively drives the soul to seek fulfillment. He states that when someone “has an appetite for something”, their soul not only wants that object but also seeks to take possession of it. The language of “taking to oneself” and “nodding assent” suggests that desire involves an active impulse- it is not simply an awareness of absence but a force that moves the soul toward satisfaction. The soul, in experiencing desire, does not remain passive but affirms its pursuit by willing the fulfillment of its lack.

This aligns with the broader analysis of the structure of desire in the *Republic* (437d6-438a6), where Socrates uses the example of “the thirsty person wants to drink” to illustrate how appetite functions as an active force. He explains that when someone is thirsty, their soul, insofar as it experiences thirst, does not merely recognize the absence of drink but actively desires and strives for it. As he states, “the soul of the thirsty person, insofar as he is thirsty, does not wish for anything else but to drink, and yearns for and strains toward this” (*Rep.* 437d8-e1). This example demonstrates that desire is not a passive condition but an impulse that drives the soul toward acquiring what it lacks. The language of “yearning” (“*epithumei*”) and “straining toward” (“*neitai pros touto*”) highlights the dynamic nature of appetite as a force that moves the soul, rather than a mere awareness of deficiency. Through this analysis, Plato establishes that desire inherently involves motivation and is structured as an active pursuit of fulfillment.

To conclude, *erôs* is fundamentally a form of desire in Plato’s philosophical framework. First, *erôs* presupposes a recognition of deficiency. In the *Symposium*, Diotima explicitly describes *erôs* as neither fully possessing nor entirely devoid of the good (202d-203e). Rather, it exists in a perpetual state of striving, always desiring what it does not yet have. This ontological incompleteness is what defines *erôs* as a force distinct from mere pleasure-seeking or static admiration; it is an active yearning that arises precisely because the soul perceives itself as lacking something essential. Second, *erôs* is not just a passive awareness of lack but a motivational force that compels the soul to seek completion. In both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, Plato presents *erôs* as the driving energy behind the soul’s ascent toward higher realities. The soul, stirred by the sight of beauty, does not merely recognize an absence but is moved to pursue wisdom, truth, and ultimately the divine²³. This dynamic quality sets *erôs* apart from other forms of longing- rather than being content with absence, it generates movement, leading the soul toward self-transcendence.

By linking *erôs* to both lack and motivation, Plato defines it as the very principle that animates human aspiration. It is through *erôs* that the soul becomes aware of its own incompleteness, and it is through *erôs* that it is set in motion toward the pursuit of higher realities. This dual nature- both recognizing absence and striving toward fulfillment- establishes *erôs* as an essential force in Plato’s philosophical framework.

2.1.2 *Erôs* as Either Rational or Irrational

²²I treat appetite (*epithumia*) as a specific type of desire. It is associated with the bodily and material aspects of human motivation. It belongs to “the appetitive part of the soul” (*to epithumêtikon*), which Plato characterizes as responsible for basic physical urges such as hunger, thirst, and sexual desire (see esp. *Rep.* 439d-e).

²³ See *Symp.* 210a-212a; *Phdr.* 249d-253c.

Now that *erôs* has been established as a fundamental form of desire or force, the next step is to examine its nature: is this desire rational, irrational, or a combination of both? This question has been the subject of significant scholarly debate. I will now explore the nature of *erôs* with particular attention to scholarly interpretations.

To provide a clear and comprehensive understanding of the nature of *erôs*, this discussion is divided into two sections. In Section 2.1.2, I focus on the core issue by closely examining Plato's texts and analyzing the work of scholars who interpret *erôs* as either fundamentally rational or irrational. Section 2.1.3 then explores interpretations that view *erôs* as an intermediate state and concludes with my own reading of the matter.

The view that *erôs* is fundamentally rational is defended by scholars such as Ralph Wedgwood, Alexander Nehamas, and Gabriel Richardson Lear²⁴. Their central claim is that *erôs* possesses a deep and intrinsic orientation toward the soul's good, which makes it fundamentally rational. The *Symposium*'s ladder of love exemplifies this view, as it reveals a structured, rational progression in which *erôs* elevates the soul to pursue higher values, such as wisdom and virtue. While *erôs* has this capacity inherently, these scholars emphasize that it requires the refinement of reason and philosophical education to fully realize its rational potential.

After careful analysis, I will argue that this reading risks oversimplifying the complexity of *erôs* and introducing ambiguity into the *Symposium*. By adopting a teleological framework, it may overstate *erôs*'s rationality while underestimating the role of reason in "turning" the soul toward higher values and facilitating its elevation through their recognition. In short, characterizing *erôs* as inherently rational creates significant difficulties in the *Symposium* and fails to fully capture its multifaceted nature within the broader scope of Plato's philosophy.

Among scholars who view *erôs* as fundamentally irrational, I identify two categories based on the degree of irrationality they attribute to it. The first, which I call the strictly irrational view, is represented by Martha Nussbaum and Terence Irwin²⁵. This perspective emphasizes *erôs*'s inherent resistance to reason and its potential to lead to destructive behavior. Tracing *erôs*'s origins to the soul's appetitive part, which is associated with bodily desires and emotions, these scholars argue that *erôs* does not naturally align with the soul's good and lacks intrinsic moral value. Instead, it leads to irrational fears, excessive loves, and crippling angers, threatening the soul's rational order and diverting it from rational pursuits. As a result, they argue that *erôs* must be carefully managed or even restrained, requiring a rational structure—within the soul itself or through the laws of the state—to contain its potentially destabilizing tendencies.

The second category, which I call the moderate irrational view, is represented by John Cooper and Julia Annas²⁶. This view characterizes *erôs* as non-rational rather than strictly irrational. In this view, *erôs* is not inherently opposed to reason, but it also lacks a rational structure of its own. While it does not naturally align with the good, it can be cultivated through reason and philosophical education to become a powerful force for virtuous ends.

²⁴Wedgwood (2009, pp. 297-325), Nehamas (2007, pp. 1-18), and Gabriel Richardson Lear (2006, pp. 96-123; 2008, pp. 115-131).

²⁵See Nussbaum (1986, pp. 129-169). Irwin (1995 pp. 138-174).

²⁶See Cooper (1999, pp. 55-85). Annas (1981, 120-150 and 1993, pp. 75-105).

I will analyze the two categories of views that broadly consider *erôs* to be irrational. Regarding Irwin and Nussbaum's reading, I will argue that reducing *erôs* to a function of the soul's appetitive part or human emotions- and thus concluding that *erôs* lacks an inherent capacity for the good and intrinsic moral value- risks downplaying the role of human agency and overlooks *erôs*'s rich, multifaceted interaction with reason in Plato's account. *Erôs* is not always a negative force in Plato, highlighting the human agent's ability to shape its influence- an essential aspect of his account. For Annas and Cooper's view, a key concern is that their claim- that *erôs* aligns with the soul's good only as the result of reason's guidance- does not fully exclude the possibility that *erôs* possesses an inherent potential to orient the soul toward the good. In other words, their argument does not fully support the conclusion they insist upon: if *erôs* works with reason toward virtuous ends, it does not necessarily follow that *erôs* is broadly irrational, meaning that reason is the sole resource for achieving good ends.

More importantly, I argue that both categories of interpretation share a deeper issue. By relying on a dichotomous framework shaped by Plato's tripartite model of the soul, these scholars tend to conceptualize *erôs* as an appetite or desire in opposition to reason, treating them as distinct and often conflicting forces. This binary perspective reduces *erôs* to a raw, irrational impulse that must either be controlled by reason or entirely subdued. This is especially evident in the moderate irrational view, which excludes *erôs* from the rational part of the soul and thus classifies it as fundamentally irrational or non-rational, even when it demonstrates its own potential to orient the soul toward the good.

However, this binary perspective, in my view, risks oversimplifying *erôs*'s nature and failing to account for the dynamic and interconnected relationship between the soul's parts. *Erôs* may not belong exclusively to the appetitive part but could instead engage all three parts of the soul, reflecting a more complex and integrated role in its functioning. A more detailed perspective, incorporating both scholars who interpret *erôs* as intermediate and my own reading, will be presented in the next section (2.1.3).

The complex nature of *erôs* is primarily rooted in Plato's texts²⁷, where it is portrayed as a multifaceted force that can both disrupt and elevate the soul. I illustrate this duality through two key passages from *Republic* Books 3 and 9:

In Book 3 (403a-e), Plato discusses the role of *erôs* in the education of the guardians. Here, *erôs* is presented as a "regulated desire" directed toward "noble ends". He advocates for a "simple and moderate" form of love, emphasizing moderation and the removal of excess, where physical attraction is transformed into a communal bond that reinforces the city's harmony. In this context, *erôs* is aligned with self-control and civic virtue. Rather than being suppressed, it is educated and

²⁷The ambiguous nature of *erôs* in ancient Greek, beyond Plato, has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, particularly in the works of Thornton (1997, pp. 1-25; 60-85) and Calame (1999, pp. 1-30 and 120-150). These scholars explore the complexities and dualities of *erôs* in ancient Greek thought, emphasizing its role as both a generative and destructive force, as well as its function within both personal and social contexts. Thornton explores *erôs*' contradictory nature in ancient Greek culture, highlighting its generative power, as in Hesiod's *Theogony* and Plato's *Symposium* (206b-212a)- alongside its destructive potential in tragedy, such as in the stories of Phaedra and Medea. Calame examines *erôs* in Greek poetry and rituals, showing its role as both personal desire and a social force, particularly in lyric poetry, initiation rites, and civic ceremonies. Together, their analyses reveal *erôs* as a complex, ambivalent force central to Greek notions of love, creativity, and social order.

guided toward the good and fulfilling life. This passage reflects Plato's belief that *erôs* holds the potential to foster unity and cultivate moral excellence.

By contrast, in Book 9 (572e-573b), *erôs* becomes the central force behind the disintegration of the tyrannical soul. The tyrannical man, ruled by *erôs*, is "stung and goaded" into pursuing every transgressive pleasure (572e). This unrestrained desire overwhelms his reason, leading to violence, lack of self-control, and moral ruin. Here, *erôs* symbolizes "lawless desire," a stark contrast to its disciplined role in Book 3. Plato's view of *erôs* shifts, presenting it as a potential source of chaos that mirrors the tyrant's moral corruption.

These opposing depictions from the *Republic* highlight the complexity of *erôs* in Plato's philosophy, presenting its dual capacity to both hinder and guide the soul in its pursuit of wisdom, happiness, and self-realization. On the one hand, *erôs* is depicted as a force that, when properly directed, can elevate the soul toward the contemplation of higher truths. On the other hand, when left unchecked, it can overwhelm reason, leading to moral corruption and tyranny.

Similar contrasting portrayals of *erôs* appear in other Platonic dialogues. In the *Phaedrus* (244a-245c), *erôs* is described as a form of "divine madness" (*theia mania*), which, under the right conditions, can inspire philosophical enlightenment and the recollection of the Forms. However, if misdirected, it can result in irrational obsession and a loss of self-control. Likewise, in the *Symposium* (206a-212a), *erôs* is presented as a transformative force that, through the "ladder of love," guides the soul from physical attraction to the highest intellectual and moral pursuits. Yet, as Diotima emphasizes in the dialogue, this ascent requires proper education and guidance by reason. Without such direction, *erôs* risks becoming an unrestrained desire that pulls the soul away from its highest potential. These depictions illustrate the ambiguity of *erôs* in Plato's thought.

Consequently, these seemingly contrasting features make it extremely difficult to determine whether *erôs* is rational, irrational, or a combination of both. To understand Plato's view on the nature of *erôs*, scholars have engaged in extensive debate. Before presenting my own view, I will carefully examine their positions on this issue, beginning with those who argue that *erôs* is rational.

A few scholars argue that *erôs* is inherently rational. Ralph Wedgwood, in his influential 2009 paper, "Diotima's Eudaemonism: Intrinsic Value and Rational Motivation in Plato's *Symposium*", argues that *erôs* functions as a form of rational motivation. For Plato, Wedgwood explains, *erôs* is the desire to "possess intrinsically valuable things", that is, to be happy, for as long as possible (p. 297). Crucially, this "possession" is not a passive state of mere ownership but an active engagement with intrinsic values. Wedgwood highlights that possessing such values involves "actively creating instantiations" of them, both within oneself and in the external world, accompanied by knowing and loving these values and their manifestations²⁸. This framing situates *erôs* as uniquely educable and responsive to reason, capable of being refined through rational reflection. Unlike non-rational appetites that seek immediate gratification without regard for higher goods, *erôs* is directed toward enduring intrinsic goods such as virtue and wisdom. Wedgwood emphasizes that this interpretation presents Plato's eudaemonism as "a different and more defensible doctrine than many commentators believe" (p. 297), with *erôs* serving a central role as the "rational motivation" driving human pursuit of happiness (pp. 298, 306, 308).

²⁸My summary and analysis of Wedgwood 2009, pp. 316-319.

Alexander Nehamas interprets *erôs* as a fundamentally rational desire, grounded in its orientation toward beauty and its role in the pursuit of a meaningful and flourishing life. He emphasizes the aesthetic and transformational dimension of *erôs*. In his 2007 essay, “Only in the Contemplation of Beauty Is Human Life Worth Living?: Plato, *Symposium* 211d,” Nehamas takes Plato’s famous claim seriously, arguing that the contemplation of beauty initiates a rational and transformative process central to human flourishing. According to Nehamas, beauty is not simply an object of passive pleasure but a generative power that awakens desire and propels the soul toward self-improvement²⁹. He describes beauty as an open-ended kind of promise or invitation- an invitation to pursue something more rather than a guarantee of fulfillment (pp. 13-14). In this light, *erôs* is rational because it involves an evaluative stance: the lover discerns what is truly valuable in beauty and orients their desire and life accordingly. This process involves not only affect but interpretation, reflection, and aspiration, linking *erôs* closely to philosophical inquiry and ethical self-cultivation. For Nehamas, *erôs* moves the individual beyond mere physical attraction or fleeting pleasure, drawing the soul toward the Form of the Beautiful and, ultimately, the Good. Thus, *erôs* is an essential motivational force for transcending base desires and engaging in the lifelong pursuit of virtue and wisdom.

Following a similar line of thought, Gabriel Richardson Lear, in her essay “Permanent Beauty and Becoming Happy in Plato’s *Symposium*”³⁰, interprets beauty and the good as intimately connected in Plato’s ethical theory, with *erôs* functioning as the rational desire that bridges them and guides the soul toward true happiness and immortality. Lear contends that beauty is not merely an aesthetic quality but a visible expression of the good (*agathon*), which stands as the ultimate object of desire. She asserts that *erôs*, the longing for beauty, is fundamentally rational because it seeks the good, even when its expression appears misguided or misdirected. This rational orientation of *erôs* is central to her interpretation³¹. Diotima’s portrayal of *erôs* in the *Symposium* as the desire for “the perpetual possession of the good” (*Symp.* 206a10-b1) reflects this rational striving. Even when desires seem to chase harmful or mistaken ends, they still reveal an underlying, albeit flawed, effort to attain what the agent perceives as good. Thus, Lear maintains that *erôs* is fundamentally rational in its orientation, though it requires education and refinement to fully realize its rational potential.

Together, Wedgwood, Nehamas, and Lear present a unified vision of *erôs* as a rational desire in Plato’s philosophy. While each scholar approaches the topic from a slightly different angle, their interpretations converge on the idea that *erôs* is fundamentally a rationally structured force that seeks higher value. The orientation of *erôs* toward the good is seen as an inherent capacity, which is further developed and

²⁹Nehamas 2007, pp. 7-8.

³⁰Lear 2006, pp. 96-123 (in *Plato’s Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, ed. Leshner, Nails, and Sheffield, 2006).

³¹See, esp. Lear 2006, pp. 101-105. Lear explores the foundational role of beauty (*kalon*) in Plato’s ethical framework, linking it closely to the soul’s longing for immortality and the achievement of true happiness. Specifically, Lear argues that beauty is not simply an aesthetic or superficial quality but is deeply connected to the *agathon*- the ultimate object of desire and moral goodness. She shows that in the *Symposium*, beauty functions as a visible manifestation or expression of the good, which attracts and motivates the soul. This attraction to beauty is rational because it directs the lover toward what is truly valuable and good, linking *erôs* with the pursuit of moral and spiritual excellence. Lear emphasizes that *erôs* is essentially a desire for immortality and happiness, which is achieved through the perpetual possession or contemplation of the good. Through Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*, *erôs* is framed as the yearning for “the perpetual possession of the good” (*Symp.* 206a10-b1), thereby connecting the desire for beauty directly to the pursuit of the *agathon*. The desire for beauty ultimately points beyond itself toward the good, which makes the pursuit of beauty a key pathway to ethical and spiritual fulfillment in Plato’s thought.

refined by reason. In this way, *erôs* emerges as a form of rational motivation, guiding the soul toward what is truly valuable. The ascent of love in the *Symposium* exemplifies this purposeful striving, as *erôs* moves from the love of particular beautiful things to the contemplation of the Form of Beauty itself.

While offering valuable insights into the nature of *erôs*, this interpretation, in my view, presents certain difficulties when considered within the broader context of Plato's philosophy. I will clarify my position through the following three points.

First, a major issue with viewing *erôs* as inherently rational is that it risks downplaying the irrational or non-rational aspects of desire, which Plato frequently emphasizes in his dialogues³². In the *Phaedo* (66b-67b), Plato describes bodily desires as irrational distractions that pull the soul away from the pursuit of wisdom. While *erôs*, as the three scholars argue, may aspire to transcend the body, it remains fundamentally rooted in bodily desires, which are evidently not inherently rational. Moreover, in the *Republic* (442a-b), Socrates warns that unchecked appetitive desires, including *erôs*, can dominate the soul and lead to injustice, suggesting that *erôs* has an irrational dimension that, if uncontrolled, can disrupt moral harmony. Similarly, in the *Phaedrus* (244a-245c), Plato describes *erôs* as a form of "divine madness" (*theia mania*), which, while potentially beneficial, can also lead to chaos and suffering if not properly guided. This further indicates that *erôs* resists reason's governance, thereby complicating the view that it is purely rational.

Thus, these texts highlight the difficulty of arguing that *erôs* is inherently rational in Plato's philosophy. If *erôs* were purely rational, its tendency to provoke destructive impulses would be difficult to reconcile. Instead, these depictions suggest that *erôs* has a volatile and potentially destabilizing nature, making it problematic to classify it as rational by its very essence.

Second, this interpretation risks oversimplifying the complexity of *erôs* and introducing ambiguity into the *Symposium*. Scholars such as Wedgwood, Nehamas, and Lear operate on a shared premise: Diotima's "ladder of love" (*Symp.* 210a-212a) describes a process in which *erôs* is refined and educated by reason, ultimately aligning it with rational aims. While these scholars acknowledge that *erôs* retains an inherent potential for the beautiful and the good, they argue that this potential requires significant refinement and development by reason to be fully realized.

This raises a critical question: if *erôs* directs the soul toward its true good only through the guidance and refinement of reason, and only then becomes fully rational, can rationality truly be considered an inherent quality of *erôs*? Or is *erôs*'s rationality externally conferred by reason?

Equally important, if *erôs* requires reason's intervention to be properly directed, then it remains, at its core, a force that operates independently of- or even in opposition to- reason. Such a possibility complicating the view of *erôs* as inherently rational, as it challenges the idea developed by scholars that *erôs* naturally aligns with the soul's good. Instead, as far as I am concerned, it suggests that *erôs* is, by nature, a

³²In ancient Greek culture during Plato's time, *erôs* is frequently portrayed in tragedy as a powerful and destructive force that can lead to obsession, madness, and ruin. For example, in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra's *erôs* for her stepson triggers her tragic downfall. Similarly, Greek tragedies often depict *erôs* as a chaotic power that disrupts order: in *Antigone*, the chorus calls it an unstoppable force that "wars with justice" and overwhelms even the righteous. In Euripides' *Medea*, *erôs* fuels Medea's vengeful rage, driving her to commit horrific acts, including the murder of her own children after Jason's betrayal. These examples illustrate how *erôs*, when unchecked, can lead to moral and social disintegration. Given this background, it is difficult to argue that *erôs* is inherently rational in Plato's philosophy. See Easterling 1997.

neutral or ambivalent force, capable of being directed toward either virtuous or destructive ends depending on whether reason intervenes. Such a view undermines the notion that *erôs* has an intrinsic connection to the good and instead portrays it as a raw, undirected energy that requires external shaping to become virtuous.

To defend the inherent rationality of *erôs*, scholars might argue that it possesses an innate and powerful orientation toward the soul's good, making its alignment with reason not merely contingent but essential to its very nature³³. On this view, *erôs* itself is the primary driving force toward the good, already inclined toward the soul's fulfillment. Reason, in this view, plays a supportive rather than corrective role in the ascent, assisting *erôs* but not fundamentally altering its inherent pursuit of what is truly valuable.

However, this perspective faces a significant challenge when examined alongside Diotima's "ladder of love" (*Symp.* 210a-212a). This passage of the *Symposium* describes *erôs* as working in conjunction with reason, ultimately leading the lover to apprehend the Form of Beauty. Crucially, however, this process is not presented as the unfolding of an innate rational potential within *erôs* itself. Rather, *erôs* is initially directed toward lower, particular objects of desire, such as physical beauty, and only later- through the intervention of reason and philosophical education- reoriented toward higher, universal goods:

"First... he should love one body... then he should realize that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other and...he'd be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same. When he grasps this, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and he must think that this wild gaping after just one body is a small thing and despise it." (*Symp.* 210a-b)

This passage marks the initial stage of *erôs*'s ascent in the ladder of love, illustrating a fundamental shift in how the lover perceives beauty. Initially, the lover is drawn to a single beautiful body, but upon reflection, he comes to recognize that the beauty of any one body is "brother to the beauty of any other." This realization leads him to understand that the beauty of all bodies is "one and the same," prompting a shift from exclusive attachment to a single body toward a broader appreciation of beauty in all bodies.

The passage emphasizes the necessity of intellectual engagement in this transformation. This transition does not arise naturally from *erôs*'s inherent rationality but instead requires deliberate redirection through reflection and intellectual development. The passage explicitly depicts *erôs* as initially fixated on a single physical body, suggesting that without a broader understanding, it remains confined to a limited and ultimately inadequate form of desire. The phrase "he'd be very foolish" (*ἀτεχνῶς ἀνόητον*) implies that failing to recognize this broader truth is a sign of ignorance, indicating that *erôs*, on its own, is incapable of guiding the lover beyond this initial stage. Only when the lover "realizes" that beauty in one body is not fundamentally different from beauty in another does he begin to move beyond his original fixation. This realization suggests that *erôs* is not intrinsically oriented toward the good but instead requires an external force-reason and philosophical education-to expand its scope.

Moreover, the language of the passage emphasizes this interpretation. The phrase "wild gaping" (*ἀτεχνῶς ἀνόητον*), which conveys an irrational and excessive

³³Richardson Lear, Alexander Nehamas, and Ralph Wedgwood contend that *erôs* inherently possesses a profound and intrinsic orientation toward the good of the soul. These scholars argue that *erôs*'s alignment with reason is not contingent but essential, as both are directed toward the realization of the soul's highest aspirations.

attachment, underscores that *erôs* in its initial stage is not governed by reason but by a more instinctual, unreflective longing. The lover must learn to “despise” (*καταφρονήσας*) this stage, implying a necessary shift in perspective rather than an automatic progression. The lover does not ascend automatically; instead, he must learn, through reflection and education, to move beyond his initial attachment to particular bodies.

Thus, as I have shown, the *Symposium*’s “ladder of love” passage (210a-212b) does not support the idea that *erôs* possesses an intrinsic rational structure that naturally orients it toward the Good. Instead, it emphasizes that *erôs*, in its raw and uneducated form, is not inherently rational but must be shaped and refined by reason to fully develop and achieve its rational potential.

Third, I believe this interpretation stems from the teleological framework implicit in the views of Wedgwood, Nehamas, and Lear³⁴. These scholars seem to define *erôs* as a rational desire by situating it within a teleological structure, in which *erôs*, as a distinct form of desire, is inherently directed toward an ultimate end (*telos*)-namely, the soul’s good or the Form of Beauty. Within this framework, *erôs* is seen as naturally oriented toward its proper end, and its rationality is derived from this teleological orientation. In other words, because *erôs* aims at the good, it is interpreted as inherently rational.

This teleological framework clarifies the primary basis for *erôs*’s rationality in scholarly interpretations. Whether Plato views *erôs*, or desire more broadly, as inherently teleological will be explored in the next section³⁵, as it requires a more nuanced discussion of *erôs*’s object and goal. For now, my aim is to demonstrate that even if Plato endorses a teleological framework, as scholars often interpret it in the context of *Symposium*, the passage on the ladder of love does not necessarily imply that *erôs* is inherently rational. Instead, there remains a logical possibility that *erôs* is neutral and malleable- a desire that does not possess an intrinsic rational structure but can be shaped and directed by external influences, particularly reason and philosophical education.

My reading does not deny that *erôs* can be directed toward the good; rather, it challenges the idea that *erôs* naturally or inevitably progresses toward it. Instead of unfolding as a rational force in itself, *erôs* begins as an instinctive attraction to particular objects and requires intellectual cultivation to be reoriented toward higher forms of beauty and truth. Its ultimate trajectory is not predetermined by an innate rational drive but is contingent on whether it is properly guided. This perspective preserves the role of reason as essential in shaping *erôs*, reinforcing its fundamental plasticity rather than assuming an intrinsic alignment with the good.

Compared to the scholarly view that *erôs* is inherently rational, the position I defend finds stronger support in Plato’s account. If *erôs* were naturally rational and intrinsically oriented toward the soul’s true good, no deliberate or reflective process would be necessary. In that case, *erôs* would spontaneously and reliably lead the soul toward virtue and wisdom without requiring refinement. However, the *Symposium*’s

³⁴After my analysis, it becomes clear that Wedgwood, Nehamas, and Lear each implicitly affirm a teleological framework where desire and the soul’s parts are intrinsically directed toward specific ends. Wedgwood stresses that desires naturally pursue their proper objects, grounding moral harmony. Nehamas underscores the purposive structure of desire, highlighting reason’s role in guiding these goal-directed impulses toward the good. Lear further reveals that the soul’s teleological organization is essential for virtue, as each part functions toward its natural aim, contributing to overall harmony. Together, their views deepen the understanding that desire’s inherent orientation toward ends is fundamental to Plato’s ethical psychology and the soul’s flourishing.

³⁵See pp. 42-45.

account of the ladder of love makes clear that reason must shape, guide, or even restrain *erôs*, suggesting that it is not inherently rational. This interpretation aligns more closely with Plato's emphasis on the transformative power of reason in shaping desire. Without such guidance, *erôs* remains open-ended, capable of leading either toward or away from the good, underscoring its fundamentally malleable nature.

The position I defend does not conflict with the teleological framework, as it still allows *erôs* to reach its proper end- the good or the Form of Beauty- through the guiding role of reason. The key difference is that it is reason, rather than *erôs*' inherent rationality, that directs *erôs* toward its proper goal, ensuring its alignment with the good. This view preserves the idea that *erôs* has a natural potential to strive for the good but emphasizes that this potential is realized only through the active intervention of reason. Without such guidance, *erôs* could just as easily deviate from its proper end, underscoring its neutral and malleable nature. Thus, this interpretation allows for a more dynamic relationship between *erôs* and reason, where the former provides the motivational force and the latter supplies the rational direction necessary to achieve its proper end. The teleological framework can still hold, but the rationality of *erôs* is not an inherent feature- it is a potential realized through the intervention of reason.

To sum up, the view that *erôs* possesses a rational nature offers valuable insight into its potential for the good. But it may obscure the complexity of *erôs* by assuming an inherent rationality that the text does not fully support. Rather than having an intrinsic orientation toward the good, *erôs* exhibits potential- a capacity to be guided in that direction when shaped and directed by reason. The *Symposium*'s "ladder of love" passage illustrates this dynamic: *erôs* begins as a desire for particular, physical beauty but, through the intervention of reason, is gradually refined and reoriented toward higher forms of beauty, ultimately culminating in the contemplation of the Form of Beauty itself. This process underscores the transformative role of reason in actualizing *erôs*'s potential, revealing that its alignment with the good is not a given but an achievement.

Scholars who view *erôs* as an irrational desire can be categorized into two main groups, based on the degree of irrationality they attribute to it³⁶. The first, represented by Martha Nussbaum and Terence Irwin, characterizes *erôs* as fundamentally irrational, emphasizing its inherent tendency to resist reason and lead to destructive behaviors. The second, represented by John Cooper and Julia Annas, considers *erôs* as being non-rational rather than strictly irrational, meaning it is neither inherently opposed to reason nor inherently aligned with it, yet requires the governance of reason to prevent destructive outcomes. Compared to the first view, it presents *erôs* as lacking rational structure rather than actively resisting reason.

I begin by analyzing the view that treats *erôs* as strictly irrational. Irwin grounds this interpretation in Plato's tripartite model of the soul, identifying the appetitive part (*epithumētikon*) as the source of desires aimed at immediate gratification rather than rational deliberation (Irwin 1995, pp. 301). In contrast to the rational part (*logistikon*),

³⁶I divide these scholars into two groups to clarify their positions. The first group, including John Cooper (1984) and Julia Annas (1993), adopts a moderate view: they regard *erôs* as irrational in a limited sense but emphasize its capacity to be shaped and guided by reason. The second group, represented by Martha C. Nussbaum (1986; rev. ed. 2001) and Terence Irwin (1995), takes a more radical stance, arguing that *erôs* is fundamentally irrational- intrinsically disruptive to reason and a source of disorder within the soul.

which seeks harmony and long-term flourishing, the appetitive part operates independently of reason, pursuing satisfaction without regard for ethical unity. On Irwin's account, *erôs*, as an expression of this lower element, resists rational governance and disrupts the soul's internal order, rendering it fundamentally incompatible with ethical coherence (Irwin 1995, p. 303).

Moreover, Irwin situates *erôs* within Plato's broader conception of desire (*epithumia*), which includes not only erotic love but also other cravings like hunger, thirst, and material ambition³⁷. These desires, he argues, are structurally irrational: they are self-centered, focused on personal gratification, and indifferent to reason's ethical aims. Within this framework, *erôs* does not stand apart from other appetitive desires in kind, but in intensity. It exemplifies a heightened form of appetitive longing- one that, because of its power and focus, poses an especially strong threat to the soul's rational structure and ethical stability (Irwin 1995, p. 305).

The risks of *erôs*'s irrationality, according to Irwin, extend to both the individual soul and society. At the personal level, *erôs*, as a powerful appetitive desire, resists reason and can dominate the soul, leading to impulsive actions, moral instability, and the subordination of reason to desire. This disrupts the soul's harmony and undermines ethical judgment. At the societal level, unchecked *erôs* endangers social order by prioritizing personal pleasure over collective well-being. To restrain the irrationality of *erôs* and other desires, a rigidly structured society to counteract is necessary³⁸.

Hence, based on this analysis, Irwin positions *erôs* as a paradigmatic example of appetitive desire's resistance to reason. By rooting *erôs* in the soul's irrational dimension and linking it to broader ethical and political risks, he underscores Plato's insistence on external rational structures- whether in the soul or the state- to restrain its destabilizing potential.

Nussbaum views *erôs* in Plato as a potent and often destabilizing force, deeply rooted in human vulnerability and desire³⁹. In its raw, unrefined state, *erôs* is chaotic, closely tied to bodily impulses and sensory experiences. It frequently manifests as irrational longing or obsession, particularly in its lower forms, such as physical attraction or possessive love (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 217-220)⁴⁰. In these cases, desire operates independently of reason, often leading to impulsive or destructive behavior. The vulnerability of *erôs* arises from its dependence on elements outside an

³⁷Several scholars, alongside Terence Irwin, have analyzed *erôs* within Plato's broader conception of desire (*epithumia*), emphasizing its psychological, ethical, and metaphysical dimensions. David Sedley, in works such as "The Midwife of Platonism" (2004), positions *erôs* as a specialized form of *epithumia* that drives intellectual and ethical progress, differentiating it from more basic appetites. Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, in "Plato's *Symposium*: The Ethics of Desire" (2006, core *erôs* on Chapters 2-5, pp. 40-182), interprets *erôs* as a species of *epithumia* that is reoriented toward the Forms, emphasizing its metaphysical and intellectual aspects. A. W. Price, in "Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle" (2011), examines *erôs* as a subset of *epithumia* within Plato's works, arguing that it reflects the broader structure of desire while engaging with reason in a complex way.

³⁸In the *Republic*, Plato envisions a strictly organized society led by philosopher-kings who represent reason and are responsible for controlling the appetitive desires of the lower classes. This political structure reflects Plato's view that *erôs*, as an irrational force, threatens not only personal virtue but also the stability of society. Irwin's interpretation highlights this inherent irrationality of *erôs* and its significant consequences for both ethics and politics in Plato's philosophy.

³⁹Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, revised edition, Cambridge University Press, 2001. Nussbaum's analysis of *erôs*'s vulnerability, its irrational nature, and its capacity to destabilize the soul appears in her close readings of Plato's *Republic*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*- particularly in "Part II: Plato: goodness without fragility?" (pp. 85-234). In these chapters, she explores the moral psychology of *erôs* and the ethical implications of its inherent instability and reliance on forces beyond one's control.

⁴⁰Nussbaum 2001, pp. 219-220.

individual's control, making it a source of moral risk and irrationality. This intrinsic fragility allows *erôs* to overpower rational thought, driving people to pursue fleeting pleasures, act on impulse, or become trapped in unhealthy attachments.

Moreover, Nussbaum situates *erôs* within the broader spectrum of human emotions, arguing that its irrational nature extends beyond romantic desire (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 230). She emphasizes that *erôs* can fuel other excessive emotions, such as fear, attachment, and anger, all of which disrupt the soul's rational harmony. Like other emotions, *erôs* functions as a form of evaluative judgment, shaping how individuals perceive and respond to the world. However, its intense fixation on particular objects- such as a beloved- often distorts perceptions of value, leading individuals toward self-destructive actions. Nussbaum highlights how this resistance to reason stems from *erôs*'s overwhelming focus on the particular, which can cloud judgment and undermine the pursuit of higher, more universal goods.

Hence, as we see, Nussbaum argues that *erôs* is a destabilizing and often irrational desire, and its irrationality stems from its dependence on external factors beyond our control, such as luck, chance, and the actions of others. Because *erôs* ties our well-being to circumstances we cannot fully govern- like whether love is reciprocated or sustained- it exposes the inherent fragility of human life. This vulnerability, Nussbaum contends, is not a flaw to be overcome but a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human. She emphasizes that recognizing this fragility is essential for developing a realistic and compassionate understanding of ethics, one that acknowledges the risks and uncertainties of love as integral to a meaningful and emotionally rich life⁴¹.

One key concern with Irwin and Nussbaum's interpretation of *erôs* is that it may downplay the role of human agency, particularly in Nussbaum's view, by framing individuals as passive victims of irrational desires rather than active participants capable of navigating and channeling their emotions constructively. This perspective risks neglecting the ways in which Plato's philosophy emphasizes the cultivation of agency and self-mastery in relation to *erôs*.

This idea occurs at many places in Plato's writings. In the *Symposium*, for example, Diotima's ladder of love (*Symp.* 210a-212a) illustrates how individuals can actively transform their desires from base physical attraction to a higher love of wisdom and beauty. This ascent is not automatic; it requires effort, reflection, and a deliberate reorientation of one's desires. Diotima's teachings suggest that *erôs* is not merely a force that overwhelms reason but a dynamic energy that can be guided toward philosophical and ethical ends. By focusing on *erôs*'s potential to disrupt reason, Nussbaum's interpretation may obscure this active, participatory dimension of Platonic *erôs*, where individuals are not passive but engaged in shaping their desires toward the good.

Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates' allegory of the chariot (*Phdr.* 246a-254e) highlights the interplay between reason and desire, with the charioteer (reason) striving to guide the two horses (one noble, one unruly) toward harmony. While the dark horse represents the chaotic and irrational aspects of *erôs*, the charioteer's role is not to suppress it entirely but to train and direct it. This metaphor underscores the importance of agency and self-discipline in managing desire, suggesting that *erôs* can be integrated into a well-ordered soul rather than being seen as an external force that overpowers reason. Nussbaum's emphasis on *erôs*'s defiance of reason risks

⁴¹My summary and analysis of Nussbaum (2001), pp. 228-233.

overshadowing this Platonic ideal of balance and self-governance⁴².

In the *Republic*, Plato argues that the soul's health depends on the proper ordering of its parts- reason, spirit, and appetite- under the guidance of reason (*Rep.* 443d-444a). Here, *erôs* is not inherently destructive but becomes so only when it is allowed to dominate unchecked. The implication is that individuals have the capacity, through education and self-reflection, to cultivate reason and harmonize their desires. By portraying *erôs* as a force that naturally defies reason, Nussbaum's interpretation may understate the role of agency and the possibility of achieving this inner harmony.

Hence, while Nussbaum's focus on *erôs*'s irrational and destabilizing tendencies highlights important risks, it may inadvertently diminish the active role individuals play in shaping their desires and moral character, as emphasized in Plato's philosophy. Plato's texts suggest that *erôs* is not merely a threat to reason but a potential ally in the pursuit of wisdom and virtue, provided it is properly guided. A fuller understanding of *erôs* in Plato's thought, in my opinion, must account for this interplay between desire and agency, recognizing that individuals are not merely passive but can actively engage with and direct their desires toward the good⁴³.

Another concern within Irwin and Nussbaum's interpretation is their assumption that *erôs*'s irrationality is solely rooted in the appetitive part of the soul. This assumption shapes the relationship between *erôs* and the soul, by considering *erôs* as a function of the appetitive part and examining its role in relation to the other parts of the soul. According to Plato's tripartite model of the soul, as especially articulated in the *Republic*, the appetitive part is about desires like hunger, thirst, and sexual urges. So if *erôs* is rooted in this part, it would be aligned with these basic urges and thus characterized as irrational.

This reduction of *erôs* to a function of the appetitive part of the soul raises a crucial question about its relationship to the good and its moral status: If *erôs* originates in the appetitive part, it lacks an inherent orientation toward truth and the good and, consequently, lacks intrinsic moral value. Unlike reason (*logistikon*), which naturally seeks these higher ends, the appetitive part is primarily driven by desire and sensory pleasures without an inherent capacity for moral discernment. As a result, *erôs*- when understood as an appetitive function- cannot align with the good by its nature and instead requires the guidance of reason to be properly directed.

This interpretation aligns with a broader philosophical view that distinguishes between non-rational and strictly irrational elements of the soul. Scholars such as John Cooper and Julia Annas argue that *erôs* should be understood as non-rational rather than strictly irrational⁴⁴. According to this view, *erôs* does not necessarily

⁴²Irwin and Nussbaum both use Socrates' chariot allegory from *Phaedrus* to explain their views on the relationship between *erôs* and reason. Irwin interprets the allegory as evidence that *erôs* is fundamentally irrational and opposes reason. In his view, the charioteer (*reason*) struggles to control the wild horse (appetitive desire, including *erôs*), which naturally resists rational control and can overpower it, causing impulsive and harmful actions. For Irwin, the wild horse represents *erôs* as a destabilizing force that requires strict external control to maintain moral and political order. Nussbaum also emphasizes *erôs*' disruptive power but places it within the context of human vulnerability. She sees *erôs* as irrational but deeply connected to external dependencies, such as the need for reciprocation, making it a source of instability and risk. The wild horse, for her, symbolizes the unpredictability of human desire that can overwhelm reason. However, unlike Irwin, she believes that while *erôs* is dangerous, it can be shaped and guided, though never fully controlled.

⁴³Beyond Plato's philosophy, this view might also inadvertently reinforce gendered or power-laden stereotypes, particularly those that associate women or marginalized groups with irrationality and emotionality, perpetuating biases rather than challenging them.

⁴⁴Cooper (1984, pp. 3-21) and Annas (1993, esp. Chapter 2, pp. 53-65, "The Affective Aspect of Virtue") and Chapter 4 ("The structure of Moral Reasoning Rules and Insight", pp. 84-108.)

oppose reason but lacks rational capacities of its own. It is neither intrinsically good nor bad; its moral character depends on whether it is shaped and governed by reason or left unchecked, allowing it to be swayed by base appetites.

To clarify this distinction, I will introduce the moderate view, as represented by John Cooper and Julia Annas, which characterizes *erôs* as non-rational rather than strictly irrational. I then examine how the issue of attributing *erôs*'s rationality to its origin in the appetitive part arises from the broader dichotomy between rational and non-rational desires- a distinction widely emphasized in the works of scholars such as Irwin, Nussbaum, Cooper, and Annas.

Specifically, this interpretation distinguishes between non-rational and irrational elements in the soul. Non-rational desires, such as *erôs*, are not intrinsically opposed to reason but also do not possess rational structure themselves. Their moral status depends entirely on how they are directed. In contrast, irrational desires actively resist reason and disrupt the soul's harmony, as exemplified in the *Republic*'s portrayal of the tyrannical man. John Cooper supports this view by describing non-rational desires as "active psychological movements toward getting an object" (Cooper, 1984, p. 5). For Cooper, *erôs* is neither rational nor intrinsically irrational but a motivational force that becomes morally significant based on how it is governed. When properly shaped by reason, *erôs* can be directed toward higher goods, such as virtue and wisdom. Similarly, Julia Annas emphasizes the independence of appetites from reason, describing them as "instability" "lack of rational structure", and "tendency toward excess" (Annas, 1981, pp. 84-108). However, she also acknowledges that appetites, including *erôs*, do not necessarily conflict with reason. With proper guidance, they can be harmonized with the soul's rational and spirited parts, contributing to moral development rather than undermining it.

The moderate perspective emphasizes *erôs*'s dual nature, demonstrating that while it does not inherently align with the good, it can be cultivated into a powerful force for moral and intellectual growth.

The main issue with this moderate perspective is that while it claims *erôs* aligns with the good only under reason's guidance, this doesn't fully rule out the possibility that *erôs* might have an inherent tendency toward the good. In other words, even if reason is necessary to direct *erôs* toward virtuous ends, it doesn't necessarily mean that *erôs* lacks an intrinsic connection to the good. This raises questions about the nature of *erôs* itself: is it fundamentally neutral, requiring reason to steer it toward the good, or does it have an inherent orientation toward the good that reason merely helps to clarify and refine? The moderate view leaves this ambiguity unresolved, leaving room for further debate about the relationship between *erôs*, reason, and the good.

This concern, especially evident in the views who consider *erôs* as irrational or non-rational desire, I argue, arises from scholars' reliance on a dichotomous approach to understanding *erôs*'s nature. This dichotomy, in turn, arises from Plato's tripartite model of the soul, which divides it into a rational part and a non-rational part. As a result, scholars analyzing *erôs* frequently adopt this binary perspective, viewing it either as a raw, irrational force that must be controlled by reason or as a potentially virtuous impulse that aligns with the good only when properly guided.

However, this dichotomy, oversimplifies the nature of *erôs* and obscures the possibility that it might have an inherent potential for the good that is not entirely dependent on reason's governance. For instance, *erôs* might naturally incline toward beauty, truth, and the good, even if it requires reason to fully articulate and direct this inclination in a virtuous way. By treating *erôs* as purely non-rational, the Platonic

framework risks neglecting the ways in which *erôs* and reason might interact synergistically rather than antagonistically.

Moreover, this dichotomous approach fails to account for the dynamic and interconnected nature of the soul's parts. While Plato's model presents reason, spirit, and appetite as distinct, in practice, these elements often work together in complex ways. *Erôs*, for example, might not belong exclusively to the appetitive part but could also involve the spirited and rational parts, reflecting a more integrated and holistic understanding of human motivation. By adhering strictly to the Platonic division, scholars may overlook the possibility that *erôs* embodies a bridge between the rational and non-rational aspects of the soul, serving as a force that can harmonize desire and reason rather than setting them in opposition.

To move beyond this limitation, it is necessary to reconsider the Platonic framework and explore alternative interpretations that recognize *erôs*'s complexity and multifaceted nature. Beyond the dichotomous view, a recent perspective has emerged that considers *erôs* as an intermediate state. I will now turn to examine this view.

2.1.3 *Erôs* as an Intermediate State

In this section, I will examine *erôs* as an intermediate state in Plato. I argue that *erôs*'s intermediate nature can be understood through three key points. First, *erôs* occupies a space between opposing realms- mortal and divine, lack and fulfillment, ignorance and wisdom. This positioning means it is neither purely rational nor simply irrational, but rather embodies a dynamic tension between these realms. Second, this in-between status gives *erôs* an inherent duality of potential. As passages in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* demonstrate, erotic desire has the capacity to elevate the soul toward philosophical enlightenment and divine contemplation, while also holding the danger of pulling it downward into base physical gratification. Plato's treatment of *erôs* consistently acknowledges this dual potential. Third, and most significantly, *erôs*'s intermediary nature enables its essential role as a dynamic bridge between the human and divine realms. The tension within erotic desire- its grounding in physical reality and its orientation toward transcendent beauty- allows humans to participate in the divine while remaining rooted in embodied experience. This bridging capacity represents *erôs*'s deepest philosophical importance in Plato's thought. Through this analysis, we can see how Plato treats *erôs* as a dynamic, transformative force that facilitates the soul's ascent while acknowledging human finitude. The intermediate nature of *erôs* thus emerges as the key to its metaphysical and epistemological significance in Plato's dialogues.

In Plato's texts, *erôs* as an intermediate state is most clearly articulated in the *Symposium*, particularly through Diotima's teachings. Here, Plato presents *erôs* not as a static or passive condition, but as a dynamic, mediating force that bridges opposing realms- mortal and divine, lack and fulfillment, ignorance and wisdom. The dialogue emphasizes *erôs*'s role as a state of in-betweenness, connecting these realms and enabling engagement with both.

At the core of this idea is the mythic origin of *erôs*. In *Symposium* 201d-204c, Diotima challenges Agathon's view that *erôs* is a great god and instead describes it as

a “*daimon*”, a spirit or intermediary being, born from the union of Poros (Resource) and Penia (Poverty). This parentage makes *erôs* neither fully divine nor fully mortal but inherently positioned between the two, embodying an intermediate state.

“Then, **what could Love be?**” I asked. “A mortal?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then, what is he?”

“He’s like what we mentioned before,” she said. “**He is in between mortal and immortal.**”

“What do you mean, Diotima?” “**He’s a great spirit, Socrates. Everything spiritual, you see, is in between god and mortal.**”

“What is their function?” I asked.

“**They are messengers who shuttle back and forth between the two....** Being in the middle of the two, they round out the whole and bind fast the all to all... Gods do not mix with men; they mingle and converse with us through spirits instead,...These spirits are many and various, then, and **one of them is Love.**” (*Symp.* 202d9-203a7, *Trans.* Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff)

The passage describes *erôs* as “one of” the spirits that act as intermediaries between gods and mortals, a formulation that might initially appear to undermine the claim that *erôs* occupies a unique position among spiritual elements. Taken in isolation, the phrase suggests that *erôs* is merely one instance within a broader class of mediating forces. However, a closer reading of Diotima’s account shows that her aim is not to level *erôs* with other spirits, but to situate it within a functional category whose members are defined by their intermediary status rather than by uniformity of role or effect.

Diotima first establishes a general metaphysical framework in which all interaction between gods and humans requires mediation. The spirits collectively fulfill this role by transmitting influence, communication, and orientation across the divide between mortal and divine. Plato elsewhere indicates that such mediation can take diverse forms: prophetic inspiration, poetic creation, and religious enthusiasm transmit divine influence without engaging rational understanding (cf. *Phdr.* 244a-245a; *Ion.* 533e-536d); ritual practices such as prayer and sacrifice structure contact with the gods through external and socially mediated forms (cf. *Symp.* 202e-203a); and impersonal cosmic or psychical forces such as harmony, order, and necessity shape human life indirectly by reflecting divine rationality within the sensible world (cf. *Tim.* 47e-48a; 56c-57a). To say that *erôs* is “one of” these spirits is therefore to locate it within this necessary structure of mediation, not to deny its distinctiveness. The category itself is deliberately broad, encompassing a plurality of forces whose shared feature is their position “in between,” not the manner or scope of their influence.

Within this broader class, *erôs* is distinguished by its specific orientation and function. *Erôs* is unique in its persistent desire for the perpetual possession of the apparent good and in its capacity to motivate the soul toward intellectual and moral ascent. While other intermediaries facilitate limited, episodic, or externally structured relations between mortals and the divine, *erôs* is characterized by a sustained and comprehensive orientation toward the apparent good, engaging the whole soul. Its intermediary role is therefore not exhausted by transmission or communication; rather, it transforms desire itself, drawing the soul from passive recognition of value into active pursuit. In this way, *erôs* does not merely connect the mortal and the divine, but binds the soul to the good in a manner that reshapes its practical and intellectual life.

Hence, the apparent tension in the passage is resolved once the distinction between numerical inclusion and functional uniqueness is made explicit. *Erôs* is

indeed “one of” the spirits insofar as it belongs to the class of intermediaries, but it is unique in the work it performs within that class. Diotima’s formulation therefore supports, rather than undermines, the claim that *erôs* occupies a distinctive intermediary position: it shares the general mediating status of the spirits while standing apart in virtue of its singular capacity to move the soul from recognition of the good to its committed pursuit.

In this passage, Diotima redefines *erôs* not as a god but as a *daimon*- a spirit that occupies a crucial middle ground between the divine and the mortal. When Socrates asks whether Love is a mortal, Diotima responds decisively: “Certainly not” (*Symp.* 202d). Instead, she explains that *erôs* exists in an intermediary state, belonging to the class of *daimones*, spiritual beings that facilitate communication between gods and humans.

Moreover, in Diotima’s mythic teaching, the role of *erôs* is explicitly to mediate the otherwise disconnected realms of gods and humans. This intermediary status is not abstract but functionally precise: these spirits act as “messengers” who “shuttle back and forth” between the two, delivering human prayers and sacrifices to the gods and returning with divine commands and blessings (*Symp.* 202e).

Plato reinforces this liminality by emphasizing the gods’ remoteness: “Gods do not mix with men” (*Symp.* 203a). Direct interaction is impossible; communication occurs only through *daimones* like *erôs*. This textual detail is critical- it shows that *erôs* is not merely a symbolic bridge but a practical necessity for the cosmic order. Among these, *erôs* plays a crucial role, facilitating communication by carrying human prayers and sacrifices to the gods and delivering divine commands and blessings in return. Without these spirits, the divine and human realms would remain alienated, leaving mortals without access to divine guidance or favor. This structure highlights *erôs* as a necessary force that sustains the relationship between gods and humans, ensuring that the mortal pursuit of the divine remains possible.

Furthermore, *erôs*’s in-betweenness between gods and humans underscores its inherently dynamic nature. Unlike the Olympian gods, who exist in a state of perfect and unchanging fulfillment, *erôs* is defined by perpetual lack and striving- traits that mark its intermediary status. Diotima’s description of Love as “in between mortal and immortal” (*Symp.* 202b-c) reinforces this role: rather than a static being, *erôs* is a constantly striving force that binds the human and the divine through longing and aspiration. Because it is neither wholly mortal nor fully divine, it moves between these realms, serving as the essential link that enables communication and exchange.

This intermediary position gives *erôs* a unique function, setting it apart from both mortals and gods. Unlike humans- bound by their limitations and lack of complete knowledge- or the gods, who exist in self-sufficient perfection, *erôs* occupies an in-between state of perpetual striving. Never fully possessing what it seeks, it embodies the tension between lack and fulfillment. This ceaseless pursuit makes *erôs* the driving force behind human desire- not just for beauty and pleasure, but also for wisdom, truth, and, ultimately, the divine.

Having established *erôs* as a dynamic mediating force between divine and mortal realms, we must now examine how this power operates within the human soul. I offer an analysis of the *Cratylus* (420a-422c) to demonstrate that Plato presents *erôs* as an external force that enters through the senses and engages with all three parts of the human soul: the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational.

“*Erôs* (Erotic love) is so called because **it flows in from outside**, that is to say, **the flow doesn’t belong to the person who has it, but streams into him through his eyes**. Because of this it was called ‘*esros*’ (‘influx’) in ancient times, when they used ‘*o*’ for ‘*ô*’, but now that ‘*o*’ is changed to ‘*ô*’, it is called ‘*erôs*’.” (*Crat.* 420a-422c)

In this passage, Socrates argues that *erôs* originates externally, framing it not as an innate impulse but as a force that flows into the soul from outside. He grounds this interpretation in etymology, linking the word *erôs* to the ancient term *esros* (“influx”)—a linguistic connection that underscores desire as something received rather than self-generated. Unlike conventional views that treat desire as an internal appetite⁴⁵, Socrates presents *erôs* as a dynamic, flowing force that bridges the soul and the external world, drawing the self into engagement with what lies beyond it.

Meanwhile, the metaphor of flowing water reinforces this conception, depicting *erôs* as an active, moving power rather than a passive or static emotion. Just as water courses into a vessel from an external source, *erôs* enters the soul through the eyes, creating a tension between the self and the world. This imagery suggests desire’s capacity to transform the soul— not as a fixed attribute, but as a current that reshapes as it passes through. By framing *erôs* this way, Socrates suggests that love is less about possession than participation: a force that connects the soul to the transcendent, pulling it toward something greater than itself.

The emphasis on the eyes is crucial, as they serve as the primary channel through which *erôs* enters the soul. When one perceives beauty, love enters through vision, actively streaming into the soul⁴⁶. Plato’s portrayal of the eyes as the soul’s gateway indicates that *erôs* is fundamentally engaged through sensory perception, specifically through the apprehension of beauty. This visual encounter is not passive; rather, it involves dynamic interaction with the external world, requiring attention and engagement. Thus, the passage presents *erôs* as an active, flowing force— one intrinsically linked to the dynamic processes of perception and desire.

Moreover, the connection between *erôs* and sense perception explains how *erôs* first engages the appetitive part of the soul. When *erôs* enters through the eyes— our primary means of perceiving beauty— it immediately activates our most basic desires. This aligns with Plato’s tripartite soul theory (*Rep.* 439a-441a), in which the appetitive element governs fundamental physical urges and sensory pleasures. As the primary organs of sight, the eyes allow humans to perceive and interact with the external world, particularly its beauty. When *erôs* flows into the soul through the eyes, it first activates the appetitive part— the most immediate and instinctive aspect of the soul⁴⁷. This part of the soul responds to sensory stimuli, such as the sight of physical

⁴⁵See Irwin 1995 and Nassbaum 2001.

⁴⁶In Plato’s philosophy, the eyes are more than sensory organs— they are symbolic gateways linking the soul to the world of Forms. In *Phaedrus* (250d-251a) and *Symposium* (210a-212a), sight of bodily beauty awakens recollection of true Beauty and initiates the soul’s ascent. In *Timaeus* (45b-47c), vision is given for observing cosmic order, inspiring philosophical reflection. The *Republic*’s Sun Analogy (507c-509c) compares the eye’s dependence on the sun to the soul’s reliance on the Good for understanding. In *Cratylus* (420a-422c), *erôs* is said to flow through the eyes into the soul. Together, these texts show that the eyes are not merely physical organs but symbolic thresholds through which the soul begins its ascent toward beauty, truth, and the eternal Forms.

⁴⁷In Plato’s philosophy, the appetitive part of the soul is the most immediate and instinctive because it is directly linked to basic bodily needs and desires. It responds to sensory stimuli— such as the sight of something beautiful or pleasurable— not through deliberation, but through automatic impulse. This part of the soul does not engage in reasoning; instead, it reacts to what is perceived as gratifying or satisfying, making it the most reactive and bodily bound aspect of the soul. Its proximity to the physical world underscores its primal nature, distinguishing it from the rational and spirited parts. This interpretation is supported by Cooper (1999, pp. 118-125), Ferrari (2007, pp. 165-170), Annas (1981, pp. 130-135), Bobonich (2002, pp. 216-222), and Barney (2010, pp. 267-272), all of whom emphasize the appetitive part’s sensory immediacy and instinctive drive. At the same time, these scholars highlight Plato’s insistence on the need for rational control over appetite to secure psychic harmony and moral

beauty, with desire and attraction. Only after awakening these raw, bodily desires does *erôs* have the potential to engage the higher elements of the soul. Thus, *erôs* begins its influence at the level of the appetitive part, stirring desires that are deeply rooted in the sensory experience of beauty.

Desire or love begins with physical perception and gradually develops into more complex forms. As a bridge between the inner and outer worlds, *erôs* initiates a flow that engages the soul with external realities, creating both a connection and a tension between them. This influx of *erôs* into the soul is an active and continuous process—one that shapes the soul by drawing it outward, directing its attention toward the beauty and fulfillment found beyond itself. In response, the soul internalizes this external desire, transforming it into a driving force that propels the individual toward various goals, including the pursuit of wisdom, virtue, and ultimately the divine. In this way, *erôs* functions as a mediating force not only between gods and humans but also between the soul and the world it inhabits.

Plato's account suggests that this perpetual movement is what makes *erôs* so essential to the philosophical life. Since the soul's ascent relies on its ability to seek and grasp higher realities, *erôs* provides the necessary impetus for this journey. It propels individuals beyond mere physical attraction or material desires, urging them toward the pursuit of knowledge and the contemplation of the Forms. Without *erôs*, the soul would remain stagnant, unable to transcend its immediate conditions.

Thus, in Plato's thought, *erôs* is not merely a passion or emotion but an active, transformative force that bridges the mortal and divine, guiding the soul toward transcendent understanding while remaining grounded in human experience. This central idea appears in both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. To demonstrate this, I will analyze how each dialogue frames *erôs* as an intermediary power that begins in the immediacy of human desire and ascends dialectically toward the divine.

In the *Symposium*, Diotima's "ladder of love" (*Symp.* 210a-212a) illustrates how *erôs*, this desire or love, starts with physical attraction and ascends to love of beauty itself. The journey starts with something deeply human: the attraction to a particular person. This initial love, though rooted in the physical, is not dismissed as mere lust. Instead, it serves as the essential first step— a spark that ignites the soul's capacity to recognize beauty beyond the individual. The lover soon realizes that beauty is not confined to one body but is shared among many. What began as attachment to a single beloved expands into an appreciation of beauty in all its bodily forms. Yet the soul does not linger here. As the lover matures, they begin to see that the beauty of the soul surpasses that of the body. Noble character, virtuous actions, and wise souls become more compelling than physical form. From there, the scope of love widens further to embrace the beauty of institutions, laws, and knowledge. The lover now delights in the elegance of ideas— the harmonies of philosophy, the truths of mathematics, the order of justice. As we see, each step represents a purification or refinement of desire, where what was once a passion for the particular becomes a love of the universal. Finally, through sustained philosophical reflection, the lover arrives at the ultimate revelation: Beauty itself, unchanging and eternal. No longer bound to the world of appearances, the soul encounters the Form of Beauty— "not gold, not fine clothing, not beautiful boys or youths" (*Symp.* 211a), but the pure essence that makes all beautiful things beautiful. This is the fulfillment of *erôs*— a desire that began with the body but culminates in the realm of the divine.

virtue.

Hence, as we see, the ascent of love does not reject the physical world but uses it as a starting point. Human experience, embodied in the lover's initial passion for a beautiful person, becomes the foundation for a philosophical journey that transforms earthly desire into a means of transcending it. In this way, the lover becomes a philosopher, and *erôs* becomes the soul's guide to divine truth.

Another key point in Diotima's account of *erôs* is the metaphor of pregnancy (*tokos*), which reveals *erôs* as a force that begins in human finitude yet stretches toward the divine. This generative imagery is not merely poetic but philosophically precise: just as physical pregnancy seeks immortality through childbirth (*Symp.* 207a-208b), so too does the "pregnant soul," when stirred by beauty, labor to bring forth spiritual offspring- poems, laws, and ultimately wisdom itself (*Symp.* 209a-e).

The key to this transformation lies in the dual meaning of pregnancy. At its most immediate level, it reflects human mortal condition- the body's instinct to reproduce, to cheat death through progeny. But Diotima insists this is only *erôs* in its "lesser mystery" (*Symp.* 209a-c). The greater revelation comes when we recognize that the same creative urgency animates the soul's highest strivings. A lover inflamed by a beautiful body initially seeks physical union, but if properly guided, that very desire becomes the energy behind intellectual and moral creation. The poet's verse, the legislator's code, the philosopher's dialectic- all are "births" propelled by *erôs*, now operating at higher registers.

This movement from physical to spiritual generation mirrors *erôs*' role as a *daimon* (*Symp.* 202e-203a): neither fully mortal nor divine, it is the mediating force that drives the soul from bodily preoccupations toward the intelligible realm. Crucially, the ascent doesn't abandon the body but transforms its generative logic. Where physical pregnancy perpetuates the species, spiritual pregnancy seeks the immortality of truth- the kind Socrates achieves by "birthing" ideas in his interlocutors (cf. *Theae.* 150b)⁴⁸. The lover who climbs Diotima's ladder comes to see that their initial desire for a beautiful person was always, secretly, a desire for the eternal.

The power of this metaphor lies in its dialectical structure: human creativity, whether biological or intellectual, is revealed as a restless reaching beyond the self. In giving "birth," the lover momentarily touches the divine- not by escaping their humanity, but by fulfilling it at its highest pitch. Thus, *tokos* becomes Plato's master image for *erôs* as the bridge between lack and fulfillment, time and eternity. Based on this, I argue that the metaphor of pregnancy is central to the understanding of *erôs*, as it captures *erôs*' dual nature- rooted in physical existence yet capable of spiritual transcendence. At its most basic level, this generative impulse manifests in bodily procreation, where mortal beings seek a kind of immortality through offspring (*Symp.* 207a-208b). But the true power of *erôs* lies in its capacity to transform this physical urge into higher creative acts.

Thus, in the *Symposium*, *erôs* is both rooted in mortal life (the love of individuals) and oriented toward the divine (the Form of Beauty). It is the soul's "rites," (*teletai*, see *Symp.* 210a1, 212b5-6) as Diotima calls it, where human desire becomes the engine of philosophical awakening.

⁴⁸In *Theaetetus* (150b), Socrates likens himself to a midwife of the soul, unable to give birth to wisdom himself but skilled in helping others bring forth their own insights. Just as a physical midwife assists in bodily birth, Socrates aids in the delivery of ideas, guiding his interlocutors to discover and articulate truths they carry within. This spiritual fecundity offers a kind of immortality not through lineage, but through the enduring life of thought, knowledge, and philosophical discourse. It reflects Plato's deeper view that the soul's highest function lies not in reproduction of the body, but in the generation of eternal truths that align it with the divine.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato explores *erôs* as a form of “divine madness” (*θεία μανία*, 245b2, 265a-b) that elevates the soul. Here, the encounter with physical beauty acts as a catalyst, sparking the soul’s recollection of the Forms, particularly the Form of Beauty, which it once perceived before its incarnation. This passionate experience is not mere lust but a profound awakening that drives the soul to reclaim its divine nature and ascend to the higher realms.

A key distinction must be made between *erôs* and base appetite. While appetite is tied to the body’s fleeting pleasures, *erôs* can be a “divine madness” (*θεία μανία*, *Phdr.* 245b2)- a sacred, destabilizing force that elevates the soul. This divine madness, a “gift from the gods”⁴⁹, does not seek mere gratification; instead, it reawakens the soul to eternal truths it once knew before its fall into the material world. This distinction is central to Socrates’ second speech of the *Phaedrus* (esp. *Phdr.* 244a5-25b6): *erôs* is not mere desire but a spiritual awakening, a gift from the gods that reorients the soul toward transcendent truth.

The difference lies in their objects and effects. Base appetite remains tethered to the body’s transient pleasures, but *erôs*, as a divine gift, awakens the soul to eternal truths it knew before its earthly imprisonment. When one experiences true *erôs* upon encountering beauty in another person, it is not merely attraction to physical form. Rather, this experience strikes like a spiritual revelation, suddenly reminding the soul of the transcendent Beauty it once contemplated in its pre-incarnate state (*Phdr.* 250d1-e1).

Socrates elaborates this through the soul’s mythic journey. Before embodiment, the soul traveled in divine company, directly beholding the eternal Forms- perfect Beauty, Justice, and Wisdom (*Phdr.* 246e-247e). Earthly existence represents a fall from this state, with the body’s heaviness making the soul forget its divine origins. The sight of earthly beauty, particularly in a beloved person, creates a seismic moment of recollection (*anamnēsis*, *Phdr.* 249c3). This is no calm intellectual realization, but an ecstatic upheaval that violently reawakens the soul’s memory of true Beauty and its desperate longing to “regain its wings” for a return to the divine realm.

Crucially, this process does not reject the body or sensual experience but transforms them. The lover’s initial attraction to physical beauty becomes the starting point for a philosophical ascent: when the lover encounters physical beauty in another, they are not merely reacting to sensory attraction; rather, they are “struck by the recollection of true Beauty” (*Phdr.* 251d-e). This moment of recognition is not a dispassionate intellectual exercise but an ecstatic and destabilizing experience- an erotic awakening that rekindles the soul’s latent longing for the divine. It begins in the sensory realm but ultimately transcends it. This process is not a rejection of the body or the material world but a transformation of sensual attraction into something higher- an ascent toward the divine. This process of recollection ignites a philosophical longing- not to possess the beloved, but to return to the divine.

Plato goes further, arguing that this “divine madness” is superior to “sane” moderation⁵⁰. Plato’s suggestion is that the lover’s seemingly irrational passion- the intense emotions that compel them to compose love poetry or pursue their beloved

⁴⁹Many passages in Socrates’ second speech, beginning at 244a, illustrate this theme. At 245b1-c2, the soul’s prior vision of the Forms, especially Beauty, is recalled, sparking a longing that transcends the physical. At 250d1-e1, Socrates describes how this longing manifests physically and psychologically, as the soul responds to beauty with trembling and warmth, signs of its inner awakening. Finally, at 256e3-4, he affirms that divine madness enables the soul to “grow wings,” lifting it toward the divine. These passages together show that madness inspired by love (*erôs*) is not a disease but a sacred impulse, enabling the soul to recover truth and strive for immortality.

⁵⁰ *Phdr.* 244a5-245c2.

obsessively- contains within it the seed of transcendence. The wings of the soul grow precisely through this tension: the struggle between the pull of the body and the soul's longing to return to its divine origin (*Phdr.* 257a). The lover's irrational desires are not obstacles to wisdom but the very source of their potential to transcend the limitations of the material world and approach the divine.

In this way, *erôs* is portrayed as an essential force driving the soul toward higher understanding. Both the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* depict *erôs* as a state of perpetual striving, placing it at the heart of the human journey toward the divine. As a crucial mediator, *erôs* begins in the mortal realm through human love and ascends toward the divine, culminating in the understanding of Beauty itself.

This new distinction of interpreting *erôs* as an intermediate state has been made recently by some scholars, defining it as a condition of in-betweenness and providing illuminating readings of this concept. I examine the work of two scholars to show how my view builds upon their work.

Vasilis Politis offers a nuanced interpretation of Diotima's account of *erôs* in Plato's *Symposium*⁵¹, arguing that *erôs* possesses an inherently intermediate and volatile nature. According to Politis, *erôs* occupies a state between goodness and badness, a condition that arises from its paradoxical parentage: "it inherits resourcefulness from its father and resourcelessness from its mother", as described in Diotima's myth (pp. 11-13). This intermediary status, Politis emphasizes, accounts for *erôs*'s distinctive volatility- it does not inherently or necessarily direct the soul toward either goodness or badness but has the potential to develop in either direction (pp. 3-5, and 32-34). As a result, *erôs* is both connected to wisdom and marked by the lack of it. *Erôs* becomes good-directed only when it is properly related to *sophia* (p. 33), the state of the soul that is intrinsically rational and oriented toward the good.

In my view, Politis provides a clear and compelling interpretation of *erôs*'s mythological parentage, effectively illustrating the roots of its intermediate nature. He demonstrates how Plato deliberately constructs *erôs*'s in-betweenness through its divine genealogy. The parentage of *erôs*- born of Poros (resourcefulness) and Penia (resourcelessness or lack)- is not merely a decorative myth but serves as the ontological foundation for understanding the nature of desire itself. This union creates a permanent state of tension within *erôs*: it is neither fully capable nor entirely deprived but exists in a continual oscillation between the two. For me, this explains why *erôs* can never be satisfied with any particular beautiful object yet persists eternally in its pursuit.

Moreover, this interpretation shows that *erôs*'s parentage is not just background detail but provides the metaphysical structure for its mediating function⁵². As the child of both abundance and poverty, *erôs* becomes the perfect intermediary- capable

⁵¹Politis, Vasilis 2016, pp. 1-34.

⁵²Sheffield's interpretation (Sheffield 2006), like Politis's, centers on Diotima's myth of the birth of *erôs* from Poverty (*Penia*) and Resource (*Poros*), emphasizing that this parentage reveals the fundamentally intermediate nature of *erôs*. As neither wholly mortal nor immortal, neither entirely ignorant nor truly wise, *erôs* occupies a liminal state between opposites- a condition that defines its essence (pp. 90-95). Unlike the gods, who already possess immortality and complete wisdom, *erôs* lacks what it desires and is always in pursuit. It is not divine but shares in the human condition of deficiency and striving. On this basis, Sheffield describes *erôs* as a "fellow traveler" with human beings (pp. 111-140), bound to them in their shared incompleteness yet oriented toward the divine. Crucially, she argues that this intermediate status is not merely a metaphysical detail but essential to *erôs*'s role in philosophical development. It is precisely because *erôs* exists between lack and fulfillment that it can propel the soul toward ascent- awakening desire for the Forms and enabling the transformation of the self.

This reading agrees with Politis on *erôs*'s volatility but shifts focus to its mediating power. While Politis stresses its dual potential, Sheffield highlights how its in-between nature enables the soul's ascent toward the Forms.

enough to seek the divine yet insufficient enough to remain human. This insight clarifies why Socrates, the quintessential philosopher, consistently presents himself as “erotic” rather than “wise”⁵³. Furthermore, this reading helps us understand that *erôs*’s volatility is not an incidental trait but a necessary consequence of its very origins. Plato’s choice to present *erôs*’s nature through myth rather than abstract argument suggests that some truths about human desire are better captured through poetic imagery than through logical propositions alone.

M. F. Burnyeat⁵⁴, drawing on Plato’s *Phaedrus*, offers a profound interpretation of *erôs* as an intermediary between the mortal and the divine, facilitating the soul’s recollection of the Forms. According to Burnyeat, *erôs* is not merely a form of desire but a “divine inspiration” that propels the soul toward a higher understanding (*esp.* in pages 240-243). In this view, *erôs* is not a transient or base longing; rather, it is a transformative force that motivates the soul to transcend its earthly limitations and focus on eternal truths. Burnyeat further connects *erôs*’s intermediacy to the process of self-knowledge, suggesting that *erôs* helps awaken the soul’s own nature (pp. 243-258). Specifically, *erôs* stirs the soul to seek beauty and truth while also compelling a recognition of its own deficiencies and finite nature. This awareness of imperfection, in turn, guides the soul toward greater philosophical inquiry and, ultimately, toward the divine. As Burnyeat states, “Divinity is a state of perfect knowledge,” while “humanity is a state of imperfect knowledge and understanding of the Forms” (pp. 245). This distinction highlights the role of *erôs* in bridging the gap between the human condition of ignorance and the divine wisdom of the Forms, guiding the soul from its imperfect state toward greater understanding.

For me, Burnyeat’s interpretation of *erôs* illuminates two crucial insights: first, it shows that *erôs* exists in the position between, or in the middle of, the realms of ignorance and wisdom. It is neither fully bound to human finitude nor completely aligned with divine perfection but acts as the dynamic force that propels the soul upward. *Erôs* guides the soul from its imperfect state of knowledge toward a deeper understanding of the Forms. Without *erôs*, the soul would remain stagnant in its imperfection; with it, the soul is drawn into philosophical pursuit, ascending toward truth. Second, this reading reveals a profound connection between *erôs* and the self. Through the recognition of the soul’s deficiencies, *erôs* motivates the soul to seek higher truths. Burnyeat shows that *erôs* is not merely an outward attraction to beauty but an inward awakening. By confronting the soul with its limitations- its incompleteness and yearning- *erôs* compels a deep self-recognition. This awareness of lack becomes the driving force behind philosophical striving: the soul, conscious of its deficiencies, is compelled to seek wisdom, beauty, and, ultimately, reunion with the divine. In this way, *erôs* does not merely direct the soul toward truth; it first reveals the soul to itself, making the pursuit of knowledge inseparable from self-discovery.

Hence, as we see, *erôs* is not merely a passive desire for external beauty but an

⁵³Like *erôs*, Socrates embodies the condition of perpetual seeking. Aware of his own ignorance, he does not claim wisdom but is driven by the desire for it- a stance that mirrors Diotima’s portrayal of *erôs* as neither god nor fool, but as something in between. This intermediate position is not merely a metaphor for desire; it reveals the very structure of philosophical inquiry. For Socrates, as for *erôs*, philosophy is a restless movement between lack and fulfillment, knowledge and ignorance- a dialectical process sustained by the recognition that one does not yet possess what one seeks.

⁵⁴Burnyeat provides a compelling interpretation of *erôs* as a divine “gift” that mediates between mortality and divinity, particularly in his analysis of Plato’s *Phaedrus*. In his essay “The Passions of Reason in Plato’s *Phaedrus*” (later included in “*Explorations in Ancient and Modern Philosophy*” Vol. 2, 2012, pp. 238-258), Burnyeat emphasizes how *erôs* awakens the soul’s latent knowledge by reconnecting it with its prenatal experience of the Forms.

active, divine force that stirs the soul to awaken its true potential and strive for a higher understanding of the world, the self, and ultimate truth. *Erôs* facilitates the soul's ascent by awakening it to its own inherent desire for divine wisdom, positioning it as a central agent in Plato's vision of philosophical development. Through *erôs*, the soul is propelled to transcend its limitations, moving from ignorance toward knowledge, and ultimately toward a deeper connection with the divine.

2.2 *Erôs*'s Aim and Object

In this section, I analyze the meaning of “the good” in Plato's characterization of *erôs* as “the desire to possess the good forever” (*Symp.* 206a11). At first glance, this may seem surprising, since Plato typically associates *erôs* with the pursuit of beauty rather than the good. The aim of this section is to clarify why Plato includes “the good” in this characterization and to demonstrate that its presence is both deliberate and philosophically justified.

To support this interpretation, I offer two key clarifications of what “the good” means in the characterization of *erôs*. First, “the good” refers to the ultimate aim or final object of *erôs*- that is, the end toward which desire is ultimately directed, such as happiness (*eudaimonia*). Second, in the context of *erôs*, “the good” as it appears in the human realm should not be understood as the Form of the Good or the Good itself in its fullest sense, but rather as an appearance or image of the Good⁵⁵.

This clarification relies on a crucial distinction, first developed by Gerasimos Santas and widely adopted in Platonic studies, between desire's immediate object (beauty) and its ultimate aim (the good). The apparent tension between beauty and the good in Plato's account of *erôs* resolves when we recognize beauty as the perceptible medium through which we can pursue the good.

2.2.1 *Erôs*'s Aim: The Good

The first key to understanding the concept of “the good” in Plato's characterization of *erôs* as “the desire to possess the good forever” (*Symp.* 206a11) is to recognize that, in this context, “the good” refers not to the immediate object of desire but to its ultimate aim- the final end a person seeks to attain. This crucial distinction is firstly articulated in Gerasimos Santas' framework⁵⁶, which differentiates between the object and the aim of desire. According to Santas, the “object” of desire is the specific, concrete thing one pursues- whether a beautiful person, an honorable action, or a particular pleasure- understood in terms of its immediate description. The “aim” of desire, by contrast, is the deeper purpose that

⁵⁵The Good itself refers to the Form of the Good, the highest and most fundamental reality in Plato's metaphysical system (*Rep.* 504d-509c, 508e-509b, 532a-534e). It is unchanging, intelligible, and the ultimate source of all that is truly good and valuable. Only through philosophical reasoning and dialectical ascent can the soul apprehend this Good in its fullest sense. It is not accessible to ordinary perception or opinion, and it stands beyond the visible world as the principle that gives truth to the intelligible objects and being to all that exists (*Rep.* 509b-e). By contrast, the appearance of the Good refers to what seems to be good within the human realm. This includes things like beauty, honor, wealth, or pleasure- objects that appear desirable and are often pursued by human beings under the impression that they are good (*Symp.* 204e-205a, *Rep.* 581a-c). However, these are not the Good itself but rather images, reflections, or imitations of it.

⁵⁶Santas, G. (1979). “Plato's Theory of *Erôs* in the *Symposium*.” *Nous* 13, pp. 67-75.

motivates this pursuit: the enduring fulfillment or ultimate good that desire seeks, regardless of how the person might consciously interpret or describe the object.

This distinction is crucial for our understanding of *erôs* because it clarifies two closely related yet fundamentally distinct aspects of desire: its object and its aim. The object is what initially attracts the lover- something particular and concrete- while the aim is the deeper, often unrecognized end toward which all such desires ultimately point: the lasting possession of the good. Building on this distinction, I argue that when Plato defines *erôs*- considering it a crucial and powerful force in human life- he is not referring to any immediate or particular object of attraction, such as wealth, pleasure, or even individual beauty. Rather, he points to the ultimate end toward which all desire implicitly aims. “The good” in the characterization of *erôs* is not any specific desirable thing, but that which constitutes the complete and enduring fulfillment of all striving- what can rightly be called *eudaimonia*, or happiness, in its fullest sense.

This is powerfully illustrated in *Symposium* (204d2-205a10), where Diotima pointedly shifts the discussion from beauty to the good, challenging Socrates with a revelatory question: when one possesses beautiful things, what do they ultimately desire through this possession?⁵⁷ By substituting the good for the beautiful as love’s true focus, Diotima exposes the teleological structure of *erôs*: every particular object of desire- whether a beautiful body, noble deed, or work of art- serves as a provisional terminus that points beyond itself to the ultimate aim of lasting goodness (*eudaimonia*). This movement from beauty to the good reveals that the good should be understood as the aim of *erôs*, while beauty functions as its object. Thus, when introducing Plato’s characterization of *erôs* as “the desire to possess the good forever” (*Symp.* 206a11), I take “the good” in the context to refer to the ultimate aim of *erôs*, not to any particular object of attraction.

Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that “the good” in this characterization of *erôs* does not refer to the Form of the Good or the Good itself in its purest, metaphysical sense⁵⁸. Rather, it refers to the good as it appears or is apprehended within the context of human life. To clarify the distinction between the good in Diotima’s characterization of *erôs* and the Good itself, I develop this claim through the following three points.

⁵⁷In *Symposium* 204e-205a, Diotima shifts the focus of the conversation from beauty to the good by asking Socrates: “What is it that those who love beautiful things really desire?” Socrates initially answers that they desire to possess them, but Diotima presses further: “What will it be for them, when they have the beautiful things?” Eventually, she leads him to the conclusion that it is “the good” they truly desire through the possession of beauty. This redirection marks a pivotal moment in the “erotic ascent”, reframing *erôs* as a longing not merely for what is beautiful but for what is truly beneficial and enduring.

This shift is philosophically significant and has sparked considerable debate, which centers on how Diotima’s replacement of beauty with the good can be justified (Dover 1980; Obdrzalek 2010, p. 430). Some argue that the move reflects a natural progression in Platonic thought, where beauty functions as a stepping stone toward the good- the true object of *erôs* (Allen 1991, p. 185; Martha Nussbaum 2001, pp. 175-181; Wedgwood 2009, p. 300; Moss 2012, p. 206). Others contend that the shift is more abrupt, even problematic, suggesting that Diotima’s account undermines the centrality of beauty in love by redefining the lover’s desire as ultimately directed toward something other than beauty itself (Rowe 1998). Notably, Gabriel Richardson Lear (2007, pp. 224-226) suggests that the equivalence between beauty and the good is assumed without full justification, making the shift appear logically and rhetorically abrupt. The debate thus turns on whether the transition from beauty to the good is a coherent development within the structure of *erôs*, or whether it represents a conceptual displacement that requires further justification.

⁵⁸In *Republic* 505a-509c, Plato illustrates the Form of the Good as a reality that transcends being and serves as the ultimate cause of both existence and intelligibility. Unlike Diotima’s empirically accessible “good” in the *Symposium*, which is grasped through lived experience and practical reasoning, the Form of the Good is knowable only through dialectic and sustained philosophical training.

First, while the aim of *erôs* is characterized as “the possession of the good”, this should be understood as the soul’s intuitive grasp of goodness-as-flourishing (*eudaimonia*), not as a direct apprehension of the Form of the Good itself. This crucial difference means that while all people desire the good, their understanding of what constitutes “the good” varies significantly depending on the condition of their soul. In other words, the good appears differently to different individuals. Each person’s perception and conception of the good is shaped by the state of their soul: those who are closer to true knowledge recognize higher, more enduring goods, while those still governed by ignorance pursue only the fleeting shadows of what appears good to them. This distinction becomes clear when comparing two extremes: the philosopher and the tyrant. The philosopher, as the lover of wisdom, seeks wisdom and truth. For them, the good means aligning the soul with eternal realities- the just, the beautiful, and ultimately the Form of the Good itself. This pursuit brings harmony, as all parts of the soul work together under reason’s rule. The philosopher’s life is stable, free from inner conflict, because their desires are ordered toward what truly fulfills human nature. The tyrant, however, is ruled by raw appetite (*epithumia*) and pursues lawless life. Consumed by lust, greed, and the hunger for power, they mistake the satisfaction of base desires for the good. But because these desires are endless and contradictory, the tyrant’s soul is in constant turmoil. Though they may seem free to indulge every whim, Plato argues they are actually enslaved- not just to their passions, but to the inevitable misery of a fractured self. In *Republic* Book IX, he describes the tyrant as the most wretched of all, precisely because their version of the “good” is an illusion, leaving them perpetually unsatisfied and at war with themselves. Thus, for Plato, the appearance of the good is not relative- it reveals how far a soul has progressed toward truth or sunk into delusion.

Second, these appearances are imperfect reflections of the Good in the physical world. These pale imitations might misguide us because, while they may resemble genuine goodness in some superficial way, they are ultimately partial and misleading⁵⁹. When we pursue these reflections as if they were the real Good, we inevitably meet with frustration, suffering, and moral decay rather than true fulfillment. This crucial distinction comes to life through Plato’s famous allegories. In his Sun Analogy (*Rep.* 507b-509c), he compares the Form of the Good to the sun- just as sunlight makes vision possible, the Good illuminates all truth and value. Yet most people perceive this illumination only dimly, like someone straining to see in fading twilight rather than full daylight. The Allegory of the Cave (*Rep.* 514a-520a) develops this further, showing how ordinary people mistake flickering shadows on a cave wall for reality, unaware these are mere projections of higher truths. Only through philosophical education can one escape this cave of illusions and perceive the Good directly. The consequences of chasing these shadow-goods are severe. The danger lies in mistaking these partial reflections for the real thing. When we do, we fundamentally distort our understanding of how to live well. Like the tyrant who mistakes unlimited power for the good, or the pleasure-seeker who confuses gratification with happiness, those who pursue these imitations find themselves trapped in cycles of insatiable desire. Thus, Plato’s warning is profound yet clear: the

⁵⁹The problem is not that things like wealth, pleasure, or power are wholly false; rather, they are incomplete. Money may enable action, pleasure may offer momentary relief, and power may bring about results- but none of these, on their own, embody the Good. They are like broken shards of a mirror: each captures a glint of the truth, but none reveals the full image. When we mistake one of these fragments for the Good itself, we confuse a mere semblance for the whole, and this misrecognition distorts our understanding of what is worth pursuing. Such error misguides the soul to cling to what is limited, perishable, and ultimately unsatisfying, instead of orienting it toward the source of all true value.

path to true fulfillment requires recognizing worldly “goods” for what they are- imperfect reflections that cannot satisfy the soul's deepest needs. Only by turning away from these illusions and toward the cultivation of wisdom and virtue can we hope to perceive and attain the genuine Good.

Third, Plato’s point is not that the Good is identical to its appearances, but that these appearances can serve as stepping stones toward the Good. Though imperfect, they have the potential to guide the soul in its ascent, gradually leading it closer to a truer understanding of what is genuinely good⁶⁰. The key lies in how we engage with these appearances. When properly understood, worldly goods can serve as preparatory exercises for the soul. Just as mathematical diagrams help students grasp abstract concepts before they can contemplate pure forms (*Rep.* 510d-511a), these partial goods can train our desires toward higher realities⁶¹. The beauty we see in physical objects, for instance, can awaken our longing for Beauty itself (*Phdr.* 250d-e, *Symp.* 210a-212a). This transformative process requires philosophical guidance. Left to themselves, most people remain trapped at the level of appearances. But through dialectical education, we learn to recognize these reflections as invitations to ascend. What begins as attraction to particular beautiful things can develop into love of Beauty as such; the proper use of wealth can teach us about justice; even political power, when exercised wisely, can become a school for understanding the Good. Thus, Plato’s view involves neither a complete rejection nor a naive acceptance of worldly goods, but a call to recognize their proper place- as potential starting points in the soul’s ascent toward true fulfillment. These appearances are not ends in themselves; rather, they can become instruments of elevation, provided we learn to look through them rather than merely at them.

In addition, this interpretation resolves a potential tension in Plato’s thought: if *erôs* in the *Symposium* were directed at the Form of the Good or the Good itself, it would render the entire erotic ascent superfluous- one would not need the gradual progression from bodies to souls to institutions to knowledge. Rather, Diotima’s account shows how the innate human desire for “the good forever” (psychological aim) becomes increasingly refined until it can properly orient itself toward the actual Form of the Good (metaphysical reality). The *Republic*’s philosopher-kings achieve this through dialectic; the *Symposium*’s lovers approach it through erotic education.

To conclude, the distinction between the good in Diotima’s characterization and the Good itself helps explain why *erôs* seems both fundamentally oriented toward fulfillment yet often frustrated in ordinary experience- we keep mistaking the reflections for the thing itself. *Erôs*, as the desire with an intermediate nature, operates in this liminal space between appearance and reality, between the many particular

⁶⁰Gabriel Richardson Lear (2007, pp. 97-98) reinforces the idea that the appearances of the Good- though imperfect- have genuine philosophical and pedagogical significance. She argues that, according to Socrates, what draws the lover to the beauty of a person or a thing is its apparent self-sufficiency and unchangingness. As she puts it, “insofar as something is beautiful, it appears to be good in a way that seems unaffected by the passage of time” (Lear, 2007, p. 103).

My account develops this further by emphasizing that it is precisely the incompleteness of these appearances that plays a constitutive role in the soul’s transformation. Rather than viewing beauty merely as a provisional stage to be surpassed, I argue that its failure to fully satisfy is what propels the soul upward. In this way, Lear’s view provides the foundation for my argument: the lover’s encounter with partial goods is not simply a mistaken desire, but a necessary moment of tension that, when reflected upon, reorients *erôs* toward the Good itself.

⁶¹The notion that worldly goods can serve as preparatory exercises for the soul finds its strongest textual support in *Republic* Book VI (510d-511a), where Plato describes the educational function of mathematical studies. Here, Socrates explains how geometers use visible diagrams as aids to understanding, though “they are really thinking about those things of which these are images” (510e). This directly parallels how physical beauty can point toward Beauty itself- the diagrams (or beautiful objects) are not the ultimate reality, but serve as necessary intermediaries for the mind’s ascent.

goods we experience and the singular Good they reflect. The philosophical journey, as depicted in dialogues like the *Symposium*, represents the process by which we come to recognize that what first attracted our *erôs* (beautiful particulars) were always signposts pointing beyond themselves to their source in the Good itself.

2.2.2 *Erôs*'s Object: Beauty

Plato develops the idea that beauty (*kalon*) is the object of *erôs*, especially in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. In both dialogues, *erôs* is stirred by the presence of beauty and motivates the soul to pursue and ascend toward it. Beauty awakens desire, prompting the lover to take action in seeking union with what is beautiful. In the *Symposium*, this pursuit begins with physical beauty but gradually moves toward the appreciation of the beauty of souls, laws, and knowledge, ultimately culminating in the contemplation of Beauty itself-the eternal and unchanging Form. In the *Phaedrus*, the sight of bodily beauty recalls to the soul the true Beauty it once beheld before embodiment, provoking a divine madness that compels the lover to care for the beloved and strive to regain the soul's former vision. In both cases, beauty functions as the catalyst for *erôs*, initiating a movement that can elevate the soul toward truth and the divine.

This raises a crucial question: if *erôs* aims at the good, why is it attracted by beauty? Why, in other words, does Plato connect *erôs*'s deepest longing for the good with its attraction to *kalon*? A typical interpretation, advanced by scholars such as Lear, Sheffield, and Kosman, is commonly referred to as the Appearance View⁶². According to this view, in most human experience, what initially attracts our *erôs*-beautiful bodies, noble actions, intellectual pleasures- are appearances, manifestations, or reflections of the true, transcendent Good, namely the Form of the Good discussed in *Republic* 506d-509c. On this account, *erôs* is not misdirected when it is drawn to beauty; rather, beauty is the way the good first appears to us. The soul, desiring the good, is awakened by its image, *kalon*, which stirs longing and sets the soul on a path of ascent. Beauty thus plays an epistemological and motivational role: it reveals and initiates the pursuit of what is ultimately desirable.

At the core of this interpretation is the idea that the *kalon* (beauty) is the phenomenological appearance of the Good- the way the Good manifests itself to us. These appearances are not illusions to be dismissed, but genuine, if partial, revelations of the Good. On this view, when one encounters a beautiful person (*Symp.* 210a) or witnesses a just action (*Rep.* 443c-e), one is perceiving the Good refracted through particular instances. This explains why such experiences naturally draw our *erôs*: they participate in and point toward the ultimate Good that is their source.

Building on this interpretation, I offer a view of the importance of "vision" in

⁶²The Appearance View, as developed by Gabriel Richardson Lear, Frisbee Sheffield, and Aryeh Kosman, takes seriously Plato's persistent link between the *kalon* (the beautiful) and the *agathon* (the good), especially in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. It understands beauty not as a distraction from the Good, but as its first visible trace within the human realm. Lear (2004, pp. 97-103) argues that beauty appears self-sufficient and timeless- qualities of true goodness- and that this appearance draws the soul upward. Sheffield (2006, pp. 49-52, 91-95) emphasizes that the lover's ascent does not leave beauty behind but progressively clarifies its nature. Kosman (2010, pp. 39-41) shows how beauty reflects the structure of a good life, awakening *erôs* as a desire for the soul's own flourishing. Together, they argue that beauty, as an image of the Good, plays a crucial role in initiating the soul's philosophical transformation.

Plato that emphasizes how beauty is valuable precisely as the appearance of the Good- as the perceptible presence of intelligible reality within the sensible world. In this sense, beauty serves as a visible trace of the invisible, making the Good accessible to perception and thereby awakening *erôs*. It is this capacity to disclose intelligible reality through sensible form that renders beauty not only desirable but also essential to the soul's ascent toward the Good.

Plato's philosophy gives "vision"- both literal sight and intellectual perception- a central role in the soul's journey toward truth. In the *Phaedrus* (250d-e), he makes a remarkable claim: among all the Forms, beauty alone manifests with perfect clarity in our visible world, becoming "the most sharply perceived and most lovely" of transcendent realities (*Phdr.* 250d6-e3). This unique visibility gives beauty unparalleled power to stir the soul. Where justice or wisdom remain abstract concepts requiring careful reasoning, beauty strikes us immediately, awakening a response that is at once emotional and intellectual.

This transformative encounter unfolds in the *Symposium* (210a-b). When someone gazes upon a beautiful body, something extraordinary happens- the experience transcends mere physical attraction. The visible beauty before the eyes becomes a window to something beyond itself, triggering what Plato calls *anamnesis*: the soul's sudden recollection of the eternal Form it knew before birth. This moment of recognition is neither purely sensory nor purely intellectual, but exists in that revelatory space between them. The *Symposium*'s "Ladder of Love" formalizes this ascent. Diotima's dialectical progression- from love of individual beautiful bodies to love of Beauty itself- illustrates how each stage of attraction serves as a stepping stone. The initial fascination with physical beauty is not rejected but refined, as the soul learns to perceive the Good's presence in increasingly abstract forms: in virtuous souls, just laws, and finally in pure knowledge. Crucially, this ascent depends on the soul's ability to "see" rightly- to recognize that every beautiful thing participates in and points toward the Form of Beauty, which itself derives from the Good.

The *Republic*'s Allegory of the Cave (514a-517a) echoes this dynamic: just as the prisoner's liberation begins with confronting shadows and reflections, the philosopher's journey starts with the visible world's partial truths. Vision, in both dialogues, is the mechanism by which the soul turns from illusion to reality, guided by beauty's revelatory power. Moreover, the Good, as the ultimate object of knowledge, cannot be grasped through reason alone; it must first be "seen" through its sensible manifestations. This is why the philosopher's education in the *Republic* (518c-d) involves "turning the soul's eye" from the dazzle of appearances to the light of the Good itself. Yet this turning is possible only because beauty first arrests the soul's gaze, offering a preliminary disclosure of the intelligible. Without beauty's epiphanic role, the Good would remain an abstract concept, inaccessible to beings whose understanding is rooted in sensory experience. Beauty, as the threshold between the visible and the intelligible, becomes the essential medium through which the soul apprehends and pursues the Good.

This interpretation, while presenting beauty as the object of *erôs* and as a bridge to the Good, does not exclude the idea that beauty itself is desirable and valuable. On the contrary, it affirms beauty's intrinsic worth even as it situates that worth within a broader metaphysical framework. Beauty is not merely a stepping stone to something higher, to be discarded once the Good is reached; rather, it is a genuine manifestation of the Good and thus shares in its value. Its power to awaken *erôs* and orient the soul upward depends precisely on its own attractiveness and radiance. Beauty captivates not by accident, but because it bears within it a trace of intelligible order and

goodness. In this way, beauty possesses a dual value: it is both a sign that points beyond itself and a good that rightly commands love in its own right.

Thus, as the object of *erôs*, beauty's special role becomes clear in this context. Beautiful objects are not mere illusions to be dismissed, but partial revelations that can- when properly understood- guide us toward fuller truth. Their revelatory power lies precisely in their ability to engage our senses while pointing beyond themselves, making them ideal catalysts for the soul's philosophical awakening. To encounter beauty is to stand at the intersection of the human and the divine—a moment in which vision becomes insight, desire becomes wisdom, and the soul glimpses its ultimate fulfillment in the Good.

2.2.3 *Erôs's* Mode of Duration

In this section, I analyze the meaning of “forever” in Plato's characterization of *erôs* as “the desire to possess the good forever” (*Symp.* 206a11). I argue that “forever” (*aei*) is not simply a temporal extension, but becomes the mark of the ultimate aim of desire- the Good itself, the enduring horizon toward which all authentic longing is directed.

I argue that the “forever” in this context operates on two interrelated levels. On the human level, the desire for perpetuity reflects the lover's innate resistance to mortality- a refusal to accept that genuine fulfillment could be fleeting. This explains why *erôs* naturally seeks immortality through creation, whether physical (procreation) or spiritual (the generation of virtue and wisdom). As Diotima explains in the *Symposium* (206c-209e), the lover who leaves behind works of excellence achieves a form of timelessness, imprinting themselves upon the enduring realm of truth. On the metaphysical level, the “forever” corresponds to the very nature of the Good itself. As the ultimate object of *erôs*, the Good transcends time and change (*Rep.* VI, 508d-509b). The soul's desire to possess it eternally is thus not merely a wish for extended enjoyment, but an expression of its kinship with the divine. In this sense, *erôs* becomes the means by which the mortal soul participates in immortality (*Symp.* 207d-208b), revealing that our deepest longings are, in truth, recollections of our eternal origin (*Phdr.* 249c-d).

For Plato, the concept of “forever” (*ἀεί*) reveals the essential nature of *erôs*: it is an insatiable striving, perpetually oriented toward enduring fulfillment rather than temporary satisfaction. This temporal dimension (forever) distinguishes *erôs* from mere appetite, showing that it seeks not passing pleasures but permanent possession of the Good. In the *Symposium* (200a-206a), Diotima guides Socrates to recognize that *erôs* cannot be satisfied with momentary attainment of the good- what we truly desire is to “have the good forever” (*boulontai aei echein to agathon*, 206a8). Plato's precise phrasing here is telling: the emphasis on *aei* (“forever”) and *echain* (“to possess”) exposes *erôs* as fundamentally an enduring orientation of the soul, not a transient impulse. The verbal construction suggests not simply acquisition, but perpetual communion with the Good. Thus, Plato presents *erôs* as ceaseless aspiration, a dynamic movement toward eternity that defines the soul's highest purpose.

When Plato speaks of “wanting to possess the good forever,” he identifies the ultimate goal of *erôs* as the eternal possession of the good. Building on this, I argue

that the *Symposium* reveals a profound insight into the structure of human motivation as shaped by *erôs*: beneath our many pursuits of particular goods lies a unified longing for the Good itself as the ultimate aim. This helps explain why no finite object ever fully satisfies our desire- we continually mistake proximate objects such as wealth, fame, or even beautiful persons for the true object of our longing: lasting and complete fulfillment.

The significance of this distinction becomes clear when we consider ordinary human experiences of desire. We might pursue a beautiful partner, professional success, or intellectual achievement as particular “goods,” yet find that attaining these objects never fully satisfies our deeper longing. This persistent dissatisfaction points beyond the objects themselves to the true nature of our desire- what Plato understands as an implicit orientation toward the Good itself. The specification “forever” is particularly telling, as no temporal or finite object could possibly meet this condition.

However, this dissatisfaction is not merely a feeling of failure but an epistemic moment- an instance in which the soul, through direct experience, comes to understand that no finite good can satisfy its infinite longing. I argue that Plato’s insight is that this dissatisfaction is not accidental but constitutive of desire itself. The very fact that we expect fulfillment from finite things- and are repeatedly surprised when they fail us- proves that we are not, in fact, seeking those things at all. Rather, we are seeking “through” them⁶³, using them as imperfect mediators for what we truly want: the Good itself. Moreover, I argue that this recurring cycle of desire and disappointment points to what Diotima identifies as the true nature of *erôs*- not satisfaction with any earthly good, but an unquenchable thirst for the eternal. Our very restlessness becomes proof of the soul’s divine origin and destination. The more intensely we experience this dissatisfaction with worldly goods, the closer we may be to recognizing the true object of our longing.

When Plato defines *erôs* using the term “forever,” he indicates that true fulfillment, such as happiness, does not come from cycling through the shifting appearances of the good, but from transcending them to reach their eternal source. What begins as a desire for particular goods is gradually transformed, through philosophical refinement, into a desire for the Good itself- the only object capable of satisfying *erôs*’ longing for permanent possession. This structure is mirrored in Diotima’s ladder in the *Symposium*: as one ascends from love of particular beauties to love of Beauty itself, what changes is not the fundamental desire (which remains a longing to “possess the good forever”), but the understanding of what can truly fulfill that desire. The philosophical ascent consists precisely in recognizing that what we initially mistook for the goal- individual, finite goods- were only imperfect reflections of the true Good we have been seeking all along.

This perpetual dynamic is also powerfully illustrated in the *Phaedrus*: the soul’s eternal striving arises because, as Plato argues (*Phdr.* 245c-257b), the soul is immortal and inherently drawn to the Forms- unchanging, perfect realities that

⁶³At the core of Plato’s insight lies a radical re-conception of the structure of desire: what seems like a series of distinct and unrelated wants- whether for wealth, honor, or romantic love- is in fact the fragmented expression of a deeper, unified longing for the Good itself. This framework explains what might be called the “paradox of proximate satisfaction”: the recurring experience that fulfillment of a particular desire so often leads to disappointment. The failure is not due to any flaw in the desired object, but rather to a mismatch between what the soul truly seeks and what it momentarily grasps. Erotic desire, in Plato’s view, is never fully about the finite object that seems to provoke it; instead, that object serves as a provisional vessel through which the soul reaches, however dimly, for something higher and more complete.

transcend the physical world. To “possess the Good forever” thus means to participate in its timeless essence, breaking free from the cycle of temporal lack and impermanence. In this light, desire is not a flaw to be overcome but the very impulse that drives the soul toward its highest fulfillment. For Plato, desire is philosophy itself: the soul’s ascent from the shifting shadows of the corporeal realm to the luminous eternity of Truth (*alētheia*).

Thus, Plato transforms what might initially appear as a human limitation- the inability to find lasting satisfaction in any finite good- into a profound philosophical opportunity. The persistent failure of worldly objects to fulfill our deepest longing is not a defect of desire, but a revelation of its true orientation: toward the eternal. In this context, the term “forever” becomes the perfect expression of Plato’s vision. It captures not only the temporal extension of our longing but its essential structure- an unending, upward movement of the soul toward what is beyond time and change. By framing *erôs* as the desire to “possess the good forever,” Plato names the very condition that transforms ordinary human yearning into the beginning of philosophy: a restless, enduring search for the Good that no temporal object can satisfy but that guides the soul toward what is truly real.

2.3 Conclusion

In Plato, *erôs* is both a desire and a motivating power within the soul. At its essence, it is a deep and enduring longing to possess the good one judges to be truly good, a force that organizes and directs the soul’s actions, choices, and aspirations. It is not a fleeting appetite but a fundamental principle that shapes the soul’s orientation toward what it judges to be valuable and enduring.

Erôs possesses an intermediary character: it is neither wholly rational nor entirely irrational. This makes it inherently open-ended in its orientation, capable of guiding the soul toward development or corruption. In the philosopher, *erôs* is rightly directed, manifesting as a love of wisdom and truth and guiding the soul toward genuine goods. In the tyrant, by contrast, the same desire becomes corrupted, seeking what the soul mistakenly judges to be good, including unlawful and destructive pleasures. Even in this misdirected form, however, *erôs* retains its structural power and capacity to shape the soul, illustrating that its essence remains singular even as its effects vary.

The intermediary and malleable nature of *erôs* accounts for its diverse manifestations. In the philosopher, it is a virtuous and life-shaping force; in the tyrant, it dominates and corrupts. Philosophical love, virtuous aspiration, and tyrannical obsession are not separate kinds of *erôs* but different expressions of the same fundamental desire, shaped by the soul’s understanding, or misunderstanding, of the good. The apparent diversity of *erôs* thus reflects the soul’s moral and epistemic orientation rather than pluralism in its essence. When reason is strong, *erôs* cultivates wisdom and virtue; when reason misjudges, it drives destructive, lawless desires.

Erôs is further distinguished by its extraordinary intensity and duration, ensuring a sustained and formative influence on the soul. Collectively, these features establish *erôs* as a central, structuring principle in Plato’s account of self-formation. Chapter 2 therefore presents *erôs* as a unifying principle: a singular desire that functions as a powerful shaping force whose manifestations reveal the soul’s moral and epistemic condition. Whether philosophical or tyrannical, *erôs* demonstrates the soul’s capacity to pursue the good or be misled, laying the conceptual groundwork for the following

chapters. There, I will examine how *erôs* shapes the formation of the philosopher and the tyrant, showing that it is always a desire for the good, capable of cultivating virtue as well as corrupting the soul when misdirected.

Chapter 3

Erôs in Self-Formation

The chapter analyzes the precise role of *erôs* in Plato's theory of self-formation. It argues that *erôs* functions across two essential and interdependent dimensions of Platonic self-formation: internal and external. Internally, *erôs* shapes the soul's unity and stability, contributing to determining which part of the soul rules and thereby producing a well-ordered or corrupted condition. Externally, *erôs* structures interpersonal relationships, most notably through the philosophical bonds between interlocutors in Plato's dialogues, serving as a bridge between personal self-formation and social engagement. The chapter further provides a systematic interpretation of *erôs* across the primary forms of selfhood in the *Republic*- timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, tyrannical, and philosophical- highlighting its formative influence on the soul's condition and the tensions among reason, spirit, and appetite that determine the moral character and integrity of each soul.

Section 1 clarifies Plato's concept of the self by presenting it as a composite of soul (*psychê*) and body (*sōma*), each with distinct functions yet intimately connected. I emphasize the soul's primary role and examine its dynamic relationship with the body in shaping human life. Unlike modern conceptions- such as the Cartesian view- which defines the self as a purely thinking substance- Plato's self is an embodied self⁶⁴. Thus, self-formation is primarily the cultivation of the soul, while the body serves as its necessary but subordinate companion.

Section 2 analyzes the process of Platonic self-formation and the central role of *erôs* in it. Building on Section 1's account of the self as an embodied being, it divides self-formation into two interrelated dimensions: internal and external. Internally, it involves establishing a unified and stable soul in which one part consistently rules the others. Externally, it requires shaping the soul's relation to the body and to others through philosophical education.

Moreover, I argue that *erôs* is central to both the soul's internal and external formation, making self-cultivation a lifelong and practical endeavor. Internally, *erôs* functions as a powerful motivating force that creates existential tension, initiates action, sustains effort, and directs attention, thereby shaping the soul's structure. This transformation typically begins in the appetitive part and gradually extends to the whole soul. As an "in-between" force, *erôs* can lead toward true goodness or misguided ends, depending on its orientation. Externally, *erôs* structures interpersonal relationships, especially the bond between lover and beloved, often expressed as

⁶⁴Descartes famously defines the self as a thinking substance (*res cogitans*) in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641, especially *Meditation II (on the nature of the self as a thinking thing)*, asserting a strict dualism between mind and body. For him, the essence of the self lies entirely in thought, independent of sensory experience or bodily states. This disembodied conception of subjectivity establishes certainty through introspective awareness ("I think, therefore I am"), while relegating the body to a mechanical extension (*res extensa*), external to the self's true nature. Plato, by contrast, offers a conception of the soul that, while metaphysically distinct from the body and capable of surviving death, is nonetheless fundamentally shaped by its embodied existence. The soul's philosophical journey unfolds not in spite of the body but through it. See *Phdr.* 246a-254e, *Rep.* 436a-441c. Thus, for Plato, the self is not an abstract intellect standing apart from the world but a composite, striving creature whose moral and philosophical development depends on how it navigates the embodied and affective dimensions of existence. Embodiment is not a veil to be pierced, as in Descartes, but a necessary condition of the soul's ascent toward truth.

philosophical exchange between teacher and student. In this way, *erôs* bridges the internal and external aspects of self-formation. For Plato, self-cultivation is neither solitary nor static- it is an embodied, erotic, and practical process that demands continual engagement with both oneself and others.

Section 3 explores the typical forms of the self as portrayed through the extreme moral character types in the *Republic*: the timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, tyrannical, and philosophical. Each type represents a distinct model of the Platonic self, defined by a specific internal structure and developmental path⁶⁵.

The section begins by detailing the internal soul's structure of each character, focusing on the dynamic tensions among reason, spirit, and appetite that shape the soul's moral condition. The philosopher exemplifies the ideal soul, where reason governs with the support of spirit, and appetite is well ordered. The other characters show progressive distortions of this balance: the timocrat is dominated by spirit seeking honor; the oligarch, by appetite driven by wealth; the democrat rejects reason and indulges all desires equally; and the tyrant suffers total psychic breakdown, with reason completely overpowered by unchecked appetites.

Next, two central factors in the formation of these characters are analyzed: the soul's condition, especially the strength and health of reason, and the influence of *erôs*. Reason plays a foundational role: as the faculty that grasps truth, it enables the soul to recognize what is truly good; as the ruling part, it brings spirit and appetite into proper alignment. Thus, moral character depends on reason's ability to govern effectively. However, reason alone does not fully explain self-formation. *Erôs* acts as a powerful motivational force that shapes the soul's internal dynamics and external relationship with the body and with other persons. For instance, the timocratic soul arises when *erôs* channels its energy into the pursuit of honor, empowering spirit but resisting reason's rule. The oligarchic soul forms as *erôs* focuses on wealth, strengthening appetite and further weakening reason's control. In the democratic soul, *erôs* fosters the rejection of rational order, encouraging the unrestrained pursuit of all desires and resulting in inner chaos. Finally, the tyrannical soul marks the complete breakdown of the soul's harmony, with *erôs* fixated on the most extreme and lawless appetites, fully dominating and enslaving reason and spirit.

Finally, the section concludes that the formation of moral character is not a fixed or predetermined process but a continual negotiation within the soul, especially influenced by the strength of reason and the orientation of *erôs*. Unlike reason, which governs through rational insight and deliberation, *erôs* moves the soul through desire and longing, whether for beauty, knowledge, or connection. This passionate dimension inspires the individual not only internally but also in their personal relationships, fostering deep bonds that can transform the self. The quality of this interaction determines whether the soul moves toward virtue and wisdom or devolves into various forms of moral decay and internal conflict.

3.1 The Embodied Self

⁶⁵The typical forms of the self in Plato's *Republic*- the timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, tyrannical, and philosophical- are portrayed as extreme moral character types precisely because they expose the fundamental dynamics and conflicts within the soul's tripartite structure. Each type embodies a radical configuration of reason, spirit, and appetite, revealing not just different personalities but distinct ontological and ethical conditions of the soul itself. Rather than mere psychological categories, these forms represent archetypal states of being that illustrate how the soul's internal order- or lack thereof- determines its orientation toward values, desires, and ultimately, the good life. See Annas 1981; Kamtekar 2004; Kraut 2007, pp. 122-157.

This section clarifies the Platonic view of the self as a composite of soul (*psyche*) and body (*sōma*), in contrast to modern conceptions such as the Cartesian view of the self as a purely thinking substance. Its central focus is the relationship between soul and body- a key concern in Platonic scholarship. I develop three key points to address this issue: (i) the soul is the true essence of the self; (ii) during earthly life, the soul is necessarily bound to the body; and (iii) the body, though often a hindrance, also serves as a vital vessel through which the soul engages the world- particularly through sensory experience, desire, and emotions, all of which shape human behavior and identity. Thus, for Plato, the self is a condition in which the soul interacts with, and is shaped by, its embodied state. Within this framework, self-formation is a lifelong process in which the soul, while contending with the influences of the body, gradually moves toward unity and stability.

3.1.1 The Soul

It is widely accepted that, for Plato, the soul is the true essence of a person, while the body serves as its temporary and mortal vessel- a view he articulates in several dialogues throughout his work. In this section, I argue that this view rests on two key claims regarding our understanding of the Platonic self: first, the soul is immortal and possesses an eternal, unchanging nature; second, it has unique intellectual and moral capacities that enable a person to comprehend and attain knowledge. Accordingly, for Plato, the self is fundamentally identified with the soul, and self-formation consists primarily in the cultivation of the soul- an achievement that defines both human identity and moral purpose.

In contrast to the decaying body, the soul is immortal- it pre-exists the body before birth and continues to exist after death. This fundamental distinction rests on several philosophical arguments, most prominently articulated in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates presents his final defense of the soul's immortality before execution. The dialogue presents two particularly compelling arguments for the soul's eternal nature. First, the Opposites Argument (*Phd.* 70c-72a) establishes that all things in nature emerge from their opposites- waking from sleeping, heating from cooling, and crucially, life from death. This cyclical pattern implies that the soul must continue to exist after bodily death in order for new life to emerge, just as death arises from life⁶⁶. Second, the Affinity Argument (*Phd.* 78b-84b) further draws a metaphysical distinction between the perishable body and the enduring soul⁶⁷. While the body

⁶⁶More specifically, Socrates presents the Opposites Argument as a direct response to Cebes' concern that the soul might simply perish at death. By examining natural processes, he highlights a fundamental principle: for any change from one opposite state to another- such as waking arising from sleeping or life emerging from death- there must be a continuous underlying reality that persists through these transformations. The argument hinges on the idea that generation is cyclical and dependent on an enduring source. Since the soul is the bearer of life, it cannot be subject to complete annihilation without breaking this natural cycle. Instead, the soul must persist beyond bodily death, allowing it to return to life again. This conclusion not only affirms the soul's immortality but also situates it within a broader metaphysical framework where life and death are interdependent phases of an ongoing process. David Gallop (1975) offers a critical perspective on the Opposites Argument, suggesting that it is more suggestive than conclusive, relying on metaphysical assumptions about cyclical processes.

⁶⁷The Affinity Argument in Plato's *Phaedo* contends that the soul, by virtue of its resemblance to invisible, unchanging, and immortal realities, must itself be imperishable. By situating the soul within the intelligible realm,

belongs to the visible, changing world of decay, the soul is aligned with the invisible, unchanging realm of the eternal Forms it contemplates. This essential kinship with the imperishable realm of Forms demonstrates the soul's immortality. Together, these arguments establish Plato's view that the soul's pre-existence and post-mortem survival mark it as fundamentally distinct from- and superior to- its mortal bodily vessel.

The soul's pre-existence and immortality establish its primacy in Plato's conception of the self, making it the foundation of his broader philosophical theory. In dialogues like the *Meno* (81b-d), Plato argues that the soul exists before birth, having once dwelled among the eternal Forms⁶⁸. Within this framework, learning is not the acquisition of new knowledge but a process of recollection (*anamnesis*), whereby sensory experiences trigger the soul's memory of truths it already possesses. For instance, the experience of physical beauty can awaken the soul's latent understanding of the Form of Beauty, as described in the *Symposium* (210a-212b). Intellectual growth, therefore, depends on the soul's inherent connection to transcendent reality- a connection the body may mediate but cannot itself produce.

Moreover, when Plato argues that the soul is the true self, he emphasizes its distinct intellectual and moral capacities, which define the essence of human nature. The soul (*psyche*) is the seat of reason (*logos*), intellect (*nous*), and moral virtue (*aretē*). Through these faculties, a person is able to grasp eternal truths and orient their life toward happiness.

This view is presented with particular clarity in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, where Plato consistently contrasts the soul's abilities with the limitations of the body. In the *Phaedo* (65a-66a), He explains that it is through the soul that one attains philosophical knowledge, while the body, with its sensory distractions and appetitive desires, obstructs the soul's pursuit of truth. Philosophical training (*askēsis*) is thus a process of purification that prepares the soul to detach from bodily concerns and return to the intelligible realm to which it truly belongs (*Phd.* 64a). In the *Republic*, this vision is further developed through the tripartite model of the soul, divided into rational, spirited, and appetitive parts (*Rep.* 439e-444b). The rational part seeks knowledge and governs with wisdom; when it controls the spirited and appetitive parts, the individual achieves justice and inner harmony. This model highlights the soul as the center of identity and moral order. It is the soul- not the body- that determines who a person truly is, how they live, and whether they are just or unjust.

Through these dialogues, Plato presents the soul as the true essence of our being.

the argument reinforces Plato's broader metaphysical framework, wherein true knowledge and being belong to what is immutable and invisible. An compelling analysis found in Sarah Broadie's "*Soul and Body in Plato and Descartes*" (1996) argues that the Affinity Argument marks a more rigorous philosophical turn in Plato's defense of the soul's immortality. Also see Sedley (2004), who interprets these arguments as part of a broader pedagogical strategy preparing the interlocutors for Plato's final and more decisive demonstration of the soul's immortality.

⁶⁸The precise passage in Plato's *Meno* that supports the view that the soul exists before birth and has once dwelled among the eternal Forms is found at 81b-d. In this section, Socrates presents the theory of recollection (*anamnesis*), arguing that the soul is immortal, has been repeatedly born, and has seen all things- both in this world and in the world below. As he puts it at 81b-d, "Since the soul is immortal and has been born many times and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is not surprising that it can recollect what it knew about virtue and other things." This account implies that the soul, prior to its embodiment, had direct acquaintance with the Forms, and that learning in this life is the process of recollecting what the soul already knows from that prior existence. Several scholars support this reading of *Meno* 81b-d. Gill (1996, pp. 208-210), Cornford (1935, pp. 42-44), Fine (2003, pp. 86-90), and Gulley (1996, pp. 100-105) argue that Plato presents the soul as immortal, having known the Forms before birth, with learning understood as recollection.

The soul is immortal, and its immortality reflects not merely endless duration but its very nature: it belongs to the realm of what is unchanging, intelligible, and divine. Unlike the body, which is subject to cycles of generation, decay, and death, the soul partakes in the eternal and is naturally oriented toward truth and what is everlasting. Plato emphasizes that the soul is not a passive substance but an active principle: it governs thought, aspires to knowledge, deliberates about right and wrong, and directs action in accordance with reason and virtue. In this way, the soul is the source of both intellectual understanding and moral character.

Thus, for Plato, the formation of the self centers on cultivating the soul, which he sees as the true essence of a person and the foundation of rational thought and moral action. An individual's well-being depends fundamentally on the soul's condition and activity. To live well is to bring the soul into proper order through philosophy and the pursuit of justice. Conversely, neglecting the soul subjects it to the disorder of bodily desires, leading to ignorance, vice, and a disfigured self. The soul's cultivation, then, is not merely one concern among others- it is the central task of human study and the primary focus of this inquiry.

3.1.2 The Body

Plato's view of the body is nuanced. While he often portrays it as a hindrance that distracts the soul from its pursuit of truth and wisdom, he also recognizes it as a necessary and vital vessel for the soul in earthly life. Through the body's sensory experiences, desires, and emotions, the soul engages with the world- experiences that play a formative role in shaping human behavior and identity.

In Plato, the body as a hindrance to the soul is most uncompromisingly presented in the *Phaedo*⁶⁹. There, Socrates outlines three interconnected ways in which the body impedes the soul: first, it distracts the soul through the demands of physical needs and appetites; second, it distorts the soul's pursuit of truth by relying on the senses, which are unreliable and ever-changing; and third, it binds the soul to the mortal world, preventing it from attaining pure knowledge of the eternal and unchanging Forms.

The body, being closely tied to sensory perceptions, easily distorts our understanding and judgment of things. As Socrates says, "the body fills us with loves and desires and fears and all sorts of illusions and much nonsense" (*Phd.* 66b-c). This highlights how bodily existence fundamentally distracts human from its pursuit of truth. Far from serving as gateways to knowledge, the senses are portrayed as active sources of deception, trapping the mind in a world of flux and contradiction. True understanding, Socrates insists, comes only through pure thought (*logismos*), when the soul "collects itself by itself" (*Phd.* 83a), severing its reliance on the fallible data of the senses.

The body's influence through physical appetites- such as hunger, thirst, and sexual desire- easily draws the soul toward material concerns, leading to ethical

⁶⁹David Ebrey (2017) presents this reading in his article "The Asceticism of the *Phaedo*: Pleasure, Purification, and the Soul's Proper Activity", arguing that Socrates advocates an active avoidance of bodily pleasures, pains, fears, and desires- not merely dismissing them but viewing them as genuine obstacles that corrupt the soul's capacity for truth (pp. 1-30).

decline. In Plato's philosophy, this influence is most evident in the "appetitive" part of the soul (*epithymētikon*), which encompasses primal drives for physical satisfaction that constantly threaten to overpower reason's control. In the *Phaedo* (64d-65a), these bodily cravings are not seen as neutral biological functions but as active forces of moral corruption that bind the soul to the material world. Such cravings follow an insatiable logic: each satisfaction only generates new desires, creating an endless cycle. Plato compares this to pouring water into a leaky jar (*Gorgias* 493b). The more one indulges physical appetites, the stronger they become, eventually resulting in the "tyrannical soul" described in the *Republic* (571a-580a), where reason is enslaved to ever-growing demands.

The famous metaphor of the body as a prison (*sōma sēma*, "the body is a tomb") underscores this view: the body serves as a prison or grave for the soul, restricting its true nature and potential. The term "*sēma*" (*σημα*) means "sign," "mark," or "tomb," indicating that the body is a mere marker or enclosure for the soul's true essence. This metaphor first appears in the *Gorgias* (493a) and is echoed in the *Cratylus* (400c) and *Phaedo* (82e-83d). In the *Phaedrus* (250c), Plato deepens this metaphor, portraying the body not just as a physical prison but as a cognitive veil that clouds the soul's vision. Here, Plato suggests that the soul, before its embodiment, possessed knowledge of the Forms, but this knowledge becomes obscured once the soul enters the body. As a result, our understanding of eternal truths is incomplete and must be recovered through recollection (*anamnesis*), a process that demands rising above the distractions of bodily existence. The *Republic's* allegory of the Cave (515c) echoes this idea, depicting most people as trapped in sensory illusions, unaware of the higher realities beyond bodily perception.

Yet the body's role is not purely negative. A more tempered view emerges in dialogues like the *Timaeus*, *Meno*, and *Symposium*, where the body is not merely an obstacle but an essential tool for the soul's philosophical development⁷⁰. In the *Timaeus* (44d-45b), Plato offers a teleological account of embodiment, describing how the Demiurge carefully designed the human body as a vehicle for the immortal soul. The physical form is not a random prison but a precisely calibrated instrument, with the head's spherical shape mirroring the cosmos itself (*Tim.* 44d), and the senses functioning as portals for receiving intelligible patterns from the material world. Far from being mere distractions, the eyes are specifically crafted to observe celestial motions, inspiring philosophical wonder and the study of astronomy (*Tim.* 47a-c). This cosmological perspective transforms the body from an obstacle into a divinely ordained tool for intellectual and spiritual development.

Moreover, the *Meno* (81d) introduces the crucial epistemological dimension of this embodied development. Through the famous encounter with the slave boy, Socrates demonstrates how sensory experience- in this case, the geometric diagram drawn in the sand- can trigger the soul's recollection of innate knowledge. The body thus becomes the necessary medium through which the soul recovers its latent understanding of the Forms, with physical objects and conversations serving as catalysts for *anamnesis*.

⁷⁰Plato presents a broadly dualistic view of the soul (*psuchē*) and body (*sōma*), though this view evolves across his works. In early dialogues like the *Phaedo* and *Gorgias*, the soul is immortal and aligned with the intelligible realm, while the body is mortal and deceptive- a prison that hinders the soul's pursuit of truth (Gallop 1991; Broadie 2001). In the *Republic*, Plato introduces a tripartite soul and emphasizes the need to regulate bodily desires through reason, rather than simply rejecting them (Cooper 1984). Later dialogues such as the *Timaeus* present a more integrated view, where the body, though ontologically inferior, plays a necessary role in the soul's activity within the cosmos (Jorgenson 2018).

The most profound articulation of the body's value appears in the *Symposium* (210a-212a), where Diotima describes the erotic ascent from physical beauty to the Form of Beauty. Crucially, this philosophical progression begins with the body- the lover's attraction to a beautiful form serves as the first step on a ladder that ultimately leads to transcendent reality. The physical body here is neither rejected nor transcended in a dualistic fashion, but rather transformed into a vehicle for philosophical insight. As the lover learns to recognize beauty in souls and laws before finally contemplating Beauty itself, the initial bodily experience becomes the foundation for increasingly abstract understanding.

Thus, Plato's view of the body is fundamentally dialectical: it is both an obstacle and a necessary instrument. While he often portrays the body as a hindrance to the soul's pursuit of wisdom, he also recognizes its essential role as the soul's vessel in mortal life. This tension reflects a deeper philosophical dialectic between the material and the immaterial, the transient and the eternal. Although the material world is imperfect, it mirrors the intelligible realm and serves both as an impediment and a conduit to truth. The philosopher's task, therefore, is to navigate this tension- to make use of the body without becoming enslaved by it- until the soul can ultimately transcend its mortal vessel.

3.1.3 The Unity of Soul and Body

When the human self is described as a "union of soul and body," the claim is not meant to be ontological in the strong sense that the self is constituted by both elements equally. Plato consistently treats the soul as the bearer of personal identity, agency, and moral responsibility. The body is something the soul inhabits and uses, not something it is. What persists through change, grounds action, and remains accountable across a life, and beyond it, is the soul alone. Any appeal to a "union" must therefore be understood as conditional and asymmetrical, expressing the soul's temporary situation in embodiment rather than its essential nature.

At the same time, Plato does not regard embodiment as philosophically insignificant. The soul's imprisonment in the body defines the practical conditions under which its capacities are exercised and its orientation is formed. Although the body is repeatedly characterized as an obstacle to the soul's proper activity, the philosophical life is nevertheless presented as a way of life that must be lived within embodiment. The soul is required not merely to endure bodily confinement, but to learn how to distance itself from bodily distractions and reorient itself toward what is intelligible. This task presupposes that embodiment, while foreign to the soul's true nature, provides the concrete context in which purification, discipline, and care of the soul can take place.

This framework explains how Plato can be sharply critical of the body while still assigning it a positive, though subordinate, role. The body is a prison insofar as it draws the soul toward instability, pleasure, and confusion, but it is divinely ordered insofar as it furnishes the arena in which the soul must practice self-mastery and philosophical care. The soul's progress does not occur in spite of embodiment, but through the proper use of it. What appears as a limitation becomes the very condition under which formation is possible, since the soul's relation to bodily impulses provides the material through which its internal order is shaped.

From this perspective, the body functions as an instrument rather than as a

constituent of the self. Bodily pleasures and pains, desires and resistances, habits and disciplines are not parts of the self, but materials upon which the soul works. The soul's task is to govern and organize these elements so that they contribute to intellectual and moral development rather than corrupt it. The language of "union" thus captures a functional and ethical relation internal to embodied life, not a claim about the soul's identity. Plato's main texts consistently preserve this distinction: the self is the soul alone, while embodiment names the contingent but meaningful condition within which the soul's formation, corruption, and education occur.

While most scholars agree that Plato sees the self as involving both soul and body, there is ongoing debate about whether his view is strictly dualistic- treating the soul and body as fundamentally separate- or whether it allows for a more integrated and interdependent conception of the self⁷¹. I argue that Plato's account of soul and body most naturally aligns with what has been called "weak dualism"- a view in which soul and body are distinct substances sharing no essential or defining properties, while allowing for accidental overlap in non-defining attributes. This position is developed by scholars such as Sarah Broadie and Thomas Kjeller Johansen⁷².

The challenge in interpreting Plato's philosophy lies in making sense of his views on the soul and body across different dialogues, which sometimes present nuanced or seemingly divergent perspectives. In the *Phaedo*, for example, Plato provides one of his most explicit accounts of the soul's immortality, presenting the soul as ontologically independent from the body. The dialogue's central arguments emphasize that the soul exists before birth and survives bodily death, suggesting a fundamental separation between the two. This view underscores the soul's priority as the true essence of the self, which the body temporarily houses.

However, a closer examination of Plato's wider metaphysical framework reveals a more complex relationship between soul and body- one that resists a simple, absolute dualism. While the soul's rational and contemplative faculties are privileged, Plato does not depict the body as an entirely foreign or hostile element. Instead, the body is portrayed as the necessary medium or locus through which the soul operates and expresses itself during earthly life. This dynamic implies an essential interdependence between soul and body, where the body is not merely a passive container but an active participant in shaping the soul's experiences and actions.

⁷¹Most scholars agree that Plato often distinguishes soul and body, but they differ on whether this implies strict dualism or a functional unity. Defenders of Platonic dualism, such as Dorothea Frede (1978, pp. 20-27), argue that the *Phaedo* (102a-107a) proves the soul's immortality based on its full independence from the body. Crombie (1963, 110-114) interprets the affinity argument as indicating two distinct substances rather than a single composite. Conversely, those favoring a more integrated view emphasize that Plato presents the soul as necessarily embodied, forming a practical unity with the body. Trabattini (2016, pp. 84-88) describes Plato's dualism as "toned down" by political concerns, highlighting the importance of unified human action. Jorgensen (2019, 125-130) points to the *Timaeus*'s depiction of the soul "woven into" the body, suggesting a psychosomatic unity. Campbell (2021, 45-49) observes that the soul's roles as both life-principle and cognitive agent are integrated into a single account of human agency.

⁷²Thomas Johansen, in his paper "The Separation of the Soul from Body in Plato's *Phaedo*," draws a crucial distinction between strong dualism- where mind and body share no properties whatsoever- and weak substance dualism, which holds that while the mind possesses essential attributes like reason and consciousness that are not bodily, the two substances may nonetheless share accidental features (Johansen 2013, pp. 25-27). Similarly, Sarah Broadie contends that Plato's dialogues assume a real distinction between soul and body, not as completely separate entities, but as two interdependent substances whose union constitutes the human being (Broadie 2001, pp. 42-45). This nuanced view is further supported by John M. Cooper, who discusses the soul-body relationship in Plato's works (Cooper 1999, pp. 312-318), and Gregory Vlastos, who emphasizes the interconnectedness of soul and body within Plato's philosophical anthropology (Vlastos 1981, pp. 70-75).

Philosophers such as Sarah Broadie highlight this complexity by emphasizing how Plato conceives of the soul as both a self-mover (*autonomous*) and a knower. These dual functions- movement and cognition- are unified within a single substance, the soul, which suggests that while soul and body are distinct, they are not wholly separate in the manner of Cartesian dualism. Broadie's interpretation points to a more nuanced "weak dualism," which acknowledges the distinctness of soul and body but allows for their functional and existential overlap during embodied life (Broadie 2001, pp. 42-45).

Thomas Kjeller Johansen further develops this interpretation by focusing on the *Phaedo*'s metaphysical implications. He argues that Plato's soul, though immortal and capable of existing independently after death, remains spatially and causally linked to the body during life (Johansen 2013, pp. 25-27). This perspective underscores that the soul's embodiment is not accidental but constitutive of its activities in the material world. The soul's engagement with the body enables perception, desire, and movement, which are essential for its functioning but also introduce vulnerabilities, such as susceptibility to bodily appetites and distractions.

This form of weak dualism reconciles two critical dimensions of Plato's thought. On the one hand, it preserves the soul's transcendence and immortality, affirming its capacity to survive beyond physical death. On the other hand, it acknowledges the reality of embodiment, recognizing that the soul's earthly existence is necessarily intertwined with a bodily form. This balance avoids reducing the soul to mere materiality, while simultaneously resisting an overly rigid dualism that would sever the soul completely from its bodily context.

Plato's weak dualism expresses a dialectical understanding of human nature- conceiving the self as a composite unity of soul and body, with the soul as primary but never entirely separate from its embodied condition. This framework underpins his broader philosophical commitments: the soul's pursuit of eternal truth and virtue, and the practical realities of living within a changing, material world.

In this view, the human self is essentially an embodied self- rooted in the soul, yet necessarily involving the body. While the soul constitutes the true essence of the person, it exists and acts within the constraints of bodily life. The self cannot be reduced to the soul alone, since the body also shapes the soul's experiences and development. The soul uses the body as its instrument for interacting with the physical world. Although the soul is ultimately destined to transcend the body- especially after death- its earthly existence entails an inescapable union with it. Thus, the embodied self emerges as a dynamic interplay between soul and body, reflecting the complex structure of human life in Plato's philosophy.

To understand the formation of the self in Plato's thought, it is essential to examine two interconnected fundamental dimensions: the inherent structure and purpose of the soul, and its complex, often fraught relationship with the body. As the immortal and rational essence of a person, the soul defines the true self through its capacities and orientation toward the eternal. The body, as the soul's necessary vessel, contributes to shaping the self by mediating its experience of the material world. Moreover, the embodied self must also be understood in relation to others, as social interaction plays a vital role in moral development and self-understanding. From this perspective, Plato does not present the self as a fixed or static entity, but as a dynamic project of ethical and intellectual cultivation- one shaped by the soul's continual effort

to govern the body and ascend toward its divine destiny.

3.2 The Formation Process

In this section, I examine the specific process of self-formation in Plato and explain why *erôs* is integral to it. I argue that, for Plato, self-formation is a dynamic and lifelong process that unfolds through the internal harmonization of the soul and the external guidance provided by pedagogical relationships. In both dimensions, *erôs* functions as the central driving force.

The formative process consists of two key interconnected aspects: internal and external. Internally, it involves cultivating a stable and unified order within the soul, where one part- namely, reason- consistently governs the others. This also includes regulating the soul's relationship with the body to ensure that bodily desires do not disturb rational harmony. Externally, self-formation depends on one's interactions with others, especially within the context of philosophical education. I argue that *erôs* is central to both the soul's internal development and its external guidance, making self-cultivation a continuous and practical task throughout life.

3.2.1 Within the Soul

The internal dimension of self-formation focuses on Plato's tripartite structure of the soul and the necessity of establishing a stable hierarchy among its parts. I argue that this hierarchy is essential to the formation of the self, creating a stable and unified soul in which one part consistently governs the others. Plato articulates this structure across multiple dialogues- most notably the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. In the *Republic*, the soul's parts are depicted as competing forces, while the *Phaedrus* illustrates how the soul can either ascend toward truth or descend into disorder. In both dialogues, the tripartite structure is not merely a psychological model but the fundamental framework through which the self is constituted and cultivated.

Plato holds that human nature is a dynamic interplay of competing forces, a view reflected in the soul's tripartite division. This structure is first fully articulated in *Republic* IV (439d-441c), where Socrates identifies three distinct elements within the soul: the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. The rational part (*logistikon*) is the facet with which we think and seek truth; it is "the part of the soul with which it calculates" (*Rep.* 439d). The spirited part (*thumoeides*), associated with emotions like anger and a sense of honor, is "the part by which we get angry" (*Rep.* 439e). Lastly, the appetitive part (*epithumetikon*) is "the part with which it lusts, hungers, thirsts, and gets excited by other appetites" (*Rep.* 439d).

These three parts of the soul possess distinct functions, which often give rise to internal conflict. Plato illustrates this through the story of Leontius (*Rep.* 439e-440a). As Leontius encounters corpses near the executioner's block, he experiences a visceral urge to gaze at them, a desire emanating from the "appetitive" part of his soul, which seeks gratification without regard for reason or propriety. Simultaneously, he feels revulsion at his own impulse, chastising himself in anger- a reaction Plato attributes to the "spirited" part (*θυμός*), which aligns with honor and resistance to base

desires.

The soul's internal struggle exposes its fragmentation: left unguided, its parts tug the individual in conflicting directions. Plato thus insists that the rational element must govern to preserve harmony. Though the spirited and appetitive elements fuel our drive and sustain us, neither can exercise true judgment. Only the rational part- with its capacity to assess desires and align them with the good- can arbitrate these internal tensions and restore inner unity. Establishing this rational rule secures a unified, well-ordered self. When that hierarchy is overturned, psychic disharmony follows and a "false self" emerges: if appetite dominates, one becomes enslaved to fleeting pleasures; if spiritedness runs unchecked, arrogance and aggression take hold. In both cases, the rational soul's sovereignty is undermined, resulting in moral and existential disintegration.

While the *Republic* presents the necessity of a hierarchical structure within the soul in theoretical terms, the *Phaedrus* (246a-254e) vividly animates this concept through the chariot allegory⁷³. Socrates describes the soul as "a winged chariot team with their driver" (*Phdr.* 246b), portraying the soul's rational part as the charioteer struggling to control two mismatched steeds- one noble and obedient, the other unruly and resistant. This powerful metaphor does more than echo the *Republic*'s division of reason, spirit, and appetite; it dramatizes their ceaseless interplay as an existential struggle within the soul.

The allegory's three figures correspond to Plato's psychological framework. The charioteer represents reason, the soul's guiding faculty, which seeks truth and wisdom. His task is complicated by the opposing natures of his horses. One, described as "upright and cleanly made" (*Phdr.* 253d), embodies the spirited part of the soul, responding to honor and moral discipline. The other, characterized as "crooked, heavy, and of rude manners" (*Phdr.* 253d), personifies appetite, relentlessly pulling toward base desires. This tension between upward aspiration and downward drag captures the perpetual challenge of self-governance.

The soul's ultimate condition depends on the charioteer's struggle to control the opposing horses. When reason prevails- when the charioteer successfully governs both the noble and unruly steeds- the soul attains its divine potential. Plato vividly portrays this triumphant ascent: the well-ordered soul "raises the head of the charioteer into the outer region," where it beholds true reality and participates in the celestial revolution alongside the gods (*Phdr.* 248a)⁷⁴. This marks the pinnacle of psychic harmony, in which all parts of the soul work together in pursuit of philosophical enlightenment. Conversely, failure to maintain this delicate balance results in the soul's degeneration. Plato warns that when the charioteer loses control- when reason succumbs to disorder- the soul becomes "filled with forgetfulness and

⁷³Scholars generally agree that both the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus* present a tripartite soul, but they differ in emphasis. The *Republic* offers a rational, hierarchical model aimed at moral and political order (436a-441c), while the *Phaedrus* (246a-254e) uses the chariot allegory to explore the soul's erotic longing and struggle for transcendence. Some scholars (e.g. Kahn 1987, p. 132; Broadie 2001, pp. 45-48) see the *Phaedrus* as deepening the *Republic*'s account; others (e.g. Kamtekar, 2004, pp. 95-99; Whiting 1996, pp. 112-116) argue it reflects a distinct, more affective and mythic psychology. I align with scholars who view the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* as broadly compatible in their accounts of the soul, with the latter enriching rather than contradicting the former.

⁷⁴Belfiore in "Dancing with the Gods: The Myth of the Chariot in Plato's *Phaedrus*" (2006), interprets the chariot allegory as a cosmic dance. She argues that the charioteer's task is not just to control the horses but to harmonize their movements like a dancer coordinating with the divine chorus (Belfiore 2006, pp. 185-217). In my opinion, this metaphor deepens the notion of self-formation in two ways: it portrays psychic harmony as dynamic coordination rather than rigid control, and it shows that unity of soul requires balanced interaction between reason, spirit, and appetite. The soul's dance reflects the grace and struggle of achieving inner order.

vice,” loses its wings, and plunges earthward (*Phdr.* 248c). This dramatic fall underscores the consequences of failed self-governance: rather than ascending toward the Forms, the disordered soul sinks into ignorance and a base mode of existence. In the chariot allegory, self-formation requires the charioteer to master both horses- restraining the appetitive element and guiding the spirited one in support of rational ascent. Only when the soul is harmonized in this way can it rise toward the vision of true Being and attain genuine fulfillment.

While the *Republic* depicts the soul as a static structure, the *Phaedrus* myth shows it as dynamic and ever-moving- the soul is constantly either rising toward truth or falling into chaos. The charioteer’s struggle underscores Plato’s deeper claim: harmony is not given but achieved through reason’s persistent effort to align the soul’s competing forces. Success brings elevation; failure, disintegration.

The *Phaedrus* reinforces the core principle articulated in the *Republic*: the soul’s well-being depends on each part performing its proper function without disrupting the others. When reason rules wisely, spirit supports with courage, and appetite follows with moderation, the soul achieves harmony- Plato’s definition of justice (*dikaiosyne*). This inner harmony forms the foundation of a stable and virtuous life. Just as a skilled charioteer must balance the horses to ascend, a just soul ensures that reason governs, spirit defends, and appetite obeys- each part contributing to the whole without exceeding its bounds. However, when any part oversteps its role- when appetite revolts, spirit becomes reckless, or reason weakens- the soul falls into internal conflict and moral disorder. In *Republic* 443d-444a, Plato makes clear that true justice is not merely about outward conduct but about internal order: “Justice is doing one’s own work and not meddling with what isn’t one’s own.” A person who achieves this inner alignment is not only morally upright but also psychologically whole-free from internal strife and capable of rational, virtuous action.

The soul’s order reflects the structure of Plato’s ideal city, with both organized according to the same hierarchical principle of specialized function⁷⁵. In the *Republic*, Plato develops this parallel through a detailed analogy: the three classes of the just city-philosopher-kings, guardians, and producers- correspond precisely to the rational, spirited, and appetitive parts of the soul. Just as philosopher-kings govern the city with wisdom, reason must rule the soul; as guardians protect the polis with disciplined courage, the spirited part must uphold moral resolve; and just as producers provide for the city’s material needs, the appetitive part must satisfy bodily desires without overstepping its role. This structural isomorphism has profound implications. The stability of both city and soul depends on preserving this natural hierarchy- when the proper order is disrupted, disintegration ensues. A city where merchants seize power or warriors dominate becomes as disordered as a soul in which appetites overpower reason or passions subvert judgment.

Thus, for Plato, the goal of self-formation is to cultivate a soul in which reason

⁷⁵Several scholars have engaged with Plato’s analogy between the individual soul and the ideal city in the *Republic*. Julia Annas (2000, pp. 80-85) interprets the analogy primarily as a methodological device that clarifies the concept of justice by using a more concrete and visible model. Bernard Williams (2001, pp. 37-45) offers a critical perspective, cautioning that the analogy may oversimplify the complexities of individual psychology by rigidly aligning it with political structures. Norbert Blössner (2007, pp. 102-110) traces the development of this analogy throughout the dialogue, highlighting its shifting philosophical function as part of Plato’s flexible and dialectical approach rather than a fixed doctrine. This research follows Norbert Blössner’s view that the city-soul analogy in the *Republic* is a flexible, evolving tool rather than a fixed structure. Plato adapts it throughout the dialogue to highlight the soul’s internal development- especially the growth and harmony of reason, spirit, and appetite. By examining these shifts, the study emphasizes how reason gradually brings the soul to self-governance and philosophical understanding.

governs, spirit supports, and appetite obeys, leading to a life that is both just and fulfilling. This harmonious alignment enables the individual to attain inner peace and pursue philosophical wisdom, reflecting the stability and order of the ideal city. Through this internal balance, the soul reaches its true potential, resulting in a virtuous and meaningful existence.

3.2.2 The Role of *Erôs*

Having clarified that the soul's internal dimension of self-formation involves establishing a stable hierarchy among its parts, I now turn to examine the crucial role of *erôs* in this process. The analysis proceeds in two key stages. First, I explain how *erôs*, as a motivational force, generates a deep existential tension within the soul and engages all three of its parts. *Erôs* initiates action, sustains effort, and directs attention toward what the individual perceives as valuable. Second, I demonstrate that the outcome of this *erôs*-driven pursuit can be either beneficial or harmful, as illustrated by the contrasting formative paths of the philosopher and the tyrant. The underlying cause of this divergence, explored in Section 3.3, lies in the condition of the soul that *erôs* acts upon and in the presence or absence of philosophical education during one's development.

In several dialogues, *erôs* is depicted as a powerful motivational force that both amplifies and sustains the soul's drive to pursue its desired object. When directed toward what is perceived as permanently fulfilling, *erôs* not only sparks action but also intensifies and reinforces desire, generating a self-perpetuating cycle of striving.

Plato's tripartite psychology in the *Republic* (439d-441c) reveals *erôs* as a dynamic and transformative force that moves through and reshapes the soul's structure. The journey of *erôs* begins in the appetitive part of the soul (*epithumētikon*), where it is expressed in basic physical cravings- such as hunger, thirst, and sexual desire (*Rep.* 439d). At this stage, *erôs* seeks immediate, bodily gratification.

Yet *erôs*, by its very nature, is expansive and restless; it is not confined to material satisfaction. It rises to animate the spirited part of the soul (*thumoeides*), which is oriented toward ambition, pride, and the pursuit of honor. As both the *Republic* (439e-441a) and *Phaedrus* (253d-254e) suggest, when guided properly, the spirited element can be shaped by *erôs* to seek noble recognition and moral excellence.

Ultimately, *erôs* finds its highest expression in the rational part of the soul (*logistikon*), which, as Socrates explains in *Republic* VI (485a-486d), longs for wisdom and the contemplation of eternal truths. This upward movement- from bodily craving to honor-seeking ambition, and finally to philosophical desire- shows that *erôs* is not merely one desire among others. It is the soul's deepest and most fundamental impulse, capable of organizing and elevating the entire psychic structure toward its highest fulfillment.

When *erôs* is active, the interaction among the soul's parts can either intensify internal conflict or foster harmony, causing the soul to either ascend or disintegrate. Plato presents *erôs* as a double-edged force that fundamentally shapes the soul's inner dynamics: it can plunge the soul into disorder and strife or elevate it toward unified harmony. This dual potential is vividly illustrated in two key passages- the soul's

ascent toward the divine in the *Phaedrus* (246a-256e) and its descent into tyranny in *Republic IX* (572d-576b).

I begin by presenting how, in the *Phaedrus* (245a-256e), *erôs* emerges as a transformative force that restructures the soul's very architecture, creating an existential tension that can reorient all three parts of the psyche toward their divine origin. As a form of divine madness (*theia mania*), *erôs* does not merely influence the soul but fundamentally reorganizes its dynamics, creating a new hierarchy where the rational, spirited, and appetitive elements are realigned in their proper relation to the eternal. The key passage illustrates this transformation through the metaphor of the philosopher regrowing the soul's wings, restoring its ability to ascend toward the divine:

“For just this reason it is fair that **only a philosopher's mind grows wings**, since its memory always keeps it as close as possible to those realities by being close to which the gods are divine...He stands **outside human concerns and draws close to the divine**; ordinary people think he is disturbed and rebuke him for this, **unaware that he is possessed by god**.

Now this takes me to the whole point of my discussion of **the fourth kind of madness**-that which someone shows **when he sees the beauty** we have down here **and is reminded of true beauty**; then he takes wing and flutters in his eagerness to rise up, but is unable to do so; and he gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below- and that is what brings on him the charge that **he has gone mad**.” (*Phdr.* 249c-d)

This passage presents *erôs* as a form of divine madness that restructures the soul by illuminating three key aspects of its transformative power: (i) it reorients the soul's attention toward the divine by recalling its vision of true Beauty, (ii) it generates a deep existential tension between the earthly and transcendent realms, as the soul longs to ascend but remains partially earthbound, and (iii) it reconfigures the soul's internal hierarchy through the symbolic process of “growing wings,” which signifies the awakening and elevation of the rational part over the lower faculties.

First, *erôs* awakens the philosopher's soul to its latent memory of transcendent Beauty. The sight of earthly beauty stirs the soul, jolting it into recollection of its prenatal vision of true Beauty. This recollection is not merely an intellectual act but a profound reorientation of the soul's entire perceptual framework. Where once the soul was scattered by mundane concerns, *erôs* directs its focus upward, creating a divine focal point in the Beauty itself that reorganizes all psychic activity around the transcendent. The philosopher's mind “grows wings” because this reorientation activates dormant capacities for transcendence within the soul. It is for this reason that the philosopher is said to “stand outside human concerns and draw close to the divine”: the soul's center of gravity has shifted, transformed by its sustained orientation toward the eternal⁷⁶.

Second, *erôs* creates a deep existential tension within the soul, vividly illustrated by the arresting image of frantic wing-fluttering (*Phdr.* 249d5-8). This image, used to describe the soul's response to earthly beauty, captures the strain and instability that accompany its internal reorientation. The tension arises because each part of the soul reacts differently to the call of the divine: the appetitive part, bound to bodily pleasures, resists the upward pull; the spirited part vacillates between its worldly ambitions and the longing for transcendence; while the rational part recognizes the

⁷⁶Dominic Scott, “*Erôs*, Philosophy, and Tyranny,” in *Maieusis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Dominic Scott (2007, pp. 136-153), supports this view by emphasizing *erôs* as a transformative force that reorients the soul toward the contemplation of transcendent Beauty, activating its latent capacities for transcendence and divine insight.

madness as a divine summons and begins to assert greater influence over the soul as a whole.

Accordingly, when confronted with beauty, the erotic soul does not simply admire it; it undergoes a profound ontological disruption⁷⁷. Being “reminded of true beauty” initiates a psycho-spiritual crisis in which the soul “takes wing and flutters in its eagerness to rise up.” This fluttering symbolizes the dynamic tension among the soul’s three parts: the rational part strains upward, fixed on the eternal; the spirited part fluctuates, caught between resistance and aspiration; and the appetitive part remains anchored in earthly desires, preventing full ascent. The result is a state of suspended tension- neither entirely earthly nor fully transcendent- that gives rise to the appearance of madness. From the perspective of ordinary life, this restructured orientation appears irrational, yet it reflects the soul’s genuine movement toward the divine.

Third, *erôs* brings about the growth of wings, which signals a reordering of the soul and the emergence of a new mode of existence. The wings symbolize the development of new psychic capacities- not physical appendages, but metaphysical faculties of perception and ascent. Just as wings change a bird’s relationship to space, these psychic wings transform the soul’s orientation toward reality. The claim that “only a philosopher’s mind grows wings” emphasizes that *erôs* does not produce a temporary state of inspiration but initiates a lasting structural transformation of the soul. The soul becomes aerodynamic- its very form reconfigured for vertical movement toward the divine. At the same time, this new orientation alienates the soul from ordinary life, making it increasingly indifferent to worldly concerns and “paying no attention to what is down below.” Thus, the imagery of wings encapsulates both the soul’s elevation and its estrangement from the mundane, revealing the profound and permanent effect of *erôs* on the philosopher’s inner life.

Thus, the *Phaedrus* passage demonstrates that *erôs* does not merely introduce an additional desire into the soul; it fundamentally restructures the soul’s orientation and internal dynamics. By instilling a divine dissatisfaction- a longing for what truly “is” rather than what merely “appears”- *erôs* generates a permanent upward pull that reshapes the soul’s orientation. It does not simply layer divine longing onto an otherwise unchanged psyche, but rewires the soul’s fundamental architecture: its patterns of attention, its existential priorities, and its internal hierarchy of power. What appears as madness to ordinary observers is, in fact, the visible symptom of this deep restructuring- a process by which a soul once suited for earthly life is transformed for participation in the divine. The charge of madness becomes a diagnostic marker of successful transformation, a sign that the soul has been seized by a divine force powerful enough to alter its very structure and direction⁷⁸.

By contrast, *Republic IX* presents *erôs* at its most destructive. The tyrannical soul is governed by “lawless *erôs*” (573b)- an insatiable appetite that enslaves reason

⁷⁷The lover embodies the fundamental tension of *erôs*- caught between the eager desire to ascend toward the divine and the persistent pull of the embodied, fallen condition. Unlike the gods, who possess an unbroken, serene vision of the Forms, the human soul’s recollection is fraught with struggle and incompleteness. As Diotima explains in the *Symposium* (206e), this struggle manifests as a perpetual process of “birth in beauty,” a never-ending ascent rather than a final achievement. Each encounter with beauty reignites the soul’s yearning and strengthens its wings, drawing it upward, while simultaneously reminding it of the bodily weight that restrains it- its “oyster-like” imprisonment (*Phdr.* 250c). Thus, *erôs* is both the source of profound longing and the transformative power that channels that longing into continuous philosophical striving.

⁷⁸For the positive role of divine *mania* in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (249d2-3), see Rowe (2007, pp. 121-122) and Kraut (1992, pp. 93-94). Both authors interpret the soul’s apparent madness not as mere irrationality but as a divinely inspired ecstasy that elevates human reason toward transcendent truth.

and corrupts spirit into its accomplice. Rather than elevating the soul, this debased *erôs* disintegrates it: reason is reduced to a mere instrument for gratifying desire, and spirit becomes a violent enforcer of those cravings. The result is a soul in perpetual civil war, incapable of harmony because its ruling desire admits no limits.

In *Republic* IX (573a-580a), *erôs*, the very force that elevates the philosopher's soul, becomes the tyrant's undoing. Socrates explains that "when a master passion (*erôs*) takes hold of the reasoning part and runs wild... it seeks to dominate everything within" (573b). This "lawless *erôs*" overturns the soul's natural hierarchy, installing appetite as the tyrant. Reason, instead of governing desire, becomes "a slave to the continual eruptions of wild appetites" (573d), calculating how best to serve their demands. Spirit, which ought to support reason, is degraded into "a mercenary soldier for the satisfaction of base desires" (575a), enforcing appetite's rule through force and intimidation. This debased form of desire operates as a corrosive force that inverts the soul's proper hierarchy, creating not the divine madness of philosophical ascent but a pathological state of internal enslavement. Here, *erôs* manifests not as wings straining upward, but as chains dragging the soul downward into ever-deepening servitude to appetite.

The transformative consequences are systematic and catastrophic. Reason, which in the philosophical soul functions as the charioteer guiding the soul toward truth, is reduced to a mere technician of gratification (573d-574a); its capacity for judgment is not destroyed, but co-opted to devise increasingly sophisticated means of satisfying base desires. Spirit (*thumos*), the natural ally of reason in the pursuit of courage and honor, undergoes an even more disturbing degradation: no longer mediating between reason and appetite, it is repurposed as appetite's brutal enforcer. Its aggressive energy, instead of defending rational order, is redirected toward intimidation, domination, and the elimination of anything that stands in the way of pleasure.

The result is a soul in a state of perpetual insurrection. Where the erotic soul in *Phaedrus* experiences productive tension between earthly and divine, the tyrannical soul knows only destructive conflict between competing appetites⁷⁹. The soul is overwhelmed by "a swarm of pleasures and pains never experienced by others" (*Rep.* 574e), and is described as "filled full with much slavery and servitude" (*Rep.* 577d). Plato's description of the tyrant's endless, unsatisfied cravings (*Rep.* 578a-579e) exposes the paradox at the heart of this condition: the more completely *erôs* dominates the soul, the less capable it becomes of genuine satisfaction. Each gratification only inflames further desire, creating a feedback loop of escalating demands and diminishing returns. The famous image of the leaky jar from the *Gorgias* (493d-494a) finds its psychological counterpart here- a soul constitutionally incapable of harmony because its ruling principle is, by nature, insatiable.

In this portrait of the tyrannized soul, *erôs* functions not as a divine madness that elevates the soul, but as a corrosive force that inverts its proper hierarchy. Rather than generating the divine madness of philosophical ascent, it produces a pathological state of internal enslavement. Here, *erôs* manifests not as wings straining upward, but as chains dragging the soul downward into ever-deepening servitude to appetite.

The passages from the *Phaedrus* and *Republic* suggest Plato's warning about the dual potential of *erôs*. The same force that can restructure the soul toward the divine

⁷⁹Unlike the philosopher's soul, where *erôs* unites all parts toward the Good, the tyrant's soul is divided and chaotic: "there is no friendship nor communion between the parts" (*Rep.* 554d) and is "full of disorder and regret" (*Rep.* 577e). Socrates describes the tyrant as a slave to his desires, "the most incapable of satisfying his own desires" (*Rep.* 579d-e), trapped in internal conflict and dissatisfaction.

can also dismantle its architecture of virtue. Moreover, Plato implies that the soul's internal determination-its capacity to shape, govern, and unify itself- depends largely on how *erôs* is directed and integrated.

3.2.3 Beyond the Soul: The Body

Plato's approach to cultivating the body emphasizes disciplined regulation rather than rejection, aiming to prevent it from distracting or obstructing the soul's rational development. While the appetites and emotions rooted in sense perception can threaten the soul's pursuit of higher ends, Plato maintains that the body's proper cultivation is essential. This section begins by examining the ethical, educational, and lifestyle disciplines he proposes to minimize the body's disruptive influence. It then shows that Plato does not merely call for mastery over the body but also for cooperation with it, treating the body as a necessary ally in the soul's development. When properly trained, the body becomes a disciplined partner and a training ground for virtue. Finally, I turn to *erôs*, which plays a central role in this process by supplying the inner drive needed for the demanding task of bodily cultivation-something reason alone cannot accomplish. *Erôs* ignites the will, fortifies perseverance through hardship, and transforms the recognition of the good into sustained moral action.

In several dialogues, particularly the *Republic*, *Phaedo*, and *Timaeus*- Plato outlines concrete measures to limit the body's influence. I now turn to show that these measures fall into ethical, educational, and lifestyle disciplines aimed at cultivating moderation (*sōphrosynē*) and fostering the soul's development⁸⁰.

Moderation in food and drink is presented in *Republic* Book II (372e-373c) as a fundamental practice for cultivating a just and well-ordered soul. Plato describes a "healthy city" where citizens live on a simple diet of basic, natural foods like barley bread, olives, cheese, and moderate amounts of wine. This diet is intentional, reflecting Plato's philosophical commitment to *sōphrosynē* (moderation)- the idea that the soul flourishes when bodily desires are controlled and the body's needs are met without excess or indulgence.

Plato contrasts this balanced lifestyle with what he calls the "feverish" or "luxurious" city, which emerges when people reject simplicity and seek rich foods, elaborate meals, and bodily comfort. As their appetite for luxury grows, so does the need for specialized labor, trade, and eventually conquest. This leads to injustice both in the city and within the soul, as bodily pleasures, once kept under reason's control, begin to dominate, stirring excessive desire and disrupting the soul's harmony.

This focus on moderation reveals Plato's deep psychological insight: unchecked bodily indulgence causes inner conflict, undermines rational self-control, and distracts the soul from its pursuit of truth and the Good. Thus, moderation in food and drink is

⁸⁰ *Sōphrosynē*, often translated as moderation, temperance, or self-control, is a cardinal virtue in Plato's moral psychology. It denotes a harmonious ordering of the soul in which the rational part governs the appetitive desires, resulting in inner balance and self-mastery. In the *Republic* (430e-432a), it is characterized as agreement between the rational and non-rational parts of the soul about who should rule, while in dialogues like the *Charmides* and *Phaedo*, it is closely tied to self-knowledge and the restraint of bodily impulses.

not merely about physical health but serves as a crucial discipline that protects the soul from being overwhelmed by bodily appetites.

Physical training is presented in *Republic* Book III (410b-412a) as a means of cultivating a balanced and harmonious soul. Plato emphasizes that physical exercise must be carefully moderated and always combined with musical and intellectual education⁸¹. While developing the body is important, it must never overshadow or dominate the cultivation of the soul. Excessive focus on physical strength and endurance risks hardening the soul, making it less open to reason and wisdom. A body trained too harshly can encourage aggression or base instincts that pull the individual away from rational control. On the other hand, neglecting the body weakens it, leaving it unable to support the soul's higher functions. A weak or unhealthy body can become a source of distraction or suffering, undermining one's ability to engage in thoughtful reflection. Therefore, Plato advocates a balanced regimen where physical training strengthens the body just enough to serve the soul effectively, without inflaming passions or dulling the intellect.

The *Timaeus* (87c-90d) develops the theme of bodily discipline through a therapeutic framework, presenting self-restraint in explicitly medical terms⁸². He likens the philosopher's task to that of a physician who carefully balances the body's humors to restore physical health. Similarly, the philosopher must apply measured disciplines to reestablish harmony between soul and body, ensuring that the body functions as a well-crafted instrument that supports the soul's higher pursuits.

It seems clear to me that *Timaeus* (87c-90d) presents the therapeutic process as involving three interrelated practices. First, sensory input must be regulated to prevent distortions in perception and disruptions in thought, since unchecked sensory stimulation can cloud the mind and divert attention from the truth. Second, desires and appetites require disciplined training to preserve the soul's unity and maintain its orientation toward the Good, avoiding fragmentation caused by conflicting impulses. Third, cultivating healthy physical habits ensures that the body acts as a reliable support rather than a source of distraction or disorder, enabling the soul to pursue rational contemplation effectively.

The aim is not to suppress or destroy bodily impulses but to educate and redirect them. Plato's medical analogy emphasizes healing and balance rather than outright denial of the body, portraying bodily discipline as a form of care that enables the soul to fulfill its rational and philosophical vocation. Through this therapeutic model, the body and soul are harmonized, allowing the individual to pursue wisdom without being overwhelmed by corporeal desires or dysfunction.

Systematic discipline of the body is essential for its proper cultivation. Whether through dietary, physical, or therapeutic measures, all efforts share the goal of subordinating the body to the soul, preventing it from becoming a source of

⁸¹Plato holds that true flourishing requires harmony between body and soul. In *Republic* 401d-403c, he argues that *mousikē* (intellectual and moral education) and *gymnastikē* (bodily training) must be balanced and guided by reason. Without this integration, the body or soul can become disordered. Proper discipline allows the body to support the soul's rational aims, enabling justice, moderation (*sōphrosynē*), and the Good. This view is supported by Reid and Mouratidis (2020, pp. 15-30), who highlight the ethical harmony Plato seeks through combined physical and intellectual education.

⁸²The *Timaeus* presents the body as a carefully crafted instrument whose proper functioning supports the soul's higher work. Digestive processes, sleep cycles, and even physical exercise (as noted in the *Republic*'s guardian training) must be regulated to maintain the somatic stability required for contemplation.

distraction and corruption⁸³. This discipline is not simply self-denial; rather, it restrains the body's chaotic tendencies while strengthening its capacity for order. When well governed, the body becomes, as described in the *Laws* (716d), "a temple for the divine"- not by denying its nature, but by perfecting its role as the soul's instrument. This careful balance between restraint and fulfillment captures Plato's enduring insight into embodied rationality, where harmony between body and soul makes possible the pursuit of the highest good.

Moreover, beyond merely limiting the body, Plato emphasizes the importance of cooperating with and mastering it as the foundation for justice, enabling the soul's ascent toward philosophical understanding. The body serves as a crucial training ground for virtue and plays a central role in achieving harmony between soul and body. In the *Republic*, virtues such as temperance (*sōphrosynē*) and courage (*andreia*) are not abstract, purely intellectual ideals; rather, they arise directly from the soul's active engagement with, and regulation of, bodily impulses and experiences. Temperance involves the rational part of the soul moderating desires for pleasure, food, and comfort in accordance with reason's guidance. Similarly, courage is cultivated when the spirited part (*thumos*) stands firm against fear and pain, especially in situations where bodily preservation is at risk. Plato presents these virtues as deeply connected to the dynamic relationship between soul and body⁸⁴.

This suggests that bodily discipline provides the essential practical framework within which self-mastery is cultivated. In the *Republic*, Plato articulates this through the concept of the tripartite soul, which must achieve a state of internal harmony: reason must govern, spiritedness (*thumos*) must support reason's rule, and appetite must be restrained (*Rep.* 441e-442c). This hierarchy is not a mere abstract ideal but a lived reality that requires continuous effort and practice involving the body. The soul's capacity to master itself is inseparable from its ability to regulate bodily desires and impulses; through disciplined engagement with the body- such as controlling appetites and enduring pain or fear- the soul trains itself to uphold justice within. This embodied self-mastery forms the foundation of the individual's internal justice and establishes the conditions necessary for the soul's ascent toward philosophical understanding, in which reason may contemplate higher truths unimpeded by bodily distractions. Bodily discipline, therefore, is not an obstacle to philosophy but a necessary preparatory stage in the soul's development.

Thus, as I have shown, Plato's treatment of the body serves two fundamental purposes. First, it acts as a safeguard, preventing the body from obstructing the soul's ascent toward knowledge and wisdom. Second, it transforms the body into an active instrument of virtue rather than a source of disorder. By exercising measured restraint over bodily appetites and deliberately cultivating disciplined habits, the individual creates the necessary harmony between soul and body that allows for the genuine

⁸³For detailed analyses of Plato's view that bodily discipline is essential to subordinating the body to the soul, preventing corruption, and fostering harmony, see Fine (2003), pp. 119-121; Annas (1981), pp. 100-105.

⁸⁴Plato's *Republic*, especially Books IV and VI, develops the soul's regulation of bodily impulses and the virtues of temperance (*sōphrosynē*) and courage (*andreia*). In Book IV, he outlines the tripartite soul- rational, spirited (*thumos*), and appetitive- and shows how justice and virtues arise from their harmony. Temperance is the rational part's moderation over desires tied to bodily pleasures, while courage is the spirited part's steadfastness in overcoming fear and pain, often linked to bodily survival. Book VI details the philosopher's ascent from bodily distractions to intellectual clarity, highlighting the soul's ability to transcend bodily influences through reason. Key passages include the discussion of temperance (433d-434c), courage (430b-436e), the soul's harmony (441d-445e), and the philosophical ascent (486a-490a).

pursuit of wisdom. This disciplined relationship with the body is not about rejecting bodily existence but about refining and ordering it. Through this process, the body becomes a well-ordered vessel, capable of receiving and responding to truth. Ultimately, such bodily discipline enables the soul's gradual alignment with, and participation in, the Good, which Plato regards as the highest aim of life. The body is thus essential- not as a hindrance to be discarded- but as a partner in the soul's journey toward philosophical understanding and moral excellence.

Why is *erôs* crucial in the cultivation of the body? Primarily because disciplining bodily appetites is a difficult and arduous task, one in which mere intellectual understanding is insufficient. Knowing that moderation is good or that justice is noble does not, on its own, compel action- especially when such action requires denying immediate pleasures, enduring hardship, or confronting one's own weaknesses.

This insight reflects Plato's deep understanding of human psychology and the limitations of reason alone. He sees the body as an inherently unruly force- a source of insatiable appetites and distractions that constantly threaten to pull the soul away from virtue and wisdom. In the *Phaedo* (66b-67b), Socrates describes the body as "full of desires," "loves," and "fears," which disturb the soul and hinder it from attaining truth. He warns that those who are too attached to bodily pleasures become "enamored of the body and its desires," thereby binding the soul to the realm of change and illusion. Even if one intellectually acknowledges the need for temperance, the pull of the body can overpower reason. As Socrates observes in the *Laws* (863e-864b), "the majority of people are unable to resist pleasures and pains," and he emphasizes that education must aim not merely at knowledge but at cultivating a love for order and self-mastery.

This is why I argue that *erôs* is indispensable. In Plato's philosophy, the arduous task of disciplining bodily appetites and cultivating virtue cannot be sustained by reason alone. Intellectual recognition of the good- knowing, for instance, that moderation is healthy or that justice is noble- lacks the necessary power to overcome the inertia of habit, the resistance of base desires, and the temptation of immediate pleasures. The soul, as Plato depicts it, is not a purely rational entity but a dynamic interplay of competing forces: appetite (*epithumia*), spirit (*thumos*), and reason (*logos*). While reason may recognize what is right, it often lacks the power to enforce its judgments upon the appetitive part of the soul, which is driven by immediate pleasures and bodily desires. The lower impulses resist rational control, and knowledge by itself cannot overcome their force. What is needed is a power that can bridge the gap between recognizing the good and actually striving toward it- a force that can ignite the will, sustain effort through hardship, and transform moral aspiration into concrete action. That force is *erôs*.

It is *erôs*, with its intense longing and affective force, that provides the necessary inner drive for this struggle. Unlike mere reasoning, *erôs* moves the whole soul. Plato's conception of *erôs* is far richer than mere sexual desire or fleeting attraction. It awakens longing, reorients desire, and lends emotional weight to rational insight⁸⁵. In the *Symposium*, Diotima teaches that *erôs* is a daemonic intermediary, a yearning for possession of the good and the beautiful that propels the soul upward from base

⁸⁵Plato's conception of *erôs* extends far beyond sexual desire, encompassing the soul's aspiration for beauty, truth, and the Good. It is a dynamic, transformative force that elevates the soul from bodily attraction to philosophical understanding. See Vlastos (1981), pp. 17-25; Nehamas (1999), pp. 45-50; Nussbaum (1986), pp. 165-199; Gordon (2012), p. 254; Kraut (1992), pp. 279-284.

physical impulses toward higher realities. It is this longing- this divine discontent- that makes the labor of self-mastery meaningful. Without *erôs*, the pursuit of virtue remains an abstract ideal, a cold and lifeless dictate of reason. But when the soul is inflamed with love for the good, the sacrifices demanded by discipline- renouncing gluttony, enduring physical training, resisting laziness- are no longer experienced as mere deprivations. Instead, they become acts of devotion, steps in an ascent toward something greater. The lover of wisdom does not abstain from excess out of grim obligation, but because his desire for harmony and beauty reshapes his very relationship to pleasure.

Similarly, in the *Phaedrus* (246a-249d), Plato's chariot allegory illustrates how *erôs* empowers reason by enlisting *thumos*- the spirited part of the soul- as its ally. Socrates describes the soul as a chariot drawn by two horses: one noble and obedient to reason, the other unruly and driven by appetite. The charioteer, representing reason, must struggle to control these opposing forces. Without the divine madness of *erôs*, however, the soul remains earthbound, trapped in cyclical patterns of desire and gratification. Only when it is struck by the beauty of the beloved- or, at a higher level, by the radiance of truth itself- is the soul jolted into motion, its wings regenerated through the heat of longing. The pain of discipline is thus not an end in itself, but a necessary purification- a burning away of lesser attachments so that the soul may ascend. When *erôs* inspires the soul, even hardship becomes meaningful, and endurance is no longer mere self-denial but a sacred labor of love.

Ultimately, Plato's view suggests that the body is not an enemy to be conquered through sheer will, but a medium through which the soul learns to govern desire and direct it toward the good⁸⁶. The body, with all its appetites and impulses, becomes a site of education and transformation- not through denial alone, but through the redirection of its energies. It is *erôs* that makes this redirection possible, for it does not simply suppress appetite; rather, it elevates and refines it. The power of *erôs* lies in its capacity to take the raw, unruly force of bodily longing and reorient it toward higher ends- toward beauty, harmony, and ultimately truth.

In this light, bodily discipline is not a rejection of desire but its reconfiguration. Discipline without *erôs* risks becoming a cold, joyless austerity- a battle of repression that cannot be sustained. But when animated by *erôs*, even the most demanding practices of self-restraint become meaningful. They are no longer acts of mere denial but expressions of love- love for the beautiful, for the noble, for what transcends the self. Under the guidance of *erôs*, the soul does not simply endure suffering but embraces it as part of a sacred ascent, where the pain of discipline becomes the price of transformation. In this way, *erôs* turns bodily struggle into spiritual progress and makes philosophy not a flight from the body, but a journey through it toward the divine.

In this way, *erôs* answers a fundamental question of moral motivation: "Why bother?" Why endure the struggle of self-overcoming when the path of least resistance offers immediate satisfaction? Because *erôs* makes the good not just an object of understanding, but of desire- an all-consuming pull that reorders the soul's priorities. In the *Republic*, this is why the philosopher-kings must be erotic souls: only those who love wisdom with a lover's passion will have the strength to turn away from the cave of illusions and ascend toward the light. Mere knowledge of the Forms

⁸⁶Modern scholars emphasize the transformative nature of *erôs* in Plato as a force guiding the soul from bodily desire toward intellectual and divine fulfillment. See Gordon (2012), p. 254; Burnyeat (1980), pp. 7-10; Nehamas (1999), pp. 45-50; Slings (1982), pp. 70-74; Ahbel-Rappe (1996), pp. 22-27.

would not suffice; it is the lover's relentless pursuit of beauty, truth, and justice that fuels the journey. Thus, for Plato, *erôs* is the fire that forges virtue, the divine spark that makes the difficult work of self-cultivation not only possible, but glorious.

The key claim of this section is not merely that reason alone is insufficient to motivate bodily discipline, but that *erôs* is uniquely capable of bridging the gap between recognizing the good and actively striving toward it. This is not a claim of broad exclusivity regarding other affective states; rather, it is an argument for the particular suitability of *erôs* as the potent desire capable of integrating bodily, cognitive, and affective dimensions of motivation in the pursuit of the good.

Reason alone, conceived as the cognitive apprehension of the good, cannot compel the body to act in accordance with that apprehension. An agent may intellectually recognize what is good, yet such recognition, by itself, fails to generate the affective energy necessary to overcome entrenched bodily appetites or habitual tendencies. This limitation underscores the need for a desire-like state capable of translating knowledge into sustained action.

Erôs, as conceived within the Platonic framework, is uniquely future-oriented and teleologically structured. It inherently aspires to the wholly good and integrates both cognitive recognition and affective investment, generating a unifying motivational force that aligns bodily and psychic energies with the pursuit of what is intelligibly desirable. Unlike other aspirational states, *erôs* is constitutively directed toward that which is ultimately fulfilling and thus functions as the essential bridge between knowing the good and acting upon it.

Crucially, in my reading, other affective states in Plato's account cannot fulfill this comprehensive motivational role. Plato does not treat typical affective states such as curiosity, care, concern, or courage as distinct psychological kinds in the modern sense, though he addresses related phenomena under different conceptual frameworks. What resembles modern "curiosity" is the desire to know (*epithumia tou eidenai, philosophia*), consistently subsumed under *erôs*: the philosopher's pursuit of knowledge is erotic, driven by lack, and oriented toward the good and intelligible (*Symp.* 204b-206a; *Rep.* 475b-480a). Wonder (*thaumazein*) initiates philosophical inquiry (*Theaet.* 155d) but does not function as a sustained motivational state. Care (*epimeleia*), especially the care of the soul (*Apol.* 29d-30b), denotes a normative commitment rather than an emotion. Concern, understood as practical attentiveness or worry about bodily or external goods, appears in everyday contexts, such as the Cephalus passage (*Rep.* 330d-331b), but does not operate as a sustained affective principle structuring the soul's motivation. Courage (*andreia*), finally, is a virtue, not an affective state: it consists in the stable preservation of correct beliefs about what is to be feared and is located in the spirited part (*thumos*; *Lach. passim*; *Rep.* 429a-430c). None of these states independently organize the soul's motivational structure as *erôs* does.

Plato engages with these phenomena either by subsuming them under broader structures, most notably *erôs*, or by construing them as virtues, dispositions, or normative orientations rather than as affective states. This reinforces the view that *erôs* alone occupies a comprehensive psychological role, capable of integrating desire, judgment, and character over time.

3.2.4 Beyond the Soul: The Other Person

This section examines the role of the other in self-formation and explains why *erôs* is essential to this process. Drawing on Plato, I show that self-knowledge is not achieved in isolation but is awakened through philosophical dialogue. The other serves as a mirror, revealing hidden contradictions- such as unexamined prejudices, inflated self-conceptions, or logical inconsistencies- by offering a perspective that challenges and deepens self-understanding. This awakening is inspired by *erôs*, reflecting Plato's broader epistemological claim that true education is not the mere transmission of knowledge but a shared, dialectical process of awakening. I also clarify a key qualification in Plato's insight: not all interpersonal relationships support self-cultivation, and some can actively hinder philosophical progress.

For Plato, the role of the other person in self-cultivation is essential, primarily because human beings are inherently limited in their capacity for self-reflection.

True self-knowledge, Plato insists, cannot be achieved in isolation- a claim grounded in a profound epistemological and psychological insight: the soul, in attempting to know itself, faces an internal limitation, much like the eye's inability to see itself directly⁸⁷. In the *Phaedrus* (229e-230a), Socrates critiques solitary contemplation as inadequate for self-understanding, comparing those who investigate myths or themselves without dialectical engagement to people groping in the dark. Without the presence of another to question and challenge, they lack the critical friction needed to test and refine their assumptions. The Delphic imperative "know thyself" thus becomes, for Plato, not a call to mere introspection but a summons to dialogue. It is only through encountering another's perspective that one's hidden contradictions- such as unexamined prejudices, inflated self-conceptions, or logical incoherencies- can surface. This confrontation provokes *aporia* (perplexity), a disoriented but fertile state that drives the soul toward deeper self-examination and genuine philosophical inquiry.

This relational dynamic is further crystallized in the *Alcibiades* (esp. 132d-133c), where Socrates deploys the metaphor of the eye and the mirror: just as an eye sees its own reflection only by gazing into another eye- the pupil becoming a mirror- the soul must gaze into another soul to recognize its nature. The "other" here functions as an ontological mirror, reflecting virtues and flaws the self cannot perceive directly. Without this reflective surface, the soul remains trapped in subjective illusion, mistaking its own shadows for substance. For instance, Alcibiades' initial arrogance dissolves only through Socrates' probing questions, revealing his ignorance of justice and governance. Thus, the other person is not merely helpful but necessary to disrupt self-deception, as isolation breeds epistemic blindness. Plato implies that the unmirrored soul, like the unexamined eye, is condemned to ignorance of its own essence.

This framework reveals why Plato's dialectical method- rooted in communal interrogation- replaces solitary meditation as the path to wisdom. The other person becomes the catalyst for awakening the soul to its latent truths and limitations.

⁸⁷Here I do not mean to suggest that Plato questions reason's unique capacity to grasp the Forms; rather, his claim is that the soul's self-knowledge cannot be achieved in isolation. Like the eye that sees itself only by looking into another eye or reflective surface, the soul requires another rational soul as a mirror to recognize its own nature (cf. *Alcibiades* I 132d-133a; *Republic* 508b-509c).

Furthermore, Plato's epistemology shows why knowledge requires the presence of another person, particularly through his account of learning as recollection (*anamnēsis*), which is typically awakened through dialectical interaction. Learning is not passive absorption of new facts but the "reawakening of what the soul already knows."⁸⁸ According to the theory of *anamnēsis*, the soul, prior to its embodiment, beheld the eternal Forms- the pure, unchanging essences of Truth, Justice, Beauty, and other absolutes. Although incarnation causes the soul to forget this knowledge, it is not destroyed but merely obscured.

Yet here lies the paradox: if truth is already within us, why can't we access it alone? Plato's answer is decisive: the soul's buried wisdom requires an external spark to reignite it. No matter how deep, introspection alone is insufficient, because the mind- when isolated- tends to revolve endlessly within its own assumptions, reinforcing rather than challenging them. Without confrontation from the outside, the soul remains enclosed in its own illusions, mistaking familiarity for understanding.

True recollection, therefore, occurs only in dialogue, where another person's questions disrupt this circularity and force the soul into self-examination. The interlocutor functions as a midwife, drawing forth hidden insights through tension, contradiction, and challenge. This is not a merely pedagogical technique but a metaphysical necessity: for Plato, knowledge cannot be recovered unless the soul is stirred from dormancy by something- or someone- beyond itself. It is only through this encounter with another mind that the soul is compelled to remember, to clarify, and ultimately to ascend toward the truth.

The *Meno* (82b-86c) offers Plato's clearest demonstration of his theory of recollection. In this dialogue, Socrates engages an untutored slave boy in a series of questions, guiding him- through dialectic alone- to discover how to double the area of a square. The boy is never taught in the conventional sense; instead, Socrates' probing questions unlock what is already latent within him⁸⁹. Step by step, the boy's false assumptions are exposed, his reasoning is refined, and his intuitive grasp of the solution gradually emerges. He does not receive new information, but rather "remembers" the truth through a process of guided recollection.

This moment crystallizes Plato's conviction that knowledge is not implanted from without, but elicited from within, and that such elicitation depends entirely on the presence of another who can provoke the soul into recollection. As Socrates remarks at *Meno* 85c, the boy "only had to be asked questions in order to learn for himself." Thus, the dialogue exemplifies Plato's broader epistemological claim: that true education is not a matter of transmission but of awakening, and that this awakening can only occur through shared, dialectical engagement.

The implications are profound. If genuine learning is recollection, then the teacher's role is not to transmit information but to provoke the soul's latent memory. The learner, in turn, cannot achieve understanding in isolation; the mind requires the friction of dialogue to break free from forgetfulness. Without the external stimulus of another's questions, the soul's knowledge remains buried, like a spark smothered beneath ash. Thus, for Plato, the other person is not merely an aid to education but its very catalyst- the necessary mirror in which the soul's obscured truths are revealed

⁸⁸*Men.* 82b-85b; *Phd.* 73a-77a; *Phdr.* 276e-277a.

⁸⁹In *Meno* 82b-86c, Socrates demonstrates that even an uneducated slave boy can grasp fundamental geometric truths through persistent, guided questioning. Although the boy has no formal training, he reaches the correct conclusion- not because Socrates imparts knowledge directly, but because the dialectical method forces him to recognize and correct his own mistakes, thereby eliciting knowledge latent within his soul. This illustrates Plato's belief that learning is a process of recollecting innate truths rather than acquiring new information.

and revived.

Thus, for Plato, the other person is not just a helper in education but the necessary condition for it. Real understanding emerges only when one mind, through dialectic, stirs another to awaken its own innate light. Truth is not a private possession but a shared discovery, emerging through the collaborative labor of minds in conversation. The solitary thinker, no matter how brilliant, risks stagnation without the challenge and clarification that only another can provide. In this way, Plato's theory of recollection does not diminish the importance of others but elevates it, making interpersonal engagement the indispensable means by which the soul reclaims its forgotten wisdom.

Erôs (love or desire) plays a transformative role in self-cultivation through the presence of another person, embodying Plato's profound insight into how human desire drives our capacity for self-transformation through relationships. In Platonic thought, love is not merely an emotion but a philosophical force that operates on multiple, interconnected levels. It reveals why meaningful engagement with another person is essential for the soul's ascent toward wisdom, virtue, and ultimately, the contemplation of the Forms.

At its most fundamental level, *erôs* functions as the soul's awakening mechanism. In the *Symposium*, through Diotima's speech (202d-204c, 210a-212a), Plato explains how our attraction to physical beauty in another person contains the seed of philosophical insight. Encountering beauty in a beloved does more than please the senses; it stirs a deeper memory within us- a recollection of the absolute Beauty our souls once knew before embodiment. The beloved person- whether a beautiful youth, as in the Athenian homoerotic tradition, or a wise philosophical guide- serves as the indispensable spark that ignites this transformative ascent. By loving another's beauty, the lover is compelled to recognize that such beauty is not unique to the individual but a reflection of a higher, universal principle. This realization marks a turning point: the lover begins to ascend Diotima's "ladder of love," progressing from love of one body, to all bodies, to the beauty of souls, customs, and laws, and finally to the vision of Beauty itself- the eternal, unchanging Form that grounds all particular beauties (210a-212a).

Throughout this ascent, the other person becomes a "living mirror" of the divine, a presence that awakens the soul from its ordinary attachments and draws it toward philosophical contemplation. Without this encounter, the soul remains earthbound, absorbed in appearances. Through *erôs*- and the beloved who embodies it- the soul is pulled out of its complacency and set on the path toward wisdom, immortality, and the divine.

This erotic awakening necessarily involves a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between self and other. Unlike the solitary mystic's pursuit of enlightenment, Platonic self-cultivation depends fundamentally on the presence of another consciousness⁹⁰.

⁹⁰Erotic desire (in Plato's philosophy) functions not merely as personal longing but as a transformative force that calls the soul beyond itself through recognition and relational interplay. This relational dimension is foundational to the erotic as a path toward self-realization and philosophical ascent, highlighting the soul's dependency on the Other to awaken and actualize its higher potential. In stark contrast, the solitary mystic's pursuit of enlightenment privileges a withdrawn, introspective path aimed at direct, unmediated union with the divine or ultimate reality—often achieved through solitary contemplation, self-purification, and inner transformation without recourse to external relational engagement. While both paths seek transcendence and spiritual fulfillment, the erotic emphasizes intersubjectivity as essential for awakening and growth, whereas the mystic centers on solitude and inward communion. For detailed treatments of the solitary mystic's inward journey and its experiential union with the divine, see Corrigan (1996); Stace (1960); Underhill (1911, *esp.* pp. 163-136); Forman (1990); and James

Plato develops this insight most vividly in the *Phaedrus*, where the lover-beloved relationship is portrayed as a mutual process of transformation.

In the *Phaedrus* (250a-257b), the lover, inspired by divine madness (*theia mania*), perceives in the beloved qualities that transcend the individual and point toward eternal truths. This vision of the beloved as a living symbol of higher realities awakens the lover's soul, igniting a desire not only for physical beauty but for spiritual and intellectual growth. At the same time, the beloved, by being loved in this philosophical way, is encouraged to recognize and cultivate virtues that the lover perceives but the beloved may not yet fully realize.

This reciprocal dynamic establishes a shared journey of self-cultivation: each person serves as both mirror and midwife to the other's soul. Through loving and being loved, both are elevated beyond their original capacities- moving closer to the ideal of the philosopher who seeks wisdom not in isolation but in relationship. For Plato, this interplay between self and other is essential; it is through the encounter with another that the soul awakens, is challenged, and ultimately transformed. Without the other, the soul's ascent toward truth and virtue remains incomplete, trapped within the confines of its own limited perspective.

In both the *Lysis* and the *Republic*, Plato presents friendship and political association not as peripheral aspects of human life, but as essential contexts for self-cultivation. In the *Lysis* (212a-221d), Plato explores the nature of friendship (*philia*), ultimately suggesting that true friendship arises between those who are neither completely good nor wholly bad, but in between- those who desire the Good because they lack it. This shared desire for the Good binds friends together, making the relationship a site of mutual striving toward virtue. A true friend, in this Platonic sense, does not merely gratify personal needs but acts as a mirror to the soul, revealing its condition and helping direct it toward what is best.

This vision of relational self-formation is deepened in the *Republic*, especially in Books VI and VII. There, Plato outlines the education of the philosopher and the difficult ascent of the soul from the cave of ignorance to the light of truth. In Book VII (514a-521b), the allegory of the cave dramatizes how individuals must be "freed" from illusion by others and gradually turned toward the Good. The ascent is not a solitary journey; rather, it is guided by those who have already begun to see the light. In Book VI (502c-511d), Plato describes how education relies on the turning of the whole soul, an effort requiring teachers who draw the student out of the realm of opinion into dialectical understanding.

Together, whether in the lover-beloved dynamic of the *Phaedrus*, the ladder of love in the *Symposium*, or the friendships of the *Lysis* and the educational relationships in the *Republic*, Plato consistently shows that human connection is essential to self-knowledge and the soul's ascent toward the Good. Self-cultivation is never a purely internal process; the soul requires others- friends, teachers, and fellow citizens- to become fully itself. Through the intimacy of friendship and the broader context of political and educational institutions, human relationships inspired by *erôs* are the indispensable medium through which the soul turns toward truth and the Good.

Notably, Plato's profound insight about the necessity of others in self-cultivation comes with a crucial qualification: not all interpersonal relationships are equally beneficial, and some can actively hinder philosophical progress. This warning permeates his works, forming a counterbalance to his celebration of dialectical and

(1902). These scholars explore the nature of solitude, self-purification, and direct mystical experience as essential to the mystic's path across diverse traditions.

erotic relationships. In the *Republic* (492a-493d, 557a-562a), Plato presents a scathing critique of democratic society, where the “crowd” operates as a corrupting influence, reinforcing base appetites and superficial values. The democratic soul, pulled in countless directions by shifting popular opinion, becomes fragmented and disordered, mistaking license for freedom and pleasure for goodness⁹¹. Similarly, in the *Gorgias* (452a-466c, 484a-488a, and 513c-515b), Plato contrasts Socratic dialogue with the empty flattery of rhetoricians like Gorgias and Callicles, who pander to audiences rather than challenge them to pursue truth. These counterfeit educators strengthen illusions rather than dispel them, making the soul more resistant to genuine philosophical transformation.

The danger lies in how easily these relationships can masquerade as beneficial while actually reinforcing our worst tendencies. The crowd appeals to our desire for approval, the rhetorician to our intellectual vanity, and both cater to our existing prejudices rather than helping us transcend them⁹². Plato’s analogy of the cave is particularly relevant here- most social interactions keep us chained to illusions, with the “others” in our lives serving as fellow prisoners who can only confirm our shared misconceptions rather than liberate us from them. This explains why Socrates so carefully selects his interlocutors, preferring those like Glaucon or Phaedrus who show philosophical potential over those like Thrasymachus or Callicles who are entrenched in cynical worldviews⁹³.

For Plato, the solution lies in discerning association with truly philosophical others- those rare individuals whose own orientation toward the Good allows them to serve as reliable mirrors and guides. These are not merely knowledgeable people, but those whose entire way of life embodies philosophical pursuit. In the *Seventh Letter* (340b-341a), Plato emphasizes that understanding comes through long-term companionship with the subject matter and with those already on the path to wisdom. The worthy interlocutor must combine intellectual rigor with moral integrity, able to both provoke thought through sharp questioning and inspire through lived example. This explains the intense educational system of the *Republic* (500b-d), where future philosopher-kings are carefully nurtured in community with other truth-seekers under the guidance of wise mentors.

What makes this caveat so essential is its psychological realism. Plato recognizes that we become like those with whom we associate, absorbing their values and patterns of thought often unconsciously. The wrong kind of relationships don't just fail to help us - they actively deform our souls by reinforcing our lower nature. This is why the transition from the cave of ordinary society to philosophical enlightenment is

⁹¹In the *Republic* (around 557a-564a), Plato critiques democracy as a system where freedom leads to instability and fragmentation of the self. In Book VIII, he describes how democracy arises when the poor gain power and grant equal rights, with offices assigned by lot. This excessive liberty turns individuals into “chameleons,” swayed by popular opinion. While seemingly diverse and free, democracy’s erosion of authority allows demagogues to exploit the masses, risking chaos and the rise of tyranny.

⁹²In *Phaedo* (89d-91c), Plato warns against misology, the hatred of reason, that arises from repeated exposure to poor or fallacious arguments. Associating with such bad dialecticians risks poisoning the soul, causing individuals to reject rational inquiry altogether, which undermines true self-cultivation. Similarly, in *Protagoras* (312d-314c), Plato depicts Sophists as purveyors of “psychological junk food,” offering empty, attractive rhetoric that lacks genuine nourishment for the soul. Unlike true philosophers who lead the soul toward wisdom, these Sophists cater to shallow desires, perpetuating ignorance and illusion instead of fostering authentic self-development.

⁹³This idea recurs across several dialogues, most clearly in the *Republic*, where Socrates deliberately engages with interlocutors open to philosophical inquiry, such as Glaucon in Book II and Phaedrus in the *Phaedrus* dialogue. In contrast, characters like Thrasymachus (*Republic* Book I) and Callicles (*Gorgias* 482a-484b) embody more cynical, sophistic, or purely rhetorical approaches. While Socrates challenges their views vigorously, he does not regard them as suitable partners for authentic philosophical dialogue, as their perspectives often resist the pursuit of truth and genuine self-examination.

portrayed as so difficult in the *Republic*- it requires not just intellectual effort but radical reorientation of one's entire social world. The true measure of a relationship's value, for Plato, lies in whether it draws us toward the Good or keeps us mired in illusion, whether it awakens our philosophical *erôs* or merely gratifies the soul's attachment to pleasure. Thus the other person's role in self-cultivation is indeed essential, but only when that other is themselves oriented toward truth and virtue in a way that can reliably reflect and evoke these qualities in ourselves.

Scholarly discussions of *erôs* and self-cultivation through the other person focus on two central questions: first, whether the other person is essential or indispensable to the process of self-formation; and second, if the presence of another is indeed necessary, whether it functions merely as a provisional or temporarily instrumental means to a more abstract philosophical end⁹⁴.

The first question, whether the other person is essential or indispensable to self-formation, has been addressed by me above. I argue that the other person plays a constitutive role in the formation of the self, rather than serving as a mere external influence or optional aid. Self-cultivation through *erôs* unfolds within and through the relationship with another, making the presence of the other not only necessary but integral to the very structure of self-becoming. The self does not emerge in isolation but is shaped, challenged, and transformed in response to the other's presence.

Now I will turn to the second question: if the presence of another is necessary, does it serve merely as a provisional or temporarily instrumental step toward a more abstract philosophical goal? This question concerns the "function" of the other person in the process of self-cultivation through *erôs*. While my previous view affirms the indispensability of the other in self-formation, this question probes whether that necessity endures throughout the process or is ultimately transcended as the self moves toward more universal or abstract ideals.

Scholars are divided on this issue. Some, particularly in interpretations of Plato's *Symposium*, argue that the beloved serves merely as a temporary means for the lover's ascent toward the Form of Beauty. The key passage cited in support of this view is Diotima's speech (209c-212a), where love is described as a gradual progression: beginning with attraction to a single beautiful body, then extending to all beautiful bodies, then to beautiful souls, customs, and finally to the Form of Beauty itself. This ascending structure has led many scholars to interpret the beloved as instrumental- a necessary starting point that is ultimately left behind as the lover moves toward abstract philosophical contemplation. According to this view, particular relationships are valued not for their intrinsic qualities but for their role in leading the lover to higher philosophical ideals.

Gabriela Roxana Carone, in her essay "The Virtues of Platonic Love," discusses this interpretation⁹⁵. She notes that Diotima's account suggests a shift in focus- away from attachment to particular individuals and toward an abstract, philosophical appreciation of beauty. Carone acknowledges that this ascent could be seen as portraying the beloved as a mere stepping stone in the lover's philosophical journey

⁹⁴For discussions on the constitutive role of the other in self-formation through *erôs*, see Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (1990, pp. 23-45; Robert Solomon, *About Love: Reinventing Romance for Our Times* (1988, pp. 101-120); Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (2002, pp. 150-170). For a more general analysis of the role of the other in shaping the self, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (1989, pp. 29-52); Jessica Moss, *Being, Relating, Becoming: An Existential Theory of Identity* (2014, pp. 75-90).

⁹⁵This essay is in *Plato's Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, edited by J. Leshner, D. Nails, and F. Sheffield, 2008, pp. 208-234.

(pp. 220-222). This interpretation aligns with a broader scholarly perspective that sees Diotima's speech as advocating detachment from the particular in favor of the universal.⁹⁶

Similarly to Carone, Julia Annas offers a more developmental interpretation⁹⁷. She maintains that relationships with others- particularly in the context of *erôs*- are crucial in the early stages of moral and philosophical formation. Through these relationships, individuals develop emotional insight, ethical sensitivity, and the drive for self-betterment. However, once a certain level of philosophical maturity is reached, the particular relationship is no longer necessary. For Annas, as for Carone, the beloved plays an important formative role, but is ultimately left behind as the self advances toward a more autonomous and universally oriented ethical understanding.

This instrumentalist reading of Plato's *Symposium* has been challenged by several contemporary scholars, such as Gregory Vlastos, Martha Nussbaum, and Michel Foucault. These critics argue that such an interpretation risks depersonalizing the beloved, reducing the concrete, individual other to a mere tool for abstract philosophical contemplation⁹⁸. In doing so, it diminishes the ethical and emotional value of real interpersonal relationships. By subordinating the particular other to a higher philosophical end, this model ultimately erodes the very affective and moral foundations that make *erôs* meaningful.

Martha Nussbaum, in her essay "The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato's *Symposium*" interprets Alcibiades' speech as a direct counterpoint to Diotima's theory⁹⁹. While Diotima describes a philosophical ascent that moves away from attachment to particular individuals toward the contemplation of the Form of Beauty, Alcibiades presents a deeply personal and embodied form of love. His passionate attachment to Socrates foregrounds the emotional depth and moral significance of loving a particular person. For Nussbaum, this contrast reveals a tension within the dialogue itself- between a disembodied, idealized love and a love grounded in vulnerability, desire, and the singularity of the other¹⁰⁰. Through her analysis, Nussbaum advocates for a conception of love that recognizes and preserves the value of particularity and personal connection, arguing that these elements are essential to the ethical and emotional dimensions of human life.

Gregory Vlastos similarly resists the view that Plato's conception of love is

⁹⁶Carone emphasizes that Diotima's notion of "begetting true virtue" (*Symp.* 209c) implies the lover's active return to the earthly realm to participate in this creative process, often in relation with another person. She challenges interpretations that portray Socrates' love for the Form of Beauty as excluding his love for the individual Alcibiades, arguing instead that Socrates' comprehension of beauty enables him to value particular instances without being limited by them. This interpretation resonates with other scholarship emphasizing the inherent tension in the object of *erôs* between universality and particularity. For instance, when *erôs* pursues the universal Form of Beauty, it seemingly disregards the unique individuality of the beloved. Similarly, if the ultimate goal on the ladder of love is the Form of Beauty itself, particular beloveds risk being valued only instrumentally, as stepping stones toward that universal ideal rather than ends in themselves.

⁹⁷Julia Annas offers a developmental interpretation of Platonic love that emphasizes the soul's progressive ascent toward the Form of Beauty, highlighting ethical growth and self-transformation. For a detailed account, see Annas, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* (Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁹⁸Vlastos (1973), Martha Nussbaum (2001), and Michel Foucault (1985).

⁹⁹This essay is also included as Chapter 6 in her book *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, 2001, pp. 165-199.

¹⁰⁰Nussbaum argues that the *Symposium* presents a fundamental dilemma between two conceptions of love: the philosophical ascent toward the universal Form of Beauty, as articulated by Diotima, and the intense, particular passion embodied by Alcibiades. Nussbaum contends that Plato deliberately avoids offering a simple resolution to this tension, instead inviting readers to engage with the complex interplay of love, reason, and human vulnerability. She emphasizes that the dialogue highlights the necessity of recognizing the significance of individual attachments- their value and inherent risks- alongside the pursuit of abstract, universal ideals. See Nussbaum 2001, pp. 297-313.

purely instrumental¹⁰¹. While he acknowledges the structured ascent in Diotima's account, Vlastos argues that love of the particular person is not simply a means to the end of contemplating the Form of Beauty. Instead, he insists that genuine love of the individual persists even as the lover is drawn toward the universal. On Vlastos's interpretation, the beloved is both a participant in and a manifestation of higher beauty, and thus remains an object of love in their own right. Vlastos identifies an implicit tension in Plato's theory: although the ascent leads toward abstraction, the emotional and ethical investment in the beloved is too profound to be reduced to a temporary stage. For Vlastos, *erôs* initiates a relationship that is not discarded, but rather deepened and transformed through the philosophical journey.

A different perspective is offered by Michel Foucault, particularly in "*The Care of the Self*"¹⁰². Foucault emphasizes the central role of *erôs* and interpersonal relationships in the ethical practices of antiquity. For him, self-cultivation is neither an isolated nor purely intellectual pursuit, but one that unfolds within structured relationships- often pedagogical or erotic- that provide the framework and discipline necessary for shaping the self. Within this model, the other is not merely a temporary aid but a constant and indispensable component of ethical formation. The presence of the other is not something to be transcended, but is constitutive of the very practice of self-care.

These contrasting views reflect a deeper philosophical divide. At its core, the debate centers on whether self-realization- whether moral or intellectual- requires detachment from the particular or sustained engagement with another person. My analysis of Platonic self-formation challenges the instrumental view, arguing that the other is not merely a provisional aid but an enduring and essential presence in the process of becoming.

This perspective highlights the ethical and emotional significance of lasting relationships. Rather than advocating detachment from the particular in favor of the universal, I contend that true self-realization arises through an ongoing, transformative relationship with another individual. The cultivated self does not transcend the particular but is shaped and sustained by it.

3.3 The Extreme Moral Characters

This section examines the extreme moral characters in Plato's *Republic*- the timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, tyrannical, and philosophical types- as representations of his concept of the self in its various forms. It focuses on the internal structure of these souls and the dynamic tensions among reason, spirit, and appetite that determine their moral health or corruption. In a just soul, reason governs wisely, spirit supports this rule with courage, and appetite remains moderate. When this balance breaks down, the soul becomes unjust, and each extreme character exemplifies a distinct distortion: the timocrat is ruled by spirit and pursues honor over wisdom; the oligarch is secretly enslaved to appetite despite appearing self-controlled; the democrat abandons reason's guidance, indulging all desires equally; and the tyrant

¹⁰¹Vlastos develops this interpretation in his essay "The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato's *Symposium*", which appears in the collection *Platonic Studies* (1981, pp. 202-231).

¹⁰²Foucault explores ancient practices of self-formation through erotic relationships, emphasizing care, pleasure, and ethical self-mastery rather than purely philosophical ascent (pp. 12-45).

represents total collapse, with reason completely dominated by insatiable appetites.

3.3.1 The Five Types

Plato's extreme moral characters, especially those in the *Republic*, serve as revelatory embodiments of the Platonic self. These figures are not aberrations but expositions: they lay bare the soul's underlying structure and expose its internal dynamics. By magnifying the effects of a soul dominated by a single element- reason, spirit, or appetite- Plato renders visible the intrinsic architecture of the soul and the dynamic tensions that determine its health or corruption. Both the ideal figure of the philosopher and the degenerate characters- the timocrat, oligarch, democrat, and tyrant- are not arbitrary moral types but systematic representations of distinct psychic configurations. Through these portraits, Plato presents the consequences of psychic imbalance and harmony alike, revealing the Platonic self in both its corrupted and ideal forms.

Extreme characters exemplify what happens when one part of the soul dominates or corrupts the whole. According to Plato's tripartite psychology, the soul consists of reason (*logistikon*), spirit (*thumoeides*), and appetite (*epithumêtikon*), each with its distinct function (*Rep.* 436a-441c). Justice in the soul- mirroring justice in the city- arises when reason rules, spirit supports its authority, and appetite submits to their guidance (*Rep.* 442c-444a). When this proper order is disrupted and one part usurps control, the soul becomes disordered and unjust. Plato's extreme characters embody these corruptions, each illustrating the consequences of psychic imbalance¹⁰³.

Plato's timocrat (*Rep.* 548c-550b) embodies a soul in which the spirited element (*thumoeides*) has usurped reason's rightful rule. Unlike the philosopher, whose reason governs desire through wisdom, the timocrat subordinates logic to the pursuit of honor, warping the soul's natural hierarchy. The timocratic character reveals a critical psychological truth: when spirit dominates, it does not eradicate reason but corrupts it, transforming rationality into a servant of ambition.

This corruption manifests in two key ways. First, the timocrat's reason becomes instrumentalized- no longer oriented toward truth, but subordinated to the pursuit of honor and prestige. As Plato explains, the timocratic soul emerges when reason is overthrown by spirit, which becomes the ruling part, while appetite is forcibly suppressed (*Rep.* 549a-550b).

An everyday example of the timocratic soul is the competitive soldier- statesman who values honor and status more than truth. While the timocrat may achieve success in warfare or politics, his virtues are hollow- driven by ambition and rivalry rather than by philosophical understanding. His appetites, though externally disciplined, are not truly harmonized. Unlike the philosopher, who moderates desire through wisdom and orients the soul toward the Good (*Rep.* 504d-511e), the timocrat suppresses his baser impulses through sheer force of spirit. This creates a fragile psychic order: his discipline is rigid rather than integrated, making his soul prone to fracture under pressure.

¹⁰³For general discussions on Plato's moral psychology focusing on extreme character types, see Annas 1981, pp. 120-140; Vlastos, 1995, pp. 75-95; and Irwin, 1995, pp. 281-297.

Plato's deeper insight is that the timocrat's soul mirrors a political revolution. Just as the ideal city falls first to timocracy when the guardians prioritize honor over wisdom (*Rep.* 547b-548d), the individual's soul decays when spirit overthrows reason. The timocrat thus exemplifies a transitional corruption- one that appears noble but contains the seeds of further decline. His tragedy lies in his self-deception: he believes himself virtuous, unaware that his honor is merely the mask of a disordered soul¹⁰⁴.

In this way, the timocrat is not merely a character but a case study in the soul's vulnerability. His psychic imbalance reveals that even the most disciplined lives can be unjust if their order is enforced by spirit rather than governed by reason. Plato's warning through the timocratic figure is clear: true virtue requires more than self-control- it demands the right kind of rule. Only when reason leads, aligning spirit and appetite toward the Good, can the soul achieve genuine harmony and justice.

The oligarchic person, as the degenerated form of the timocratic soul, is one in whom appetite- previously held in check by spirit- gains dominance, and the love of wealth replaces the love of honor (*Rep.* 550c-552c). The appetite (*epithumētikón*) establishes dominance not through brute force, but by co-opting reason itself. This character reveals how the soul's highest faculty can be perverted into service of its lowest when virtue collapses into calculation.

The oligarch's psyche operates like a corrupted business: reason, which should govern wisely, instead becomes a meticulous bookkeeper of desires. It doesn't restrain appetite but rather optimizes its satisfaction through hoarding. We see this in the oligarch's defining traits- his miserliness isn't simple greed but a systematic suppression of all expenditures that don't serve accumulation. His "virtues" of thrift and discipline are hollow, deployed not for moral growth but as tools for wealth preservation.

What makes the oligarch particularly tragic is his semblance of self-control. Unlike the later democratic man who indulges all appetites equally, the oligarch maintains strict discipline- but in service of a single, overarching appetite: the love of money. His spirit (*thumoeides*), which should energize noble ambition, is either atrophied or entirely subordinated to this financial obsession. The military honors prized by his timocratic father hold no value unless they can be monetized¹⁰⁵.

Plato's psychological insight here is profound: the oligarch shows how reason, when detached from its proper *telos* of truth and justice, doesn't disappear but rather becomes a slave to appetite. This creates a peculiarly fragmented self- one capable of impressive focus and self-denial, but fundamentally disordered. In the oligarch, Plato gives us a warning about the dangers of instrumental rationality- reason that is technically proficient but morally bankrupt. His soul represents a dead-end of human potential: efficient, disciplined, and profoundly unhappy.

Plato's democratic man (*Rep.* 557a-562a) represents a soul in which the principle of appetite achieves its most sophisticated- and ultimately most destructive- victory. Unlike the oligarch who represses most desires to serve his singular lust for wealth, the democrat proclaims all appetites equally valid, transforming the soul into what we

¹⁰⁴Christopher Rowe explores how Plato uses the timocratic figure to illustrate the partial and unstable nature of this regime, situated between aristocracy and oligarchy. See *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 85-105.

¹⁰⁵Terence Irwin discusses the oligarchic person in *Plato's Ethics* (1995), particularly on pp. 214 and 283-284, where he analyzes the moral psychology and characteristic desires of the oligarchic soul, emphasizing its focus on wealth and self-restraint as well as its internal conflicts and consequences for self-governance.

can call a “multiculturalism of desires.”¹⁰⁶ This apparent liberation masks a deeper enslavement, as reason abdicates its governing role to become a mere spectator of the soul’s chaotic marketplace of impulses.

The democrat emerges in reaction to his oligarchic father’s miserliness, rejecting the strict suppression of desires in favor of unrestricted indulgence (*Rep.* 559d-561a). Where the father permitted only profit-driven impulses, the son elevates all desires equally, adopting a principle of “one appetite, one vote”- whether the desire is for philosophy or for drunkenness, political action or idleness. This radical egalitarianism among desires initially appears as freedom but in truth marks the complete surrender of reason. In the democratic soul, no hierarchy guides action; the longing for wisdom is treated as no more legitimate than a craving for sweets. The result is not liberty, but disorder- a *psyche* ruled by whim rather than understanding¹⁰⁷.

The tragedy of the democratic man lies in his self-congratulatory blindness. He prides himself on being “open-minded” and “non-judgmental,” failing to recognize that his refusal to judge between desires is itself a judgment- one that privileges appetite’s rule. His version of “freedom” is actually the worst kind of determinism, as he becomes whatever desire happens to seize him in the moment. This psychic anarchy inevitably prepares the way for the tyrant’s rise, as the most ruthless appetite eventually eliminates all competitors (*Rep.* 562a-565c).

Plato’s democratic soul offers a timeless warning: A life that refuses to distinguish between higher and lower desires doesn’t liberate human potential, but rather surrenders it to whatever impulse shouts loudest in the moment. True freedom, for Plato, comes not from satisfying all desires equally, but from cultivating the wisdom to know which desires deserve satisfaction.

Plato’s tyrant (*Rep.* 571a-580a) represents the final and most catastrophic stage of psychic degeneration- a soul in which lawless appetite seizes total control, reducing reason to a servant and spirit to a brutal enforcer. This is not merely a soul governed by desire, but one utterly possessed by *erôs*, so much so that the very possibility of self-governance is annihilated. The tyrant embodies the paradox of absolute power: his domination over others externally reflects his complete internal enslavement. He is driven not by choice but by compulsion, ruled by insatiable cravings that fragment and consume the soul from within.

The tyrannical soul emerges from the democratic man’s indiscriminate indulgence (*Rep.* 572e-573b). Whereas the democrat grants equal legitimacy to all desires, the tyrant becomes consumed by what Plato calls “imported madness” (*despotic erôs*, *Rep.* 573b)- a dominating, lawless craving that gradually expels or subjugates all rival impulses. This is no ordinary appetite but addiction personified: a pathological desire that reorganizes the entire soul around its own gratification. In the tyrant, reason is not merely overpowered but actively conscripted, used to justify and facilitate the ruling obsession. Spirit, instead of allying with reason, becomes a brutal

¹⁰⁶For detailed discussions of the democratic soul in Plato’s Republic, see Mark Johnstone (2013, 139-159), who explores how the democratic soul mirrors the chaotic values of the democratic city; Dominic Scott (2000, 19-37), who analyzes Plato’s critique of the democratic character as dangerously seductive; and Gerasimos Santas (2001, 57-71), who highlights Plato’s concern that the democratic man is enslaved to unnecessary and shifting desires.

¹⁰⁷Plato’s insight anticipates contemporary critiques of relativism by illustrating how the democrat’s soul reflects the political disorder of the democratic city, in which all lifestyles and values are treated as equally valid. In this psyche, reason no longer evaluates or prioritizes desires but instead passively enables their successive dominance- one day pursuing philosophy, the next indulging in drunkenness, followed by vigorous exercise, and then idleness. This pattern of fleeting, unanchored gratification fosters a “consumerist soul,” perpetually shifting among competing desires much like a viewer channel-surfing on a television, resulting in instability and fragmentation of the self.

enforcer, eliminating any internal resistance. The result is psychic collapse- a soul fragmented, enslaved, and utterly incapable of self-governance.

The tyrant experiences what we would recognize as the logic of addiction: each act of satisfaction intensifies his craving, requiring ever greater excess to achieve the same fleeting relief (*Rep.* 573d-574d). This leads to an endless escalation of demands, as the soul is driven by a desire that can never be fulfilled. His paranoia and violence are not incidental traits but structural necessities-inevitable expressions of a psyche enslaved to insatiable *erôs*. Because his entire being revolves around feeding this ravenous desire, any obstacle to gratification is perceived as an existential threat. Thus, fear, aggression, and compulsion are not symptoms but constitutive features of the tyrannical soul.

What makes the tyrant particularly tragic is his complete loss of self-awareness. Unlike the earlier degenerate types, who still preserve some vestige of virtue or internal order, the tyrant can no longer even conceive of a well-ordered soul. His dreams of unrestrained license (*Rep.* 574d-575a) have become his waking reality, and his external domination over others merely mirrors the internal despotism that rules him. For Plato, the tyrant is the most wretched of all: what appears as absolute power is in fact total enslavement. He is the least free of human beings- a puppet of his basest impulses, condemned to an existence of endless craving and perpetual dissatisfaction (*Rep.* 579d-e)¹⁰⁸.

Plato suggests that the unrestrained pursuit of desire leads not to mastery but to the most profound form of slavery. The tyrant's soul reveals the ultimate consequence of appetite's unchecked rule: not lasting fulfillment, but an existential emptiness that demands ever more extreme and destructive means of temporary satisfaction. In this sense, the tyrannical soul stands as the antithesis of human flourishing- a vivid warning of what occurs when we confuse the license to indulge every impulse with true freedom.

Plato's philosopher-king embodies the soul's *telos*- its perfected state in which reason governs not by suppressing the other parts but through their harmonious integration. This figure is more than a thinker; he exemplifies a psyche where the rational, spirited, and appetitive faculties form an ordered hierarchy, all directed toward the Good. Unlike the tyrant's fractured and enslaved self, the philosopher's soul attains true unity- not by eradicating desire or ambition, but by rightly channeling them toward their proper ends.

The philosopher's reason does not dominate like a tyrant but governs like a wise sovereign. It transforms spirit from blind aggression into courageous defense of truth, and reshapes appetite from chaotic craving into a harmonious participation in the good life. When Plato describes this soul as "just" (*Rep.* 443d-e), he refers to something far deeper than mere moral behavior- an ontological rightness in which each part fulfills its nature in proper relation to the whole. Rather than being repressed, the appetites find fulfillment through moderation; spirit gains honor by supporting reason's rule instead of chasing external glory.

This harmony manifests in three crucial ways: First, the philosopher experiences desires without being controlled by them- a "freedom from" compulsive craving.

¹⁰⁸For detailed analyses of the tyrannical soul in Plato's *Republic*, see Rachana Kamtekar, *Plato's Moral Psychology* (2004, pp. 150-165), on the appetitive domination within the tyrannical character; Laurence Lampert, *Plato's Temple* (1986, pp. 112-130), on the tyrant as the tragic result of psychic disintegration; and Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (1981, pp. 160-175), on the moral and psychological collapse marking the tyrannical descent.

Second, spirit fuels the energetic commitment to live according to reason- a “freedom to” pursue wisdom despite challenges. Third, and most importantly, reason’s connection to the Forms offers a “freedom for” participation in transcendent goodness. While the tyrant’s soul contracts inward around insatiable lack, the philosopher’s soul expands outward toward the truly real¹⁰⁹.

Plato’s profound psychological insight is that this ideal state is not mere abstraction but the true actualization of human nature. The philosophical life does not reject our complexity; rather, it represents its fullest flowering. While other character types embody various forms of self-alienation, the philosopher attains unity of soul- not by being “pure reason,” but by fully embodying what a human soul is meant to be. Seen this way, the *Republic*’s political project reveals its deeper purpose: the just city matters primarily as the environment that nurtures just souls capable of perceiving and loving the Good itself.

3.3.2 The Formation Model

This section argue that Plato’s extreme moral characters- the philosopher, timocrat, oligarch, democrat, and tyrant- are not fixed types but outcomes of a dynamic process of soul formation. The soul’s condition, particularly the strength and proper ordering of reason, forms the foundation of moral character. The foundation of moral character lies in the condition of the soul, especially the strength and proper ordering of reason. Yet reason alone does not account for the full process of self-formation. *Erôs* also plays a crucial role, acting as a powerful motivating force that shapes the soul’s internal dynamics and drives its orientation toward- or away from- the good.

The state of the soul itself is crucial- most importantly, the strength and health of reason (*logistikon*), which plays a governing role within the tripartite structure of the soul. Reason’s capacity to govern and harmonize the soul’s other parts lays the foundation for moral character. When reason is robust and clear-sighted, it can guide spirit and appetite toward their proper roles, fostering balance and justice within the soul. But when reason is weak, confused, or overpowered, the soul becomes vulnerable to disorder and domination by inferior parts, setting the stage for the extreme types.

Plato presents the strength of reason as manifesting in two essential capacities: first, as a cognitive faculty that apprehends truth, and second, as an executive power that transforms understanding into effective governance. The former enables the soul to discern what is truly good and right, while the latter ensures that this judgment is translated into firm and consistent action, not easily swayed or reversed by impulse or external pressure. When healthy, reason unites these functions seamlessly- contemplating the eternal Forms while actively directing spirit (*thumoeides*) to uphold

¹⁰⁹For detailed analyses of the philosopher in Plato’s *Republic*, see Julia Annas (1981, pp. 73-110), on the philosopher’s harmony of reason and soul; G.R.F. Ferrari, (2005, pp. 65-85; 100-108), on the philosopher’s unique relation to truth and justice; and Terence Irwin, (1995, pp. 264-265), on the ethical and epistemological foundations of the philosopher’s character.

its judgments with courage and guiding appetite (*epithumētikon*) toward measured and appropriate satisfaction. This threefold operation results in what Plato calls the just individual, whose outward behavior reflects the inner harmony of a well-ordered soul.

However, Plato's degenerative character types reveal reason's vulnerability to degradation through four distinct modes of failure:

The timocrat exemplifies reason's first form of failure- its reduction to mere instrumental rationality. In this state, reason retains its calculative ability but loses its normative guidance, becoming what Weber later termed "*zweckrational*": efficient in pursuing means but blind to true ends¹¹⁰. Here, reason acts as a political strategist rather than a seeker of truth, focusing solely on crafting ever more effective ways to gain honor while abandoning concern for the ultimate good. The tragic irony is that the timocrat sees himself as virtuous, unaware that beneath his disciplined exterior lies a soul already in internal rebellion.

In the oligarch, reason suffers a further diminution, becoming little more than a computational tool. Severed from any connection to transcendent truth, it devolves into appetite's accountant- methodically precise yet utterly bankrupt in purpose. This degeneration embodies Plato's early warning against what contemporary philosophy calls "instrumental reason": a technical rationality stripped of wisdom and moral vision¹¹¹. The oligarch's meticulous ledgers of profit and loss measure everything except what truly matters, as his soul shrinks into a glorified abacus, calculating without insight or higher aim.

The democrat exemplifies reason's most insidious failure- not from weakness but from willful abdication. By declaring all desires equally valid, reason falls into what might be called "the neutrality fallacy," mistaking refusal to judge for impartiality when it is actually surrender. Here, reason becomes a passive observer at the soul's chaotic carnival of appetites: it retains its theoretical capacity but abandons its essential governing role. Plato's profound insight anticipates modern critiques of relativism, revealing how the democrat's celebrated "open-mindedness" is, in fact, reason's capitulation to disorder and chaos.

Finally, the tyrant embodies reason's ultimate perversion- not merely subdued but actively co-opted as appetite's chief propagandist. This mirrors what Frankfurt School theorists later described as pathological "rationalization": reason fully mobilized to justify and enable ever more extreme indulgences. Here, the soul's proper order is completely inverted, with reason transformed from wise guide into desire's most cunning advocate. The tyrant's elaborate justifications for his excesses reveal reason's terrifying capacity to become appetite's most effective servant rather than its master.

¹¹⁰Max Weber's concept of *Zweckrationalität*, typically translated as "instrumental" or "purposive" rationality- refers to a form of reasoning oriented exclusively toward the efficient selection of means for achieving pre-given ends. In this mode, rationality is detached from any evaluative consideration of whether the ends themselves are morally or existentially justified. The focus is not on the goodness or legitimacy of the goals, but solely on how effectively they can be attained. Weber warns that this type of rationality, if dominant, leads to a technocratic worldview in which normative judgment is displaced by procedural calculation. For a detailed exposition of Weber's typology of rationality and the implications of *Zweckrationalität*, see Stephen Kalberg, "Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 5 (1980): 1145-1179.

¹¹¹"*Instrumental reason*" refers to reasoning focused solely on the most efficient means to achieve a goal, without evaluating the goal's moral worth. Thinkers like Horkheimer and Adorno criticize this as a hallmark of modern rationality that can lead to dehumanization when ethical reflection is replaced by technical calculation. In contrast, "value rationality" concerns ends that are intrinsically worthwhile, such as justice or truth (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 1-34). Plato's *Republic* anticipates this concern: its educational program is a form of soul-medicine designed to strengthen reason, ensuring it rules not merely efficiently but justly.

Plato's psychological schema offers a graduated anatomy of reason's decline- from the philosopher-king to the tyrant- not as a sudden collapse but as a systematic degradation unfolding through distinct and recognizable stages¹¹². This progression reveals that the soul's health depends not merely on reason's technical abilities but, more fundamentally, on its proper orientation toward the Good. In the timocrat, reason becomes instrumental, serving honor instead of truth. In the oligarch, it is reduced to a calculating tool for wealth. In the democrat, reason relinquishes all judgment, treating every desire as equal. In the tyrant, it is wholly enslaved to lawless *erôs*, rationalizing increasingly extreme indulgences. Thus, the soul's state- whether reason is strong and rightly ordered, or weak and displaced- sets the foundation for moral character.

In addition to reason, *erôs* is a vital force in the formation of the self, influencing both the soul's inner dynamics and the deeply personal, transformative relationships that shape one's identity.

In the timocratic person, *erôs* plays a significant but distorted role, working in tandem with the compromised state of reason to shape the soul's formation. Unlike the philosopher, whose reason directs desire toward the Beautiful and the Good, the timocrat's reason (e.g., the Homeric warrior-hero) is weakened, enslaved to the demands of thumos- the part of the soul that hungers for victory and esteem. As a result, *erôs* shifts from a philosophical yearning into a competitive drive, fueling the pursuit of honor, dominance, and public acclaim.

This transformation begins with the corruption of reason itself. In the well-ordered soul, reason discerns the true Good and guides *erôs* accordingly. But in the timocrat, reason no longer seeks wisdom; it becomes a mere strategist for status, calculating how best to win admiration rather than how to live justly. *Erôs*, once the soul's upward-reaching impulse, now fixates on external validation- military glory, political power, the trappings of prestige. It still energizes action, but without wisdom's guidance, it leads the soul astray. The timocrat mistakes the appearance of virtue for virtue itself, believing conquest proves worth and reputation reflects true excellence. The longing inspired by *erôs* becomes fixated on external rewards rather than higher, transcendent goods.

Thus, *erôs* in the timocratic person intensifies the drive for social success and dominance, but because reason is weakened- unable to critically assess or moderate these desires- the soul becomes vulnerable to imbalance and misdirection. This is the tragedy of the timocrat: his longing for greatness persists, but true greatness remains beyond his grasp.

In the money-loving oligarch, *erôs* undergoes a profound degradation, transforming from a potentially ennobling force into a relentless drive for material accumulation- shaped by the continued degeneration of reason. This reflects not the absence of reason, but its reduction: a sharp yet narrowly focused faculty that restrains

¹¹²Plato's *Republic* presents the educational program as a kind of medicine for the soul- designed to fortify reason and protect it from the corrupting influences of unruly desires and false beliefs. This therapeutic model of education is not merely about imparting knowledge but about cultivating the soul's internal harmony, ensuring that reason maintains its rightful authority over spirit and appetite. Just as political justice requires careful structuring and vigilance to preserve order, so too does psychic justice depend on the sustained effort to resist internal disorder and imbalance. The curriculum functions as a moral and psychological discipline, shaping the soul toward truth, self-mastery, and the love of the good. The specific structure and aims of this formative regimen- and its essential role in producing the philosophical soul- will be explored in detail in Chapter 4.

extravagant impulses not out of self-mastery or virtue, but because unchecked appetite threatens the efficiency of accumulation. Reason thus becomes the servant of acquisitive desire, meticulously calculating means while remaining indifferent to the worthiness of ends.

Correspondingly, the oligarch's *erôs* loses all connection to higher objects of love. No longer drawn to beauty, wisdom, or even glory, it fixates entirely on possession- money, property, and the power they confer. Wealth becomes the sole object of desire, not because it fulfills the soul, but because it promises control and security. Yet this *erôs* is inherently insatiable: the more the oligarch acquires, the more he fears loss, and the more he craves. His love, once capable of reaching toward the transcendent, now clings to the material, as if the sheer mass of possessions could compensate for the atrophy of his spiritual aspirations.

The tragedy of the oligarch lies in how his reason, though disciplined, becomes an accomplice to his own degradation. Rather than guiding *erôs* toward genuine fulfillment, reason entrenches the soul in a cycle of perpetual want. Outwardly, he may appear orderly, successful, and even superior to the more openly chaotic democratic or tyrannical types. Yet inwardly, his soul is hollow- its higher capacities stifled by the monotony of relentless calculation. The repressed passions that occasionally break through- whether in secret indulgences or sudden waves of anxiety- expose the deep instability lurking beneath his carefully maintained façade of control.

In the democratic soul, *erôs* appears as a restless and ever-shifting multitude of desires, each pursued with equal enthusiasm. Unlike the oligarch, who maintains a grim focus on wealth, or the timocrat, who channels energies into honor, the democrat fully embraces the idea that all desires are equally valid. Reason, rather than guiding or restraining *erôs*, becomes a passive enabler- offering justification for whatever impulse arises by declaring each new craving "fair" and "free" simply because it is felt. This lack of rational direction leads to a chaotic and fragmented soul, driven by caprice rather than coherent purpose.

Democratic reason does not evaluate, prioritize, or subordinate appetites to any higher principle; instead, it functions like a democratic assembly where every urge, no matter how trivial or base, is given an equal vote. As a result, the democrat's *erôs* loses all unifying direction. One day it may fixate sincerely on philosophy, the next on gourmet dining, and the following day on political activism- not as expressions of a coherent self, but as interchangeable consumer choices. What makes this condition particularly insidious is its veneer of liberation. The democrat truly believes himself free precisely because he recognizes no authority higher than his shifting desires. Yet this apparent freedom is actually a deeper bondage- not to any single vice, like the oligarch- but to the tyranny of whim itself.

Erôs, which in the philosophical soul is a unifying force that draws the self toward higher reality, becomes in the democrat a principle of disintegration, pulling him in countless directions without any ultimate meaning. He may experience moments of aesthetic pleasure, intellectual curiosity, or even fleeting compassion, but because these impulses are not ordered toward anything lasting, they fail to cohere into genuine character.

The tragedy of the democratic soul is that it mistakes the absence of restraint for true freedom. Its *erôs* is not truly liberated but atomized- scattered among countless trivial pursuits, none capable of satisfying because each is followed without any deeper purpose. Reason, which could have ruled the soul, instead becomes its servant,

justifying every fleeting whim as an expression of “authenticity.” The result is a life that may appear vibrant- full of experiences, open-minded, and free from dogma—but is ultimately hollow, lacking the unity that comes from loving something beyond oneself.

Plato’s genius lies in revealing how the democratic soul represents the logical outcome of valuing freedom without truth. When reason abandons its normative role- no longer asking “What is worth loving?” but instead only “What do I happen to love?”- *erôs* does not vanish but fractures into a thousand sparkling fragments. Each fragment promises fulfillment, yet none can deliver it. The democrat becomes a spiritual tourist, endlessly collecting experiences without ever forming true character, mistaking the absence of constraints for genuine selfhood.

In the tyrannical soul, *erôs* reaches its ultimate perversion- not merely misdirected, as in the oligarch, or scattered, as in the democrat, but transformed into an all-consuming force that colonizes reason itself. Here we witness the final inversion of the soul’s proper order: where reason ought to govern desire, desire instead enslaves reason, converting it into a mercenary intellect tasked solely with justifying and advancing the tyrant’s obsessions. The result is not mere unrestrained appetite, but something far more dangerous- a brilliant, calculating mind wholly subordinated to a single, insatiable lust¹¹³.

The tyrant’s *erôs* differs qualitatively from all other forms of desire because it no longer seeks external objects for their own sake, but rather for the thrill of domination they provide. Where the philosopher’s love moves outward toward the Beautiful and the Good, the tyrant’s turns inward in a self-devouring spiral- each conquest only intensifying his hunger while providing no nourishment. His reason, which in a healthy soul would discern true goods, becomes instead the perfect servant of this pathological desire, devising ever more elaborate schemes to satisfy what cannot be satisfied. Thus the tyrant’s greatest tragedy: he possesses all the intellectual capacity for wisdom, but uses it only to deepen his own enslavement.

This corrupted erotic energy manifests in several distinctive ways. First, it follows an escalating pattern: ordinary pleasures quickly lose their appeal, driving the soul toward ever more extreme and destructive indulgences to satisfy its jaded appetite. Second, it breeds deep paranoia, as the tyrant’s distorted worldview comes to see enemies and conspiracies everywhere, eroding trust even in closest allies. Most crucially, it generates a terrifying inner void- an emptiness that no amount of external power can fill, because reason, the soul’s natural anchor, has been overthrown. The tyrant may dominate others, command armies, and hold vast dominions, but he remains utterly enslaved to his own ungoverned *erôs*- powerful in appearance, yet powerless within.

Plato’s profound insight is that the tyrannical soul endures the most extreme form of bondage precisely because it imagines itself free. Having cast off all external constraints and moral boundaries, the tyrant mistakes his lawlessness for liberation- yet in truth, he is enslaved to desires that grow ever more insatiable and consuming. His *erôs*, once capable of elevating the soul toward the divine, has become a crushing weight, and his reason, which could have guided him to truth, now serves only to deepen his captivity. In the end, the tyrant’s soul mirrors the tyrannical city: a desolate

¹¹³Annie Larivée argues that in *Republic* IX (572d-573b), *erôs* tyrannos, a lawless, tyrannical form of erotic desire, is the driving force behind the tyrant’s soul and political domination (Larivée 2012, pp. 1-26). See also Cinzia Arruzza, *A Wolf in the City: Tyranny and the Tyrant in Plato’s Republic* (2015). Arruzza discusses how Plato’s critique of tyranny is intertwined with his critique of Athenian democracy.

ruin of squandered potential, where love is no longer a path to transcendence but a self-devouring hunger.

Finally, the philosopher-king represents the soul in its highest and most ordered form, where *erôs* and reason are fully reconciled. Unlike the tyrant, whose *erôs* enslaves reason, or the democrat, whose *erôs* disperses it, the philosopher's *erôs* is directed by reason toward the Good itself. It is not extinguished but elevated-transformed from a craving for possession into a longing for truth, beauty, and harmony. This purified *erôs* fuels the soul's ascent beyond the world of appearances, sustaining the philosopher's pursuit of wisdom and justice.

Here, reason does not suppress desire but perfects it, giving it shape, aim, and clarity. The philosopher-king does not renounce love; he loves more deeply, but rightly- guided not by impulse or convention, but by knowledge of what truly is. In this harmony of *logos* and *erôs*, the soul achieves its fullest realization: self-governed, unified, and attuned to the eternal order. The philosopher-king alone is truly free, because he alone loves what is most worth loving¹¹⁴.

Thus, these extreme moral characters do not merely illustrate harmony and failure; they illuminate the inner workings of the soul by revealing what occurs when its internal structure either achieves balance or collapses into disorder. The philosopher-king, alongside the distorted types- timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, and tyrannical- renders Plato's abstract psychology legible in concrete form. Through the disintegration of these flawed characters, we come to understand the architecture of the well-ordered soul and the indispensable role reason must play in its governance.

These figures serve as mirrors, reflecting the soul's potential for both integration and disintegration. By isolating distinct patterns of corruption, Plato shows that the self is not a fixed essence but a dynamic interplay of psychic forces. Whether a life flourishes or decays depends entirely on how these elements- reason, spirit, and appetite- are ordered. In exposing the anatomy of imbalance, Plato not only diagnoses moral failure but also clarifies what it means to live well: to be ruled not by impulse or fashion, but by a reason harmoniously attuned to *erôs*, and directed toward what is truly good.

¹¹⁴G. R. F. Ferrari highlights the philosopher-king's unique alignment of love and reason as the foundation for his freedom and rule (2005, pp. 100-108) .

Chapter 4

Erôs in Shaping the Philosophical Character

In Plato's moral spectrum in the *Republic*, the philosopher occupies the highest position, portrayed as a "lover of wisdom" (*philosophos*), driven by a profound love for eternal, unchanging truth (*Rep.* 485a-486a6). This chapter aims to examine how this moral character is cultivated and to investigate the crucial role of *erôs* in this transformative process. The analysis will primarily focus on the *Republic*, with supporting insights drawn from the *Alcibiades*, the *Symposium*, and the *Phaedrus*.

The first section will introduce the concept of the philosopher by examining Plato's depiction of the philosopher as the "lover of wisdom" (*philosophos*). This section will explore the defining characteristics that distinguish the philosopher from other types of the self within Socrates' moral spectrum, focusing on their unwavering love for eternal and unchanging truth.

The second section analyzes the four key stages of the philosopher's formation, highlighting the central role of *erôs* at each phase. It will begin with the selection of individuals with a proper nature, exploring how *erôs*, as the love for truth and wisdom, serves as the foundational criterion for identifying those suited to the lifelong pursuit of philosophy. The discussion then will turn to the foundational education in music, poetry, and physical training, highlighting how *erôs* nurtures the soul's affinity for beauty, harmony, and order, aligning it with virtue and preparing it for intellectual growth. Next, the study of mathematics will be analyzed, focusing on how *erôs* drives the philosopher's ascent from the contradictions of sensory perception to the realm of abstract reasoning and universal truths. Finally, the section will explore the method of dialectic, the culminating stage of the philosopher's formation, showing how *erôs* sustains the philosopher's commitment to uncovering ultimate truths and attaining a comprehensive understanding of the Good. Throughout this section, *erôs* is revealed as the transformative and sustaining power vital to the philosopher's journey, aligning the soul's desires with the pursuit of wisdom and moral improvement.

Based on this, I argue that Plato provides a clear and rigorous process for the formation of the philosopher, with *erôs* at its core. Unlike traditional approaches that focus primarily on external discipline or the acquisition of practical skills, Plato's method highlights the transformative power of *erôs*- a profound, intrinsic longing for truth, beauty, and the Good- as the central driving force behind personal and philosophical development.

Erôs serves not only as the catalyst that initiates the soul's turning toward higher realities but also as the sustaining force that propels its pursuit of intellectual and moral growth throughout every stage of the philosopher's formation. By directing and aligning the soul's desires with the pursuit of wisdom, *erôs* transforms self-cultivation from an external obligation into a deeply internal, self-directed journey. It centers on the soul's innate longing to realize its highest potential, ensuring that the philosopher's development is both meaningful and enduring.

4.1 The Concept of the Philosopher

4.1.1 The Lover of Wisdom

In *Republic* 474b-480d, Plato explicitly introduces the philosophical character, defining the philosopher as “the lover of wisdom,” which can be understood as one who earnestly desires to possess eternal truth forever. This section will clarify this characterization, showing how it is central to Plato’s philosophy, where the philosopher serves as the crucial mediator between the human and the divine. Key supporting texts include *Republic* Books V-VII, *Symposium* (204a-212a), and *Phaedrus* (244a-257a), which offer the most detailed and nuanced accounts of the philosopher’s nature and role.

The first defining characteristic of the philosopher is their focus on knowledge rather than opinion. According to Socrates (esp. *Rep.* 476d-477d), knowledge pertains to what is eternal, unchanging, and true- the realm of the Forms, which represent the ultimate realities underlying the sensory world. In contrast, opinion belongs to the realm of Becoming, a domain characterized by constant change and impermanence. Those who hold opinions focus on particular sensory objects, mistaking these transient appearances for ultimate reality. In *Republic* 476c2-6, Socrates uses the distinction between “the beautiful itself” and “beautiful things” to illustrate this difference:

“What about someone who believes in beautiful things, but doesn’t believe in the beautiful itself... But someone who believes in the beautiful itself, can see **both it and the things that participate in it** and **doesn’t believe that the participants are it or that it itself is the participants**... So we’d be right to **call his (the philosopher’s) thought knowledge**, since he knows, but we should **call the other person’s thought opinion**, since he opines?” (*Rep.* 508e-509a, *trans.* Grube, revised by Reeve)

In the account, Socrates clarifies a fundamental difference between the philosopher’s thought, which qualifies as knowledge (*epistêmê*), and the opinioner’s thought, which is mere opinion (*doxa*).

This distinction is drawn by examining the objects of their beliefs and the depth of their understanding. For the philosopher, particular beautiful things- such as a painting, a sunset, or a person- are not beauty itself but rather participants in or reflections of the Form of Beauty. The philosopher not only comprehends the Form but also recognizes its relationship to particular beautiful things in the sensory world, which participate in the Form but are not identical to it. This capacity places the philosopher in what Socrates describes as a state of “wakefulness” (*Rep.* 476d2)¹¹⁵, where they grasp the true reality rather than being misled by appearances. In this state,

¹¹⁵A state of “wakefulness” (*Rep.* 476d2) represents more than mere alertness; it embodies an enduring transformation of the philosopher’s entire mode of being. In this state, the philosopher transcends the superficial realm of sensory illusions and opinions, accessing a profound intellectual and spiritual clarity. This wakefulness entails an active and sustained attentiveness to the eternal and unchanging Forms, enabling the philosopher to apprehend reality in its purest essence. It is a form of enlightened consciousness that resists distraction and deception, cultivating a continuous and rigorous discernment between what is genuinely real and what merely appears so. Through this vigilance, knowledge becomes a living, dynamic force- an ongoing process of illumination that liberates the soul from ignorance and aligns it with the eternal Good. This awakened state is thus foundational to the philosopher’s ability to guide both themselves and others toward true wisdom and justice.

the philosopher understands the beautiful itself, seeing beyond the transient beauty of all beautiful things.

In contrast, opinioners are described as focusing only on “beautiful things,” the ever-changing objects of sensory perception. They fail to grasp the Form of Beauty and do not understand the relationship between the Form and its participants. Mistaking the particular for the universal, the opinioner lacks the intellectual capacity to perceive the underlying reality. Socrates likens this state of mind to “dreaming” (*Rep.* 476c5), where one confuses appearances with reality. Although the opinioner’s views might align with truth in certain instances, their understanding is fundamentally unstable and superficial because it is confined to the sensory realm.

This distinction demonstrates that only philosophers, who possess true knowledge, are capable of understanding truth beyond appearances, grasping it in its most authentic and universal form.

The defining characteristic of the philosopher is an insatiable desire for truth and a longing to possess it eternally. The central claim, as articulated in *Republic* 475b6-9, is that anyone who genuinely loves or desires something must desire all aspects of it, not merely select parts:

“We mean **he (the philosopher) desires everything**.

Then won’t we also say that the philosopher doesn’t desire one part of wisdom rather than another, but desires the whole thing?

Yes, that’s true.” (*Rep.* 475b6-9, trans. Grube, revised by Reeve)

This passage supports the view that a philosopher’s love for wisdom is comprehensive and all-encompassing rather than selective or partial. The phrase “he (the philosopher) desires everything” underscores that the philosopher’s pursuit of knowledge embraces the whole of wisdom, without excluding any aspect or domain. This universal desire reflects the philosopher’s commitment to understanding truth in its entirety, highlighting an inclusive and holistic approach to the love of wisdom.

The philosopher, who genuinely loves wisdom, seeks to possess all forms of knowledge, never settling for fragments or isolated truths. In *Republic* 475d2-b9, Socrates uses the examples of a lover of boys, a wine-lover, and an honor-lover to demonstrate the insatiable nature of true love and desire. He argues that a genuine lover does not limit their affection or interest to specific parts or instances of what they love but instead seeks the entirety of the object of their desire: the lover of boys, for instance, appreciates all boys in their youth, regardless of their specific features. A snub-nosed boy is seen as charming, a hook-nosed boy as regal, and others are praised for being well-proportioned or having other appealing traits (*Rep.* 474d2-475a2). The wine-lover similarly embraces all kinds of wine, finding reasons to enjoy every variety, irrespective of its individual characteristics. Likewise, the honor-lover seeks recognition in all its forms, from positions of great distinction to lesser, more humble accolades, driven by their overarching desire for honor itself (475a8-b1).

Socrates uses these examples to highlight the all-encompassing nature of genuine desire. Just as lovers seek the entirety of what they cherish, the philosopher, as a lover of wisdom, yearns for complete knowledge and truth. Rather than accepting partial or fragmented insight, the philosopher pursues wisdom in its full and unified form. This universal and holistic yearning sets the philosopher apart, emphasizing their alignment with the eternal and unchanging realities of the Forms.

In summary, the defining traits of the philosopher, described as “the lover of

wisdom” in *Republic* 474b-480a, can be outlined as follows: first, they possess an insatiable love or desire for wisdom; second, their understanding of wisdom pertains to eternal truth, which constitutes knowledge rather than opinion; and third, philosophers differ from ordinary people by directing their focus toward eternal realities instead of transient appearances. In the next section, we will examine how this character is developed further.

4.2 The Role of *Erôs* in the Philosopher’s Formation

4.2.1 The First Stage

The initial stage in the formation of a philosopher, as described by Socrates in *Republic* (485a-495a), is to identify individuals with the proper nature. Socrates emphasizes the importance of this process, pointing out that only a rare few possess the necessary qualities (see *Rep.* 491a7, 495a10). The purpose of this selection is to ensure that those naturally suited to pursue truth and wisdom throughout their lives are identified early and adequately prepared for further education. This stage forms the essential foundation for the philosopher’s education and development.

I argue that two main qualities must be sought in identifying a philosopher. The first is a love of truth and learning, which entails a deep, enduring desire to pursue truth and knowledge to the fullest extent and for as long as possible. The second is the possession of character traits that facilitate and sustain the pursuit of truth and wisdom, such as a good memory, courage, and a strong sense of justice.

I argue that *erôs*, as a powerful and passionate love, is essential for sustaining and developing the philosophical nature. I support this view with the following three points: First, As illustrated in the Channel Analogy (*Rep.* 484d6-e), *erôs* redirects a person’s desires away from transient, ever-changing pursuits and toward higher, eternal truths and knowledge. This reorientation ensures that their focus aligns with enduring realities, which are critical for philosophical inquiry and the pursuit of wisdom. Second, *erôs* serves as a sustaining passion, providing unwavering focus and perseverance for the lifelong effort required to grasp the Forms and attain wisdom. Philosophical love is a profound and intrinsic longing for understanding what truly is. It motivates individuals to devote all their energy, focus, and attention to overcoming distractions and challenges that might otherwise corrupt them and lead them astray from the philosophical path. Third, *erôs* fuels the passion and joy to the learning process, transforming the often arduous path of intellectual development into a deeply fulfilling journey. Without this love, learning would be fraught with frustration. The absence of love for learning inevitably leads to discouragement, self-loathing, and ultimately, a rejection of philosophical pursuits altogether.

Through these points, I demonstrate that the key to the selection process is identifying individuals who embody philosophical love- those with a deep, enduring, and unwavering desire to seek and possess truth and wisdom for all time. This love is not a fleeting curiosity or a mere intellectual inclination but a profound and intrinsic longing that drives individuals to devote their entire lives to the pursuit of what truly is. Such individuals are distinguished by their ability to rise above transient distractions and resist the corrupting influences of external pleasures, wealth, or power. Instead, their passion for truth and knowledge becomes the guiding force of their lives, shaping their character and directing their every thought and action.

The foremost quality required for this selection is a genuine love of learning. This refers to a person who has an intrinsic love for knowledge and truth, which consequently diminishes their desires for other pursuits, such as wealth, power, or sensory pleasures. Socrates illustrates this idea through the famous Channel Analogy (*Rep.* 485d-486a):

“Now, we surely know that, **when someone’s desires incline strongly for one thing, they are thereby weakened for others**, just like a stream that has been partly diverted into another channel.” (*Rep.* 485d-486a, trans. Grube, revised by Reeve)

In this analogy, Socrates likens the soul’s desires to a stream of water, with the channel symbolizing the specific object of a person’s desires. Just as water flowing into one channel reduces the amount available to others, when a person’s desires are strongly directed toward a particular goal, such as learning and knowledge, their capacity for other pursuits- like wealth, power, or sensory pleasures- is naturally diminished¹¹⁶.

The premise of the analogy is clear: a person’s desires are finite and cannot be evenly distributed across multiple pursuits. Just as water cannot flow with equal strength into several channels at once, a person cannot sustain equally strong desires for conflicting goals¹¹⁷. When a person’s love for knowledge and truth becomes their primary focus, other desires naturally fade. As a result, the different goals compete for the soul’s limited attention, energy, and priorities.

Here, the conflicting goals expose fundamentally different orientations of the soul, underscoring the vital importance of choosing to pursue what truly “is”. I argue that it is at this juncture that Socrates draws a clear distinction between the philosophical character and all other character types:

Socrates describes the philosophical individual as one who is driven by a genuine and profound love of learning- a philosophical *erôs* that compels them to prioritize the pursuit of knowledge, particularly concerning the essence of things, above all else (*Rep.* 485a10). In contrast, non-philosophical individuals direct their desires toward fleeting and ever-changing goals, which exist in a cycle of “coming into being and decay” (*Rep.* 485b1). These competing pursuits bind their souls to the ever-changing realm of transient goals and pleasures, thereby hindering their ability to focus on the higher realities connected to true knowledge¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁶See Scott 2007, p. 136. For the philosopher, *erôs* is like a steady and focused channel that directs the soul’s desires toward the unified and eternal Forms, particularly the Form of Beauty. I employ this analogy in a different way.

¹¹⁷Socrates clearly presents these aims as fundamentally opposed. The pursuit of knowledge and truth calls for the cultivation of the rational soul- demanding intellectual discipline, self-mastery, and an orientation toward the eternal and unchanging. This path often entails a conscious withdrawal from the distractions of wealth, honor, and bodily pleasure, as such attachments tether the soul to the world of appearances. By contrast, the desire for wealth, status, or physical gratification anchors the soul in the realm of the transient and the particular. These desires fragment attention, disorder the soul, and hinder the ascent toward true understanding. The philosopher’s commitment to truth thus requires not merely preference but renunciation- a deliberate refusal to be ruled by lower appetites in favor of the soul’s higher calling.

¹¹⁸In *Republic* 484c-d, Socrates compares those without knowledge of “each thing that is” to the blind, emphasizing that without access to the Forms, they lack a clear model of truth. Like unskilled painters without a standard, they cannot reliably judge or preserve what is fine, just, or good, leaving their moral and political decisions unstable and prone to error. For a detailed analysis of the painter analogy in *Republic* 484c-d, see Naddaff Silver’s commentary on Book VI, which explains how Socrates compares those without knowledge of “what is” to blind people lacking a stable standard for judgment, and Reeve (1996, pp. 209-228, esp. Chapter 11), who highlights the analogy’s significance for philosophical education by showing that only those who grasp the

Moreover, the preference for and pursuit of knowledge and wisdom is not merely a deliberate choice but an inherent inclination that deeply aligns with the philosophical nature. Socrates explains that an individual with such a nature will naturally “hate” falsehood and “love” truth (*Rep.* 485c3-d2)¹¹⁹. For the philosopher, falsehood is more than a mere impediment- it is a profound obstacle to the pursuit of truth and fundamentally at odds with their very essence. This nature is characterized by an unwavering love of learning and a passionate commitment to understanding what truly is. The philosopher’s rejection of falsehood is neither superficial nor circumstantial but a deeply instinctive response that arises from their inherent alignment with the eternal and unchanging realities of the intelligible realm.

In contrast, the non-philosopher lacks this profound aversion to falsehood. Falsehood, for them, may be tolerated, accepted, or even embraced if it serves their immediate interests or aligns with their limited and fragmented perspective¹²⁰. Socrates describes such individuals as “without a clear model of truth guiding their soul” (484c6-d3) highlighting their inability to discern or prioritize the pursuit of what is genuinely real. This fundamental difference in their relationship to falsehood underscores the philosopher’s unique suitability for seeking knowledge and truth.

Now we see the role of *erôs* in defining and shaping the philosophical nature. As a profound and passionate longing, *erôs* redirects the philosopher’s soul from transient pursuits such as wealth, power, or sensory gratification. Instead, it channels their desires toward the pursuit of learning, allowing their energy and priorities to be entirely devoted to intellectual aspirations. This unwavering dedication enables the philosopher to rise above the distractions of material and bodily concerns, aligning their life with higher, more enduring, and meaningful goals. In this way, *erôs* becomes the driving force that not only shapes the philosopher’s character but also reorients their soul’s priorities, diminishing the intensity and length of other desires and fostering a steadfast commitment to what truly is.

Furthermore, this relentless passion for learning and truth is vital for sustaining the lifelong effort required to comprehend the Forms and attain wisdom. The path of this love is marked by the soul’s profound enjoyment of its own intrinsic pleasures- what Socrates refers to “the pleasures of the soul itself by itself” (*Rep.* 485d10). These higher pleasures, rooted in intellectual pursuits, are accompanied by the abandonment of bodily pleasures, which are tied to the ever-changing realm of transient things:

Forms- like painters guided by a clear model- can establish and preserve coherent conceptions of justice, beauty, and the good.

¹¹⁹In *Republic* 485b-d, Socrates depicts the philosopher’s soul as inherently loving truth and hating falsehood. This deep aversion to falsehood stems from the philosopher’s natural orientation toward the eternal and unchanging Forms. Falsehood disrupts the harmony the philosophical soul seeks, marking a fundamental difference from those focused on the transient world.

¹²⁰Several passages across Plato’s dialogues reinforce this distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers. In *Republic* 484c-d and 491d-e, Socrates highlights that non-philosophers lack a “clear model of truth” and are swayed by fleeting desires, rendering them vulnerable to falsehood. Similarly, in *Phaedrus* 247c-e, souls driven by non-rational, sensory concerns cannot ascend to higher truths. In *Gorgias* 482c-486c, sophists prioritize appearance and persuasion over truth, exemplifying the non-philosopher’s acceptance of falsehood. *Theaetetus* 172c-177c examines how those governed by opinion confuse appearances with reality, further demonstrating their inability to grasp true being. Finally, in *Symposium* 203b-204a, Socrates contrasts lovers of mere appearances with those who seek the Forms, illustrating the failure of non-philosophers to transcend falsehood. Collectively, these texts emphasize the philosopher’s distinct and sustained orientation toward truth.

“Then, when someone’s desires towards learning and everything of that sort... with the pleasures of the soul itself by itself, and they, abandon those pleasures that come through the body- if indeed he is a true philosopher and not merely a counterfeit one.” (*Rep.* 485d10-e1, trans. Grube, revised by Reeve)

This passage suggests that philosophical love of learning and wisdom brings about a significant transformation that defines the philosopher’s character- a redirection from bodily pleasures to the higher pleasures experienced by the soul itself. These higher pleasures, rooted in the pursuit of knowledge and the contemplation of eternal truths, a deeper and more enduring satisfaction than any bodily pleasure. This enjoyment is always accompanied by the rejection of bodily pleasures, which are tied to transient and ever-changing things. The philosopher, driven by *erôs* for what truly is, comes to view bodily pleasures as inferior distractions that hinder the soul's alignment with the eternal and intelligible realm. In this reorientation, the soul sheds its attachment to the fleeting and impermanent, dedicating itself wholly to the pursuit of higher, more meaningful joys.

More importantly, to attain the ultimate goal of wisdom, a philosopher’s finite desires must be directed toward a singular, overarching purpose. This requires unwavering focus, dedication, and the investment of significant time and effort. The process is not casual or episodic; rather, it demands the philosopher’s full commitment and the careful organization of their life around this central aim. A true philosopher achieves this because their love for learning is not merely superficial or circumstantial but both authentic and profoundly intense. This passionate *erôs* for knowledge and understanding is powerful enough to overshadow other desires, such as those tied to wealth, pleasure, or status, which naturally diminish in significance as the philosopher’s soul becomes reoriented toward higher pursuits.

This transformation, guided by *erôs*, is not forced or imposed from external sources; it arises organically from the philosopher’s very nature. Their innate orientation toward truth, combined with their capacity for deep focus and perseverance, fuels this redirection. Over time, their singular devotion to wisdom shapes not only their character but also their entire way of life, allowing them to transcend the distractions of transient desires. In this way, the philosopher’s journey toward wisdom reflects the harmony between their intrinsic nature and the ultimate, enduring goal of pursuing what truly is.

The second key to identifying a philosophical nature is determining whether a person possesses the character traits required for a soul capable of attaining a complete understanding of reality. These include a good memory, a sense of justice, courage, freedom from slavishness, and other essential qualities (*Rep.* 487a2-5)¹²¹. Together, these traits create a unified and coherent nature, making the soul uniquely suited to the pursuit of understanding. A soul with these traits is the most suitable for becoming a philosopher.

I argue that *erôs* plays a crucial role in developing and sustaining these traits. In *Republic* 486c-e, Socrates highlights two key points that illustrate this connection:

¹²¹In *Republic* 487a2-5, Plato outlines key qualities essential to the philosophical nature. A philosopher must possess a strong memory, which enables the effective retention and accumulation of knowledge over time. Equally important is a well-developed sense of justice, ensuring that the soul remains ordered and harmonized according to moral principles. Courage empowers the philosopher to confront difficulties and overcome fears that arise on the path to wisdom. Additionally, freedom from slavishness- detachment from base appetites and transient, material concerns- allows the philosopher to maintain focus on higher pursuits. Together, these traits form the internal harmony and resilience necessary for the philosopher’s sustained dedication to the search for eternal truth and understanding.

First, Socrates emphasizes that a person must love the pursuit of learning and truth for its own sake. This passionate love is essential for enduring the challenges and demands of intellectual inquiry. Without it, the individual will inevitably experience great “pain” (*Rep.* 486c3-5)- a profound sense of frustration- because the pursuit of knowledge often requires significant effort and perseverance, while the progress and rewards may appear slow or minimal. As Socrates notes, a person cannot sustain an activity that feels arduous and unfulfilling, particularly when the returns seem disproportionate to the effort invested.

In contrast, love for learning and truth transforms what might otherwise feel burdensome into a deeply fulfilling and motivating endeavor. It enables the person to find joy in the process of learning itself, independent of immediate outcomes, fostering resilience and a continued commitment to the pursuit of knowledge. Without this love, the philosophical journey becomes unbearable, leading to discouragement and abandonment of the quest for wisdom. Socrates’ emphasis on this point underscores the foundational role of *erôs* in shaping and sustaining the traits necessary for a philosophical nature.

Second, love serves as the unifying force that binds the necessary traits of a philosophical soul- good memory, a sense of justice, courage, and freedom from slavishness. This passionate *erôs* for truth and wisdom harmonizes these traits, ensuring they work together cohesively in the soul’s pursuit of understanding. According to Socrates, love drives the philosopher’s commitment to justice, providing the moral framework for an orderly and balanced soul (486b3-8)¹²². It fuels courage, allowing the philosopher to face challenges and transcend fears, such as the fear of death (486a8-b2)¹²³. It also fosters freedom from slavishness, liberating the soul from petty concerns and attachments to transient things (486b3-5). Good memory, essential for retaining and building knowledge, is similarly nurtured by love, which inspires attentiveness and a lasting connection to learning (486c7-d2). By integrating these traits, love creates a unified and coherent nature, perfectly suited for the philosopher’s lifelong journey toward wisdom and the ultimate grasp of reality.

In sum, philosophical love is not just a motivator but the central force that animates and integrates all the traits of the philosophical nature. It provides the passion and joy that transform the arduous process of learning into a fulfilling journey. Furthermore, it provides the energy, focus, and passion needed to cultivate these qualities and sustain the philosopher’s lifelong journey toward wisdom. Without *erôs*, the soul would lack the intrinsic drive necessary to overcome distractions, maintain perseverance, and achieve the harmony required for true philosophical inquiry.

4.2.2 The Second Stage

¹²²Plato’s *Republic* links the philosopher’s love (*erôs*) of truth to their commitment to justice. At 441d-442d, justice is defined as soul harmony, with reason ruling and spirit supporting to control desires. The philosopher’s *erôs* ensures this balance, motivating their pursuit of knowledge (485b-c) and aligning them with the Form of the Good (504a-505b). At 443c-444a, the just soul’s love of order reflects *erôs* for the intelligible realm, sustaining philosophical inquiry and moral integrity.

¹²³Plato’s works show that *erôs* fuels the philosopher’s courage, helping them overcome fears like death. In *Republic* 486a-b, the philosopher’s focus on eternal truths makes life and death seem insignificant. In *Phaedo* 67d-69e, death is seen as the soul’s release toward truth, inspiring courage through love of wisdom. Socrates exemplifies this in *Apology* 28b-d by valuing philosophy over fear of death. In *Symposium* 210a-211b, Diotima explains how *erôs* elevates the soul to conquer fear in pursuit of immortality. These passages confirm *erôs* as the source of philosophical courage and steadfastness.

The second stage in shaping the philosopher centers on physical training, music, and poetry, with the primary aim of cultivating harmony within the soul- a prerequisite for achieving justice. This stage plays a vital role in the philosopher's development, as it aligns the soul's three parts- the rational, spirited, and appetitive- under the governance of reason, fostering the inner balance required for philosophical inquiry.

In this section, I will provide a detailed analysis of how each of these elements, including physical training, music, and poetry, contributes to the harmonization of the soul, establishing the essential foundation for becoming a philosopher. Additionally, I will examine the role of *erôs* as a driving force in this process, demonstrating how the passionate longing for truth and beauty sustains and motivates the soul's pursuit of wisdom during this formative stage.

This analysis is based on Plato's account of the philosopher's education in the *Republic*: physical training and music are discussed in 376e-403c and 410b-412a, while poetry is examined in 386a-391c and further critiqued in 595a-608b. This early foundational education- consisting of music, poetry, and physical training- serves as preparation for the philosophers' higher studies, which Plato outlines in 503b-521c.

According to the view that I defend, each element plays a crucial role in fostering harmony within the soul: music and poetry refine the rational part, instilling a love of order, truth, and beauty, while physical training fortifies the spirited part, promoting courage and discipline and ensuring it remains aligned with reason rather than becoming unruly or excessive. This harmony, where all parts of the soul function under the governance of reason, constitutes the soul's justice and lays the groundwork for its higher pursuits, such as mathematics and dialectic. Thus, education in music, poetry, and physical training serves as an essential preparatory stage, harmonizing the soul and equipping it for the rigorous pursuit of higher knowledge and ultimate understanding.

What's more, *erôs* is essential to this process of education. It serves as the driving force that motivates and sustains the soul's pursuit of harmony and order. In the realm of music and poetry, *erôs* fuels the pursuit of harmony and order, as this pursuit originates in the soul's inherent desire for beauty. By directing the soul toward beauty, *erôs* instills order and harmony through crafted works and sustains the soul's natural inclination toward truth, particularly during its formative stages, before reason fully matures. In the context of physical training, *erôs* drives the soul's aspiration for strength, discipline, and balance, which represent beauty in the form of proportion and measure. Strength embodies the soul's capacity to endure and overcome challenges; discipline ensures the regulation of desires and the maintenance of self-control; and balance integrates these virtues, aligning them with reason.

Together, these elements of education- music, poetry, and physical training- cultivate the soul's affinity for beauty and order. By nurturing this affinity and fostering harmony within the soul, *erôs* prepares it for the higher pursuit of wisdom and, ultimately, for the apprehension of the Forms.

In *Republic* 376e-403c, Plato establishes an educational framework that forms the foundation for developing a philosophical soul. He argues that education must cultivate both the soul and the body through two distinct forms of training: music and

poetry for the soul, and physical training (*gymnastics*) for the body. The goal of this dual education is to achieve both moral and physical excellence, ensuring the proper formation of character. I will now introduce these two forms of education and explain why I believe *erôs* is deeply involved in this process.

The first reason for developing education in music, poetry, and craftsmanship, as Socrates emphasizes in *Republic* 401d-402a, is their ability to cultivate the soul by creating an orderly and beautiful environment, particularly through artistic and cultural works. This harmonious environment encourages the soul to align with its rational part and fosters intellectual growth by shaping its natural affinity for beauty, order, and virtue:

“our guardians will be brought up on images of evil, as if in a meadow of bad grass... Or must we seek out craftsmen by nature able to pursue what is fine and graceful in their work, so that those fine works will strike their eyes and ears like a breeze that brings health from a good place, leading them unwittingly, from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason?”

The latter would be by far the best education for them.” (*Rep.* 401d–402a, trans. Reeve)

In this account, Socrates highlights the profound influence of a beautiful and orderly environment on the soul. He insists that the soul, particularly in its formative years, is shaped by what it is repeatedly exposed to¹²⁴. When surrounded by what is “fine and graceful” (*Rep.* 401c5)- through music, poetry, and craftsmanship- the young soul is gently guided toward harmony, virtue, and alignment with reason.

Such an environment acts like a healthful breeze, gently nurturing the soul’s natural affinity for order and beauty. This effect is achieved through the rhythm and harmony present in artistic and cultural works. As Socrates explains in *Republic* 401d5-8, rhythm and harmony penetrate deeply into the soul, exerting a stronger influence than anything else and imparting “grace” (401d7). This grace enables a properly educated person to develop a sense of harmony and beauty that reflects the order of reason. It allows the soul to instinctively love what is noble and reject what is base, laying the foundation for a just and virtuous character.

In contrast, Socrates warns of the dangerous consequences of exposure to what is “ugliness, disordered, or morally corrupt” (401a4-5). He describes this through the metaphor of grazing in a meadow of “bad grass,” where the soul, like an animal consuming harmful food, gradually and unknowingly absorbs “images of evil”. This vivid image underscores how prolonged contact with poor artistic and moral influences leads to the deformation of the soul. Just as the body can be poisoned over time through unhealthy consumption, the soul accumulates corruption when it is continually exposed to works that reflect vice, disorder, or ugliness. In this way, the soul becomes habituated to discord, fostering an internal disharmony that pulls it away from virtue and reason.

Clearly, Socrates’s relies on the principle that the soul is malleable, especially during youth. It absorbs its surroundings and reflects them back over time. If the soul is surrounded by works of “beauty, grace, and order”, it will internalize those qualities, becoming harmonized and attuned to the higher truths that reason reveals (401d-402a). Conversely, an environment filled with “ugliness, chaos, and vice” distorts the soul’s sense of harmony and moral discernment. Instead of nurturing virtue, it fosters an

¹²⁴Plato emphasizes that the soul is shaped early through its experiences. In *Republic* 377a-c and 401d-402a, he shows how beauty, rhythm, and harmony nurture the soul’s love for virtue, while negative influences corrupt it (*Rep.* 401a-c). *Laws* 653a-c further stresses the lasting impact of early education. Together, these passages highlight that proper exposure to beauty and order is essential for developing a just and rational soul.

affinity for what is base, leading to a state of moral and intellectual corruption.

It seems clear to me that this argument explains why Socrates places such strong emphasis on education in music, poetry, and craftsmanship. These arts are not mere embellishments but tools for the soul's formation. Properly crafted works instill the values of rhythm, harmony, and order- qualities that reflect the beauty of reason itself. In contrast, poorly crafted or morally corrupt works pollute the soul, steering it away from its natural inclination toward justice and truth. Exposure to beauty prepares the soul to recognize and embrace reason, while exposure to ugliness erodes its capacity for virtue.

This is why I believe *erôs* is essential in the process of education through music, poetry, and craftsmanship. *Erôs* is the soul's deep desire to seek and possess what is beautiful eternally, as beauty is its natural object. It serves as the driving force that draws the soul toward beautiful things, which resonate with and nurture the rational part of the soul. Through this process, the soul gradually develops a profound affinity for what is noble and virtuous.

In this way, *erôs* propels the soul to move beyond superficial appearances, guiding it toward the higher truths of reason and the Good. Without *erôs*, the soul lacks the necessary motivation to pursue beauty and order forever, leaving it vulnerable to the disorder and corruption that arise from exposure to ugliness.

Furthermore, Socrates connects this love of order, grace, and measure to the soul's capacity for truth, even before a person's reason has fully matured. In *Republic* 402c-403c, Socrates introduces the idea that this form of education prepares the soul for its eventual encounter with "reason itself". By cultivating a deep love and appreciation for order and virtue from childhood, the soul becomes naturally inclined to "recognize" and embrace reason more readily when it matures (402a3):

"And since he has the right distastes, he'll praise fine things, be pleased by them, receive them into his soul, and, being nurtured by them, become fine and good. He'll rightly object to what is shameful, hating it while he's still young and unable to grasp the reason, but, having been educated in this way, he will welcome the reason when it comes and recognize it easily because of its kinship with himself."

In this passage, Socrates emphasizes the transformative power of *erôs*- specifically the love of order, grace, and measure- in shaping, harmonizing, and refining the soul, enabling it to achieve balance, cultivate virtue, and align its spirited and rational parts toward a unified and well-ordered life. Socrates explains that through exposure to beauty, harmony, and noble works, a person develops "the right distastes"- an intuitive appreciation for what is fine and a rejection of what is shameful. Even before the soul can fully understand the rational explanations behind its preferences, it instinctively loves what is noble and virtuous while detesting what is base.

The key idea here is that a love for beauty and order is essential for a person's development, serving as an early and formative intuition of what is noble and good, guiding the soul toward virtue even before reason has fully matured. Socrates suggests that through exposure to harmony, grace, and finely crafted works, the soul develops an intuitive sense of discernment, naturally gravitating toward what is virtuous and rejecting what is base. This initial appreciation for beauty acts as a moral guide, shaping the soul's inclinations and fostering an affinity for what is fine and

orderly¹²⁵.

Even without fully understanding the rational basis for these judgments, the soul begins to mirror the order and harmony it perceives in its environment. By nurturing this love for beauty early on, the soul becomes predisposed to embrace reason when it matures, recognizing it as something familiar and akin to itself. In this way, the love for beauty and order not only refines the soul's sensibilities but also prepares it for the higher pursuit of truth, virtue, and the Good, which are ultimately realized through the whole soul.

Socrates adopts a more cautious attitude toward poetry, recognizing its powerful influence on the soul- either cultivating virtue and order or corrupting it through disordered representations of reality. To protect the soul from corruption, he advocates for the censorship of poetry.

In *Republic* 386a-391c, he argues that poetry, particularly when it portrays gods and heroes behaving unjustly or immorally, implants harmful values in the soul. Such representations distort the soul's sense of what is noble and good, encouraging disordered desires and undermining its moral formation. By censoring these works, Socrates seeks to ensure that the soul is exposed only to representations that cultivate virtue, harmony, and order, aligning it with reason and preparing it for a life of justice and truth.

This argument is further developed in *Republic* Book X (595a-608b), where Socrates presents a more comprehensive critique of imitative poetry (*mimēsis*). He contends that imitative poetry is far removed from truth, as it imitates appearances rather than reality. Such works appeal to the irrational parts of the soul- its emotions and desires- rather than to reason. By fostering emotional excess and disorder, imitative poetry disrupts the soul's harmony, encourages harmful passions, and weakens its alignment with reason. Socrates concludes that most imitative poetry must be rejected, as it corrupts the soul and obstructs its pursuit of truth and virtue.

Hence, to sum up, early education in music and poetry shapes the soul's moral sensibilities, fostering an appreciation for harmony, order, and beauty that prepares it to embrace reason and virtue. *Erôs* is essential to this process, as it is the soul's deep longing for what is beautiful and noble. *Erôs* fuels the desire to pursue harmony and grace within music and poetry, drawing the soul toward order and instilling a natural love for what is good and virtuous. By guiding the soul to appreciate and internalize beauty, *erôs* nurtures the conditions necessary for the soul to recognize and align itself with reason when it matures, ultimately preparing it for the higher pursuit of truth and the Forms.

The discussion of physical training is introduced by Socrates in *Republic* 410b-411e. Physical training serves to strengthen "the spirited part of the soul" (*thymos*), cultivating courage and resilience:

"Physical training is for the sake of the spirited part of the soul, to make it courageous, and to make it resilient both in battle and in all circumstances." (*Rep.* 410b-c, trans. Grube-Reeve)

¹²⁵Gabriel Richardson Lear's argument in "Permanent Beauty and Becoming Happy in Plato's *Symposium*" (2007, pp. 96-123) supports this view by emphasizing how *erôs* begins with an attraction to physical beauty, which acts as an initial spark for the soul's movement toward higher realities. She shows that this early love for beauty is not merely superficial but plays a crucial formative role, guiding the soul's innate desire for order, harmony, and the good- values that precede full rational understanding.

In this passage, Socrates explicitly links physical training to the spirited part of the soul, emphasizing its role in fostering courage and resilience. He argues that physical training ensures the spirited part remains strong and capable of enduring hardship, particularly in situations that demand fortitude, such as battle. Without this training, the spirited part may become soft and docile or excessively aggressive, both of which lead to imbalance.

Socrates regards the spirited part (*thumos*) as a crucial ally of reason, with physical training functioning to strengthen and discipline it, so that it reliably supports rational judgment instead of acting impulsively or rebelliously. This process aligns the spirited part with the soul's higher purposes of order and justice.

The balance between physical training and music is key to achieving harmony in the soul. In *Republic* 410b-c, Socrates warns against overemphasis on either form of education, as it risks disrupting the harmony of the soul:

“Too much devotion to music produces softness and gentleness, **while excessive emphasis on physical training** produces a hardness and harshness that are equally out of harmony. **We must give both music and gymnastics their due and assign them to the soul in the proper proportions.**” (*Rep.* 401d-402a, trans. Grube, revised by Reeve)

In this account, Socrates emphasizes that imbalance leads to disharmony: an excess of music weakens the spirited part, making the soul overly soft and indulgent, while too much physical training makes the soul harsh and inflexible. The proper balance ensures that the spirited part- strengthened and tempered by physical training- remains an ally to reason, supporting the soul's pursuit of justice and virtue.

By integrating both music and physical training in the right proportions, Plato shows how each part of the soul- rational, spirited, and appetitive- can function harmoniously. This harmony reflects the soul's internal justice, preparing it to live in alignment with reason and, ultimately, to ascend toward the higher truths of the Forms.

The ultimate aim of this early education becomes clear in *Republic* Books VI and VII (503b-521c), where Plato outlines the higher education of the philosopher. Music, poetry, and physical training serve as a preparatory stage that shapes the character and harmonizes the soul¹²⁶. Only after achieving this harmony can an individual proceed to the rigorous intellectual studies necessary for philosophy. Beginning with mathematics and culminating in dialectic, this higher education allows the philosopher to ascend from the visible world to the intelligible world, culminating in the vision of the Form of the Good. Plato emphasizes that the soul must be properly prepared for this ascent; an unbalanced or disordered soul, one that has not undergone the harmonizing influence of music and physical training, cannot progress toward philosophical understanding.

4.2.3 The Third Stage

The third stage in the formation of a philosopher is the study of mathematics, a

¹²⁶Several scholars affirm that Plato's educational program in *Republic* (esp. 376e-403c) is designed to prepare the soul for philosophical development by harmonizing its parts through music, poetry, and physical training. See Erik Kenyon, “Music, Gymnastics, and Moral Development: *Republic* 2-4”, in *Philosophy at the Gymnasium* (2024); and Eirini Nikolaou, “The Educational Role of Harmonics in Plato's *Republic* VII,” *European Journal of Education Studies* 10.12 (2023): 345-360.

crucial step in the soul's intellectual ascent. This stage turns the soul toward abstract thought, guiding it beyond the world of appearances to focus on what is eternal and intelligible. In *Republic* Book VII (521c-531d), Plato identifies four key branches of mathematical study: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics. In this section, I will explore how each of these disciplines contributes to the philosopher's development and examine the role of *erôs* in driving this transformative process.

Mathematics disciplines the rational part of the soul, sharpening its ability to engage with eternal and unchanging truths. Arithmetic trains the mind to understand unity and multiplicity abstractly, laying the foundation for logical reasoning. Geometry focuses on spatial relationships and immutable forms, detaching the soul from the transient material world. Astronomy elevates the soul by revealing the harmonious order of the cosmos, fostering an understanding of rational structure. Harmonics connects mathematical proportions to auditory beauty, highlighting the unity between abstract principles and sensory experience. Together, these disciplines guide the soul's ascent toward higher knowledge and alignment with truth and harmony.

I argue that, in this process, *erôs* plays a crucial role by igniting and sustaining the philosopher's desire for knowledge and beauty. Mathematics, as the study of harmony, proportion, and order, resonates deeply with the soul's natural affinity for beauty- a longing awakened and fueled by *erôs*. This desire to uncover the deeper harmony underlying the world mirrors the soul's yearning to grasp the eternal Forms. *Erôs* propels the soul to transcend the limitations of opinion and sensory perception, compelling it to engage with the higher, intelligible truths that mathematics reveals, guiding it closer to wisdom and ultimate reality.

The necessity of studying mathematics arises from the inadequacy of sense perception, particularly when confronted with phenomena that present opposing appearances. In *Republic* 522d-523c, Socrates draws a distinction between summoning perceptions and Non-summoning perceptions. The key difference lies in whether sense perception alone is sufficient to provide a clear and reliable judgment:

"I'll point out...that some sense perceptions don't summon the understanding to look into them, because the judgment of sense perception is itself adequate, while others encourage it in every way to look into them, because sense perception seems to produce no sound result." (*Rep.* 523a8-b3, trans. Grube, revised by Reeve)

In this passage, Socrates highlights the limitations of sense perception as a standard for judgment. When sense perception provides clear and consistent information, it is sufficient on its own, and no further inquiry is needed. For example, when identifying three fingers and determining which one is the smallest, sense perception alone is adequate (*Rep.* 523c4-5). By contrast, sense perception often produces contradiction or ambiguity. For instance, the same object may appear both "big" and "small", light and heavy, or hard and soft, depending on the context or the perspective¹²⁷.

¹²⁷Socrates illustrates this point with the example of three fingers- index, middle, and ring- none of which differs significantly in color, shape, or size (*Rep.* 523c). While sense perception can easily distinguish them, it does not provoke the intellect to question further. However, when one and the same finger is perceived as both large and small, depending on what it is compared with, this contradiction triggers the need for rational inquiry. The soul, confronted with such conflicting appearances, is prompted to turn away from the senses and engage the understanding (*nous*) to resolve the inconsistency and pursue what truly is (*Rep.* 523b-524c).

When the senses fail to produce a “clear report,” the result is confusion, which gives rise to intellectual questioning and puzzles the soul. In such cases, the soul is compelled to turn to reason (*dianoia*) and understanding to resolve the contradictions and attain a higher level of clarity¹²⁸.

In my view, Socrates uses this argument to demonstrate why the study of mathematics is essential. It trains the soul to engage in “abstraction”, allowing it to transcend the unreliable and contradictory nature of sense perception and focus instead on eternal and intelligible truths that can be grasped only through the intellect.

Specifically, the soul seeks to move beyond what it perceives in order to think abstractly and grasp the true nature of reality. In Socrates’ example of seeing three fingers (*Rep.* 523c10-d4), the concepts of big and small appear mixed together through sight because sense perception cannot adequately distinguish between them. This confusion compels the soul to separate these qualities intellectually, relying on “thought” (*dianoia*) rather than perception alone¹²⁹. Through this process, the soul begins to ask questions such as “What is the big?” and “What is the small?”- a critical step toward abstraction and the comprehension of intelligible concepts. As Socrates explains a little earlier, “Understanding was compelled to see the big and the small, not as mixed up together, but as separate- the opposite way from sight” (*Rep.* 523b1-2). In this way, the soul begins its ascent from the contradictions and limitations of sense perception toward the clarity of reason and the realm of intelligible truths.

This discussion establishes the importance of mathematics in the philosopher’s education. According to Socrates, the earlier stages of education, such as music, poetry, and physical training, while valuable, are inadequate for the soul’s ascent to higher knowledge (*Rep.* 522a-c, 525b3-6). At this point, Socrates begins to direct attention toward a study that “touches all of them”- a discipline with a universal and abstract nature (*Rep.* 522b8). This leads to the introduction of mathematics, encompassing arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics, as the field that enables the soul to transcend the material world and focus on intelligible truths. I now turn to examine how each of these disciplines contributes to the philosopher’s formation.

These disciplines, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics, serve as instruments of soul-turning (*anagôgê*), training the soul to think abstractly and initiating the intellectual ascent from the world of appearances to the realm of ultimate reality¹³⁰. Socrates’ descriptions of each discipline illustrate how they contribute to this intellectual and spiritual ascent:

Socrates begins with Arithmetic (*Rep.* 522c-525a), as the study of pure numbers, is the first step in this ascent. It compels the soul to consider entities that cannot be

¹²⁸In the Divided Line analogy (*Rep.* 509d-511e), *dianoia* refers to the intermediate cognitive state used by the soul when it engages in reasoning based on hypotheses, such as in mathematics and geometry. It operates above mere belief (*pistis*) but below pure understanding (*noēsis*). In the context of sense perception’s contradictions (*Rep.* 523a-525a), *dianoia* is the faculty the soul turns to when it seeks to resolve ambiguities presented by the senses. It marks a shift from reliance on appearances to rational investigation, initiating the ascent toward knowledge (*epistēmē*).

¹²⁹See note 121: *Dianoia* is the level of thinking described in the Divided Line (*Rep.* 509d-511e), referring to the soul’s ability to engage in discursive or logical reasoning.

¹³⁰The term *anagôgê* (*ἀναγωγή*), meaning “ascent” or “leading upwards,” refers in *Republic* VII (*esp.* 521c-531d) to the soul’s intellectual movement from the visible realm of opinion to the intelligible realm of knowledge. The mathematical disciplines- arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics- are described as preparatory studies that draw the soul upward (*anagôgê tēs psychês*, 521d6) by turning it away from sensible particulars and toward the Forms, especially the Form of the Good (see *Rep.* 525c-526c; 531d). On this process, see also Ferrari 2000, pp. 74-81; Burnyeat 2000, pp. 21-35.

grasped through the senses but only through reason. Numbers exist eternally and unchangingly, separate from the material world, which awakens the soul to think abstractly and prepare for higher intellectual inquiry (*Rep.* 525a1, 525c3). Socrates emphasizes its significance by describing arithmetic as indispensable for the awakening of the intellect, since it frees the soul from reliance on the sensory and focuses it on what is eternal.

Geometry follows as the study of spatial forms and eternal relationships (*Rep.* 525a-527d). Socrates highlights its role in turning the soul toward the realm of being, as it deals with universal and unchanging truths. By contemplating geometrical forms such as lines, circles, and planes, the soul learns to distinguish between the transient appearances of the material world and the constancy of the intelligible realm (*Rep.* 527b7-9). Geometry, therefore, trains the philosopher to contemplate realities beyond the visible and prepares the mind for more abstract reasoning.

Next, astronomy continues the upward ascent by directing attention to the motion of the heavens (*Rep.* 527d-530c). However, Socrates distinguishes between observing physical celestial bodies and contemplating the mathematical order that governs their movement. True astronomy, according to Socrates (*Rep.* 530b2), is not concerned with what can be seen with the eyes but with the rational harmony and geometric precision underlying celestial motion. It encourages the philosopher to move beyond appearances and recognize the rational structure of the universe.

Finally, harmonics serves as another stage in the intellectual ascent by revealing the mathematical ratios that underlie musical harmony (*Rep.* 530c-531c). Socrates warns against focusing on the physical sounds of music, as these are perceived through the senses. Instead, the philosopher must turn their attention to the pure proportional relationships that create harmony, which reflect the same order and unity found in the cosmos. In doing so, harmonics, like the other mathematical disciplines, directs the soul to perceive the eternal, abstract truths that mirror the Forms.

Together, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics form a path for the soul's turning upward. These disciplines cultivate the philosopher's ability to think abstractly, rely on reason rather than the senses, and recognize the rational and eternal structure of reality. By engaging with these studies, the philosopher is prepared for the final ascent through dialectic, which leads to the direct apprehension of the Form of the Good. Mathematics, therefore, plays a foundational role in transforming the soul and aligning it with ultimate truth¹³¹.

In this process, *erôs* serves as an implicit yet essential motivating force for the soul's ascent and engagement with these disciplines. While Plato does not explicitly address the role of *erôs* in the study of mathematics in *Republic* 521c-531d, the broader theme of *erôs* as a driving force behind the philosopher's pursuit of higher knowledge is evident throughout his works, particularly in *Republic* Book VI, as well as the *Symposium* (210a-212a) and *Phaedrus* (246d-249d). I will argue that, although *erôs* is not directly mentioned in connection with mathematics here, its underlying presence- manifesting as the soul's longing for truth and ultimate reality- provides the essential motivation to undertake and persevere in the rigorous intellectual study required by these disciplines.

In *Republic* Book VI (485a-487a), Plato makes clear that the philosopher's love of learning, rooted in *erôs*, is what drives them to seek knowledge of eternal truths.

¹³¹Several scholars support the view that the mathematical disciplines- arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics- serve as essential preparatory studies guiding the soul's intellectual ascent (*anagôgê*) in Plato's *Republic*. See Burnyeat (2000, pp. 1-81), Fine (1990, pp. 85-115).

Mathematics, as an abstract and rational discipline, requires precisely this kind of passionate commitment and intellectual desire. Without *erôs*, the soul would lack the motivation to engage in the rigorous study of mathematics or to ascend toward the ultimate understanding of the Forms. Moreover, in the *Republic*'s Book VII, the study of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics is introduced as a means of turning the soul away from the sensory world and toward the intelligible realm. Philosophers have a deep desire to know the eternal and unchanging realities, which aligns with the soul's engagement in abstract studies like mathematics. Although Plato does not directly invoke *erôs* in this section, the passionate longing for truth and beauty, central to *erôs*, is implicitly necessary for the philosopher's character.

In the *Symposium* (210a-212a), Diotima describes the ascent of *erôs*, where the soul moves from love of physical beauty to the love of higher, abstract beauty, culminating in the vision of the Form of Beauty. This framework can be applied to the study of mathematics in the *Republic*: *erôs* for knowledge drives the soul to ascend from the sensory world (appearances) to the intelligible world (Forms) through disciplines like arithmetic and geometry. In the *Phaedrus* (246d-249d), Plato describes *erôs* as the force that gives the soul "wings," enabling it to rise toward the divine and the realm of truth. This metaphor aligns with the soul's upward journey in the *Republic*, where the study of mathematics plays a role in turning the soul upward (*anagôgê*).

Based on this textual basis, I argue that while Plato does not explicitly connect *erôs* to the study of mathematics in the *Republic*, a close examination of his dialogues shows that *erôs* operates as an essential yet often implicit force driving the philosopher's intellectual ascent. This passionate longing for truth and beauty motivates the soul to engage rigorously with abstract disciplines, enabling it to transcend the world of sensory appearances and approach the eternal Forms. Thus, *erôs* is fundamental not only to the philosopher's moral and spiritual development but also to their sustained commitment to the arduous study required for true philosophical knowledge. In other words, although the direct connection between *erôs* and mathematical study is not stated in *Republic* Book VII, its importance is firmly established in Book VI (485a-487a) and is further articulated in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, where *erôs* is portrayed as the motivating power behind the soul's upward journey toward the truth.

To be clear, the argument is not that mathematics cannot be studied without *erôs* in a minimal or instrumental sense, but that *erôs* is indispensable for the sustained, wholehearted, and genuinely transformative engagement with abstract truths that Plato takes to be the proper aim of mathematical inquiry. What is at issue is not mere exposure to mathematical content or the acquisition of technical competence, but the soul's stable orientation toward intelligible truth as something worth pursuing for its own sake. It is this love of truth that makes genuine study possible, and it is this orientation that Plato consistently identifies as *erôs*.

Mathematics, for Plato, concerns objects that are intelligible rather than perceptible and whose truth is stable, eternal, and independent of sensible change (*Rep.* 520b-521d, 532b-533a). To engage with such objects is therefore to direct the soul away from what is immediately given and toward what is abstract, invisible, and resistant to ordinary cognition. This redirection cannot be adequately explained in terms of external compulsion, procedural training, or habituation alone. Mathematical study requires the soul to persist in inquiry despite difficulty, opacity, and the absence of immediate gratification, and thus presupposes a motivational orientation that draws

the soul toward intelligible truth as something choiceworthy in itself.

Although Plato does not explicitly state that *erôs* motivates mathematical study, this role follows naturally from his account of intellectual formation and the structure of the soul. *Erôs* is the principle through which the soul becomes affectively invested in intelligible objects, sustaining attention, effort, and discipline over time (*Symp.* 202c-203b; *Phdr.* 251a-254e). While attitudes such as care, concern, or curiosity may initiate engagement with abstract subjects, they do not by themselves explain the depth and persistence of commitment required for rigorous mathematical inquiry¹³². These attitudes can remain episodic or externally oriented, whereas *erôs*, as Plato conceives it, integrates cognition and desire, aligning the soul's motivational economy with its epistemic aims. Insofar as mathematics occupies an intermediate position between opinion and knowledge and functions as a preparatory discipline that habituates the soul to intelligible being, it requires precisely this kind of enduring orientation toward truth.

One might think that a lesson of the Cave analogy is that the study of abstract truths does not require passionate commitment or intellectual desire, since the ascent toward the intelligible initially occurs against resistance and under compulsion (*Rep.* 517a-518c)¹³³. On this reading, learning appears to be something imposed upon the soul rather than something it actively seeks. However, this interpretation overlooks the distinction Plato draws between being forced to encounter intelligible objects and genuinely coming to know them. Compulsion may initiate the soul's reorientation, but it cannot by itself account for the stability, depth, or continuity of understanding that Plato associates with knowledge. The prisoner who is merely dragged upward remains disoriented and pained; only when the soul comes to find intelligibility itself attractive does it cease resisting and begin to engage willingly. The Cave thus illustrates not the dispensability of desire in intellectual formation, but its necessity: the soul must be transformed so that it desires what it initially resists. *Erôs* explains this transformation by grounding the shift from coerced exposure to sustained contemplation, showing that passionate commitment is not required at the outset of learning but is indispensable for the soul's enduring engagement with abstract truth.

4.2.4 The Fourth Stage

The fourth stage in the formation of a philosopher is dialectic (*Rep.* 531c-535a), which Plato identifies as the highest and most essential stage of the philosopher's education. This stage is achievable only after the soul has been prepared by preliminary studies such as music, poetry, physical training, and mathematics. In this section, I examine the significance and concrete process of dialectic education in shaping the philosopher, while also analyzing the role of *erôs* in driving and facilitating this transformative journey.

I begin by clarifying the distinction between dialectic and the preliminary stages of education: unlike earlier disciplines, dialectic relies entirely on intellectual reasoning rather than sensory experience. As Socrates illustrates through the analogy of emerging from the cave to behold the sun (*Rep.* 514a-521b, 532b-535a), dialectic enables the direct apprehension of ultimate principles, equipping the philosopher with the ability to distinguish between what merely "seems" and what truly "is." Through

¹³² For the distinction between *erôs* and other affective states operative in Plato's account of the soul, see p. 80.

¹³³ McDavid, 2025, pp. 1-12. Nathan Pinkoski, 2019.

dialectical inquiry, philosophers critically examine all unexamined beliefs and assumptions, moving beyond appearances to grasp the essence, or “being itself”, of each thing.

Next, I will examine the role of *erôs* in the process of dialectic education. I argue that *erôs*, or philosophical love, acts as an indispensable driving force, inspiring and sustaining the philosopher’s pursuit of truth and virtue. To support this argument, I draw on the *Alcibiades* as a significant complement to the *Republic*. While the *Republic* outlines the overarching goals and principles of dialectic in shaping a philosopher, I contend that Plato offers a more detailed and practical account of its process in the *Alcibiades*.

I argue three key points to illustrate the role of *erôs* in shaping the philosopher. First, philosophical love serves as an indispensable reflective medium that allows one to see oneself more clearly. Socrates explains that this process is not possible in isolation, as the soul, like the eye, cannot see itself directly; it requires a mirror. Philosophical love provides this relational mirror, enabling the soul to reflect on its nature and recognize its true state.

Second, philosophical love facilitates and sustains philosophical engagement by fostering the critical examination of unexamined assumptions. This process involves questioning and clarifying misconceptions, ultimately leading to deeper knowledge and a clearer understanding of one’s epistemic state. Recognizing one’s ignorance is the essential first step in self-cultivation, which is why Socrates insists that self-knowledge is the necessary foundation for self-cultivation.

Third, philosophical love is characterized by its extraordinary enduring nature. Unlike fleeting passions, its duration and intensity stem from its focus on the soul, which is stable and imperishable. The lover’s devotion persists even as physical beauty fades, and the relationship endures as long as the soul continues to progress toward virtue and goodness. Through its unwavering constancy, philosophical love fosters a lifelong process of introspection and self-discovery. It ensures that self-knowledge is not a fleeting realization but a continuous endeavor, enabling individuals to deepen their understanding of themselves, refine their character, and align their actions with the principles of justice and wisdom.

Thus, the philosopher’s development in dialectic is inherently relational, requiring active engagement in dialogue and is rooted in philosophical love.

Building on this analysis, I propose that Plato outlines a crucial method within philosophical love. This method is neither critical nor domineering but inherently collaborative and transformative, grounded in the lover’s unwavering commitment to the intellectual and moral betterment of both parties. Philosophical love ensures that this process is not coercive but guided by a shared aspiration for the good. It fosters mutual appreciation and respect for each other’s character and virtues, creating a powerful bond that sustains the connection between souls over time.

In both the *Alcibiades* and the *Republic*, philosophical love functions as the catalyst for the dialectical education, channeling desire into the pursuit of wisdom, self-improvement, and the cultivation of virtue. This transformative power of *erôs* demonstrates its central role in aligning the soul with its highest aspirations.

In *Republic* 531c-535a, Socrates presents dialectic as the highest stage of

formative education for the philosophical soul¹³⁴. This stage is distinguished by its rejection of sole reliance on images or assumptions, focusing instead on understanding the very essence of each thing through reason. Socrates compares this process to a journey from darkness to light, using the analogy of emerging from the cave to behold the sun:

“It (dialectic) is intelligible, but it is imitated by the power of sight... In the same way, whenever someone tries through argument and apart from all sense perceptions to find the being itself of each thing and doesn’t give up until he grasps the good itself with understanding itself, he reaches the end of the intelligible, just as the other reached the end of the visible.

Absolutely.

And what about this journey? Don’t you call it dialectic?

I do.” (*Rep.* 532a-b5, trans. Grube, revised by Reeve)

In this account, Socrates defines dialectic and illustrates it through a comparison with the faculty of “sight” (*Rep.* 532a2). Just as the eyes move past shadows and reflections to behold the sun itself, so the intellect, guided by dialectic, moves beyond sensory aids and hypothetical assumptions to apprehend the very essence- or “being itself”- of each thing.

The purpose of Socrates’ explanation of the intellectual journey, in my view, is to emphasize that the dialectical method differs significantly from other forms of inquiry. It represents the soul’s progression from dependence on sensory perception and images to the direct apprehension of ultimate principles. Socrates explicitly distinguishes dialectic from earlier studies, such as music, poetry, physical training, and mathematics, which he describes as a preliminary education. While these preparatory disciplines help the soul think more abstractly, they still rely, to some extent, on assumptions or on what can be visualized¹³⁵.

Dialectic, by contrast, is guided entirely by pure reason. When Socrates states that it proceeds “apart from all sense perceptions” (*Rep.* 532a5), he underscores that dialectical inquiry relies purely on intellectual reasoning rather than sensory experience such as sight or hearing¹³⁶. Instead, it involves starting from hypotheses and systematically ascending toward ultimate truths, the Forms, without relying on physical representations or empirical observations. This method enables the philosopher to move beyond appearances and grasp the essence, or “being itself,” of each thing.

¹³⁴Dialectic, as described in *Republic* 531c-535a, represents the pinnacle of philosophical education. It involves moving beyond reliance on images, opinions, or sensory-based assumptions to grasp the true essence or being of things through rigorous, reasoned inquiry. This method cultivates the philosopher’s capacity for direct intellectual apprehension of the Forms, culminating in the understanding of the Form of the Good, which is the ultimate object of knowledge and the source of all reality and truth. See Ferrari 2005. Irwin 1995, pp. 274-279.

¹³⁵In *Republic* 510b-511d, Plato explains that disciplines such as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics guide the mind beyond the world of sensory perception toward the realm of intelligible objects. However, these studies still depend on certain unexamined assumptions or hypotheses and make use of visible figures and diagrams as aids to understanding. While they elevate the intellect by focusing on abstract concepts rather than mere appearances, they do not achieve complete freedom from reliance on images or taken-for-granted principles. This reliance marks a significant difference between these mathematical sciences and dialectic, which Plato presents as the highest form of knowledge. Dialectic alone seeks to ascend beyond hypotheses to grasp the first principles or the very essence of things, enabling a purer, direct apprehension of truth. Thus, while mathematics plays a crucial preparatory role in training the soul for philosophical inquiry, it remains an intermediate stage that is surpassed by dialectic’s rigorous, assumption-free reasoning.

¹³⁶This reflects Socrates’ distinction between knowledge (*episteme*) and opinion (*doxa*), a central feature of Plato’s epistemology, especially in the *Republic* (509d-511e). *Episteme* is true knowledge of the unchanging, eternal Forms, attained through reason, while *doxa* involves beliefs or opinions about the sensory, changeable world, which are less reliable and more prone to error.

The ability provided by dialectic to distinguish between what “seems” and what “is” is essential for the philosopher, whose task is to understand the true nature of reality. Dialectic enables them to “destroy the hypotheses” (*Rep.* 511b-c) and seek the ultimate foundation of knowledge. It trains the philosopher to challenge every assumption and to think critically, systematically, and purely through reason, distinguishing them from those who rely on opinion, sense perception, or unexamined beliefs.

This ability represents the philosopher’s essential ascent, both intellectual and spiritual. This transformative power is vividly exemplified by Socrates’s metaphor of the cave (514a-521b, 532b-d)¹³⁷, where the soul is initially imprisoned in darkness, bound to the illusions of shadows cast on the wall. These shadows represent false opinions and the deceptive nature of sense perception, which the unexamined life accepts as reality. The process of dialectic begins with the soul’s release from these bonds, initiating a gradual and difficult reorientation toward the light of truth.

In this metaphor of the cave, Socrates describes this ascent as a difficult but necessary journey, during which the philosopher’s intellect gradually advances through successive levels of understanding. At first, the soul can only perceive reflections and “shadows of the things that are” (*Rep.* 532c1)- a stage akin to the study of preparatory disciplines like mathematics and geometry, which rely on assumptions and images. However, as the soul progresses through dialectical reasoning, it learns to transcend these intermediaries and strive toward direct knowledge of reality. The philosopher’s ultimate goal is to behold the “sun” itself, which symbolizes the Good, the source of all truth, intelligibility, and existence¹³⁸.

Thus, dialectic is not merely a tool of reasoning but a means of liberation and enlightenment. It shapes the philosopher by freeing the soul from the cave of ignorance and leading it toward the highest form of knowledge. Without dialectic, the soul remains trapped in illusion, unable to fulfill its potential or comprehend the ultimate principles that govern the world. Socrates points out that dialectic method “awakens the best part of the soul” and directs it toward “the study of the best among the things that are” (*Rep.* 532c4-5).

The best part of the soul- the rational part, reasoning faculty- is drawn upward by dialectic, which leads it away from lesser forms of knowledge based on opinion, sense perception, and images. This ascent enables the soul to apprehend true reality, represented by the Forms, particularly the Form of the Good. Without dialectic, the soul remains trapped in the cave, unable to see beyond shadows and reflections, and incapable of attaining genuine knowledge of reality. Through dialectic, the soul achieves liberation and fulfills its ultimate purpose: the pursuit of wisdom and the comprehension of the highest truths.

Hence, the ability to progress from reliance on sensory images and unexamined assumptions to the apprehension of ultimate principles, as described by Socrates,

¹³⁷Earlier in the *Republic* (514a-517b), Socrates presents the famous allegory of the cave, where prisoners mistake mere shadows for reality. To gain true knowledge, they must be freed from their chains, turn their gaze away from the shadows, and ascend toward the illuminating light of the sun, symbolizing the Form of the Good. In 532b-d, Socrates explicitly connects this gradual process of awakening and ascent with the study of dialectic, identifying dialectic as the method by which the soul moves from ignorance to knowledge, ultimately reaching the highest understanding of reality.

¹³⁸Through the disciplined use of reason, the philosopher rises above the lower levels of cognition- belief (*pistis*), which is tied to trust in sensory experience, and imagination (*eikasia*), which involves mere conjecture about appearances- and progresses into the higher realms of intellectual activity. These include *dianoia*, or discursive reasoning based on provisional hypotheses and logical deduction, and finally noesis, the direct, intuitive apprehension of the Forms and ultimate truths without reliance on assumptions or sensory input.

establishes dialectic as the cornerstone of philosophical education and the essential path for those who seek to understand truth in its purest form. The philosopher, trained in dialectic, is uniquely equipped to comprehend reality at its core, not merely through its images or reflected appearances. Through the rigorous process of dialectic, the philosopher ascends step by step, moving from the examination of provisional truths to the apprehension of the highest principle- the Form of the Good. This ascent culminates in the wisdom that enables the philosopher to perceive the world as it truly is, representing the pinnacle of the philosopher's education and the fulfillment of the soul's ultimate purpose.

4.2.5 The Role of *Erôs*

The significance of dialectic and its profound impact on shaping the philosopher's abilities is now evident. In this section, I will demonstrate that *erôs* plays a pivotal role in dialectical education, acting as a central driving force that inspires and sustains the philosopher's pursuit of truth and virtue, ultimately guiding the soul toward philosophical growth and enlightenment.

To support this argument, in this section, I will introduce the *Alcibiades* as a crucial complement to the *Republic*, illustrating how *erôs* functions as a central force that propels lovers toward deeper truth and moral growth¹³⁹. While Plato emphasizes the transformative role of dialectic in shaping the philosopher in *Republic* Book VII, he offers a more detailed and practical illustration of its precise process in *Alcibiades*. In *Republic* Book VII (532a-535a), Plato outlines the general principles and ultimate aim of dialectic as the philosopher's supreme method for attaining intellectual clarity and truth. In contrast, *Alcibiades* provides a vivid and detailed account of how this method is applied in practice. By examining both texts, I will demonstrate how Plato connects the theoretical framework of dialectic, as the highest stage of philosophical education, with its practical application in the dialogical engagement.

In sum, this comparison seeks to offer a more complete and comprehensive framework for understanding of Plato's vision of philosophical education. Ultimately, this analysis underscores the central role of *erôs* as the driving force behind the philosopher's pursuit of wisdom.

¹³⁹Some scholars have raised doubts about the authenticity of the *Alcibiades* I, highlighting its simpler style, repetitive argumentation, and less sophisticated treatment of philosophical themes compared to Plato's acknowledged dialogues (Schleiermacher 1818; Taylor 1926). Questions about its authorship are further supported by manuscript traditions and ancient catalogues that either omit the work or attribute it ambiguously within the Socratic tradition (Nails, *The People of Plato*, 2002). Consequently, some propose that *Alcibiades* I may have been composed by a later follower of Plato or another Socratic philosopher aiming to imitate Plato's style and ideas, possibly as an introductory text for younger or less advanced students. However, recent scholarship has seen a resurgence in support for the dialogue's authenticity. Jakub Jirsa, for instance, contends that the arguments against its authenticity do not conclusively disprove its attribution to Plato, and that the dialogue offers valuable insights into early Platonic philosophy (Jakub Jirsa, "On the Authenticity of *Alcibiades* I: Some Reflections" 2009, pp. 225-244). Despite these concerns, the dialogue remains a valuable resource for exploring key early Platonic concepts such as self-knowledge, *erôs*, and the education of the soul. Its portrayal of *Alcibiades* as a figure struggling with desire and philosophical insight provides important perspective on Plato's pedagogical intentions and the moral psychology underlying his philosophy. Therefore, regardless of questions about its direct authorship, *Alcibiades* I continues to offer significant insight into Plato's intellectual development and remains a useful text for understanding his broader philosophical project.

Before examining the precise role of *erôs* in dialectical education, it is essential to first clarify how the *Alcibiades* aligns with and supplements the *Republic*. In my view, two key points illustrate this connection:

First, the *Alcibiades* demonstrates that the dialectical method unfolds through a series of philosophical dialogues, guiding the interlocutor to recognize and examine the hidden assumptions that underlie his beliefs. This process allows the soul to move from confusion toward greater clarity and philosophical insight. Second, the dialogue emphasizes that the aim of dialectical education is not merely intellectual refinement but the transformation of the self- it is a moral as well as cognitive ascent, in which the individual turns from ignorance toward genuine self-knowledge and care for the soul. These themes- the uncovering of presuppositions, the ascent toward truth, and the ethical reorientation of the soul- closely parallel the account of the philosopher's development in the *Republic*, especially as outlined in the images of the Divided Line and the Cave, where dialectic leads the soul upward from opinion to knowledge, and from shadows to reality.

The first step of the dialectical method is to challenge overconfidence, with the goal of exposing unexamined assumptions or beliefs. This approach is exemplified in the philosophical dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades in *Alcibiades* 109a-113c6. Here, Socrates systematically poses a series of probing questions to examine Alcibiades' confidence in his readiness to lead Athens. Through this conversation, it becomes evident that Alcibiades' self-perception, particularly his understanding of justice and his preparedness to act on it, is unfounded and lacks a solid basis.

Socrates begins by asking Alcibiades whether he knows "what is just and unjust," treating this knowledge as a necessary precondition for anyone who aspires to lead (*Alc.* 109b3-c1)¹⁴⁰. Alcibiades replies with confidence, but Socrates immediately challenges the basis of this claim, asking whether his knowledge comes from formal instruction, personal experience, or rational inquiry (*Alc.* 109d2-4). As the conversation unfolds, Alcibiades is unable to identify any reliable source for his supposed knowledge. He admits he has not studied justice, has no teacher, and cannot explain how he came to believe he understands it. His confidence is exposed as unfounded, grounded not in education or reflection but in convention and unexamined belief.

The inconsistency in Alcibiades' belief is thereby evident: he claims to possess knowledge despite having never received formal instruction. This reveals that his supposed understanding of justice is not grounded in seriously examined assumptions. By drawing attention to the absence of a clear source or foundation for this knowledge, Socrates dismantles Alcibiades' confidence, showing that it is not based on genuine understanding.

As we observe, Socrates uncovers Alcibiades' ignorance in this process: Alcibiades does not know what justice is, yet he mistakenly believes he does. Socrates then challenges him to consider the implications of such ignorance, especially in matters of justice. He claims that if Alcibiades is mistaken about justice, he cannot

¹⁴⁰Plato consistently treats knowledge of justice as essential for leadership. In *Republic* I (331c-336a), Socrates refutes Thrasymachus' claim that justice is merely the interest of the stronger, arguing that true rulers serve the good of the ruled. In *Republic* IV (433a-444a), justice is defined as inner harmony, where reason governs spirit and desire- a condition necessary for sound judgment. The *Gorgias* (469b-480e) presents justice as the ethical boundary that distinguishes true statesmanship from tyranny. In *Alcibiades* (109b-126e), Socrates begins by testing Alcibiades' understanding of justice, exposing his ignorance and showing that without such knowledge, political ambition is misguided and dangerous.

hope to guide others effectively, let alone lead the city (*Alc.* 113c2-6). This realization compels Alcibiades to confront the gap between his lofty ambitions and his actual lack of preparedness, exemplifying the essence of the elenchus.

For Alcibiades, acknowledging his ignorance is a necessary first step in his philosophical journey toward genuine understanding and self-knowledge¹⁴¹. This is essential because he initially rejects Socrates' advice about the importance of true knowledge of justice, believing instead that he already understands what justice is. As a result, he is unable to approach or attain real knowledge.

This acknowledgment compels him to examine the underlying foundations of his beliefs, ultimately revealing them to be false. His state closely parallels the intellectual condition of the prisoners in the Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic* (514a-517a)¹⁴². Just as the prisoners are confined to a limited perspective, mistaking shadows on the wall for reality due to their inability to perceive the true forms behind them, Alcibiades is similarly trapped by his unexamined beliefs. He assumes he understands concepts such as justice and virtue, yet his beliefs remain superficial and untested. This false confidence, rooted in ignorance, blinds him to the deeper truths he must uncover to fulfill his ambition of becoming a wise and effective leader.

What is most significant in the *Alcibiades* is that *erôs* plays a crucial role in bringing about this acknowledgment of his ignorance. This ignorance extends beyond a mere lack of concrete knowledge about justice to include his epistemic state: Alcibiades not only does not know what justice is but is also unaware that he lacks this knowledge.

Plato's message is that recognizing one's ignorance requires philosophical love, a true love rooted in virtue, as an indispensable medium for this recognition. Beginning at *Alcibiades* 124b, Plato explains why philosophical love is essential for attaining the clearest self-knowledge¹⁴³. The most critical passage appears in 132c6-133c7, where Socrates employs the analogy of sight, describing the tangible process of seeing oneself in a mirror, to illustrate how self-knowledge is achieved through philosophical love.

In the key passage of *Alcibiades* (132c6-133c7), Socrates introduces that one can attain the clearest understanding of the soul only if four conditions are met: (i) the soul must reflect on itself by observing another soul; (ii) this reflection must take

¹⁴¹See Ellisif Wasmuth (2016) and Pauliina Remes (2013). Wasmuth (2016) argues that *Alcibiades I* presents a complex model of self-knowledge involving three interrelated dimensions: recognizing one's limits, acquiring the kind of reflective understanding necessary for political leadership, and achieving a form of self-mirroring wherein the soul turns inward to examine itself. This interpretive framework reinforces the idea that the recognition of ignorance is not merely a dramatic device but the essential condition for the philosophical development the dialogue seeks to initiate. Similarly, Remes (2013) maintains that Socrates leads Alcibiades to realize he does not yet know the true object of self-knowledge- namely, the soul understood as the rational agent of action- before any genuine care or inquiry can begin. This further reinforces the idea that the recognition of ignorance is the essential starting point for the soul's philosophical transformation.

¹⁴²In both cases, ignorance remains hidden to those who possess it- they are unaware of their own lack of knowledge. The prisoners in the cave accept the shadows as reality, convinced that their limited perceptions are the full truth. Similarly, Alcibiades falsely believes he already knows what justice and leadership entail, unaware that his understanding is superficial and incomplete. The crucial moment of transformation in both narratives arises through the intervention of a guide: the philosopher who leads the prisoners out of the cave into the light, and Socrates, who rigorously challenges Alcibiades to recognize the limits and inadequacies of his supposed knowledge. This guiding role is essential for awakening the soul to its ignorance and initiating the journey toward genuine knowledge and self-awareness.

¹⁴³See *Alcibiades I* 124b and especially 132c6-133c7, where Plato uses the analogy of "sight" and the "mirror" to explain how philosophical love (*erôs*) enables the clearest self-knowledge. This passage highlights that genuine self-understanding arises not simply from intellectual inquiry alone but through a loving, virtuous engagement with oneself, making *erôs* essential to the soul's recognition of its own nature and ignorance.

place within a philosophical dialogue, using words as the medium for developing understanding and knowledge; (iii) the dialogue must aim at the betterment of the soul, promoting virtues such as wisdom; and (iv) the process must persist for as long as possible¹⁴⁴.

Building on this, Socrates explains that philosophical love is essential for attaining self-knowledge. Just as one cannot see oneself physically without a reflective surface like a mirror, the soul requires a relational and reflective medium to understand itself. In the *Alcibiades*, the philosophical love between Socrates and Alcibiades serves as this medium, enabling Alcibiades to recognize his ignorance of justice and his epistemic limitations regarding it.

The key point here is that self-knowledge arises from the soul's ability to reflect on itself through engagement with another soul, a process facilitated by philosophical love¹⁴⁵. This relational dynamic is essential because self-perception is inherently limited; individuals often lack the capacity to see their own assumptions, biases, and ignorance without external guidance. In the dialogue, Socrates acts as this reflective "surface" for Alcibiades, challenging his unexamined beliefs about justice, leadership, and his own readiness to govern¹⁴⁶. Equally important, Socrates employs a methodical series of questions and answers, utilizing the refutational method of dialectic. By probing Alcibiades' confidence in his understanding of justice and exposing the lack of a solid foundation for his claims, Socrates compels him to confront the reality of his ignorance.

In addition, Plato makes it clear that this process is not possible in isolation. The soul, like the eye, cannot see itself directly. It requires a relational medium, namely, another soul engaged in philosophical dialogue, to uncover its true nature. Through this engagement, individuals are able to identify and question their own assumptions, correct their misconceptions, and start the journey for virtues such as wisdom and justice. This confrontation is not purely destructive; it is profoundly constructive, as it allows the beloved to see themselves more clearly, and initiates the process of introspection and self-cultivation¹⁴⁷.

For the formation and education of the philosopher, this love holds even greater significance. In *Alcibiades* 124b–135e, Socrates identifies three key characteristics of

¹⁴⁴Georgia Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi, "Plato's *Alcibiades* on Self-Knowledge and the Forms," *Ancient Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2015): 85-102. Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi explores how the analogy between vision and knowledge in *Alcibiades* directs the soul toward the apprehension of the Forms, especially the Form of the Good.

¹⁴⁵Daniel Werner (2013, pp. 307-331) argues that the eye analogy in *Alcibiades I* (133a-c), in which the soul comes to know itself by looking into another soul as into a mirror, illustrates that self-knowledge is achieved only through relational reflection rather than introspection alone. On this view, Alcibiades must first acknowledge his ignorance to become receptive to the kind of dialogical encounter that enables true self-recognition.

¹⁴⁶The metaphor of the "surface" or "mirror" in *Alcibiades I* (132c-133c) captures how self-knowledge depends on the soul's capacity to see itself indirectly, through reflection in another soul. Socrates functions as this reflective surface for Alcibiades, enabling him to perceive the gaps and contradictions in his beliefs. This externalized self-examination is necessary because individuals often cannot directly access or recognize their own assumptions and ignorance (cf. Socratic maieutics). The dialogical method, characterized by questioning and refutation, acts as the tool for revealing these hidden flaws, as Socrates' dialectic dismantles Alcibiades' superficial confidence in his knowledge. Linda Napolitano's detailed analysis emphasizes that recognizing one's own soul and understanding its nature are foundational for cultivating virtues such as wisdom and justice, highlighting the constructive role of this reflective process in Plato's philosophy (Napolitano 2012).

¹⁴⁷Fiona Leigh's article (2020, pp. 247-280) supports this view by showing that the elenchus functions not simply as a negative critique but as a constructive, dialogical process that helps individuals uncover and critically examine their own beliefs. Leigh emphasizes that through this method, interlocutors become aware of their cognitive states and faulty assumptions, which initiates a process of self-correction and intellectual growth. This aligns closely with the idea that Socratic confrontation in *Alcibiades* is not destructive but formative- enabling the beloved to see themselves more clearly and begin the journey toward virtues like wisdom and justice through introspection and self-cultivation.

philosophical love:

First, philosophical love, rooted in virtue and characterized by mutual care for the other's betterment, creates an environment conducive to meaningful self-reflection. Unlike other forms of love that focus on physical beauty or fleeting desires, philosophical love centers on the pursuit of virtue and the cultivation of wisdom. It guides the soul to look beyond superficial attributes, directing attention to the deeper truths of character and knowledge.

This highlights the uniqueness of philosophical love as a force that aligns the soul with its higher purpose: the pursuit of truth and the cultivation of virtue. In *Alcibiades* 131c6-132a7, Socrates contrasts this philosophical love with the love of the common people. He concludes that the love of the common people might "corrupt" Alcibiades (132a3) because their affection is not for Alcibiades' soul but for external qualities such as his wealth, physical beauty, noble lineage, and similar attributes. This kind of love is inherently unstable and perishable, as it is tied to possessions or qualities that are themselves impermanent. In contrast, true philosophical love is both enduring and intense because its object, the soul, is stable and non-perishable. A lover guided by philosophical love will not abandon the beloved even when physical beauty fades. Moreover, this love remains steadfast as long as the soul continues to progress in its pursuit of virtue and goodness, ensuring its extraordinary longevity and transformative power.

Second, the process of self-discovery within philosophical love is inherently collaborative and transformative. It enables the beloved to see themselves more clearly, not through criticism or dominance, but through the lover's unwavering commitment to their intellectual and moral betterment¹⁴⁸. Philosophical love ensures that this process is not coercive but guided by a shared aspiration for the good. More specifically, this method involves a mutual appreciation and valuing of each other's character and virtues, creating a powerful bond that sustains the connection between souls over time. In both the *Alcibiades* and the *Republic*, philosophical love functions as the catalyst for the dialectical process, channeling desire into the pursuit of wisdom, self-improvement, and the cultivation of virtue. This transformative power of *erôs* demonstrates its central role in aligning the soul with its highest aspirations.

Finally, the effectiveness of philosophical love lies in its enduring nature. Unlike fleeting passions, philosophical love persists, offering a sustained framework for self-examination and personal growth. Socrates emphasizes (*Alc.* 131d-e, 104c-d) that true love is remarkable for its extraordinary duration and intensity, as its focus- the soul- is stable and imperishable. The lover remains devoted even when physical beauty fades, and the relationship endures as long as the soul continues its progress toward virtue and goodness. Through its unwavering constancy, philosophical love fosters an ongoing process of introspection and self-discovery, ensuring that self-knowledge is not a fleeting revelation but a lifelong endeavor. This sustained engagement enables individuals to deepen their understanding of themselves, cultivate their character, and align their actions with the principles of justice and wisdom. By nurturing this transformative process, philosophical love serves as a vital force in the soul's pursuit

¹⁴⁸James Michael Ambury's works (Ambury 2014 and 2025) support this view by emphasizing that the confrontation Alcibiades experiences with Socrates is not intended to shame or destroy him but to initiate a transformative process. Ambury interprets *Alcibiades I* as a dialogue focused on dismantling Alcibiades' false self-image so that he can gain clearer insight into his true nature as a rational soul. This "destructive" encounter with ignorance is actually constructive, as it enables Alcibiades to see himself more honestly and thus begin genuine introspection and self-cultivation. Ambury highlights how this process is foundational for philosophical knowing and virtuous living, showing that the dialogue's pedagogical aim is to foster self-recognition and moral improvement rather than mere criticism or condemnation.

of truth and moral excellence.

Thus, to conclude, philosophical love uniquely unites the pursuit of self-knowledge with the cultivation of virtue, as demonstrated in both the *Republic* and the *Alcibiades*. For Socrates, true self-knowledge, which forms the foundation of self-cultivation, involves more than simply recognizing one's limitations; it requires actively directing the soul toward wisdom and justice. Philosophical love facilitates this alignment by ensuring that the reflective process serves the soul's betterment. It not only uncovers ignorance but also provides the motivation to overcome it, as the lover's commitment inspires the beloved to strive for excellence. In this way, philosophical love transforms self-knowledge from a passive recognition into an active and enduring practice of personal and moral growth.

Now we can understand Socrates' suggestion that philosophical love is the most effective way to achieve self-knowledge and self-cultivation (*Alc.* 133c6-7, *Rep.* 490a-494a)¹⁴⁹. This is because it integrates relational reflection, rigorous inquiry through dialogue, the pursuit of virtue, and the sustaining power of enduring commitment. Philosophical love uniquely enables the soul to confront its ignorance, cultivate wisdom, and align its actions with the good, making it the ultimate path to genuine self-knowledge.

4.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrate that Plato presents a clear and rigorous process for the formation and development of the philosopher, which progresses through four distinct stages: the selection of individuals with the proper nature, a foundational education in music, poetry, and physical training, the study of mathematics, and the practice of dialectic. Furthermore, I argue that *erôs*, or philosophical love, plays an indispensable and essential role in this educational process, serving as the central element in Plato's theory of the philosopher's formation.

Erôs initiates the educational journey in the formation of the philosopher. According to Plato, identifying a philosophical nature is fundamentally about recognizing individuals who possess philosophical love. This is because forming a philosopher is a lifelong and profoundly challenging endeavor, suitable only for a rare few. The selection stage is, therefore, regarded as an essential starting point, ensuring that those chosen are naturally inclined to pursue truth and wisdom throughout their lives.

Philosophical love is a deep, enduring, and unwavering desire to seek and possess truth and wisdom for all time. A person who embodies this love devotes their energy, focus, and attention to overcoming distractions and challenges that might otherwise "corrupt" them and lead them astray from the philosophical path. In contrast, a person lacking this love is easily swayed by other desirable things, such as wealth, political power, or bodily pleasures. The absence of *erôs* results in

¹⁴⁹This idea finds a parallel in the *Timaeus* (90d-92c), where, although *erôs* is not explicitly named, Plato emphasizes the soul's development through its harmony with the cosmic order. In this account, the soul's love for wisdom and cosmic order acts as a vital motivating force, enabling it to turn inward, comprehend its own nature, and strive for moral and intellectual perfection. By aligning itself with the rational and harmonious structure of the universe, the soul deepens its self-understanding and strengthens its commitment to virtue and knowledge, thus achieving true cultivation and growth.

discouragement, self-loathing, and ultimately, a rejection of philosophical pursuits altogether. For this reason, Socrates initially identifies the philosophical individual as someone who possesses a genuine and powerful love for truth and wisdom.

Erôs is essential to the philosopher's early development. I develop two key points to support this:

First, as demonstrated in the Channel Analogy (*Rep.* 419b-d), *erôs* redirects one's desires, reorienting them toward eternal goals and diminishing their inclination toward fleeting and ever-changing pursuits. This redirection prioritizes higher aims, particularly the essence of things, above all else. As a result, individuals driven by this love come to value the pleasures derived from these higher pursuits, such as the acquisition of knowledge and the contemplation of eternal truths, seeing them as deeper and more enduring than any other pleasure. This transformation shapes both their character and way of life, as they shed their attachment to the transient and impermanent, dedicating themselves fully to the pursuit of higher, more meaningful joys.

Second, *erôs* plays a crucial role in sustaining the soul's balance and order during the philosopher's formative stages, particularly before reason fully matures. It acts as a driving force that draws the soul toward beautiful things, which resonate with and nurture the rational part. By engaging with the values of rhythm, harmony, and order inherent in beautifully crafted works, the soul develops a deep affinity for what is noble and virtuous. This is why Plato designates education in music, poetry, and physical training as the second stage of the philosopher's education. A soul nourished by beautiful things develops "the right distastes" (*Rep.* 402a3), an intuitive appreciation for what is fine and a rejection of what is shameful. Even before the soul fully understands the rational basis for its preferences, it instinctively loves what is noble and virtuous while detesting what is base. This initial appreciation for beauty functions as a moral guide, shaping the soul's inclinations and fostering a love for what is fine and orderly. As a result, the soul becomes naturally inclined to "recognize" and embrace reason more readily as it matures, laying the foundation for its alignment with truth and wisdom.

Erôs plays a crucial role in the philosopher's later (intellectual) development, especially in the final two stages of their formation: the study of mathematics and the engagement in dialectic. These stages share a fundamental characteristic: both require the individual to move beyond the limitations of personal sense perception and unexamined beliefs, driving them to seek higher, more abstract and eternal truths.

According to Socrates' account, sense perception often fails to provide clear and consistent information, puzzling the soul and prompting deeper inquiry. For example, in mathematics, the same object (such as one finger among three) may appear both big and small, light and heavy, or hard and soft, depending on context or perspective. Similarly, in dialectic, individuals may hold conflicting views on abstract concepts such as justice. These contradictions force the soul to turn away from unreliable sensory input and unexamined opinions, relying instead on higher understanding to resolve inconsistencies and attain greater clarity. Through this process, the soul begins to contemplate essential questions, such as "What is the small?" or "What is justice?" This process marks the beginning of intellectual ascent, which Socrates refers to as "the turning of the soul" (*Rep.* 518c-d). It is at this point that the soul starts its journey upward, leaving behind the contradictions and limitations of sense perception and progressing toward the clarity of reason and the realm of intelligible truths.

This intellectual ascent is driven by *erôs*; it not only fuels but also sustains philosophical engagement, which is, for Plato, the key to exposing limitations and pursuing critical examination.

In philosophical engagement, *erôs*, the powerful love rooted in virtue, plays a central role in aligning the soul with betterment. It nurtures a deep appreciation and valuing of each other's character and virtues, forging a profound bond that sustains the connection between souls over time. *Erôs* embodies the lover's unwavering commitment not only to their own intellectual and moral betterment but also to that of the beloved. To achieve this, they engage in a dynamic process of questioning and answering, fostering critical reflection and self-examination. This dialogical interaction challenges unexamined beliefs, reveals inconsistencies, and guides both individuals toward a deeper understanding of truth and the Good, thereby enriching their intellectual and moral growth.

What is more, *erôs* transforms the arduous and lifelong philosophical journey into a deeply fulfilling pursuit. As a sustaining passion, *erôs* provides the focus and perseverance essential for the philosopher's lifelong effort to grasp the Forms and attain wisdom. Philosophical love embodies a profound and intrinsic longing to understand what truly is, driving individuals to dedicate all their life to overcoming distractions and the things might divert them from the philosophical path. This passionate love ensures that the philosopher remains steadfast, finding purpose and fulfillment in the pursuit of truth and wisdom.

In this way, we can understand why Plato defines the philosopher as "the lover of wisdom." This love initiates the soul's "turning" away from the contradictions of the sensory world and toward the realm of intelligible realities. It fuels and sustains the entire formative process, redirecting one's desires toward the pursuit of wisdom, self-improvement, and the cultivation of virtue, while ensuring that their focus remains steadfastly aligned with this goal. The transformative power of *erôs* highlights its central role in guiding the soul toward its highest aspirations. With this love, the journey of intellectual and moral growth is transformed into a fulfilling and virtuous pursuit, embodying the very essence of the philosopher's life.

Chapter 5

Erôs in Shaping the Tyrannical Character

I have argued that, in Plato, the role of *erôs* in shaping various character types is captured by the characterization that “*erôs* is wanting to possess the good forever” (*Symp.* 206a11). In Chapter 4, I applied this conception to the philosopher, who occupies the highest position on Socrates’ moral spectrum. In this chapter, I will apply the same concept to the opposite end of the spectrum, the tyrannical character, to explore the consistent role of *erôs* in Plato’s writings.

Section 1 introduces the concept of tyrannical *erôs*, which I define as the dominant desire or ruling power that governs the soul of the tyrannical man¹⁵⁰. To clarify this concept, I will address and resolve a significant but ambiguous issue raised in the literature concerning the nature of tyrannical *erôs*. The primary issue centers on the category of tyrannical *erôs*, which leads to a broader debate about its object. The section will examine these two issues separately to provide a clearer understanding of *erôs* in the context of tyranny. Building on this investigation, Section 2 will provide a clear and detailed analysis of the role that *erôs* plays in shaping the tyrannical man. This process will be divided into three stages: early, middle, and late, with an examination of *erôs*’s influence at each stage. These sections will focus on Books IX and X of the *Republic*, where Socrates gives a detailed account of the formation and development of the tyrannical character. Finally, Section 3 will conclude the chapter with a summary of the key findings.

5.1 The Concept of Tyrannical *Erôs*

This section focuses on the nature of tyrannical *erôs*- understood as the dominant desire or ruling power that governs the soul of the tyrannical man. In light of the ongoing and often ambiguous scholarly debate surrounding the nature of this desire, the purpose of this section is to clarify and resolve that ambiguity. Before examining the specific role *erôs* plays in forming the tyrannical character (the subject of Section 5.2), it is necessary to establish a clear account of what tyrannical *erôs* is.

I begin by introducing the concept of tyrannical *erôs*, which I define as the ruling desire or dominant power within the tyrannical soul. This definition, I will show, is consistent with Socrates’ account in the *Republic* and broadly accepted among commentators. I then turn to a central issue in the literature: the categorization of tyrannical *erôs* and the question of its object. These two questions- what kind of desire *erôs* is and what it desires- will be treated separately. In the final part of the section, I offer my own account, arguing that *erôs*, as it rules in the tyrannical man’s

¹⁵⁰Tyrannical *erôs* should be understood as a particular- and radically distorted- expression of *erôs* in its general form. At its core, *erôs* is the soul’s “longing to possess the good forever”, a fundamentally teleological and aspirational drive that, when rightly ordered, can lead the soul toward wisdom and the divine. However, the nature of *erôs* is profoundly shaped by the psychic condition in which it emerges. In the tyrannical soul, where reason has been overthrown and the lawless appetites have gained ascendancy, *erôs* is co-opted by the basest elements of the soul. It becomes fixated on the immediate, the excessive, and the unnecessary, while still retaining its essential drive for permanence and total possession. What makes *erôs* tyrannical is not a change in its fundamental structure- *erôs* remains a unifying and ruling desire- but the perversion of its orientation: the soul’s vision of the good is corrupted, and so *erôs* leads not upward toward truth and order, but downward into bondage, delusion, and insatiable craving.

soul, is a single, unified and powerful desire that drives him to pursue the permanent possession of what he takes to be good¹⁵¹.

The main conclusion is as follows: (i) tyrannical *erôs* is a single kind of desire, not a broad category of erotic desires; (ii) the *erôs* ruling the tyrannical man's soul should be understood as the desire that manifests as a form of lawlessness, highlighting the tyrant's method of obtaining and enjoying the goods he identifies; and (iii) while the goods the tyrant seeks are indeed unnecessary or lawless appetitive desires, this is not due to the inherently bad nature of *erôs*, but rather the weakness of reason in this character type and the bad company surrounding him¹⁵².

5.1.1 Tyrannical *Erôs*

I argue that tyrannical *erôs* is the ruling desire or dominant psychic force that governs the soul of the tyrannical man- a definition grounded in key passages where Socrates explicitly describes *erôs* as the power that seizes control and comes to rule within this character's soul.

This conception is developed most fully in *Republic* 571a-576b, where Socrates offers a sustained analysis of the origin, formation, and way of life of the tyrannical individual. In these passages, *erôs* is portrayed not merely as one desire among others, but as the central and overwhelming force that seizes control of the soul, directing all thought and action toward the pursuit of its object and reinforcing the tyrant's descent into lawlessness and enslavement.

To substantiate this account, I turn to three pivotal passages that illustrate the sovereign role of *erôs* in the tyrannical soul- passages that, as I will show, support this interpretation both textually and through their reception in the secondary literature.

First, the dominant role of *erôs* is established early in the development of the young tyrant. In *Republic* 572e4-7, Socrates explains how tyrant-makers deliberately plant a powerful *erôs* in the young man's soul to lead his idle desires. The purpose of planting this *erôs* is to transform the young man into a potential tyrant, fulfilling the hopes of the tyrant-makers. This process takes place during the very early stages of the young tyrant's development:

“Then, when those clever enchanters (*magoi*) and tyrant-makers have no hope of keeping hold of the young man in any other way, they contrive to **plant in him a powerful erotic love, like a great winged drone, to be the leader of those idle desires that spend**

¹⁵¹This understanding of tyrannical *erôs* accords with my general characterization of *erôs* as “the desire to possess the good forever” (*Symp.* 206a11). Even in its most distorted and lawless form, *erôs* retains its essential structure: it is a longing oriented toward what the soul perceives as good and seeks to secure as a lasting possession. In the case of the tyrannical soul, this structure is preserved, but its orientation is corrupted- reason no longer governs what is judged to be truly good, and the soul instead fixates on base, unnecessary pleasures. What distinguishes tyrannical *erôs* is not the absence of the fundamental *erôs*-structure, but the disordered condition of the soul in which it arises.

¹⁵²As defined in Chapter 1, *erôs* has a dual nature: it can move the soul either upward or downward, depending on the soul's condition and orientation. In its upward direction, *erôs* draws the soul toward genuine goods- truth, beauty, and ultimately the Form of the Good- guided by reason and philosophical aspiration. In its downward expression, however, *erôs* becomes attached to illusory or base goods, pulled by the appetitive part of the soul when reason is weak or suppressed. The case of the tyrannical man exemplifies this downward pull: *erôs* remains the same in structure- a longing for permanent possession of the good- but becomes corrupted in content and direction due to the collapse of rational guidance and the influence of corrupt associations.

whatever is at hand." (*Rep.* 572e3-6, trans. Grube-Reeve)

In this passage, *erôs* is likened to a "winged drone" leading all other desires. This imagery suggests that *erôs* becomes not just one among many desires, but the primary, commanding force that organizes and controls all other desires. From the very beginning, *erôs* is established as the driving force behind the young tyrant's actions, shaping his tyrannical nature.

Second, in *Republic* 573c-d, *erôs* is portrayed not merely as a simple desire or preference but as a compulsive and tyrannical force that seizes control over the entire soul of the tyrannical man. It functions as a kind of internal despot, dictating not just isolated actions but the total orientation of the individual's life:

"I think that one in whom the tyrant of erotic love dwells, and in whom **it directs everything, next goes in for feasts, revelries, luxuries, girlfriends, and all that sort of thing.**

Necessarily.

And **don't many terrible desires grow up day and night beside the tyrannical one, needing many things to satisfy them?"**

Indeed they do." (573d2-7, trans. Grube-Reeve)

Here, *erôs* is more than a simple desire; it is a compulsive, overpowering force that governs the tyrant's every action and shapes his entire life. This relentless craving overwhelms him, driving him to satisfy his desires endlessly and without limits. The phrase "without restraint" highlights the absence of reason or self-control, which normally regulate desires. Because these guiding faculties are weakened or ignored, *erôs* seizes full control of the soul, demonstrating how the tyrannical man becomes enslaved to his own unruly passions.

Third, in the city-soul analogy in *Republic* 574e-575a, Socrates compares *erôs* to a tyrant ruling the soul of the tyrannical man with complete anarchy and lawlessness. This *erôs* becomes the sole ruler of his soul, driving him as if he were a city governed by chaos:

"But, rather, **erotic love lives like a tyrant within him**, in complete anarchy and lawlessness as his sole ruler, and drives him, as if he were a city." (574e6-575a2, trans. Grube-Reeve)

In this passage, *erôs* is portrayed as the ultimate force of tyranny within the soul, exercising absolute and lawless control over the individual. It is not merely one desire among others, but a dominant and destructive power that usurps reason and subjugates the entire soul to its rule. By likening *erôs* to a tyrant ruling a city in anarchy, the text underscores its totalizing influence: it governs every aspect of the man's life, driving him toward lawlessness, excess, and moral collapse. This depiction makes clear that *erôs*, when unchecked by reason, does not simply mislead- it enslaves and corrupts the soul from within.

Thus, as these passages make evident, *erôs* functions as the ruling force within the tyrannical man's soul- a point that is both textually grounded and widely accepted. Yet a crucial and unresolved question remains: what precisely is the nature of this tyrannical *erôs* that governs the soul? Interpretations diverge significantly. Some scholars maintain that tyrannical *erôs* comprises a collection of appetitive desires that, taken together, gain dominance over the soul- treating it as a general category of unruly impulses. Others argue that tyrannical *erôs* should be understood as a single,

distinct appetitive desire that assumes total control, standing as the central psychic force in the tyrant's inner life. To clarify this disagreement, I will now examine the principal scholarly positions and their underlying arguments.

5.1.2 The Category of Tyrannical *Erôs*

In this section, I address the question of how tyrannical *erôs* should be categorized: is *erôs*, as it rules within the soul of the tyrannical man, a broad class of appetitive desires, or is it a single, specific kind of desire? To clarify this issue, I will first present the major scholarly interpretations and the central lines of debate. I will then critically assess these positions, examining the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments. Finally, I will offer my own account, explaining why I reject some of these views while also acknowledging areas of partial agreement.

In exploring the question of whether tyrannical *erôs* should be understood as a broad class of desires or as a single, specific kind of desire, two principal lines of interpretation emerge in the scholarly literature. Before advancing my own view, I will first outline these two approaches, highlighting their core claims and underlying assumptions.

The first view argues that tyrannical *erôs* is an entire class of appetitive desires, particularly those that are unnecessary and lawless¹⁵³. These desires collectively dominate the tyrannized soul. For example, Reeve states that “the tyrannical person... is ruled by lawless unnecessary appetitives” (Reeve, pp. 157, 257)¹⁵⁴, emphasizing how these desires collectively dominate and control the tyrannical man's actions. By treating tyrannical *erôs* as representative of a wider set of desires, Reeve reinforces the view that the tyrannized soul is overwhelmed by a multitude of appetites or desires, all of which drive the individual toward lawlessness and indulgence.

Although this view is supported by relatively few scholars, its strength lies in a crucial textual detail: at the beginning of *Republic* Book IX, Socrates introduces a distinct category of appetitive desires- lawless appetitive desires (*Rep.* 571a1-b7). The timing and unique emphasis on this category in connection with the tyrannical soul strongly suggest that these lawless desires govern the tyrant. Notably, this class of desires is absent from Socrates' descriptions of other character types and appears specifically at the outset of his analysis of the tyrannical man, reinforcing its special role.

Scholars who endorse this interpretation argue that lawless appetitive desires best capture the tyrant's ruling power. As a corrupt subset of unnecessary desires, lawless desires are far more extreme and destructive, characterized by “complete freedom from any control by shame or reason” (*Rep.* 571c7). Socrates' portrayal of the tyrant's

¹⁵³In *Republic* Books VIII and IX, Socrates identifies three types of desires: necessary, unnecessary, and lawless. Necessary desires, like hunger, are natural and essential for well-being. Unnecessary desires seek pleasure beyond basic needs and can be controlled through reason. Lawless desires, introduced in Book IX (571a1-572b7), are extreme and violate moral and social limits. While normally restrained by reason and law, these desires dominate the tyrannical soul, with *erôs* becoming the driving force behind its disorder and moral decay.

¹⁵⁴Reeve, C. D. C., *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato's Republic*, Princeton University Press, 1988. Reeve understands tyrannical *erôs* not as a single desire but as a collective force comprising various excessive and uncontrolled appetites.

behavior in 574a-575a, marked by reckless and destructive actions, closely aligns with the nature and consequences of these lawless desires. Therefore, tyrannical *erôs* can be understood as constituted by these lawless, unnecessary appetitive desires that dominate and corrupt the tyrannical soul.

This interpretation of tyrannical *erôs* is not fully supported by the text. I will first outline the general position of this view and then, after presenting the opposing view—which holds that tyrannical *erôs* is a single, specific kind of appetitive desire— I will explain why I reject the broader interpretation. My reasons for rejecting it draw on both Johnstone’s argument for a singular tyrannical *erôs* and my own analysis of the section on lawless desires in the *Republic*’s account of tyranny. These points will be developed in the following discussion.

The second view argues that tyrannical *erôs* is a single, specific kind of desire, often associated with the pursuit of a particular object, such as sex, political power, or bodily pleasure. Scholars like Nicholas White, Rachel Barney, and Cinzia Arruzza contend that tyrannical *erôs* is primarily a desire for sex, defining it as “sexual desire”¹⁵⁵. White emphasizes this by stating that “the sexual desire that characterizes the tyrannical personality...dominates in such a way as to provide for its own satisfaction at the expense of the satisfactions of all other parts of the soul” (White, 1979, p. 201). This perspective aligns with Barney, who suggests that “the tyrannical man’s sexual desire dominates, driving him to obtain wealth from everywhere” (Barney, 2008, p. 369). Similarly, Arruzza posits that tyrannical *erôs*, an extreme form of the democrat’s ruling desire, is “of a sexual kind” (Arruzza, 2019, pp. 180, 183).

In addition to sexual desire, some scholars interpret tyrannical *erôs* as a desire for power¹⁵⁶. Blössner views tyrannical *erôs* as a desire for political power, arguing that, in both the tyrannical soul and city, the dominant drive is the pursuit of “unlimited power” (Blössner 2007, p. 361). Similarly, Scott interprets tyrannical *erôs* as a desire for power, but with a unique intensity that transforms the person’s attitude, making them “indifferent” to social norms and boundaries (Scott 2007, p. 140). Scott’s analysis underscores tyrannical *erôs* as a potent and destructive force that compels the tyrant toward detached and self-serving relationships.

Johnstone offers a distinctive interpretation by arguing that “tyrannical *erôs* is fundamentally a single, specific desire for bodily pleasure” (Johnstone 2015, pp. 424, 428, 436)¹⁵⁷. According to him, the tyrannical man’s relentless drive to become a tyrant is deeply rooted in this craving— the aspiration to satisfy a multitude of clamorous bodily desires without limitation (Johnstone 2015, p. 429). He contends that bodily pleasure constitutes both the original and ultimate object of the tyrant’s *erôs*, with all other pursuits functioning instrumentally to secure this gratification. This perspective emphasizes the centrality of hedonistic impulse in shaping the tyrannical soul, portraying the tyrant’s initial and defining choice as one committed to the pursuit of unrestrained sensual pleasure, which then cascades into the broader character of lawlessness and self-indulgence¹⁵⁸.

¹⁵⁵Barney (2008), pp. 357-372; Arruzza (2019); White (1979).

¹⁵⁶Blössner, 2007, pp. 345-385; Scott, 2007, pp. 136-153.

¹⁵⁷Johnstone, 2015, pp. 423-437.

¹⁵⁸Although minor differences exist among scholars within the second view, they consistently emphasize three key points: (i) tyrannical *erôs* is a single kind of appetitive desire, not a broad category; (ii) it is singular because it drives the individual to pursue one specific type of object, with its focus fixed on this particular aim; and (iii) this object fundamentally defines the tyrannical person, serving as the primary motivation and ultimate goal behind all their actions, with everything directed toward attaining it. This concise summary of the second view’s core points

I will now explain why I reject the interpretation of tyrannical *erôs* as an entire class of lawless appetitive desires, while still finding partial agreement with the view that tyrannical *erôs* is a single, specific kind of desire¹⁵⁹. To support my position, I first outline Johnstone's analysis, which demonstrates that Socrates uses "*erôs*" as a singular term when describing the tyrant. I then present additional points focused on the contextual limits of lawless appetitive desires in Socrates' account, showing why these desires cannot function as the sole ruling force within the tyrannical soul. Together, these arguments highlight the difficulties of equating lawless appetitive desires with the tyrant's governing power.

Johnstone offers two main reasons for his view that Plato presents tyrannical *erôs* as a single kind of desire- a position that aligns with my own. First, he points that Socrates consistently uses "the singular term *erôs* to describe the ruling force in the tyrannical man's soul" (Johnstone 2015, p. 425). This is evident in Book IX of the *Republic* (e.g., 572e5, 573d4, 574e3, 575c6-8, 577d1-5), where every reference Socrates makes to tyrannical *erôs* is singular. On the basis of this consistent grammatical usage, Johnstone argues that tyrannical *erôs* is distinct from a collection of appetitive desires. Instead, he maintains, it is "a single, persistent, powerful desire for bodily pleasure." (Johnstone 2015, p. 428).

Second, Johnstone argues that the city-soul analogy supports the interpretation of *erôs* as a singular desire, "since a tyrannical city has (by definition) only a single ruler" (Johnstone 2015, p. 425). This parallel suggests that the tyrannical soul, too, is ruled by a single dominant desire, *erôs*. I find this inference from the city-soul analogy persuasive, as it accords with Plato's broader philosophical framework, in which the soul's structure mirrors that of the city. Just as a city ruled by one tyrant is governed by a single, supreme authority, so too the tyrannical man's soul is ruled by one overriding desire that consolidates and directs the rest. In agreement with Johnstone, I therefore maintain that understanding *erôs* as a single kind of desire, rather than as a broad class of appetitive desires, offers a more coherent and philosophically consistent reading of the *Republic*'s depiction of the tyrannical soul.

In addition to Johnstone's grammatical analysis of tyrannical *erôs* as a singular term, I offer a further reason for rejecting the opposing view that identifies the ruling force in the tyrant with lawless appetitive desires. My argument focuses on a contextual limitation: specifically, whether these lawless desires can genuinely serve as the dominant power throughout the tyrant's psychological development. This issue raises doubts about whether lawless desires, despite their destructive character, possess the coherence and continuity required to function as the ruling principle in the soul's internal hierarchy:

In *Republic* Book IX, Socrates makes it clear that the "lawless" appetitive desires (*paranomoi*, 571b4), introduced at the beginning of the book, are only unleashed in

is provided here as a foundation for the more detailed analysis that follows. These points are crucial for framing the subsequent examination of the specific object of tyrannical *erôs*- one of the most central and enduring questions in Plato's depiction of the tyrant.

¹⁵⁹Although I agree with Johnstone that tyrannical *erôs* is best understood as "a single kind of desire", my interpretation differs from his in an important respect. Johnstone identifies "bodily pleasure" as the specific object of the tyrant's *erôs*, suggesting that this desire explains the tyrant's pursuit of wealth and power as a means to sensual gratification. In contrast, I remain "agnostic" at this stage about the precise object of tyrannical *erôs*, focusing instead on the structural role of *erôs* as a singular, dominating force that cannot be reduced to a mere aggregation of lawless desires.

the tyrannical man's soul at a later stage in his development. These lawless desires emerge after the last remnants of restraint in the tyrant's soul have been completely eroded (especially *Rep.* 574d5 and following)¹⁶⁰. By this point, *erôs*- the powerful desire that has been ruling the tyrannical man's soul- has already taken control and shaped his character for some time. This timeline is crucial for rejecting the idea that lawless desires are synonymous with *erôs*: while lawless desires eventually take over, it is *erôs* that has been the driving force from the very beginning. By the time lawless desires emerge, *erôs* has already been in control, shaping the tyrannical man's soul. Therefore, tyrannical *erôs* cannot be understood as a broader set of lawless appetitive desires; instead, I argue, it must be seen as a distinct, singular desire that precedes and enables the rise of lawless appetites.

This section has examined the debate over the nature of tyrannical *erôs* in Plato's *Republic*: whether it should be understood as a broad class of lawless appetitive desires or as a single, specific kind of desire. I outline both interpretations and the scholarly positions supporting them. While some argue that tyrannical *erôs* represents a collective of lawless desires dominating the tyrannical soul, others- including White, Barney, Arruzza, Blössner, Scott, and Johnstone- interpret it as a singular desire focused on a particular object, such as sex, bodily pleasure, or political power.

I have presented two main arguments for rejecting the view that tyrannical *erôs* is a broad class of desires. The first reason, drawn from Johnstone's grammatical analysis, shows that Socrates consistently refers to tyrannical *erôs* in the singular throughout Book IX of the *Republic*, indicating that it is not a diffuse collection of appetitive urges but rather a unified desire. The second reason, based on my own analysis, highlights the contextual limitations of lawless appetitive desires in the tyrant's development: while they emerge at a certain stage, they do not function as the governing force that drives the tyrannical soul. These two arguments, taken together, undermine the claim that tyrannical *erôs* is equivalent to a broad class of lawless desires and instead support the view that tyrannical *erôs* is a singular, dominant desire.

Thus, although I find partial agreement with the second view, I do not adopt any existing interpretation in full. Rather, I argue that determining the exact nature and object of tyrannical *erôs* requires further analysis- an inquiry that the next section will pursue in detail.

5.1.3 The Object of Tyrannical *Erôs*

In this section, I continue to examine the nature of *erôs*, focusing on whether tyrannical *erôs* constitutes a single, specific kind of desire- namely, desire for a particular object. Based on my analysis of the scholarly view, their position rests on two main claims: (i) tyrannical *erôs* is a single type because it is exclusively directed toward one particular type of object, such as the sex, political power, or bodily pleasure; and (ii) the tyrannical person is characterized by the object of this dominant desire, with the object being seen as the ultimate goal and primary motivation of the tyrant. I will critically examine both of these claims.

While I agree that tyrannical *erôs* constitutes a single type of desire, I reject the attempt to define it in terms of any specific object. To support this position, I first highlight the limitations of reducing tyrannical *erôs* to a desire for a particular kind of

¹⁶⁰Lawless appetitive desires, according to Socrates, emerge when reason is suppressed, like in sleep, allowing "bestial and wild" cravings to take over (*Rep.* 571c3-5).

object, such as sex or political power. Second, I show that it is inadequate to define the tyrannical person solely in terms of the object of this dominant desire. Finally, I challenge the view that the tyrant's position at the bottom of Socrates' hierarchy of corrupt souls must be understood by interpreting tyrannical *erôs* as a form of inferior appetite or pleasure.

Building on this, I present my own view: tyrannical *erôs* is a single, powerful desire that drives the person to possess what he identifies as "the good" forever. The object of tyrannical *erôs* should be broadly understood as "what the tyrannized soul identifies to be the good"- an appearance of the good, rather than the true good. To truly understand the tyrannical person, we should shift our focus from the object of their ruling desire to the manner in which they pursue it. What truly distinguishes the tyrannical person is not the specific object of their *erôs*, but the extraordinary and unsatisfied way in which they pursue and indulge in it, which Socrates describes as lawless and mad. This interpretation aligns with the general understanding of *erôs* in the soul of the philosopher, as I have developed in Chapter 4¹⁶¹.

When tyrannical *erôs* is understood as a single type of appetitive desire, commentators suggest that this is because it drives the person to pursue a specific kind of object, such as sex, political power, or bodily pleasure. In this interpretation, tyrannical *erôs* is singular because it is exclusively focused on a single type of object. They argue that this object defines or characterizes the tyrannical person, serving as the ultimate goal and primary motivation behind all of the tyrant's actions- everything the person does is directed toward attaining this object.

It is important to note that commentators are not suggesting that the object of tyrannical *erôs* is a single, narrowly defined entity, such as acquiring a specific person, a set amount of wealth, or a particular position of power alone. As noted, various passages in the *Republic* indicate that the pursuits of the tyrannical man are diverse and ever-changing, which cannot be reduced to a single, specific object. For example, when Socrates describes what a person guided by tyrannical *erôs* seeks, he mentions "everything next goes in for feasts, revelries, luxuries, girlfriends, and all that sort of thing" (*Rep.* 573d2-4). Obviously, the objects of tyrannical *erôs* encompass a wide range of desirable things rather than a single, particular thing. My aim here is to clarify that commentators generally do not dispute this interpretation.

Alternatively, scholars argue that tyrannical *erôs* is a desire directed toward a single, specific type of object, even if they differ on what that object is. The "type" of object here refers to an underlying cause, meaning that all of the tyrannical man's pursuits can ultimately be traced back to the possession or satisfaction of this particular kind of thing. According to this interpretation, for example, if the object of tyrannical *erôs* is understood to be physical pleasure, then all his pursuits- whether for physical power, political control, or wealth- serve as means or tools to satisfy his insatiable craving for bodily pleasure (as in Johnstone 2015, *esp.* pp. 426-428). The tyrannical man's actions, though they may appear varied or even contradictory on the

¹⁶¹As argued in Chapter 4, *erôs* functions in a structurally similar way in both the philosopher and the tyrant: it is a dominant, unifying desire for what the soul takes to be the good. I challenge the view, common among scholars, that *erôs* comes in many kinds, each defined by a specific object- for example, an *erôs* for sex, for power, or for knowledge. This is not to deny that the object of *erôs* matters; rather, my point is that we should not reduce *erôs* to a plurality of kinds based on its object. Instead, there is a single type of *erôs*, whose character is shaped by the soul's orientation and by what it identifies as the good. The object of *erôs* should not be narrowed down to any fixed category, but broadly understood as whatever the soul takes to be good.

surface, are aligned with the ultimate goal of fulfilling his bodily desires. What might seem inconsistent is, in fact, a consistent, though diverse, commitment to a single, specific end- the object of tyrannical *erôs*.

I argue that the emphasis on a single, underlying object of desire is the defining feature of scholars' interpretations, as I understand them. Specifically, scholars such as White, Barney, and Arruzza identify tyrannical *erôs* as a desire for sex, portraying sexual craving as the tyrant's dominant drive- one that governs his soul and compels him to pursue erotic gratification above all else. Blössner, by contrast, interprets tyrannical *erôs* as a desire for political power, casting this as the tyrant's ultimate aim and the principal force shaping both the tyrannical soul and the city. Similarly, Scott also locates the core of tyrannical *erôs* in the pursuit of power but underscores its destructive character, emphasizing how it isolates the tyrant and drives him into self-serving and disconnected forms of rule. Johnstone, in turn, argues that the tyrant is fundamentally motivated by a desire for bodily pleasure, treating this as the primary impulse that animates and organizes all his pursuits. Despite their differences, these interpretations converge on the view that tyrannical *erôs* is oriented toward a specific kind of object- whether sexual satisfaction, political domination, or bodily indulgence- and that this object functions as the central motivation behind every action the tyrannical person undertakes.

Furthermore, scholars contend that the specific object of tyrannical *erôs* serves as the defining feature of the tyrannical person. The tyrant's aspiration to dominate is fundamentally rooted in a powerful, all-consuming erotic desire for this one overarching object- whatever it may be. This singular focus explains why the tyrannical soul occupies the lowest position in Socrates' hierarchy of corrupt souls: it is driven by an unrelenting and obsessive pursuit of appetitive desires, many of which are unnecessary and some outright lawless, stemming from the most extreme and unruly impulses that reject reason and self-control¹⁶². Socrates' ranking of the final three corrupt souls illustrates this pattern: in the oligarchic soul, necessary desires hold sway over unnecessary ones; in the democratic soul, all desires are treated with equal weight and pursued indiscriminately; and in the tyrannical soul, the worst and most lawless appetites overwhelm the better desires entirely. Thus, the tyrannical man embodies the complete loss of restraint over the lowest and most base human desires, their unchecked dominance, and consequently, a profound inversion of the natural and proper order of power within the soul.

While I agree that tyrannical *erôs* is a single kind of appetitive desire, I reject the further claim that its object must be narrowed to a specific type. Specifically, I reject the idea that tyrannical *erôs* is singular because it is exclusively directed toward one particular object, such as sex, political power, or bodily pleasure, and that the tyrannical person is defined or characterized solely by this object. I will now explain my reasons for these rejections through a close analysis of the section on the tyrannical person in the *Republic*, supplemented by insights from other Platonic dialogues, including the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, before presenting my own view.

My first reason is that the pursuit of any specific type of object is not sufficient to explain why a person becomes a tyrant. Desires for sex, political power, or bodily

¹⁶²Annas (1981, p. 303) argues that the tyrant is logically an excrescence- an excessive outgrowth- on a line of development already completed by the democratic man. In contrast, Johnstone rejects this view, insisting that the tyrant occupies the lowest position in the hierarchy and represents a distinct and more extreme stage of desire and corruption (Johnstone 2015, pp. 432-436).

pleasure are not unique to the tyrannical type, as they are present in other types of souls as well. For example, in Book VIII of the *Republic* (561b-562a), the democratic person seeks all forms of appetitive desires, including sexual pleasure, physical indulgence, and political influence, without being tyrannical. The democratic lifestyle is often characterized as hedonistic, similar to that of the tyrannical man¹⁶³. Similarly, the pursuit of physical or political power is common among the spirited types, such as those with timocratic or oligarchic souls¹⁶⁴. In addition, bodily pleasures like food, drink, and luxury are sought by all soul types governed by some appetite, not just by tyrants. What differentiates the tyrant is not the pursuit itself but the lack of any restraint or moderation in satisfying these desires. Therefore, the pursuit of these inferior appetites cannot be the defining feature of the tyrannical character, as it is a trait shared by various types of souls.

Instead, I argue that what defines the tyrannical character is not the specific objects of desire but the lawless manner in which these objects are pursued. The tyrannical soul is distinguished not by what it seeks, but by how it pursues and indulges in these objects- marked by a total absence of self-control and a disregard for moral or rational limits. While the object of *erôs* undeniably shapes the soul's focus and direction, the essential distinction lies in the tyrant's mode of pursuit. It is not simply the nature of the desired object that defines tyrannical *erôs*, but the obsessive, uncontrolled, and lawless relationship to any object that exposes the deeper disorder at the heart of the tyrannical soul.

In contrast, although the final three corrupt souls in Socrates' hierarchy all contend with inferior desires, none are entirely dominated by them. The oligarchic and timocratic souls, for instance, retain a measure of control over their appetites, while the democratic soul, despite its disorder, does not allow any single desire to wield absolute power¹⁶⁵. The tyrannical soul, however, is wholly enslaved by its appetites, utterly lacking self-control and rational direction (*Rep.* 571a-573d). This complete surrender to base desires plunges the tyrant into a life marked by chaos, paranoia, and profound suffering. Driven incessantly by fear and insecurity, the tyrant becomes both a prisoner to his own impulses and a menace to others (*Rep.* 577c-580a). This destructive and self-perpetuating cycle is unique to the tyrannical soul, making it the most miserable and corrupt type within Plato's moral hierarchy.

My second reason is that interpreting inferior desires- most of which are unnecessary and some of which are lawless- as the object of *erôs* creates a potential inconsistency with Plato's broader philosophical view of *erôs*. If this interpretation is accepted, it raises the question of how tyrannical *erôs* and general *erôs* are related or distinct. However, to my knowledge, scholars have not yet provided a satisfactory answer for this question¹⁶⁶. More importantly, in Plato's works, *erôs* is often depicted

¹⁶³Plato's *Republic* (561b-562a) illustrates the democratic soul's pursuit of diverse appetitive desires without the singular, lawless dominance characteristic of the tyrannical soul. The democratic person embraces a wide range of pleasures- sexual, bodily, and political- without the same extreme lack of restraint found in the tyrant. This is further supported by the depiction of the democratic lifestyle as hedonistic yet distinct from tyranny, highlighting the democratic soul's relatively balanced, though indulgent, approach to desires.

¹⁶⁴In the *Republic* (550a-551c), Plato describes the timocratic soul as one driven by honor and a desire for political power, while the oligarchic soul (550d-553a) is characterized by a dominant pursuit of wealth and material gain, both reflecting spirited and appetitive desires linked to power and control.

¹⁶⁵This disorder in the democratic soul stems from its failure to uphold the proper hierarchy within the soul, where reason governs spirit and appetite. As described in *Republic* Book IV, a well-ordered soul features rational control over the other parts, promoting harmony and balance. In contrast, the democratic soul reverses this order, allowing appetitive desires to compete freely and unchecked, resulting in inconsistency, indulgence, and inner turmoil.

¹⁶⁶This issue involves understanding the nature and function of *erôs* across Plato's dialogues. Some scholars, such as Irwin (1995, pp. 305-307) and Nussbaum (1986, pp. 203-223), emphasize distinctions between dialogues,

as a powerful force that has the capacity to drive the soul toward higher forms of beauty, truth, and the good. When *erôs* is reduced to the pursuit of base and purely irrational desires, as in the case of the tyrannical soul, it seems to contradict this more nuanced understanding. In other words, interpreting tyrannical *erôs* solely as the pursuit of inferior desires based on its object seems to oversimplify and misrepresent the complex nature of *erôs* as Plato describes it.

Specifically, in several passages of Plato's works, *erôs* is portrayed as a desire with the potential to lead towards good and beautiful things. For example, in *Symposium* 202e-203a, Diotima describes *erôs* as an intermediate state between beauty and ugliness, emphasizing its potential to inspire people to move towards truly beautiful and good things¹⁶⁷. In *Phaedrus* 244a-257b, Socrates introduces *erôs* as a kind of divine madness to counter the view that *erôs* is essentially harmful, discussed in 237b-241d¹⁶⁸. In Book III of the *Republic*, Socrates mentions that *erôs* is "by nature of beauty and order" (403a8-b3)¹⁶⁹. Accepting Johnstone's interpretation that the *erôs* governing tyrants is solely a desire for inferior pleasures, such as bodily indulgence, creates a tension with Plato's broader and more sophisticated treatment of *erôs* in other dialogues¹⁷⁰. There, *erôs* is portrayed not merely as a base appetite but as a complex motivational force capable of inspiring the soul toward higher goods like truth, beauty, and virtue, while also having the potential to mislead or corrupt. Reducing tyrannical *erôs* to mere bodily cravings risks flattening this rich ambivalence, thereby oversimplifying the dynamic and transformative nature of *erôs* as depicted throughout Plato's philosophy.

The two reasons I have given for rejecting the further refinement of tyrannical *erôs* as a desire for a specific type of object- and consequently for rejecting the idea that this object defines the tyrannical person- are now evident. I will next present my own interpretation of the object of tyrannical *erôs* and show how this perspective deepens our understanding of *erôs* throughout Plato's works.

I argue that the *erôs* that rules the tyrannical man's soul is a single, dominating desire to possess what the soul perceives as the good eternally. This desire is structurally identical to that found in the philosopher, but it is fundamentally distorted in its content and mode of expression. In support of this interpretation, I propose four claims:

First, to understand the tyrannical soul, we must shift the explanatory focus away from the specific object of tyrannical *erôs*- whether bodily pleasure, political power,

particularly in comparing the roles of *erôs* and reason in the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. Conversely, Scott (2007, pp. 141-146) attempts to bridge these texts, arguing that both philosophical and tyrannical *erôs* share a common effect: they isolate the individual and foster detached, self-centered relationships. Scott characterizes this influence as passive and inherently detrimental.

¹⁶⁷In *Symposium* 204b-206a, Socrates, speaking through Diotima, presents *erôs* as fundamentally a desire for the good, driving individuals to seek and pursue goodness and beauty in many forms. Notably, at 205a-b, Diotima explains: "That is what causes everyone to desire the good to be one's own forever; it is what makes everyone long for immortality."

¹⁶⁸In the *Phaedrus* (244a-257b), Socrates presents *erôs* as a form of divine madness that elevates the soul, challenging earlier negative portrayals of *erôs* as harmful or purely irrational (237b-241d). This divine madness is portrayed as a positive, inspiring force that connects the lover to higher truths and beauty.

¹⁶⁹See *Republic* 403a8: "But the right kind of *erôs* is by nature that of order and beauty, and is moderated by education in music and poetry." This conception of *erôs* as directed toward the good in Book III is supported by Scott (2007, p. 142).

¹⁷⁰Johnstone's interpretation implicitly endorses a pluralistic understanding of *erôs*, proposing that *erôs* manifests in multiple distinct forms, each defined by its particular object or focus- whether bodily pleasure, political dominance, or other appetitive ends. This view treats *erôs* not as a unified, singular motivational force, but as a category encompassing various specific desires, each constituting a different kind of *erôs* with its own character and aims.

or sexual gratification- and instead attend to the manner in which these objects are pursued and enjoyed. This shift is crucial because the distinguishing feature of the tyrannical character does not lie in the particular content of the desire, which can also be found in other types of souls, but in the pathological structure and intensity of the desire itself. In the tyrannical soul, the pursuit of the object is marked by compulsion, lawlessness, and a total lack of rational governance. The tyrant does not merely want, but is consumed by his wanting; he does not pursue a good in accordance with order or measure, but is violently driven to seize and possess what he takes to be good at any cost. Thus, the tyrannical condition is defined less by the specific appetites that dominate it and more by the lawless, insatiable, and frenzied mode in which those appetites are expressed.

Second, the manner is marked by lawlessness, revealing the extreme, compulsive, and unbounded character of the tyrant's appetitive drives. Unlike other soul-types, which may still retain some measure of order, self-restraint, or rational oversight, the tyrannical soul is characterized by the total collapse of internal hierarchy: reason and spirit are subjugated, and the basest appetites reign unchecked. The tyrant does not merely desire intensely; he is possessed by his desires, which erupt without measure or moderation. His pursuit of what he takes to be good unfolds in a frenzied and anarchic fashion, indifferent to social norms, moral limits, or the demands of reason. This lawlessness is not incidental but essential to the tyrannical condition- it defines how the soul relates to its object of longing. The tyrant seeks possession not as an end in accordance with need or value, but as an obsessive and self-consuming impulse to dominate, to consume, and to have without limit. It is this violent and chaotic form of *erôs* that renders the tyrant incapable of genuine satisfaction and locks him into a perpetual state of inner turmoil and external conflict.

The object of tyrannical *erôs* should therefore be understood not as a determinate type of appetitive good- such as sex, power, or bodily pleasure- but as whatever the tyrant's soul takes to be the good. In other words, the object is not fixed in kind but is defined by the soul's internal condition: it is an appearance or illusion of the good, generated by a disordered and corrupted psychic structure. In the absence of rational guidance and self-mastery, the tyrant lacks the capacity to apprehend the true good. Instead, his soul projects goodness onto whatever object most immediately stimulates his basest appetites. These objects appear irresistibly attractive to him not because they are genuinely choice-worthy, but because his soul is so thoroughly distorted that it mistakes the pleasurable for the good, the lawless for the free, and the insatiable for the satisfying. Tyrannical *erôs* thus aims not at what is genuinely good in itself, but at the phantom image of the good constructed by a soul governed by chaotic and unexamined desires. This misidentification lies at the heart of the tyrant's corruption: it is not simply that he desires badly, but that he is blind to the very nature of the good itself.

Finally, while it is true that the tyrant's *erôs* is directed toward unnecessary and even lawless pleasures, this should not be taken as evidence that *erôs* is by nature drawn to base or irrational objects. Rather, the degeneration of *erôs* in the tyrannical soul reflects a deeper disorder within the soul's structure: the impotence of reason, the unchecked dominance of appetite, and the distorting influence of an environment that nourishes lawless desires. The soul of the tyrant lacks the inner harmony necessary for *erôs* to be properly oriented. In the absence of rational governance, *erôs* is captured by the most unruly elements of the psyche and redirected toward deceptive images of the good- those that promise gratification but deliver ruin. Thus, what *erôs* desires in the tyrant is not base because *erôs* is essentially base, but because it is shaped and

guided by a disordered soul incapable of discerning what is truly noble, beautiful, or good. The tyrant's *erôs* becomes destructive not by necessity but by corruption. In this way, Plato shows that *erôs* is not intrinsically noble or base, but radically dependent on the soul's orientation: it can either ascend toward truth and beauty or descend into madness and vice, depending on which part of the soul holds sway.

Understood in this way, *erôs* remains a desire for what the soul takes to be good and desirable forever, but in the tyrannical soul, this desire is radically misdirected. The tyrant's *erôs* is compulsive, insatiable, and destructive- not because *erôs* is inherently base, but because its natural longing is shaped by a disordered psychic structure. This interpretation enables a unified account of *erôs* across Plato's dialogues, preserving its essential character as a longing for the good while showing how it can either elevate or corrupt, depending on the condition of the soul. In this light, the tyrannical soul reveals not a different kind of *erôs*, but the same *erôs* misled by a radically disordered vision of the good.

5.2 The Role of *Erôs* in Shaping the Tyrannical Man

After clarifying the nature of tyrannical *erôs* as a singular, dominating desire that governs the tyrannical soul, I now turn to examine how this power actively shapes and transforms the tyrannical character. The guiding question for this section is: What role does *erôs* play in the formation and development of the tyrannical character? To address this, I will analyze Socrates' account of the tyrannical man in *Republic* Books VIII and IX, dividing his development into three distinct phases- an early stage, a middle stage, and a final stage. In each of these stages, I will show how *erôs* functions as a driving force: first, by awakening and legitimating lawless desires; then, by progressively undermining the soul's internal order; and finally, by establishing itself as the ruling power, leading to the complete disintegration of rational control and the emergence of tyranny within the person.

5.2.1 The Early Stage

This section explores the role of *erôs* in the early development of the tyrannical character, concentrating on the initial phase in which a person, shaped by a permissive and disordered democratic environment, begins the transformation into a tyrant. I argue that *erôs* is the crucial force in this stage, functioning as the catalyst that drives the soul beyond ordinary democratic excess into a deeper moral and psychological degeneration. Under its influence, the individual becomes increasingly fixated not just on unnecessary pleasures, but on desires that are violent, extreme, and lawless. *Erôs*, in this stage, awakens and empowers the most unruly appetites, undermines the authority of reason and shame, and initiates a radical internal disorder that lays the foundation for tyranny within the soul.

In *Republic* Book IX (572e-573b), Socrates uses the image of a drone to illustrate the growing dominance of *erôs* in the soul of the young tyrant. *Erôs* is described as "a great winged drone" implanted in the young tyrant's soul by "clever enchanters and tyrant-makers":

“They (the clever enchanters and tyrant-makers) contrive to **plant in him a powerful erotic love, like a great winged drone, to be the leader of those idle desires** that spend whatever is at hand. Or do you think that **erotic love is anything other than an enormous drone** in such people?” (*Rep.* 572e3-573a2; trans. Grube-Reeve)

Clearly, *erôs* assumes a commanding role among the soul’s various desires, gradually asserting itself as the dominant force. At the outset, these desires might coexist with some degree of equilibrium, each influencing the individual’s behavior to varying extents. However, as *erôs* intensifies, it disrupts this fragile balance, overwhelming other appetites and impulses. This growing dominance means that *erôs* increasingly dictates the person’s motivations, decisions, and actions, shaping their entire character and guiding them toward the unchecked pursuit of what they perceive as good. The gradual usurpation of control by *erôs* marks the critical shift from a conflicted soul to one increasingly enslaved by a single, overpowering desire.

This marks the initial stage of becoming tyrannical: the individual, now dominated by a powerful *erôs*, begins to see desires and values in a fundamentally different way from his democratic father¹⁷¹. In *Republic* Book VIII (561a4-e5), Socrates depicts the democratic man as one driven by a broad and disorderly range of desires, both necessary and unnecessary, without any clear hierarchy or self-discipline. As Socrates notes, “He spends as much money, effort, and time on unnecessary pleasures as on necessary ones” (*Rep.* 561a4-5). This democratic soul indulges freely in whatever pleasures catch his fancy at the moment, treating all desires as equally important. As a result, he lacks a consistent or coherent aim, living a life dominated by fleeting satisfactions and impulsive gratification rather than reasoned pursuit of true goods.

In contrast, as tyrannical *erôs* rises to dominance among the person’s desires, a profound transformation takes place in the focus and intensity of their pursuits. Rather than maintaining a balance among diverse desires, the individual becomes singularly fixated on a specific category- unnecessary and excessive desires- with growing obsession and consistency. Socrates explains (*Rep.* 573b1-d5) that the young tyrannical man, now led by *erôs*, becomes consumed with fulfilling extravagant and often immoral cravings, including excessive physical pleasures, violent acts, and a blatant disregard for moral and legal boundaries. These desires far exceed natural or reasonable needs, encompassing luxury, indulgence, and lawlessness. As *erôs* asserts greater control, the pursuit of these unnecessary pleasures intensifies and becomes more relentless. The person becomes driven by an insatiable hunger for excess, where gratifying these appetites overtakes all other concerns. This obsessive focus marks a sharp departure from the democratic man’s way of life and constitutes the first pivotal stage in the soul’s degeneration toward tyranny.

The second sign of becoming tyrannical is that, as the person continues to pursue unnecessary appetitive desires, their focus increasingly shifts toward harmful and even lawless ones, indicating a steady progression toward tyranny. Socrates illustrates this process by describing the “implanting of the sting” into “the drone” (*Rep.* 573a6-

¹⁷¹This process of degeneration from the democratic to the tyrannical soul is extensively discussed in *Republic* Book VIII (558d-576e), where Socrates traces the decline of the soul through successive stages of moral and psychological disorder. The democratic soul’s lack of self-discipline and equal pursuit of all desires creates the fertile ground for the rise of tyrannical *erôs*, which seizes upon the soul’s weaknesses and drives it toward lawless excess and domination (see also Annas 1981, 302-305; Reeve 1988, 184-190).

7), symbolizing the deepen corruption within the person's soul:

“And **when the other desires-** filled with incense, myrrh, wreaths, wine, and the other pleasures found in their company- **buzz around the drone, nurturing it and making it grow as large as possible, they plant the sting of longing in it.**” (*Rep.* 573a4-8, trans. Grube-Reeve)

The phrase “implanting the drone with a sting” (*Rep.* 573a6) is crucial, as it marks a turning point in the young tyrant's soul, signifying the transformation of *erôs* into a destructive and uncontrollable force. Here, *erôs*, having become dominant among the other desires, is further intensified by being “implanted with the sting of longing.” This metaphor captures how *erôs* transforms from a mere appetite into a painful, insatiable craving that propels the tyrant toward ever more extreme and destructive pursuits. Following this moment, Socrates' description of the tyrant's desires (beginning at 573d1) moves beyond simple unnecessary appetites, emphasizing their escalation into increasingly violent, lawless, and self-destructive behaviors.

To clarify this point, it is helpful to compare Socrates' description of “the drone with a sting” to his earlier use of “the drone” in Books VIII and IX. In Book VIII (*Rep.* 554b7-c3), Socrates depicts “drones” as symbols of unnecessary appetitive desires within the democratic soul- desires that, at best, are useless like beggars in the city, and at worst, harmful like criminals¹⁷². Here, the “drone without a sting” represents desires that are mostly futile and only mildly harmful. Therefore, when Socrates later describes *erôs* as “an enormous drone” (*Rep.* 573a2), he implies that the initial objects of tyrannical *erôs* are similarly unnecessary and only somewhat lawless, laying the groundwork for these desires to escalate into more dangerous and destructive forms.

Over time, this “drone” is implanted with “a sting.” In Socrates' technical usage, “the drone with a sting” represents criminals or those who commit unjust and harmful acts in society (see *Rep.* 552c-d, 564c-d, 574d1-3). At this stage, the tyrant's *erôs* becomes “an enormous drone with a sting,” growing more insatiable and destructive, compelling him to pursue increasingly intense and lawless pleasures without regard for reason or moral integrity. The power of *erôs* steadily expands, cementing its dominance in the tyrannical soul. Consequently, the young tyrant, driven by *erôs*, increasingly devotes himself to hedonistic and appetitive pursuits, “directing everything toward feasts, revelries, luxuries, girlfriends, and all that sort of thing” (573d3-4)¹⁷³.

Erôs in the young tyrant's soul, first called “the drone” and then quickly “the drone with a sting,” reveals its escalating and destructive power. As *erôs* dominates the other desires, the young tyrant's behavior shifts profoundly: he grows intensely fixated not only on unnecessary pleasures but also on increasingly harmful and lawless pursuits.

¹⁷²*Rep.* 554b-c. In this passage, Socrates employs the metaphor of drones- both with stings and without- to characterize different types of individuals within a city, especially in democratic and tyrannical contexts. The “drones with stings” represent those who commit unjust and harmful acts, akin to criminals who actively threaten social order. In contrast, the “stingless drones” are non-violent yet parasitic and lazy, living off the labor of others without contributing themselves. While not overtly harmful, their idleness and dependence drain the city's resources. Socrates uses this imagery to highlight how both types, though distinct, undermine the well-being and stability of the city in their own ways.

¹⁷³According to Socrates (*Rep.* 573d1-5), the goods that the tyrannical man pursues are chiefly appetitive desires, including feasts- excessive and lavish meals; revelries- wild, disorderly celebrations; luxuries- extravagant possessions and comforts; and girlfriends- numerous and often fleeting romantic or sexual relationships.

I demonstrate that *erôs* plays a vital role in shaping the young tyrant from the outset. Socrates' powerful metaphor of the drone vividly illustrates this process when he explains that the tyrant-makers "plant *erôs* into the young tyrant's soul" (*Rep.* 573a8). This image is far more than symbolic; it uncovers a fundamental truth about the emergence of the tyrannical character. *Erôs* functions as a destabilizing force within the soul, sharply focusing the individual's attention on a particular object of desire and igniting an insatiable craving. This overwhelming passion disrupts the soul's inner harmony, driving the person away from balance and reason. Through this transformation, *erôs* reshapes the entire soul, corrupting the formerly democratic character and ushering in the early formation of tyranny. Therefore, *erôs* is not merely a fleeting longing but the very engine that propels the soul toward its tyrannical metamorphosis.

Next, I engage with a crucial and widely debated issue: although it is generally accepted that the tyrannical soul is ruled by *erôs*, does this necessarily mean that it is dominated by the appetitive part of the soul?¹⁷⁴

This question is pivotal for understanding the precise way *erôs* functions within the tyrannical character and requires careful analysis. From my perspective, it raises two fundamental questions: first, does *erôs* exert its influence across the entire soul as a unifying force, or is its power limited exclusively to the appetitive part? Second, can the appetitive part itself, often viewed as the source of motivation, be directly identified with the specific appetites that drive the tyrannical desire for possession? These questions are essential for clarifying the dynamics of *erôs* and the structure of the tyrannical soul.

My general response is that we cannot simply equate the claim that the tyrannical man's soul is ruled by *erôs* with the idea that it is ruled by the soul's appetitive part, because in Plato's philosophy these two are fundamentally distinct:

When the appetitive part of the soul dominates, it generates desires aimed at satisfying basic needs, such as the desire to acquire wealth, without regard for the moral quality of the means used. Socrates illustrates this in *Republic* IV (439a5-c8) by comparing the appetitive part to "thirsty people wanting to drink," whose sole concern is to quench their thirst, indifferent to whether the drink is good or harmful. Likewise, under the rule of the appetitive part, a person seeks money simply for its own sake, caring little about how it is obtained.

However, the case of the tyrannical soul ruled by *erôs* reveals a more complex and profound corruption. In *Republic* IX (574a3-d5), Socrates depicts the tyrant as someone whose desire for wealth is not merely about possession but is characterized by a reckless, lawless pursuit that violates all moral and social constraints. The tyrant's actions escalate from deceit to outright violence and theft- from family members, strangers, and even sacred institutions. This relentless transgression cannot be reduced to the appetitive part's natural cravings alone. Instead, it reflects how *erôs* fuels not only an insatiable desire for objects but also a destructive impulse that corrupts the soul's entire moral structure. The tyrant's lawlessness- both in desire and method- is thus a sign of *erôs*' power to unsettle and reorder the soul in ways far

¹⁷⁴See Vlastos 1991, Scott 2007. Vlastos emphasizes that *erôs* is distinct from ordinary appetitive desires such as hunger or thirst and can influence the entire soul rather than being confined to the appetitive part alone. Scott, however, highlights that the tyrannical soul is dominated by lawless appetites, with *erôs* acting as an especially intense and disruptive force that fuels these appetites, ultimately resulting in the soul being ruled by its appetitive part.

beyond mere appetite, marking a profound disintegration of the soul's harmony and order.

In other words, while the appetitive part may generate desires without moral discrimination, *erôs* transforms desire into a force that actively defies law and reason, corrupting the soul at its core. This distinction explains why the tyrant's pursuit of wealth cannot be fully accounted for by appetitive domination alone, as it entails both the object of desire and the reckless, immoral means by which that desire is pursued.

Building on this clarification, I argue that explaining the tyrannical person's rule by *erôs* solely as the dominance of the appetitive part is inadequate. While some scholars, such as Price and Blössner, treat *erôs* as merely a particular desire within the appetitive part and therefore equate the two claims, this interpretation overlooks important nuances¹⁷⁵. There is little textual or philosophical justification in Plato's work for subdividing the appetitive part in such a manner. Rather, Plato presents *erôs* as a more complex and pervasive force that cannot be fully captured by identifying it simply with appetitive desire. This suggests that *erôs* operates on a different level, shaping not only specific desires but also the overall orientation and disorder of the soul, making it distinct from, and irreducible to, the appetitive part alone.

I argue that *erôs* functions as a dominant desire that governs the entire soul of the tyrant, rather than residing solely within the appetitive part. Unlike interpretations that confine *erôs* to a single segment of the soul, *erôs* interacts dynamically with all three parts- rational, spirited, and appetitive. It operates as a unifying yet destabilizing force: unifying in its capacity to override the soul's natural balance by drawing together and commanding the different parts, and destabilizing because it can produce both constructive and destructive effects. Whether *erôs* leads to harmony or chaos depends on the alignment of its desires and methods with the rational part's guidance. In the tyrant's soul, this alignment fails, allowing *erôs* to drive relentless, often lawless pursuit of its objects, ultimately disrupting the soul's unity and justice.

I argue that this framework offers a compelling explanation for the young tyrant's transformation- from pursuing a variety of democratically valued desires to single-mindedly chasing increasingly harmful and lawless ones. This shift arises as the appetitive part of the soul gains dominance, overwhelming the rational and spirited parts. This interpretation coheres closely with Socrates' accounts in both the *Protagoras* and the *Republic*, where the breakdown of the soul's natural hierarchy leads to destructive behavior once reason ceases to govern.

In the *Republic*, Socrates describes the emergence of the lawless desires driving the tyrant as occurring when "the rest of the soul- the rational, gentle, and ruling part- slumbers" (*Rep.* 571c3-5). This metaphor indicates that the rational part becomes passive and inactive, losing its role as the guiding authority. In a well-ordered soul, by contrast, the rational part governs, restraining the spirited and appetitive elements (see *Rep.* 440a-441e). But when reason "slumbers," the appetitive part is unleashed to indulge in excessive and destructive cravings. These lawless desires- normally suppressed by reason- take control, propelling the individual toward immoral and harmful actions (*Rep.* 571d1-3).

Socrates' view in the *Protagoras* complements this by emphasizing that wrongdoing results from ignorance rather than a deliberate choice to do evil (*Prot.* 351b-352e)¹⁷⁶. This suggests that the entire soul, when misguided, pursues harmful

¹⁷⁵For the interpretation that *erôs* is merely a particular desire within the appetitive part and thus that the tyrannical soul's rule by *erôs* coincides with rule by the appetitive part, see Price (2008, 53-54); and Blössner, (2001): 352.

¹⁷⁶In *Protagoras* 351b-352e, Socrates initiates a discussion on pleasure, pain, and knowledge, ultimately arguing

actions under the mistaken belief that they are good.

Together, these accounts underscore how *erôs* functions as a powerful and disruptive force within the soul, capable of overturning its natural harmony. When reason, the soul's guiding and regulating faculty, is weakened or "slumbers," *erôs* seizes control and distorts judgment, clouding the individual's capacity to discern true goods from harmful pursuits. This distortion leads the person to chase destructive desires relentlessly, not out of clear-headed choice but because *erôs* fuels insatiable cravings that overwhelm reason's capacity to moderate and direct. In this way, *erôs* not only unsettles the soul's internal balance but also initiates a downward spiral in which the individual becomes increasingly enslaved to lawless and self-destructive impulses, marking the emergence of the tyrannical character in its earliest form.

In the early stages of the tyrant's development, *erôs* plays a pivotal role by disrupting the soul's natural balance. It does so by elevating certain appetitive desires, particularly those that are unnecessary and lawless, above all others. This reordering empowers the appetitive part to dominate unchecked, undermining the rational part's capacity for guidance and ethical judgment. Consequently, *erôs* reshapes the soul's internal hierarchy, weakening reason's influence and paving the way for the soul's increasing disorder. This distortion of harmony drives the young tyrant toward progressively harmful and lawless behaviors, marking the gradual emergence of the tyrannical character. Ultimately, *erôs* acts as a transformative yet corrosive force, initiating the soul's descent into tyranny by subverting its proper order and corrupting its moral compass.

5.2.2 The Middle Stage

The following section explores the role of *erôs* during the intermediate phase in the formation of the tyrannical soul. The key argument is that the tyrant, driven by *erôs*, relentlessly pursues whatever they perceive as the ultimate good- without restraint or moral consideration- employing any means necessary to secure it indefinitely.

The central argument unfolds in three parts: First, the tyrannical person will use any means necessary to pursue their goals without limitation. Second, they mistakenly identify these goals as the true good, when in fact they are mere illusions or false appearances of the good. Third, this distortion occurs because the soul's rational part becomes constrained and impaired. Through the intense experiences of pleasure and pain generated by *erôs*, the rational part's capacity for sound value-judgment is warped. Instead of discerning what truly aligns with the good and truth, reason shifts its focus toward maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Consequently, the rational part loses its proper role as the guide of the soul and becomes enslaved to the appetites. This subjugation transforms reason into a servant of irrational desires, rendering the tyrant himself a slave- just as Socrates describes in 579d6-580a5. In this way, both reason and the tyrant's whole soul are dominated by *erôs*, making the tyrant, like his city, a true slave to his passions.

that wrongdoing arises solely from ignorance. He contends that no one willingly chooses evil or harm; rather, individuals err because they mistakenly perceive harmful actions as beneficial or lack the knowledge necessary to choose rightly. This argument is central to Socrates' broader thesis that knowledge, or reason, is the essential guide in governing and directing one's desires.

In *Republic* 573d2-575a, Socrates introduces the evolution of the tyrannical man as he enters the middle stage of his development. At this point, the person displays relentless determination to acquire possessions by any means possible to satisfy his ever-expanding desires. This occurs for two main reasons: first, the tyrannical person is overwhelmed by an extraordinary number of desires, which Socrates refers to as “the violent crowd of desires” (573e3), constantly growing day and night, requiring a huge amount of things to satisfy them; second, and more significantly, these desires are insatiable, with the soul of the tyrant being likened to “filling a vessel full of holes” (586b3), indicating that the process of satisfying them is endless. These are also the two key features of the tyrannical person in the middle stage of development.

The first feature, an extraordinary number of desires, is introduced at 573d2-e4. After being ruled by *erôs* for a time, the tyrannical man’s soul becomes increasingly dominated by tyranny, as a vast array of appetites emerges, forming what Socrates calls “the violent crowd of desires”:

“And **don’t many terrible desires grow up day and night beside the tyrannical one, needing many things to satisfy them?**

Indeed they do.

...

And when everything is gone, won’t the violent crowd of desires that has nested within him inevitably shout in protest?” (*Rep.* 573d2-e4; trans. Grube-Reeve)

Socrates explains that the tyrant’s desires grow relentlessly, day and night, highlighting their dynamic and expanding nature rather than being fixed or limited. These desires form what he calls “the violent crowd,” serving as *erôs*’s “bodyguard” (*Rep.* 573e6), which signals that they are not ordinary human wants but excessive, irrational urges that multiply uncontrollably¹⁷⁷. This overwhelming multitude of desires saturates the tyrannical soul, intensifying as the tyrant indulges them. Each gratification only fuels the emergence of new cravings, ensuring that the tyrant is never satisfied and perpetually driven to seek more. In this way, the tyrannical person becomes utterly consumed by an insatiable hunger for a widening array of appetites—whether for wealth, power, food, luxury, or sensual pleasure—trapped in a cycle of endless desire and pursuit.

The growing crowd of desires results not only in an overwhelming need for more objects or goals but also to an intensified experience of pleasure or pain, depending on whether those desires are satisfied or left unfulfilled. A closer look at an earlier part of Book IX (*Rep.* 571e1-572a3) helps clarify this. Here, Socrates discusses the soul’s condition when appetites are either overindulged or deprived:

“(If) he neither starves nor feasts his appetites, so that they will slumber and not disturb his best part (the rational part) **with either their pleasure or their pain...**” (*Rep.* 571e1-572a3; trans. Grube-Reeve)

¹⁷⁷Johnstone portrays the tyrannical man as a drug addict with an unmanaged addiction, relentlessly pursuing excessive bodily pleasure by any means necessary (Johnstone 2015, p. 429). I believe this metaphor effectively captures the tyrant’s insatiable craving and the compulsive nature of his desires.

Here, Socrates emphasizes that the relationship between the appetites and the rational part of the soul is mediated by pleasure and pain. When a person neither starves nor excessively indulges their appetites, these desires remain subdued, “slumbering”, so they do not agitate the rational part with either intense pleasure or pain. This equilibrium allows reason to function with clarity and authority, free from the disruptive influence of the passions. In this ideal condition, the rational part can govern the soul effectively, maintaining harmony and preventing the appetites from overwhelming judgment or distorting the pursuit of the true good.

Intense experiences of pleasure and pain exert a profound influence on the tyrannical man’s soul. When his desires remain unfulfilled, he endures deep pain and frustration. Socrates vividly describes this condition: the “violent crowd” of desires within him “shouts in protest” (*Rep.* 573e4), demanding relentless attention and satisfaction. As these desires multiply and remain unsatisfied, their agitation intensifies, fueling growing internal conflict and psychological turmoil. This ceaseless clamor creates an unending state of unrest, leaving the tyrant’s soul trapped in perpetual disturbance. This agonizing tension between pleasure and pain defines the tyrant’s inner life, driving his compulsive pursuit to quell the unrest by satisfying ever-expanding desires.

Conversely, when the tyrannical man’s desires are satisfied, he experiences an intense surge of pleasure. This pleasure, however, is not the calm fulfillment of natural human needs but a heightened, almost addictive sensation that arises from gratifying excessive and irrational urges. Driven by *erôs*, these desires are amplified in both number and intensity. In moments of satisfaction, the tyrant feels fleeting relief and gratification, yet this pleasure is unstable and short-lived. Its intensity is heightened precisely because the desires themselves are extreme and insatiable. Almost immediately after, new cravings arise, compelling the tyrant to pursue yet another round of fulfillment, perpetuating an endless and restless cycle of desire and temporary pleasure.

Beyond the sheer multitude of desires, Plato identifies a deeper cause for the tyrannical man’s relentless pursuit: his desires are fundamentally insatiable, as his soul resembles a “vessel full of holes”¹⁷⁸. This metaphor captures the endlessness of his craving- no matter how much he acquires or satisfies, his desires can never be fully quenched. Consequently, his pursuit becomes an unceasing, futile effort to fill what can never be filled. This theme recurs not only in the *Republic* but also in the *Gorgias*, texts I will now turn to examine.

Both *Gorgias* (492d1-494a) and *Republic* (586a1-b6) present a fundamental critique of hedonism- the view that pleasure is the highest good- through the powerful metaphor of the “vessel full of holes.” Scholars commonly interpret this image as illustrating the instability and dissatisfaction inherent in a life devoted to bodily or material pleasure¹⁷⁹. Plato argues that such pleasures are fleeting and insufficient,

¹⁷⁸Socrates’ metaphor of the insatiable soul appears in both *Gorgias* and *Republic*. In *Gorgias* 492d1-494a, he challenges Callicles’ advocacy of indulgence by likening such a life to trying to fill a leaky jar, highlighting its inherent emptiness and futility. Similarly, in *Republic* 586a-586b, the tyrannical soul is compared to a vessel full of holes, illustrating the endless and unquenchable nature of its desires. Both metaphors emphasize the self-destructive cycle of insatiable craving that traps the tyrant in perpetual dissatisfaction.

¹⁷⁹Scholars often use the metaphor of the “vessel full of holes” to highlight Plato’s critique of hedonism- the idea that pleasure is the highest good (See Johnstone 2015, p. 429). Plato argues that chasing bodily pleasures leads to instability and dissatisfaction. The tyrant, as the embodiment of this pursuit, shows hedonism’s failure: no pleasure can satisfy him because his soul cannot be fulfilled. This reflects Plato’s broader view that a life focused on bodily pleasure is flawed and cannot bring true happiness. Building on this, I argue that unchecked desires not only fail to

leaving the individual in a perpetual state of unrest. The tyrant, who embodies this relentless pursuit of pleasure, exemplifies hedonism's failure: no matter how much gratification he attains, his soul remains unfulfilled.

I contend that this metaphor points to a deeper and more essential problem within the tyrannical soul itself, beyond external circumstances or specific objects of desire. The soul's fundamental disorder arises because its rational part- the aspect meant to govern and harmonize- has been overthrown by unchecked appetites. As a result, the soul resembles a broken vessel that cannot hold or retain satisfaction. Just as a leaky jar cannot be filled, the tyrant's soul perpetually loses any fulfillment it attains, as each desire, once satisfied, is immediately supplanted by another. This endless cycle of craving and frustration renders the tyrant's pursuit of wealth, power, or pleasure inherently futile, revealing the profound instability and self-defeating nature of a life ruled by insatiable desire.

The tyrant's desires are not only countless but fundamentally insatiable because his soul is unable to attain lasting satisfaction. This condition traps him in a continuous cycle of unrest, where he relentlessly chases fleeting pleasures that provide only temporary relief. Each moment of gratification is swiftly replaced by new cravings, leaving him perpetually dissatisfied. Crucially, the tyrant's struggle is not due to a lack of resources or opportunities to satisfy his desires, but rather a deep structural flaw within his soul that makes true fulfillment impossible¹⁸⁰.

So far, I have identified two fundamental characteristics of the tyrannical soul in its middle stage: first, the continuous emergence of an overwhelming multitude of desires demanding satisfaction; second, the insatiable nature of these desires, as the soul- like a "vessel full of holes"- cannot achieve lasting fulfillment. Together, these features drive the tyrannical man to pursue possessions and pleasures with relentless determination, employing any means necessary to satisfy his ever-growing cravings. I will now turn to analyze the underlying process fueling this relentless pursuit and examine more closely the specific role that *erôs* plays within it.

The usual means of satisfying the tyrant's desires quickly prove inadequate. As Socrates observes, some try to meet these desires through legitimate channels, such as inheriting wealth from family or friends (*Rep.* 573d9-e2), but whatever they acquire is rapidly spent, while their cravings only intensify. Consequently, the tyrant resorts to shameless criminal acts, "deceit and force", to obtain whatever can gratify him (*Rep.* 574a1-c6). These appetites soon become the driving force behind his actions, compelling him to pursue increasingly extreme and depraved behaviors. Unlike his morally corrupt predecessors, such as the democratic man, whose immoral desires remained unacted fantasies or subconscious dreams, the tyrant actively indulges these urges in reality, crossing a boundary that others dared not approach. This descent into brazen wrongdoing erodes the last remnants of restraint within his soul (*Rep.* 574d1-575a1). At this stage, his *erôs* takes on a tyrannical role internally, relentlessly compelling him to satisfy itself and the "unruly mob" of intense appetitive desires that surround it (*Rep.* 575a1-4). This mob clamors incessantly for gratification, driving the tyrant's *erôs* to pursue fulfillment as a source of constant pleasure, while failure to do

satisfy but also disrupt the soul's internal harmony.

¹⁸⁰Plato argues that a well-ordered soul, governed by reason, attains a stable and lasting fulfillment. The philosopher's soul, properly harmonized, seeks higher goods such as knowledge, wisdom, and justice- sources of genuine and enduring satisfaction. This philosophical soul resembles a sound vessel, able to retain true fulfillment rather than losing it through unruly desires. Unlike the tyrant, whose endless and unchecked appetites cause internal chaos, the philosopher's desires align with the good, enabling true happiness.

so inflicts profound pain.

In this process, a crucial transformation occurs from the tyrant's earlier stage: he adopts a conception of the good defined solely by whatever satisfies his desires, without regard for the inherent goodness or moral status of the object or the means used to obtain it. In other words, his value judgments, normally governed by the rational part of the soul, become subordinated to this single criterion: to acquire whatever most fully gratifies his desires, regardless of whether the object or method is good or bad.

This is crucial for understanding *erôs*'s role in the tyrant's deepening descent. It marks a fundamental shift in how the rational part of the soul functions, caused by a severe imbalance between reason and appetite in the tyrannical soul.

Specifically, when functioning properly, the rational part of the soul makes value-judgment, determining whether the thing is good or bad based on its alignment with truth. In contrast, the appetitive part, by nature, does not consider what is truly good; instead, it judges whether the thing is desirable based on whether it brings pleasure or avoids pain. However, in the soul of a tyrannical man, *erôs* drives other desires, creating an overwhelming need to satisfy them. At the same time, intense pleasure or pain is linked to whether these needs are fulfilled. The rational part of the tyrannical man is, in fact, weaker than that of his morally corrupt predecessors- it loses control over the soul and never regains it¹⁸¹. As a result, under the powerful influence of tyrannical *erôs* via the intense sensations of pleasure and pain, the rational part changes its approach to what is good or bad. It begins to follow this pattern: When pleasure increases or pain decreases, the thing is seen as desirable and appears good; when pleasure decreases or pain increases, the thing is seen as undesirable and appears bad.

This does not imply that the appetitive part possesses true value judgment. Some scholars, such as Sorabji, interpret the appetitive part as having a capacity similar to value judgment, akin to the rational part¹⁸². Sorabji interprets the appetitive part as capable of making decisions about what is desirable, not just based on pleasure and pain but in a way that mirrors the rational part's value-judgment. In this view, the appetitive part is not purely irrational, as it can form preferences and assess objects of desire.

However, my interpretation departs from this. Within Plato's framework, the appetitive part lacks genuine value judgment, determining a thing's worth only according to its capacity to satisfy desire rather than through rational assessment. For Plato, only the rational part is capable of true value judgments, grounded in truth and a correct understanding of the good. The appetitive part, by contrast, is driven solely by desire and sensory perception, evaluating things only by their ability to bring pleasure or avoid pain. Though it may seem to form preferences, these do not amount to genuine moral or philosophical judgments, as they are disconnected from reason and the pursuit of truth.

¹⁸¹To clarify, according to the *Republic*, all souls are morally corrupted to varying degrees when compared to the perfectly just soul, depending on how much the rational part, the appetitive part, and the soul's overall order are preserved or lost. For instance, the democratic man, emerging from an oligarchic background, retains some balance among his desires. Although his rational part is weakened, it still exerts some influence. His soul is characterized by freedom and equality among desires, with no single appetite dominating completely. While he indulges in many pleasures, he does not allow any one desire to fully control his life. His rational part, though diminished, continues to act as a moderating force, occasionally guiding his value judgments. In stark contrast, the tyrannical soul reveals a far deeper moral corruption: here, the rational part is nearly overwhelmed and subordinated by the most intense desires, especially those fueled by *erôs*- the irrational, obsessive craving for pleasure and power.

¹⁸²See Sorabji (1993, pp. 10-11).

While Sorabji attributes a more active role to the appetitive part in determining value, I maintain that its role is limited to responding to sensual perception, without the rational calculation to discern what is truly good or bad¹⁸³. The appetitive part may seek what it finds desirable, but its “judgments” are fundamentally different from the value-based decisions made by the rational part. This distinction is crucial for understanding the hierarchy of the soul as Plato presents it in the *Republic*.

The role of *erôs* in the tyrant’s deepening descent into tyranny becomes more evident: it generates an overwhelming and ever-expanding demand for satisfaction. This relentless craving compels the tyrant to pursue, by any means necessary, whatever can momentarily gratify his desires. When these desires go unmet, the tyrant experiences intense pain or a loss of pleasure; yet, even when temporarily fulfilled, his soul remains incapable of enduring satisfaction. Like a vessel full of holes, the tyrant’s soul cannot retain fulfillment, leaving him trapped in an endless cycle of desire and frustration, perpetually dissatisfied and driven by insatiable longing.

More importantly, the tyrant’s experience of extreme pleasure and pain profoundly distorts the soul’s rational faculty, undermining its proper function. Rather than evaluating what is truly good or bad based on objective truth, the rational part becomes overwhelmed and fixated exclusively on what will maximize pleasure or minimize pain. In this state, the rational part ceases to be the guardian of truth or the impartial judge of value; instead, it becomes enslaved to the appetites. Its reasoning is twisted and corrupted, not aimed at discerning genuine goodness, but bent toward rationalizing and justifying the pursuit and fulfillment of the tyrant’s insatiable desires.

One key effect is that the tyrant pursues merely the appearance or illusion of the good, rather than the truly good itself. This results from the weakening of the rational part of the soul, caused by the tyrant’s nature and the overwhelming power of erotic desires. I argue that Socrates’ use of Stesichorus’ story of Helen’s phantom (*Rep.* 586b-c) supports this view, illustrating how a person can be deceived into chasing illusions instead of truth:

“Then isn’t it necessary for these people to live with pleasures that are mixed with pains, mere images and shadow-paintings of true pleasures? And doesn’t the juxtaposition of these pleasures and pains make them appear intense, so that they give rise to mad erotic passions in the foolish, and are fought over in just the way that Stesichorus tells us the phantom of Helen was fought over at Troy by men ignorant of the truth?” (*Rep.* 586b4–c2; trans. Grube-Reeve)

In the story, the Greeks fought over a phantom of Helen, believing it to be the real Helen, unaware that they were chasing a mere image. Socrates uses this as a metaphor for the tyrant’s life: just as the Greeks were misled, the tyrant’s rational part is deceived by the extreme intensity of his desires and pleasures, mistaking fleeting pleasures and superficial satisfactions for the true good.

In this passage, Socrates argues that the close succession of pleasures and pains intensifies the distortion of judgment in the soul, especially in those lacking wisdom. In such individuals, the rational part is not merely overpowered by the appetites- it becomes actively complicit in their aims. This supports the deeper claim that, under

¹⁸³I argue that, in Plato’s philosophy, an overreliance on sensual perception is fundamentally misleading because the physical world is imperfect and constantly changing. Sensory experiences are therefore unreliable and deceptive. True knowledge, according to Plato, arises from the rational grasp of the eternal and unchanging Forms- abstract realities that lie beyond the fluctuating appearances of the sensible world. Only through this rational insight can one attain genuine understanding and avoid the errors produced by trusting mere sensory input.

the rule of tyrannical *erôs*, the rational part ceases to function as the soul's guardian of truth and order. Rather than evaluating objects in light of what is genuinely good, it adopts a crude metric: what increases pleasure or reduces pain is judged as good; what increases pain or reduces pleasure is judged as bad. This inversion marks a fundamental corruption in the soul's evaluative structure.

As a result, the tyrant no longer seeks the truly good but only the appearance of the good- that which seems desirable because it produces intense sensations. He becomes trapped in a cycle of insatiable craving, always pursuing new objects of desire under the illusion that they will bring happiness, but never attaining real fulfillment. His soul, like the Greeks misled by the phantom of Helen, is deceived by mere images, confusing momentary gratification with genuine good.

More profoundly, this shift leads to the breakdown of the soul's inner order. The rational part, which should rule, is dethroned and reoriented to serve the appetites. It no longer distinguishes good from bad in moral or philosophical terms but redefines these terms in light of pleasure and pain alone. In surrendering the pursuit of truth, the rational part abandons its function, and the soul collapses into disorder. *Erôs*, now the dominant force, leads the other desires in an unending quest for gratification, with pleasure replacing truth as the highest standard. In this state, moral judgment is eclipsed entirely, and the soul descends into chaos.

In sum, the tyrannical man exemplifies the soul in its most disordered and corrupted state. His life, driven by unchecked *erôs* and increasingly depraved desires, is not one of freedom or pleasure, but of enslavement, inner turmoil, and relentless craving. What appears as power and indulgence from the outside masks a deeper psychological collapse: the rational part, no longer able to rule or discern truth, is reduced to a servant of the appetites. This breakdown is both moral and psychological, resulting in a life that is not only unjust but profoundly miserable. The tyrant's condition thus reveals the ultimate failure of a life governed by appetite and the critical role of reason in securing genuine fulfillment and harmony within the soul.

5.2.3 The Late Stage

This section examines the final phase of the tyrannical soul's development, where *erôs* completes its corrupting work. At this point, the soul has fully succumbed to tyranny: *erôs* becomes completely lawless, with madness serving as its enforcer, eliminating any remaining internal restraints¹⁸⁴. All beliefs connected to shame, moderation, and law are uprooted, allowing *erôs* to assume absolute control. The result is a soul in its most disordered state, ruled entirely by obsessive desire and stripped of rational or moral guidance.

This stage marks the peak of the tyrannical soul's corruption, representing its

¹⁸⁴Plato distinguishes sharply between the madness (*mania*) that accompanies the tyrannical soul and the divine madness associated with the philosopher. In the *Phaedrus* (244a-245b), divine madness, such as that inspired by love, prophecy, poetry, or religious ritual, is presented as a gift from the gods, capable of leading the soul toward truth and the divine Forms. This madness elevates the soul by breaking free from the constraints of ordinary perception and guiding it toward higher realities. In contrast, the madness found in the tyrannical soul, as described in *Republic* IX (574d-576b), is destructive and degrading. It arises from the soul's complete enslavement to lawless appetites and is fueled by *erôs* when detached from reason. Far from elevating the soul, this madness obliterates any remaining moral and rational structure, plunging the individual into chaos and misery. Thus, while both forms of madness involve a departure from ordinary rational control, one is upward-leading (divine and philosophical), the other downward-driving (tyrannical and ruinous).

deepest disorder, as the best or most divine part of the soul is enslaved by the “beast-like” part- a state that Plato likens to a tyrannical city¹⁸⁵. At this point, the rational part of the soul is enslaved to the appetitive part, with all beliefs in moderation, shame, and law that might restrain excessive erotic pursuits thoroughly uprooted. Meanwhile, the soul’s value judgments are entirely dominated by *erôs*’s rule, shifting its sense of good and bad to focus solely on pursuing what increases pleasure and reduces pain. With no internal obstacles to restrain this insatiable expansion, the soul is now fully inclined to follow wherever *erôs* leads. Just as a tyrannical city has only the tyrant as its ruler, the tyrant’s soul recognizes *erôs* as its sole ruler. This leads the tyrant’s life into an endless, single-minded, and chaotic pursuit of what merely appears to be the good- a mistaken illusion for the true good.

Plato considers the tyrant to be the most wretched person, placing him at the bottom of his catalogue of corrupt souls. This is because the tyrant trades away the best and most divine part of his soul, enslaving it to the most beast-like part, and mistakes this pursuit of the merely desirable- the appearance or illusion of the good- for the actual good. To achieve this, the tyrannical man adopts every possible means to satisfy his appetites, regardless of whether the object is good or bad, or the means lawful or lawless, seeking intense gratification as much as possible and for as long as possible. In a word, the tyrant misidentifies the good, mistaking it for the true good, and enslaves the rational part of his soul to justify his behavior.

Although the tyrant appears powerful and ruler, he is, in reality, the most enslaved. His enslavement is not external but internal, as he is ruled by his own appetites and trapped in a constant cycle of craving without lasting fulfillment. The tyrannical person embodies the greatest possible inner disorder. His lack of moderation, inability to experience true happiness, and moral decay make him deeply miserable. In contrast to the just person, who experiences harmony and fulfillment with the real pleasure, the tyrant lives in turmoil, imprisoned by his own desires. For Plato, this inner enslavement and moral corruption make the tyrant’s life the most wretched possible.

In *Republic* 572e-573b, Socrates describes how, in the final stage of the tyrant’s development, *erôs* completes its corrupting work on the soul. It systematically eradicates any remaining internal restraints- especially beliefs tied to shame, law, and moral conscience- that might hinder its rule. To secure its absolute dominance, *erôs* installs “madness” (*μανία*) as its bodyguard, a vivid image that symbolizes the collapse of rational order and the onset of deep psychic disorder:

“Then this leader of the soul (*erôs*) adopts madness as its bodyguard and becomes frenzied. If it finds any beliefs or desires in the man that are thought to be good or that still have some shame, it destroys them and throws them out, until it’s purged him of moderation and filled him with imported madness.” (Rep. 573a7-b4; *trans.* Grube-Reeve)

In this account, the soul’s final transformation into tyranny is driven by *erôs*’s

¹⁸⁵The term “beast-like” refers to the irrational and appetitive part of the soul, which Plato often associates with animalistic impulses and desires. In the *Republic* (e.g., 576c-d, 591a-c), this part is contrasted with the rational, divine aspect of the soul. When Plato describes the soul as “beast-like,” he emphasizes its lack of reason and moderation, dominated instead by base instincts and cravings. The image of the tyrannical city (Rep. 592a-c) serves as a political analogy for this inner disorder, where the “best” or rational element is subjugated by the unruly, violent desires that act like a ruling tyrant.

relentless expansion of power. As *erôs* establishes itself as the tyrannical “leader” within the soul, it seeks to eliminate all forms of internal resistance. To secure and defend its dominance, it enlists madness as its “bodyguard,” symbolizing the collapse of rational order and the rise of psychic chaos. This alliance enables unrestrained desire to seize full control, overwhelming any remaining influence from the rational part of the soul.

Specifically, *erôs* identifies any moderating influence, such as feelings of shame, beliefs in law, or ethical considerations, as threats to its rule. These are rooted in the rational part’s capacity to make value judgments oriented toward truth, long-term good, and harmony. But under *erôs*’s rule, such values are treated as obstacles to be eliminated. The appetitive part, intensified by *erôs*, begins to dominate the soul’s judgments and actions, fixating solely on immediate pleasure and the avoidance of pain, regardless of the means or consequences. The soul thus becomes increasingly willing to pursue even the most lawless and unnecessary desires.

This produces an internal reconfiguration: the rational part no longer functions as a guide or judge but is reduced to a tool used by *erôs* to justify gratification. The conflict between the soul’s higher aspirations and its base appetites is resolved by silencing the rational part altogether. In this way, *erôs* not only overthrows rational authority but also redefines the very criteria for what is good and desirable. Moderation, self-restraint, and moral judgment are no longer intelligible values within the tyrannical soul. They are replaced by a single standard: whatever satisfies desire is “good,” and whatever frustrates it is “bad.”

Further, *erôs* calls upon “madness” as its “bodyguard,” symbolizing the soul’s deep internal disorder. Socrates’s use of “madness” (*μανία*) in this passage (*Rep.* 573a) reveals two key aspects of the tyrannical soul:

First, madness functions as a defense mechanism that secures *erôs*’s dominance. Like a political tyrant who relies on violent enforcers to maintain power, *erôs* enlists madness to shield itself from any influence that might restore rational control. Madness ensures that the rational and spirited parts of the soul remain suppressed, disrupting any attempt at internal balance or moral self-regulation. In this way, the soul is kept in a condition of constant disorder, where the normal checks and restraints provided by reason and moderation are dismantled.

Second, madness introduces a state of frenzy and lawlessness. Socrates describes how *erôs*, now fully in control, seeks to purge the soul of all beliefs connected to shame, law, and ethical restraint (*Rep.* 573a-b). The tyrannical man becomes entirely consumed by his desires, ready to do anything to satisfy them- even at the cost of morality, legality, or personal relationships¹⁸⁶. As Socrates later explains (575b-576a), the tyrant will resort to deceit, coercion, and violence, even against his own family and friends, if these means serve his cravings. This descent into frenzied and immoral behavior illustrates the extent to which *erôs* can disfigure the soul when left unrestrained.

This frenzied state marks the peak of the tyrannical soul’s corruption. Socrates explicitly likens the soul under the domination of *erôs* to a tyrannical city (576c5-7, 577d1), where one lawless ruler imposes absolute control. In the soul, *erôs* becomes

¹⁸⁶In this passage, Socrates describes how the tyrannical man, completely enslaved by his desires, becomes willing to do whatever it takes to satisfy them- including breaking laws, violating moral norms, and destroying personal relationships. He is prepared to use deceit and violence to get what he wants, even if it means harming his own family and friends. This shows how unchecked desires consume the tyrant entirely, leading to a life driven by reckless, lawless, and immoral behavior.

that ruler, replacing reason and virtue with the blind pursuit of pleasure. The result is a form of internal tyranny: the soul is no longer self-governing but enslaved to its most lawless and irrational impulses. In this condition, moderation, shame, and moral reflection are eradicated, leaving the person in a state of chaos, moral decay, and self-imposed slavery.

It is now clear how tyrannical *erôs*, with madness as its companion, continues to drive the soul's progressive corruption. This explains why Socrates places the tyrannical soul at the very bottom of his hierarchy of corrupt character types. I argue that there are two main reasons for this:

First, the tyrannical man enslaves the best and most divine part of his soul, the rational part, to the most base and lawless part, the appetitive element dominated by tyrannical *erôs*. Socrates characterizes this internal inversion as both shameful and ultimately unprofitable. In *Republic* 589c6-590a2, he reinforces this point by invoking the myth of Eriphyle, who was bribed with a necklace to betray her husband. Just as Eriphyle sacrifices what is most just and noble for a superficial gain, so too does the tyrant trade away the soul's highest element for the fleeting satisfaction of desire. This image underscores the moral and psychological tragedy of the tyrannical soul: it betrays what is truly good for the mere appearance of the good:

“Fine things are those that subordinate the beast-like parts of our nature to the human, or better, perhaps, to the divine; shameful ones are those that enslave the gentle to the savage?”

.....

How, then, **could he fail to be wretched if he pitilessly enslaves the most divine part...** to the most godless and polluted one and accepts golden gifts in return for a more terrible destruction than Eriphyle's when she took the necklace in return for her husband's soul?” (*Rep.* 589c6-590a2; trans. Grube-Reeve)

In this passage, Socrates explains that “fine things” are those that subordinate the beast-like parts of our nature to the human- or better yet, to the divine- part of the soul. In contrast, “shameful things” occur when the savage and irrational desires overpower the gentle and rational element. The tyrannical man embodies this shameful condition to the highest degree, as he allows the most vicious part of the soul to rule over the best. To emphasize the gravity of this internal betrayal, Socrates draws on the myth of Eriphyle, who accepted a necklace in exchange for her husband's life. In the same way, the tyrant trades away the most divine part of himself for the sake of fulfilling base and lawless appetites.

Socrates' point is that what may appear to be “profitable”- whether it be wealth, power, or pleasure- is, in truth, a loss if it comes at the cost of the soul's inner order and virtue. The tyrant mistakes the appearance of the good for the real good, and in doing so, sacrifices what is most essential to human flourishing. As a result, he falls into a state of deep inner wretchedness, losing all connection to reason, justice, and the possibility of true happiness.

Second, the tyrant occupies the lowest position among corrupt souls because he has forfeited any real potential for achieving a genuinely good and happy life. By abandoning fundamental virtues such as justice, wisdom, and moderation, the tyrant plunges his soul into complete disorder and moral decay. These virtues are not merely abstract ideals but essential qualities that maintain the soul's harmony and enable it to pursue true fulfillment. Without them, the soul becomes fragmented and chaotic,

dominated entirely by unchecked appetites and desires.

The tyrant's surrender to his appetites means he severs his connection to the rational part of the soul, which alone possesses the capacity to discern genuine goods and pursue long-term well-being. Instead of allowing reason to guide his choices toward balanced and meaningful pleasures, the tyrant embraces excess and indulges in an ever-growing array of cravings. This insatiable appetite traps him in a cycle of addiction to immediate gratification- whether in power, wealth, or sensual pleasures- that ultimately undermines his stability and happiness.

This loss of self-control eliminates any possibility for inner peace or genuine contentment. The tyrant's life becomes a constant turmoil of restless desire, leading not only to external conflict but also to profound psychological suffering. Unlike the just or philosophical soul, which achieves fulfillment through harmony and virtue, the tyrant remains enslaved to fleeting pleasures, condemned to a life marked by imbalance, dissatisfaction, and moral ruin.

The tyrant's rejection of wisdom, moderation, and justice leads to deep moral decay that destroys his character. Devoid of these virtues, he loses the ability to recognize true good, achieve inner peace, or live in harmony¹⁸⁷. As a result, his life becomes a constant struggle with restless, unfulfilled desires and inner conflict. For Plato, this total moral breakdown renders the tyrant the most wretched of souls, stripped of any hope for justice, meaning, or genuine happiness.

5.3 Conclusion

To sum up, I understand that *erôs*'s role in shaping and deepening the tyrannical character unfolds in three distinct stages:

The first stage begins to shift when an individual, raised in a corrupt democratic environment, starts evolving into a tyrant. Socrates describes tyrannical *erôs* as a "great drone with the sting," a dominant and powerful desire that grows stronger as it feeds on and unites other desires. As *erôs* gains strength, it increasingly disrupts the soul's balance, causing the person to prioritize certain appetitive desires- especially those that are unnecessary, excessive, and often lawless. Unlike the democratic father who values all desires more evenly, the emerging tyrant becomes fixated on these harmful and unlawful cravings. This shift marks the foundation for the full development of the tyrannical character. This stage demonstrates how, within a corrupt democratic context, *erôs* reshapes the soul's internal hierarchy by elevating unnecessary and lawless appetites above reason and moderation, fundamentally altering the person's motivations and choices.

The second stage reveals the deepening tyranny within the soul. At this point, the tyrannical person relentlessly pursues what he believes to be the good- but this goal is merely an illusion or appearance of the true good, which he mistakenly confuses with reality. Driven by the overwhelming power of tyrannical *erôs*, his desires become insatiable and ever-expanding, creating constant demands that exceed all limits and require endless satisfaction. When these desires are frustrated, they cause intense pain

¹⁸⁷Plato holds that the tyrant's corrupted life brings harm not only to himself but also to society at large. His absence of virtue fosters chaos and suffering among others, making the tyrant's soul- dominated by vice- the most deeply degraded and destructive state of existence.

or diminish pleasure, pushing the tyrant to use any means necessary- no matter how extreme or unjust- to obtain whatever might temporarily satisfy his cravings.

In this middle stage, *erôs* exerts significant influence over the soul's rational part, especially when that part is weakened in the tyrannical character. When the rational part "slumbers" (571c4), its capacity to make sound value judgments diminishes. *Erôs* takes advantage of this weakness, imposing its own criteria on reason: what increases pleasure or reduces pain is judged good, while what decreases pleasure or increases pain is judged bad. Moreover, in the tyrant's social environment, this distorted value system is reinforced by the tyrant's companions, making it even harder for the rational part to reclaim authority. As a result, reason loses the support needed to reestablish its rule and instead redefines the good solely in terms of pleasure and the bad in terms of pain, abandoning its deeper philosophical quest for truth and genuine knowledge.

This environment, already hostile to reason's recovery, worsens in the final stages of tyranny. Two key factors deepen the tyrant's degradation: first, *erôs* compels the spirited part of the soul to ally with the appetitive part. This alliance creates a state of "madness," where the soul becomes obsessively focused on acquiring whatever it desires- regardless of whether the objects or means are good or lawful. The soul relentlessly pursues intense and prolonged gratification. In doing so, it actively purges any moderating influences- such as law, shame, and restraint- that might limit its desires. Consequently, the rational part is fully enslaved to the appetites, no longer acting as guardian of truth or judge of genuine "good" and "bad". Instead, reason becomes a distorted instrument used to justify indulgence rather than to seek truth. This complete submission to tyrannical *erôs* drives the soul toward self-destructive choices and ultimate ruin.

Now we can better understand Socrates' description of becoming tyrannical in *Republic* 573c6-8:

"Then a man becomes tyrannical in the precise sense of the term when either his nature or his way of life or both of them together make him drunk, filled with erotic desire, and mad."
(*Rep.* 573c6-8; *trans.* Grube-Reeve)

This statement encapsulates the tyrannical process: the tyrant's reason grows weak and his capacity for truthful value judgment diminishes- much like a drunk person who temporarily loses rational clarity. However, unlike a drunkard who eventually sobers and regains reason, the tyrant remains trapped in a permanent state of moral and psychological intoxication. His environment offers no chance for recovery; instead, it continually reinforces his distorted desires, pushing him further down a self-destructive path. Friends, followers, and his power form an echo chamber that blocks any possibility of moderation or critical self-reflection. This highlights the tyrant's condition as one of irreversible decline.

The tyrant's soul becomes wholly ruled by *erôs*, obsessively seeking to possess whatever is desirable without end. This state resembles madness, characterized by a disregard for lawfulness and an unrelenting justification of endless, ultimately unfulfillable desires.

Both the internal psychological structure and the tyrannical environment conspire to validate his excesses, driving the tyrant to pursue ever more intense gratification while rejecting law and moral restraint. In sum, the tyrant's condition is one of inevitable, irreversible moral and psychological degradation.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: *Erôs* and the Becoming of the Self

In this dissertation, I have argued that *erôs* plays a central and dynamic role in the process of self-formation. My core thesis is that *erôs*, characterized by Plato as “the desire to possess the good forever” (*Symp.* 206a11, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff), is both foundational and indispensable to the shaping of the self.

This conclusion emerges not from reducing *erôs* to mere sexual or romantic desire, nor from viewing it as a superficial or incidental drive. Rather, it comes from a careful philosophical analysis of Plato’s portrayal of *erôs* as the deepest and most powerful longing within the soul. This longing is not just emotional or psychological- it is ontological and epistemological. *Erôs* propels the soul outward, compelling it toward an ideal of goodness and fulfillment. In this sense, *erôs* is the driving force behind the development of personal identity, for it shapes not only what one seeks in life but also the kind of life one strives to lead. It is, ultimately, through *erôs* that the soul comes to define itself and its place in the world.

At the heart of Plato’s moral psychology lies the conviction that the soul is not a fixed or static entity, but a dynamic and ever-changing process- a becoming rather than a being. The soul is continually orienting itself, transforming in response to the desires and aspirations that drive it.

Central to this process is *erôs*, the soul’s most profound and potent longing, which acts as the catalyst for its movement. *Erôs* is not merely a fleeting passion or a superficial impulse- it is the force that draws the soul beyond itself, prompting it to seek fulfillment, meaning, and identity in relation to something external to it. In this way, *erôs* functions as the soul’s guiding principle, shaping its path and determining the direction of its transformation.

The condition, object, and direction of *erôs* are what ultimately determine whether this movement leads to integration and flourishing, or to disintegration and corruption. When *erôs* is directed toward what is truly good, rational, and noble, it draws the soul toward unity, harmony, and wisdom. When it is misplaced- when it is fixated on what is base, false, or illusory- it fragments the soul, pulling it away from its highest aspirations and leading it toward disorder and tyranny.

In this dissertation, my primary argument has been to recover the ontological and ethical significance of *erôs* in Platonic thought. This entails resisting reductive interpretations that reduce *erôs* to merely sexual or emotional desire, as it is often misunderstood. While *erôs* undoubtedly includes a passionate or affective dimension, Plato’s treatment of it is far more profound. *Erôs* is not merely the desire for physical pleasure or romantic connection- it is the fundamental power that forms the very architecture of the soul. It provides the soul with its center of gravity, the object of its longing, and the vision toward which it strives. This is why *erôs* is not just about what the soul wants, but about what it wants “most”- the thing that orders its desires, its values, and its sense of purpose.

It is through *erôs* that the soul comes to identify with a certain kind of life, whether one that seeks rational knowledge, one that pursues honor and courage, or one that is driven by appetites and base desires. *Erôs* helps the soul construct its vision of what constitutes a fulfilling life, and it reorders the faculties of the soul around that vision. Thus, *erôs* is not a peripheral or incidental aspect of selfhood; it is

its architect, shaping the soul's very structure and determining the kind of life one lives.

This insight has guided my examination of self-formation across various psychic types, especially the philosopher and the tyrant, whose souls are shaped by diametrically opposed forms of *erôs*.

The philosopher's soul is marked by *erôs* for what truly is- being itself, the intelligible, the eternal. Such a soul is governed by reason not because it denies desire, but because its deepest longing has been educated, purified, and redirected toward what is genuinely good. *Erôs* here becomes the ladder of ascent, enabling the soul to transcend the realm of becoming and participate, however partially, in the realm of being. Philosophical *erôs* is thus both erotic and rational, passionate and contemplative, grounding a form of life oriented by the love of wisdom.

The tyrant, by contrast, represents the degeneration of *erôs* into its most lawless and destructive form. When *erôs* becomes unmoored from reason and inflamed by the illusions of unchecked appetite, it corrupts the soul, rendering it fragmented, enslaved, and insatiable. The tyrannical soul is no less shaped by *erôs* than the philosophical one- it is simply shaped by a corrupted *erôs*, one that has been habituated to mistake false goods for true ones, and to seek gratification without limit. In this way, the tyrant becomes an image of what happens when the soul's most powerful force is left without guidance or cultivation: the self collapses inward, ruled by its lowest parts, incapable of genuine autonomy or unity.

Between these two extremes, the philosopher and the tyrant, lies a vast spectrum of human character, each shaped by the delicate and often unpredictable interplay between the soul's internal condition and the objects it comes to love. This dynamic underlines a crucial feature of Plato's vision: selfhood is never given once and for all; it is continuously formed by what the soul loves.

The process of self-formation is always in motion, always at risk, and always a matter of ethical and philosophical concern. If *erôs* is misdirected- if the soul's longing is for things that are shallow, transient, or illusory- the self will be distorted, even if it achieves external success. A person may gain wealth, power, or social status, but such accomplishments will not bring the soul true fulfillment or unity. Instead, they deepen the soul's fragmentation, as it continually pursues fleeting pleasures that leave it empty and unsatisfied. In this case, the soul's desire has gone astray, pulling it away from its true purpose and leading it toward a life marked by restlessness and unfulfilled potential.

Conversely, when *erôs* is properly cultivated- when the soul's longing is directed toward what is genuinely good, enduring, and noble- the process of self-formation can lead to a unified and harmonious self, one capable of wisdom. This does not mean that the self is free from struggle or conflict, but that its desires are aligned with the true good. This alignment allows the soul to find purpose and fulfillment. When *erôs* is guided toward the good, the soul's faculties- reason, spirit, and appetite- are harmonized in pursuit of a common goal. In this way, the soul becomes a cohesive whole, its desires refined and shaped by a deeper understanding of what is truly worth striving for.

Thus, *erôs* is both a risk and a promise: a force of immense transformative power that can either lead the soul to ruin or become the origin of its ascent toward truth and self-mastery. It is the condition of the soul itself- its openness to reason, its education, its habituation- that determines whether *erôs* will serve as a guide toward the Good or become an agent of corruption. This tension underscores the ethical and political

stakes of self-formation, for a society that neglects to cultivate the *erôs* of its citizens risks generating not lovers of wisdom and virtue, but lovers of power, domination, and base pleasures.

In recovering the centrality of *erôs* in the formation of the self, this project also reorients our understanding of moral education and the philosophical life. Plato's view suggests that ethical formation is not simply a matter of obeying rules or restraining impulses, but of transforming desire itself. The task of education is to reorient *erôs*- to awaken a longing for the noble, the beautiful, and the true. The role of the educator, then, is not that of the legislator or the disciplinarian, but of the midwife: one who helps bring forth in the soul a vision of the Good so compelling that it reorders the whole of life around it. Such an education requires exposure to beauty, reasoned dialogue, philosophical companionship, and a political environment that does not degrade the soul's highest aspirations.

Understanding *erôs* as the engine of self-formation also illuminates the inherently relational and political nature of the self. The soul does not form itself in isolation. Its desires are shaped by the models it sees, the values it inherits, and the structures that govern its development. A corrupt city will corrupt the *erôs* of its citizens; a just city will elevate it. This reciprocal relationship between soul and city underscores the urgency of caring for the conditions under which *erôs* can be properly educated- not only for individual well-being, but for the flourishing of a shared life.

Contemporary scholarship shows that Plato's insights remain philosophically relevant, particularly in debates about transformation, education, and the role of love, which continue to presuppose a conception of the self shaped by what it loves. In Plato, *erôs* is not a contingent attachment added to an already formed agent, but the fundamental force through which the soul acquires its orientation, structure, and standards of value. Curren (2023) emphasizes that education is not merely the transmission of information but the cultivation of love for what is good¹⁸⁸; both Plato and Curren view learning as a process in which desire is redirected toward higher objects, shaping the student's evaluative framework rather than merely supplementing it. Yao (2023) demonstrates that *erôs*, exemplified in erotic love¹⁸⁹, disrupts rational self-mastery and restructures the self's desires and evaluative framework, showing that transformative experiences cultivate vulnerability, relationality, and openness to change. These insights resonate with Plato's account of *erôs* as a formative force capable of both corrupting and elevating the soul, shaping ethical and intellectual development beyond the control of reason alone. Akhlaghi (2023) argues that transformative experiences ethically demand respect for autonomous self-making, showing that interventions are impermissible when they impede another's ability to discover themselves through change¹⁹⁰. This perspective aligns with Plato's conception of *erôs*, emphasizing that both ethical and personal development depend on allowing desire to guide the self toward transformation under proper guidance.

¹⁸⁸ Curren 2023.

¹⁸⁹ Yao's discussion, based on the philosopher and poet Anne Carson (1998), highlights the ambivalent, "bittersweet" nature of erotic love. Love simultaneously attracts and repels, and desire contains a paradox: the lover fears that attaining the beloved might extinguish the very desire that drives them. This tension demonstrates how *erôs* both motivates and destabilizes the self, reshaping its desires, attachments, and overall sense of value. See Yao. (2023, pp. 209-210.)

¹⁹⁰ Akhlaghi. (2023. pp. 6-8.)

In concluding, I return to the simple but far-reaching idea that the soul becomes what it loves. This Platonic insight underlies the whole of this dissertation. To become a self, in the full and rich sense of that word, is to become formed by what one pursues with one's deepest longing. Whether the soul rises toward the divine or falls into disorder depends on the cultivation of *erôs*. If we are to live examined lives, as Socrates urges, then we must examine not only what we believe or what we do, but what we love- and whether that love is worthy of the soul it shapes. In the final analysis, self-formation is erotic through and through: the project of becoming who one is cannot be separated from the desire for what one is not yet but could become. To guide *erôs* toward the Good is thus not only the task of philosophy, but the task of being human.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Cooper, John M., ed. (1997). *Plato: Complete Works*. Hackett.
- Dover, K. J. (1982). *Plato Symposium*. Edited with introduction and commentary. Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gill, C. (1999). *Plato: The Symposium*. Introduction, translation, and notes. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics.
- Goold, G.P., ed. ([1921] 1977). *Plato: Theaetetus, Sophist*. Trans. by Harold North Fowler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lamb, W. R. M. (1925). *Symposium*. Text and translation. Loeb Classical Library. Vol. 3 (with the *Lysis* and the *Gorgias*). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nehamas, A., and Woodruff, P., (1995). *Plato, Phaedrus*. Translated with introduction and notes. Hackett.
- Page, Capps, and Rouse, eds., ([1930] 1937). *Plato: The Republic, Vol. I: Books I-V*. Trans. by Paul Shorey. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Page et al., eds., ([1935] 1956). *Plato: The Republic, Vol. II: Books VI-X*. Trans. by Paul Shorey. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rowe, C. J. ([1986] 1998). *Plato: Phaedrus*. Edited with introduction, translation, and commentary. Warminster: Aris & Phillips.
- (2015). *Plato: Theaetetus and Sophist*. Cambridge University Press.
- Waterfield, R. (1994). *Plato, Symposium*. Translated with introduction and notes. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2002). *Plato, Phaedrus*. Translation with introduction and notes. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Secondary Sources

- Allen, R. E. (1991). *The Symposium*, In *The Dialogues of Plato*. Vol. 2. Translated with comment. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ambury, James Michael. (2014). *Know Thyself: Plato's Alcibiades I and the Foundation of Philosophical Knowing*. PhD diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, Accessed July 2025.
- Annas, Julia. (1981). *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (1993). *The Morality of Happiness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2011). *Intelligent Virtue*. Oxford University Press.
- Arruzza, Cinzia. (2018). *A Wolf in the City: Tyranny and the Tyrant in Plato's Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barney, Rachel. (2008). "Erôs and Necessity in the Ascent from the Cave." *Ancient Philosophy* 28, (2): 357-72.
- et al. (eds.), (2012). *Plato and the Divided Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bett, Richard, (1986). "Immortality and the Nature of the Soul in the *Phaedrus*," *Phronesis*, 31: 1-26.
- Blössner, Norbert. (2007). "The City-Soul Analogy". 345-85 in G. R. F. Ferrari, (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Brown, Eric. (2000). "Justice and Compulsion for Plato's Philosopher-Rulers." *Ancient Philosophy* 20: 1-17.
- Bryan, Jenny. (2021). "The Role of Lysias' Speech in Plato's *Phaedrus*," *Cambridge Classical Journal*, 67: 1-24.
- Broadie, Sarah. (2001). "Soul and Body in Plato and Descartes." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101 (1): 295-308.
- Burnyeat, M. F. (2000). "Plato on Why Mathematics is Good for the Soul," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 103: 1-81.
- ([1977] 2012). "Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration." *Bulletin of The Institute of Classical Studies* 24, (1): 7-16.
- Bury, R. G., (1973). *The Symposium of Plato*, 2nd edition, Warminster: Aris and Phillips.
- Campbell, D. R. (2021). "Self-Motion and Cognition: Plato's Theory of the Soul." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 59 (4): 523-544.
- Candiotto, L. (2020). "Purification through Emotions: The Role of Shame in Plato's *Sophist* (230b4-e5)." In *Emotions in Plato*, edited by Laura Candiotto and Olivier Renaut, 180-196. Leiden: Brill.
- Cooper, Andrew. (2017). "For the (Philosophical) Love of Poetic Beauty." *Philosophical Inquiry* 41 (1): 111-126.
- Cooper, J. M., ([1977] 1999). "The Psychology of Justice in Plato," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14: 151-157. Reprinted in Cooper 1999, 138-149.
- ([1984] 1999). "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 1 (1984): 3-21. Reprinted in Cooper 1999, pp. 118-137; in Fine 1999, 186-206.

- ([1998] 1999). “The Unity of Virtue,” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 15: 233-274. Reprinted in Cooper 1999, 76-117.
- (1999). *Reason and Emotion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- (2012). *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cornford, F. M. (1932). “Mathematics and Dialectic in the *Republic* VI.-VII. (I).” *Mind*, 41(161), 37-52.
- Corrigan, K. (1996). “‘Solitary’ Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius.” *The Journal of Religion* 76 (1): 28-42.
- Curren, Randall R. (ed.) (2023). *Handbook of Philosophy of Education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ferrari, G. (1987). *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato’s Phaedrus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1992). “Platonic Love,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Richard Kraut (ed.), pp. 248-276, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frede, Dorothea. (1978). “The Final Proof of the Immortality of the Soul in Plato’s *Phaedo* 102a-107a.” *Phronesis* 23 (1): 1-41.
- Fine, Gail. (2003). *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (ed.), (2008). *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fine, Jonathan, (2019). “The Guise of the Beautiful: *Symposium*, 204d ff.,” *Phronesis*, 65:129-152.
- Foucault, Michel. (1986). *The Care of the Self*. Translated by Robert Hurley.
- Foley, Richard, (2010). “The Order Question: Climbing the Ladder of Love in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 30 (1): 57-72.
- Griswold, Charles L. (1986), *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gordon, Jill. (2005). “*Erôs* in Plato’s *Timaeus*,” *Epoche: A Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 9 (2): 255-278.
- Halperin, David. (1990), “Why is Diotima a Woman?” in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, New York: Routledge, pp. 113-51.
- Heath, M., (1989). “The Unity of Plato’s *Phaedrus*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 7: 150-73.
- Howatson, M. C. (2008). *The Symposium*. Translation and notes, edited with introduction by Howatson and F. C. C. Sheffield. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Irwin, Terence. (1977). *Plato’s Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- (1995). *Plato’s Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- (2008). *The Development of Ethics (Volume I: From Socrates to the Reformation)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnstone, M. (2013). “Anarchic Souls: Plato’s Depiction of the ‘Democratic Man’.” *Phronesis* 58 (2): 139-59.
- (2015). “Tyrannized Souls: Plato’s Depiction of the ‘Tyrannical Man’.” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23 (3): 423-437.
- Johansen, Thomas Kjeller. (2017). “The Separation of the Soul from Body in Plato’s *Phaedo*.” *Philosophical Inquiry* 41 (2-3): 17-28.
- Kahn, Charles, H. (1987). “Plato’s Theory of Desire.” *The Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1): 77-103.
- (1996). *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kamtekar, R. (2017). *Plato’s moral psychology: intellectualism, the divided soul, and the desire for good*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kraut, Richard. (1973). “Egoism, Love, and Political Office in Plato,” *The Philosophical Review* 82, (3): 330-344.
- (2008). “Plato on Love,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, G. Fine (ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 286-310.
- and Ebrey David. (eds). ([1992] 2022). *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Cambridge University Press.
- Levy, D. (1979). “The Definition of Love in Plato’s *Symposium*.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 40 (2), 285-291.
- Lear, Gabriel Richardson. (2006). “Plato on Learning to Love Beauty.” In Santas, G. (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Plato’s Republic*. Oxford, pp. 104-124.
- Leshner, James, Nails, Debra, and Sheffield, Frisbee (eds.), (2008). *Plato’s Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lear, Jonathan. (1998). *Open Minded: Working out the Logic of the Soul*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lorenz, H. (2006). *The brute within: appetitive desires in Plato and Aristotle*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ludwig, Paul. (2002). *Erôs and Polis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (2007). “*Erôs* in the *Republic*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic*, G.R.F. Ferrari (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 202-231.
- McCabe, M.M. (1994). *Plato’s Individuals*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- (2000). *Plato and His Predecessors: the dramatisation of reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McDavid B. (2025). Prison-Breaking from Plato’s Cave, *Classical Quarterly*. pp. 1-12.
- Menn, S. (1995). *Plato and God as Noûs*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Miller, Mitchell H. (2004). *The Philosophy of Plato*. Las Vegas: Parmenides.
- Moravcsik, J. M. E. (1972), “Reason and *Erôs* in the Ascent Passage of the *Symposium*,” in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Volume I), John P. Anton and G. L. Kustas (eds.), Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 285-302.
- Nails, D. (2002). *The People of Plato. A Prosography of Plato and Other Socratics*, Indianapolis: Hackett.

- Nehamas, Alexander. (1995). *Plato: Phaedrus, translated with introduction and notes*, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- (1998). *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. University of California Press.
- (1999). *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- and Woodruff, Paul. (1989). *Plato: Symposium, translated with introduction and notes*, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- (2004). “The place of beauty and the role of value in the world of art.” *Critical Quarterly* 42 (3).
- (2007). “Only in the Contemplation of Beauty Is Human Life Worth Living: Plato, *Symposium* 211d.” *European Journal of Philosophy* 57, 227.
- Nussbaum, Martha C., (1986). *The Fragility of Goodness: luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1979). “The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato’s *Symposium*.” *Philosophy and Literature* 3 (2): 131-172.
- (1979). *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Obdrzalek, S., (2010). “Moral Transformation and the Love of Beauty in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 48: 415-444.
- (2002). “Why *Erôs*?” in *Cambridge Companion to Plato, 2nd edition*, David Ebrey and Richard Kraut (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 202-232.
- Penner, T. and C. Rowe, (2005). *Plato’s Lysis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pfefferkorn, J. (2020). “Shame and Virtue in Plato’s *Laws*: Two Kinds of Fear and the Drunken Puppet.” In *Emotions in Plato*, edited by Laura Candiottio and Olivier Renaut, 252-269. Leiden: Brill.
- Pinkoski N. (2019). The Allegory of the Cave and the Problem of Platonism in Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, *Ethics & Politics* 21(3): 201-228.
- Politis, Vasilis. (2016). “Colloquium 1: How Good is that Thing Called Love? The Volatility of *Erôs* in Plato’s *Symposium*.” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy* 31 (1): 1-34.
- Price, A. (1989). *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- (1995). *Mental Conflict*. London: Routledge.
- Reeve, C. D. C. (1988). *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato’s Republic*. Indianapolis.
- (1992). “Telling the Truth About Love: Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, VIII: 89-114.
- (2006). “Plato on *Erôs* and Friendship,” in *A Companion to Plato*, Hugh H. Benson (ed.), pp. 204-307.
- (2013). *Blindness and Reorientation*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rowe, C. J., (1986). “The Argument and Structure of Plato’s *Phaedrus*,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 32: 106-205.
- (1986). *Plato: Phaedrus* (Greek text, translation, and notes), Warminster: Aris and Phillips.
- (1998). “Socrates and Diotima: *Erôs*, Immortality, and Creativity,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 14: 239-259.
- (2007). *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Russell, D. (2005). *Plato on Pleasure and the Good Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Santas, Gerasimos. (1979). “Plato’s Theory of *Erôs* in the *Symposium*: Abstract, *Noûs* 13, (1): 67-75.
- (2006). “Plato on Pleasure as the Human Good.” In Hugh H. Benson, *A Companion to Plato*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 308-322.
- Schindler, D C. (2007). “Plato and the Problem of Love: On the Nature of *Erôs* in the *Symposium*,” *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science*, 40 (3): 199-220.
- Scott, Dominic. (2008). “*Erôs*, Philosophy and Tyranny.” In *Maieusis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat*, edited by Dominic Scott, 136-53. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2015). *Levels of Argument. A Comparative Study of Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scott, Simon. (2020). “Loving and Living Well: The Importance of Shame in Plato’s *Phaedrus*.” In *Emotions in Plato*, edited by Laura Candiottio and Olivier Renaut, 197-215. Leiden: Brill.
- Sheffield, Frisbee C. C., (2006). *Plato’s Symposium: The Ethics of Desire*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- (2011). “Beyond *Erôs*: Friendship in the *Phaedrus*.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 111, 251-273.
- Stace, W. T. (1960). *Mysticism and Philosophy*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Thornton, B. S. (1997). *Erôs: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*. Westview Press.
- Trabattoni, Franco. (2023). *From Death to Life: Key Themes in Plato’s Phaedo*. Boston, Massachusetts: Brill.
- Tuozzo, Thomas, (2021). “Saving Diotima’s Account of Erotic Love in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 41: 83-104.
- Vasilou, I. (2008). *Aiming at Virtue in Plato*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vlastos, G. ([1973] 1999). “The Individual as Object of Love in Plato”. In Gail Fine, *Plato, Volume 2: Ethics, Politics, Religious and the Soul*. Oxford University.
- (1981). *Platonic Studies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, second edition.
- (1994). *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vogt, K., (2012). *Belief and Truth: A Sceptic Reading of Plato*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Wedgwood, R. (2009). “Diotima’s Eudaemonism: Intrinsic Value and Rational Motivation in Plato’s *Symposium*. *Phronesis*, 54 (4-5), 297-325.

- (2017). *The Value of Rationality*, Oxford University Press.
- White, F. C. (1990). "Love and the Individual in Plato's *Phaedrus*". *The Classical Quarterly*, 40 (2), 396-406.
- White, N. (2002). *Individual and Conflict in Greek Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wolfsdorf, D. (2007). "Philia in Plato's *Lysis*," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 103: 235-259.
- (2013). *Pleasure in Ancient Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.