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Reason and Eros in the "Ascent"-Passage of the *Symposium**

IN *Symposium* 209E-212A—one of the best known passages of the Platonic corpus—Plato describes a series of steps leading to the apprehension of the Form of Beauty. Although much has been written on this passage, there is a need to subject both the account of the process of ascent as well as the description of the object of final vision to closer scrutiny than others have done before. Several commentators emphasize that both reason and eros play important roles in the ascent.¹ It is also well known that the object of final vision is one of the Platonic Forms. In this paper an attempt will be made to determine the exact nature of the roles and interrelations of reason and eros, and to give a detailed account of what Plato says about the Form of Beauty.

Plato's own summary of the ascent—211C 1-D 1—distinguishes only movements across four levels; from the interest in the beauty of bodies to that of institutions and practices, from there to the beauty of the sciences, and then the final movement to the apprehension of the Form of Beauty. This summary is, however, only a rough outline; although the four levels mentioned are significant within Plato's scheme of the ascent, an account of the complexity of the actual series described will have to go beneath the relative simplicity of this fourfold division. A survey of the steps described indicates that three types of steps make up the ascent. There are steps of reason, i.e., events of knowing, grasping, understanding, etc., but also steps of emotion such as loving, preferring, showing disdain, and steps of creation, in particular the creation of discourse. Accordingly, it might not be inappropriate to present a scheme that does justice to this complexity. Within the scheme R-steps, C-steps, and E-steps will mark the steps of reason, creation, and eros. The E-steps can be divided further into positive and negative ones. The possibility of

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this scheme shows the distinctness of reason and eros,² while its detailed structure should give us a better understanding of Plato's theory of mind.

Applying the scheme to a translation of the text yields the following results.

- E1. "he should love one body" (210A 7)
 - C1. "and engender within it beautiful discourse" (210A 7-8)
 - R1. "after this he should realize that the beauty of any one body is akin to the beauty of any other body" (210A 8-b1)
 - R2. "and if one is to pursue beauty in accordance with form³, it is folly not to regard beauty in all bodies as one and the same" (210B 2-3)
 - E2. "having considered this one is to become the lover of all beautiful bodies, and restrain one's zeal toward the one, disdaining it and thinking little of it" (210B 4-6)
 - E3. "and after this to honor beauty in the soul more than that beauty which is in bodies so that if a proper soul had even a little bloom, this would suffice for loving and caring for it" (210B 6-c1)
 - C2. "and to seek and bring into being discourse that improves the youths" (210C 1-3)
 - R3. "in order that he may be forced to behold beauty in practices and laws⁴" (210C 3-4)
 - R4. "and to see that all of these belong to the same kind" (210C 4-5)
 - E4. "so that he may show disdain toward the beauty of bodies" (210C 5-6)
 - R5. "and after the practices he should be led to the sciences so that he may see the beauty of these" (210C 6-7)
 - R6. "and looking at beauty in the many, not with regard to the one instant like a servant caring for the beauty of one child or man or practice, being a miserable slave limited in thought; but turning toward the wide sea of beauty, contemplating it" (210C 7-d4)
 - C3. "he would generate much beautiful and noble discourse and thoughts contained in abundant philosophy" (210D 5-6)
 - R7. "until thus strengthened and nourished he shall grasp the knowledge of the following sort of beauty" (210D 6-E1)
- (In 210E 1-6) there is a brief interlude, and then a statement of how one must proceed in proper sequence, and how one suddenly comes to see the Form of Beauty; all previous labors were for the sake of this final step. In 210E 6 following, a description of the Form of Beauty is given.)

The verbs in all of the R-steps ("realize," "regard," "see") belong to that standard vocabulary within which Plato expresses his views about intellectual processes. In E1, E2, and E3 the notion of eros enters explicitly to define the positive and negative attitudes that seem to be called for. The verb in E4 is "ἡγήσεται", suggesting the work of reason, but the compound expression within which the verb is placed appears also in E2 (210B 6) which is clearly a step determined by eros. To think little of something, in the context of this passage, is to stop loving it and to develop aversion for it. As we shall see later, a better way to put this is by saying that we must transcend certain objects as ultimate objects of over-all aspirations.

If we extract the C-steps from the series, the lower half of the ascent yields the following Platonic "equation":

$$E1 : R1 : R2 : E2 \text{ equals } E3 : R3 : R4 : E4.$$

In view of the frequent occurrence of such mathematical analogies in other dialogues—the most famous being the "Divided Line" of the *Republic*—one need not argue that this structure was intended by Plato. Its significance, however, needs to be established. The most obvious feature of the equation is that the E-R-R-E sequences can be assigned to two distinct levels; the first takes place on the level dealing with the beauty of bodies while the second is concerned with the love of souls and the beauty of practices. Another point emerging from the consideration of this structure is that neither do we have reason or eros dominate the other, nor do we have a simple cycle of mutual dependence (that would be the E-R-E-R pattern).

It is convenient to label the move from one level to the other the "transcategorical move". Our scheme brings out the important point that the transcategorical move is the work of eros alone; it is an E-E step. The explanation for this must be found in the detailed examination of the nature of E-steps and R-steps.

E1 and E3 are both positive, they both initiate a series of steps on a given level, and their objects are particular entities. (The beginning of E3 might not seem to be love of a particular, but the main emphasis of the whole step is the love of one soul.) These steps alone among the ones making up the lower half are yielding steps of creation. In contrast with these, E2 and E4 do not yield creations, they are negative, and are directed towards objects on a general plane (E2 showing partial and E4 complete disdain).

The R-steps also fall into a pattern; R1 and R2, and again R3 with R4 represent intellectual moves consisting first of recognizing common

features of a plurality of instances, and then isolating the common element and grasping its unity. R. G. Bury had probably this in mind when he described the role of "nous" in this passage as generalization and identification.⁵ It is crucial to note, however, that this is not the only work of "nous," and that the relation between unities on any given plane and their instances is not the only "one and many" relation described in the passage. For in addition to seeing the unity within each level, the mind has to grasp also that all of the levels are "akin"; they are, one might say, species of beauty. The mind has to see how the species are related, and then has to apprehend the Form of Beauty both as the common denominator among the levels and as an object in its own right.

Thus we see two "one and many" relations exhibited in the passage. There is the relation between different species or kinds of beauty—bodily, spiritual, intellectual—and their instances, and then there is the relation between the different kinds and the Form of Beauty. Only the grasp of the second unity gives complete understanding, and if knowledge is restricted to knowledge of Forms, then only the grasp of the second unity yields knowledge. This shows that the second "one and many" relation is more important for Plato than the first. Indeed, this can be supported also by passages from other dialogues; e.g. in the preliminary discussion in the *Meno* (71E–73A) Socrates' objection to his opponent is not that the latter confuses particular instances with the common denominator to be found among instances, nor that the latter provides as an answer to the question: "what is excellence?" only references to particulars, but that he mentions in his answer only many kinds of excellences instead of giving an account of excellence in general. These considerations show that already in the middle period dialogues not only is the relation between concrete instances and abstract properties in the center of focus, but also the relation of species and genus (though it must be pointed out that in the middle period dialogues Plato does not show explicitly how these two relations differ and his views about participation are answers only to questions about one of the two relations.) In order to make the transitions between levels intelligible we must assume that for Plato, each level—properly understood—"points beyond itself." For example, the beauty of moral practices and institutions is that the principles governing these can be given a priori justification, thus leading one to consider the beauty of the sciences and dialectic. Each type of beauty is incomplete in itself; only the final vision brings one into contact with an entity that is beautiful "in itself."

These characterizations of E-steps and R-steps enable us to

characterize the transcategorical move. The fact that the work of eros is required indicates that for Plato the move from one kind of beauty to another is not merely a matter of grasping common elements within pluralities, as he describes the move toward understanding unity within a given plane. The mind is turned towards a new kind of beauty by the negative feelings toward instances on the old level, and the formation of new eros toward an instance on a new level. Since this initial E-step precedes the R-steps on that level we must interpret it as eros without a clear conception as to the nature of the object loved or aspired to. Yet it must carry with it some belief ("doxa") about the nature of the object, else it could not set in motion an intellectual sequence terminating in the grasp of the unity of a kind of beauty. Aesthetic appreciation turns into appreciation for moral qualities, and that, in turn, is transformed into appreciation of the beauty of abstract intellectual systems.

This account of the transcategorical move suggests that the steps are causally interrelated. This is not the only way of reading this passage. One might think of the stages of ascent merely as stages on life's way, a series of destinations offering increasingly greater awards. To be sure, some of the phrases connecting the steps (210A 9, B 1, B 6, C 4, C 7) indicate merely conjunction and temporal succession, but the participial construction at 210B 4 and the occurrences of "iva" with the subjunctive (210C 3, C 5–6, C 7) can be taken as suggesting causal linkage. Finally, two passages clearly imply causal connections. In 210C 3 R₃ is linked to E₃ by stating that the soul along the path will be "forced" to turn to something new. Again, in 210D 6 we find that the "strength and nourishment" provided by the previous steps helps the soul to arrive at R₇.

What is the causal relationship between the steps? It cannot be the case that Plato intends each step to be a necessary condition for the one following. For this would entail the claim that nobody can appreciate the beauty of mathematics without having appreciated bodily beauty. On the other hand, we cannot suppose that the steps are sufficient conditions for their successors. Such a view would entail that once someone takes the first step on this path, he will always arrive at the terminal point, sooner or later. Not only is this a strange view, but there is evidence that Plato did not hold it. For both in R₅ and in the final summary Plato refers to the fact that the soul making this journey has to be "led right." Thus the general picture emerging is that of a series of steps that are, in some important way, contributory causes of their successors. The nature of this contributory causal role needs to be spelled out for R-steps and E-steps respectively.

One of the main ways in which R-steps guide eros is their function as revealing new possible objects of aspiration. As will be argued below, the eros of this passage is not "blind passion"; i.e., the various E-steps involve aspirations toward an object or objects on account of their nature. It is nous, in the form of R-steps, that reveals the natures of various entities that might become objects of desire and aspiration. It is important to note that in this capacity the R-steps are indeed a guiding and not a blocking force. The role of reason in this passage is not to issue injunctions against certain objects as things to be aspired to, but to help the soul transcend previous aspirations by revealing objects more worthy of eros. This guiding role, however, does not seem to be sufficient for exhausting what Plato describes as the nourishment and strengthening of the soul. The other main role of reason comes closer to what philosophers call today efficient causation. That is to say, not only do the R-steps reveal new objects, but the steps considered as processes create a general condition in which aspirations toward new objects may arise. If we interpret the causal effects of R-steps in this dual way, then the *Symposium* can be read as consistent with the Platonic view, expounded elsewhere, that all shortcomings are somehow due to the failings of reason. This view is quite misleadingly put at times as the claim that all evil is due to ignorance. On the interpretation proposed here, Plato believes that all shortcomings are due either to ignorance (lack of knowledge of certain objects) or lack of reasoning (lack of sufficient amount of reasoning going on in the soul, thus not creating conditions for new and higher aspirations to arise).

Before we spell out the causal roles of the E-steps, a general characterization of eros as presented in this dialogue is called for. The translation used in this essay, "aspiration," itself calls for justification, for this is not the usual way of interpreting eros. But from 205–206 it becomes clear that Plato is using "eros" in a wide sense, including any over-all desire or wish for what is taken to be good. The qualification "over-all" is needed, for Plato is not talking about momentary impulses but about wishes, desires, aspirations that determine the ultimate goals of one's life. Thus eros is not blind passion; it is the wish or desire (the language of 205 admits of either translation) for things deemed on account of their nature to be worthy of having their attainment become a man's ultimate goal. Plato points out that he is deliberately extending the meaning of "eros"; he remarks that men call only part of all of this by the term "eros"; by redefinition Plato is pouring new life into a traditional terminology.

Once we realize that by "eros" Plato means in this passage "aspiration," it is easy to see not only that as such it must be accompanied by some belief with regard to its object, but also that there is no underlying process called "eros" over and above the various E-steps. The E-steps represent varieties of aspiration, and there is no such thing as an underlying process called "aspiration" in addition to the varieties represented. This interpretation is supported not only by our account of the E-steps and their connection with R-steps, but by the passage referred to above where Plato suggests that what people usually call "eros" is only a part of what is really eros. Here Plato implicitly divides eros into parts, and there is no suggestion that there is a psychological substratum for these.

From this characterization a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, E₁ is not mere sexual desire; rather, it is the love of bodies for the sake of bodily beauty that can be abstracted and contemplated on a general level. It is also the sort of "eros" that yields the creation of discourse. Thus although E₁ has a clearly erotic aspect, it cannot be identified with sexuality (unless one is to suggest that according to Plato one has to overcome one's sexual desire towards one person and direct it towards many). Further textual evidence for this interpretation is given by 209, where Plato suggests that the creative products of the poets or the statesmen are more worthy than the products of the creative efforts of average men in sexual union. Thus the move from mere sexual interest to some sort of aspiration, presumably aesthetic, is made before the ascent is begun. In short, many people never arrive even at E₁.

From this point and the point about eros being the sum of "parts", i.e., various aspirations, we can draw the further conclusion that eros is not a raw motivating power, or some simple primitive force that holds sway over men. It is not the energy behind an ontological elevator, pushing souls up the ladder; or a force or fund of energy that underlies all activities.⁶ As a further consequence we can see that Plato's theory of eros is not related to modern theories of sublimation as has been thought at times.⁷ For if it were so related, then not only would we have to start with mere sexuality but also one would have to construe the R-steps as blocking rather than guiding eros. Nor is the ascent equivalent to the Freudian theory of sublimation in reverse.⁸ Plato is not assuming that everyone desires the contemplation of the Form of Beauty and that only the inability to understand higher goals leaves men with simple sexual desires as their over-all dominant motive.

After all of these negative characterizations it is time to turn to positive statements. We saw that the ascent assumes the ability on the

part of some to arrive at E₁, and not to have mere sexual satisfaction as their dominant goal. How such a "pre-ascent" move is to be achieved is not discussed in the *Symposium*; we must leave open, however, the possibility that Plato—in contrast with current fashionable psychological speculation—does not regard the man of mere appetites as somehow the "natural state." He regards man as reasoning and groping for ways of life that allow the expansion of reasoning activities in the "natural" state, and would perhaps say that the man of mere sexual appetite is "brutish" and requires therapy.

About the over-all aspirations we can conclude one thing with certainty. Both *Meno* 77–78 and *Symposium* 205 show Plato believing that these over-all aspirations aim at what people take to be good for them. The ascent-passage shows that these aspirations do not turn back upon themselves; our aspirations are not simply to the effect that whatever needs we have, these should be satisfied. Eros is always "other-directed"; i.e. it is for objects of pursuit that lie outside the soul, and the pursuit becomes the pattern along which a human life is organized. Thus in general one can say about the causal influence of eros on the mind that eros is what pushes the mind to new investigations. It "keeps the mind restless" by forming negative attitudes toward objects on a plane which has been understood already, and creating the need and motive for further exploration.

How is this interplay of reason and eros linked to acts of creation? Each of the three C-steps is linked to one of the four levels on which the ascent is based, and each involves the creation of "*logos*," by the lover or the loved one.⁹ The first two C-steps are the effects of E-steps, but the third is the result of an R-step. Although not much is said about the nature of what is created, one can draw inferences from the level at which the creation takes place, and the step that precedes it. The first C-step takes place on the aesthetic level, at which the soul has not yet attained knowledge, and indeed it has not yet concentrated on what is beneficial to the souls of men, since this comes only at the second level. Given this information and the reference to Homer in the preceding passage as a creator, it is safe to assume that C₁ results in poetry. C₂ appears on the level at which concern is for the soul, and its product is said to be improving people. Still, this creation too is the result of an E-step and it takes place prior to the appreciation of the sciences. Thus the creation represented in C₂ is also based on opinion, or belief, and not knowledge. In view of these facts, one can assume that the products of C₂ are discourses, with moral or merely intellectual and elenctic emphasis, that

improve young people. Only the third act of creation is linked to an R-step: the product is identified as philosophy, and it is hardly necessary to point out that the link to an R-step that involves appreciation of the sciences indicates that this "product" is based on knowledge and not mere belief. The causal role of these acts of creation can be seen in the following way. Attention to poetry may inspire love toward a person, but it also turns attention to the characteristics of the loved object, thus facilitating the grasp of aesthetic beauty in general. On the second level again, discourse that improves a person not only helps to increase devotion to that person, but also helps to focus attention on the nature of the beauty of souls, thus leading to a grasp of beauty in general on that plane. Finally, the production of philosophy obviously helps a soul to the final comprehension of the Form of Beauty.

As one surveys the lower half of the ascent, the question arises whether the progress achieved is a matter of more and more inclusive aspirations or of a complete change in general aims in life. In the light of this question we can distinguish between an "inclusive" and an exclusive interpretation of the ascent. According to the inclusive version our eros widens as we make progress from stage to stage; we do not abandon physical and aesthetic love for the love of spiritual beauty, nor do we jettison the latter in favor of love of the sciences. We enrich our appreciations according to this view by keeping the former interests and adding to these newer ones. According to the exclusive interpretation the former objects of aspiration are not kept but are totally replaced by the new objects. The presence of the negative E-steps is a formidable support for the exclusive interpretation. This conclusion can be made more palatable by pointing out that given our account of eros, such a view does not entail the ascription of an asexual, passionless ideal to Plato. Our over-all aspirations do indeed undergo drastic change according to the ascent-passage, but this leaves open the possibility that other sub-ordinate desires and passions are still vital parts of any human life. Only if we interpreted eros not as aspiration but as the sum total of all desires, momentary or otherwise, would we be forced to ascribe to Plato the view that sexual interest must be abandoned as we progress along the path. According to the interpretation proposed in the above, we need to say only that the "lower" types of desire cannot remain the dominant aspiration in the life of a man who traverses the path described by Plato.

The dissimilarity between C₃ and the other two steps of creation suggests that the upper half of the ascent differs from the lower half. Indeed, this much is obvious from a brief glance at the scheme presented

earlier. For in this half sequences on a level are not introduced by E-steps, the series within levels do not contain E-steps, and the relations among the R-steps on any given plane are different from the one exhibited by R-steps on the lower two levels. The absence of E-steps might lead one to suppose that when the soul reaches these stages it no longer has passions or aspirations. Such an extraordinary conclusion would be difficult to accept. Bury for one insisted that eros is still at work in the later stages of the ascent, but his account does not explain the absence of E-steps.¹⁰ As a plausible explanation one might suggest that though eros is still at work in the soul in the later stages, it no longer functions as a guide, thus not appearing in the sequence of steps described. No change in over-all aspiration is needed in order to lead the soul from the contemplation of the sciences to the comprehension of Forms. Like Virgil in the "Divine Comedy" eros helps as a guide only until we reach the final stages; there contemplation becomes self-sufficient. This interpretation helps to explain also why Socrates describes eros as "intermediate" and does not bestow upon it the superlatives that other contestants employ. Ironically he concludes that he praised eros as much as he is able to (212B 7-C 3) and suggests that Phaedrus might not consider this a proper hymn of praise. In the scheme that Plato gives in the mouth of Socrates eros is only the "best co-worker of *physis*" (212B 2-4) where "*physis*" clearly refers to reason. This secondary role of eros can be also seen by the fact that the move from the second to the third plane is accomplished without the help of an E-step. R₅ effects the transition from mere belief with regard to what is good for man to the appreciation of sciences. In other words, questions about how to justify views about practices and institutions lead to the recognition of the need for sciences and dialectic. Such a recognition is not a matter of a change in general aspirations. These recognitions lead to C₃, the creation of philosophy (dialectic), and they together strengthen the soul for the apprehension of Forms.

The lack of parallel between the R-sequences on the lower levels and those on the upper ones can be explained by the nature of the level at which we arrive with R₅. The sciences, in contrast with what appeared on the lower levels, do not have particulars as their instances. The instance of bodily beauty is a person, and the instance of spiritual beauty is likewise a person (or his soul). In the case of the sciences, however, the instances of Science are themselves already on the plane of the abstract and general. Thus the movement from R₅ to R₆ cannot be one of grasping the common element shared by a number of particulars. Given that

according to Plato knowledge is always of the general and abstract, the contemplation of the beauty of the sciences should mark the complete turning away from particulars. This is precisely what takes place in R₆; thus the "turning toward the wide sea of beauty" and the despising of particular instances. This turn leads to the creation of philosophy, and that again leads to the comprehension of the Form. Thus the relations among the final R-steps show how the relation between knowledge and its instances is conceived differently by Plato from the relation of concrete particulars partaking of characters, and also that the relation between understanding the beauty of sciences is related differently to the comprehension of the Form of Beauty than the comprehension of bodily beauty is related either to the comprehension of the beauty of the next level or to the comprehension of the Form of Beauty.

As a final comment we may add that the fourfold division of levels in this passage has its analogue in the "Divided Line" of the *Republic*; there is no one-to-one correspondence between the levels, but the upper halves are more similar than the respective lower halves.

Having dealt with the nature of the process, let us consider the nature of its object. Textual evidence indicates that there is only one Form, the Form of Beauty, involved in the ascent, and thus what one comprehends on the lower levels are not Forms, but other sorts of unities. The evidence includes the fact that—as Robin observed¹¹—whereas the ascent is gradual, the final vision comes suddenly (210E 4), and that only in connection with this final vision are we given a description of the object such that this description coincides roughly with accounts of Forms given in other dialogues. From this we may infer that the dialogue cannot be interpreted in such a way as to construe each of the objects perceived—bodily beauty, spiritual beauty, and intellectual beauty—as Forms, with Beauty as a generic Form presiding over these, making them subordinate in a way similar to that in which specific Forms are ordered under others in the "method of division" of the later dialogues. By ruling out this latter interpretation we reach two conclusions that shed light on the Theory of Forms. One of these is that according to Plato not every predicate expression stands for a Form, and the other is that the mere comprehension of a common element among a plurality of particulars is not necessarily the comprehension of a Form. Furthermore, the point just made shows that the initial comprehension of the more specific types of beauty cannot be "knowledge," in the strict Platonic sense; since it does not involve the grasping of a Form, it must be provisional understanding, to be made complete and adequate only

when the different kinds of beauty are seen in the light of their relation to the Form of Beauty. To see the types in this manner is the aim of dialectic.

What Plato says about the Form of Beauty suggests that it is a distinct entity. It is—as we saw above—comprehended suddenly, at the end of the ascent, its grasp is said to be that for the sake of which all previous efforts were made (210E 5–6), and it is that of which all other beautiful things partake (211B 2–3). This matter of participation may show the Form to have certain relations to the participants that modify its distinctness. If one were to interpret participation as analogous to the relation between an object and its image, then perhaps the claim of participation and the claim of total distinctness could be reconciled. Textual evidence, however, rules out this interpretation, for at 211B 3–5 Plato says that in spite of things partaking of it the form suffers no increase or decrease. If Plato meant by “participation” “resembling as image resembles the object,” then this remark would be needless, and indeed senseless. The remark makes sense only if we construe the relation as that between entities and one of their common elements. Thus the considerations adduced so far indicate that the Form of Beauty is conceived by Plato both as a common denominator and a distinct entity. There is no reason why these two aspects of the Form should conflict with each other, provided that the relation between the Form and the species that are subordinate to it is properly understood. The Form is the only entity that is beautiful without qualification; i.e., the only entity to which “beautiful” applies descriptively and without any added modification. Everything else is beautiful in some way, some respect, or in some place and time. As an element in a series of complex attributes the Form of Beauty is a common denominator. As the entity that can be known once one understands the variety of ways in which entities can be beautiful, and that serves as the subject of a number of *a priori* truths, it is also a distinct entity.

This account of the dual nature of Forms leads to a consideration of the properties that Plato ascribes to the Form in this dialogue. This list (210E 6–211B 4) deserves close scrutiny. The properties should be classified into three groups: (a) necessary but not sufficient conditions for being a Form; (b) sufficient conditions; and (c) individuating properties. In other words, some characteristics may be such that all Forms but not only Forms have it, while others may be Form-making characteristics; finally there ought to be a property, or set of properties, that only the Form of Beauty has, for without such individuating marks the Forms

could not have their “unity.” Plato could not claim that one knows of each what that Form in particular is.

The characteristics of being everlasting and not being subject to becoming or perishing are necessary conditions for being a Form. But if we take into consideration the proofs of immortality from the *Phaedo* these properties cannot be regarded as possessed by Forms only. Two other ones, the properties of “being in itself” and having a simple nature, are such that only Forms and all Forms have these. But neither of these serves to individuate Forms; they are true of all Forms collectively, so to say. There are, however, two properties that can be true of the Form of Beauty only, given a certain interpretation. One of these is the property of having all other beautiful entities partake of it. To be sure, as it stands, this property may be shared by a number of Forms, for it may be that there are a number of Forms, e.g., Being, Sameness, etc., of which all beautiful entities partake. If, however, one adds that all other beautiful entities and only these partake, and that they derive their nature of being beautiful from this participation, then the property is unique to the Form of Beauty. The other property is given in a series of complex and mostly negative characterizations. The Form of Beauty is not beautiful in some specific ways, or respects, or times and places, nor is it the beauty of entities like a face, body or science. As it stands, this could be true of any Form, but if one supplies the obvious premise that the entity in question is beautiful without any qualification whatsoever, then it becomes a property that is unique to the Form of Beauty.

Our last remarks as well as our observations about the need to find a property that singles out the Form of Beauty uniquely lead to the supposition that for Plato at the time he wrote the *Symposium* the Forms are self-predicational. To say that for Plato the Form of Beauty is self-predicational is to say that the term “beautiful” is used by Plato to apply to this Form with descriptive force. The nature of this descriptive force is to be specified later. To deny the self-predicational nature of the Form of Beauty is to say either that “beautiful” does not apply to this Form at all, or to claim that it is the proper name of the Form. Proper names, in contrast with descriptive terms, do not say anything about their bearers; they do not indicate their natures. To say of Mr. X that he is a father, a doctor, and a good golfer is to describe him; to say that his name is John is not to describe him but merely to name him. Below we shall consider evidence to show that Plato did not think of terms¹² like “beautiful” as only baptizing a Form but as indicating something about its nature.

In surveying the evidence it should be kept in mind that the question to be decided is simply whether Plato is committed to regarding the Form of Beauty as having "beautiful" applied to it with descriptive force. The question is not about the extent, if any, to which Plato was aware of the self-predicational nature of his Forms, and the logical consequences of this feature. The realization of all of the consequences of a metaphysical theory is the most difficult task for a philosopher. It is sufficient to note that Plato was committed to such a view; his gradual realization of all of its consequences is a story not for this paper to tell. In 210E 4-5 Plato describes the object of final vision as "beautiful in nature". That which is beautiful in its nature must have "beautiful" applicable to it with descriptive force. Again, the series of negative descriptions of the Form of Beauty in 211A, i.e., that it is not beautiful in some way, or respect, etc., makes sense only if we assume that Plato thought of the Form as beautiful without any such qualifications. This requires that the Form be described, in some sense, by the term "beautiful." In 211B 2 we read about all the *other* beautiful entities partaking of the Beautiful. The implied contrast clearly requires self-predication. Finally, in 211C 1-2 the many beautiful things are contrasted with "this beautiful" for the sake of which the whole journey was undertaken. Only the most tortuous reading of the Greek will make a proper name out of τοῦ καλοῦ in this context.

Having given conclusive evidence for the self-predicational nature of the Form of Beauty, the exact status of this nature as well as the philosophical motivation for its postulation must be examined. The long series of negative characterizations of the Form, mentioned before, as well as the fact that on account of the nature of the Form all other beautiful things partake of it, suggests that the Form is beautiful in some sense different from the sense in which every other beautiful thing has this term applied to it. Of course, to talk about differences in sense is anachronistic, for though Plato is aware of ambiguity, the concept of difference in senses cannot be found at least in the middle period dialogues. A more accurate way of making the point is to say that according to Plato the Form is beautiful in a way different from all of the ways in which the other beautiful entities have this character. This difference need not be the difference between having "beauty" as a proper name or as a predicate; a more plausible proposal is that "beautiful" applies to both Form and participants with descriptive force, but the respective descriptive forces are different. Indeed, this is the only suggestion that makes sense out of the suggestion that the predicate "beautiful" as

applied to the participants is derivative from the application of this term to the Form. For if the function of the term as a general predicate is to be explained as derivative from its functioning as a proper name of an entity of which we can give no other unique characteristics, then this sounds very much like Molière's doctor attempting to explain the power of opium to put people to sleep by the dormitive power of opium.

To claim that a term applies descriptively to abstract and concrete entities without ambiguity is hardly objectionable. There are a number of terms in English, for example the word "dangerous," that have ranges of denotation cutting across the abstract-concrete dichotomy. Another example of this sort, more suitable for our purpose, is the term "word." This term applies both to word-types and word-tokens, the former being abstract the latter concrete. Furthermore, the application to the type is complete in itself, while the application to the tokens is always in need of some supplementation; e.g., "the word 'x' as uttered by *S* on occasion *O*." This example parallels the use of terms designating Forms not only in that it cuts across the abstract-concrete dichotomy, but also in that the applications to the sensible things are always incomplete while the application to the abstract is complete. Such was our earlier account of the use of "beautiful." It must be added that not all general terms could be accounted for on this model; but—as we saw occasion to note earlier—not every general term was taken by Plato at the time of the writing of the *Symposium* to be designating a Form. In addition to the complex ones mentioned before, we may add now simples such as "red," "bitter," etc.—in general secondary qualities associated with one sense only. Certainly all of the Forms mentioned in the *Phaedo* can be given the same analysis as the one proposed here for the *Symposium*. It has been thought from time to time that construing the relation of Form to participant as analogous to that between an object and its reflection the problem of self-predication can be bypassed. That this is not so can be seen from the fact that the relation between object and reflection is that of partial common character and causal connection. Objects and their reflections have properties in common, and so have Forms and participants.

The suggestion that "beautiful" applies to the participants with qualifications and to the Form without qualification must be supplemented by the clause that the Form is necessarily the only entity to which the term in question applies without qualification. Thus the role of "beautiful" as applied to the Form of Beauty is that of specifying a unique property, thereby taking up the role of a definite description. To

be sure, it is different from ordinary definite descriptions, since these are made up of many properties and a uniqueness-indicator such as "the" in English. Still, the logical force is the same. "The Beautiful" functions as a definite description and it is equivalent roughly to "the only entity that is beautiful without qualification." How Plato arrived at this characterization is a matter for speculation only. It could be that the double negative (not such that it is not beautiful in some way) had a role in Plato's construal of the Form.

In recent discussions the notion of self-predication fared badly. Those who think that Plato held this view¹³ speak of it with regret. Those who deny that this was Plato's view write of it as "... puerile confusion."¹⁴ To be sure, the view leads to difficulties, though the exact nature of these is far from clear either to Plato in the later dialogues, or to modern scholars and philosophers. We should note, however, that regardless of these difficulties the notion of self-predication has a vital role in the ontology of the middle period dialogues. For as we saw above, it is the only property ascribed to Forms that will help to individuate these. Every Form *F* is thought of as "the unique *F*." This characterization by itself does not individuate, for it leaves open the possibility that the same Form is both the unique *F* and the unique *G*, where "*F*" and "*G*" designate different properties. We saw, however, that Plato also lists simplicity of nature ("*monoeides*") as a property of a Form. Self-predication as explained together with simplicity of nature does yield a way to individuate Forms.

It will be objected, no doubt, that the distinction between Form-making and Form-individuating properties is a modern tool of analysis and nothing even approximating a Greek equivalent can be found in the Platonic texts. It is certainly not part of the thesis of this paper that Plato drew a distinction of this sort. It is claimed, however, that Plato thought of the realm of Forms as conceptually much clearer than the realm of particulars. Such priority entails not only that necessary truths can be asserted of Forms in general, but also that each Form can be understood and seen as distinct not only from all of the participants but also as distinct from all of the other Forms. Most likely Plato thought of the world of Forms as analogous to the world of numbers; and not only do we have a clear conception of what it is to be a number, but we have also clear conceptual tools for telling the numbers apart. All of this is compressed, more or less tacitly, into Plato's phrase that each Form has to be grasped as "one, and in itself." The self-sufficiency of each Form could hardly be understood had Plato not thought that there was a

necessary truth to be asserted uniquely of each Form. Thus, far from being a confusion or a useless burden, self-predication plays a crucial role in Plato's conception of the Forms. Once this view is abandoned, the problem of individuating Forms arises again, and this problem—at least in its analogous form as applied to properties in general—continues to haunt philosophers through the ages.

To sum up, in these relatively brief paragraphs that came to be known as the description of the ascent, Plato compresses the outlines of a theory of mind as well as the main theses of his ontology. The two must have seemed to Plato harmonious, and one is tempted to think that for Plato this dual construction as an exciting philosophic edifice must have appeared in a way not unlike the vision of the Beautiful that he ascribes to the soul at the end of its journey toward understanding. If the later dialogues sound a different, more critical and tentative note, at least in the *Symposium* one still sees Plato as a confident constructor of metaphysical theories, to embrace a view of reality and to combine this with a view of the soul and its suggested movement, or "*paideia*." It would be an irony of history if the Platonic conception of "*paideia*" were to survive without the metaphysical architectonics that its inventor thought to be indispensable.

NOTES

* This essay is dedicated to the memory of my former colleague, the late Professor Paul Henle of the University of Michigan. His penetrating discussions and kind encouragement as well as his example as a fine philosopher and deep human being have inspired much of my work on Plato.

¹ E.g., Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, Stenzel, Shorey and Grube.

² For a contrasting view see R. Hackforth "*Plato's Phaedo*" (Cambridge, 1955), p. 12.

³ R. G. Bury in his edition of the *Symposium* (p. 125) outlines three interpretations of this phrase, and opts for the reading "beautiful in shape." In the context this seems to make little sense.

⁴ The translation here is closer to that of Robin (Bude, ed., p. 68) than to the Jowett or Loeb renderings.

⁵ Bury, *op. cit.*, pp. xlv.

⁶ G. M. A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (London, 1935), p. 95.

⁷ E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), p. 218.

⁸ This was once suggested to me by the late Prof. Paul Henle.

⁹ This possibility was suggested to me by Mr. C. C. W. Taylor.

¹⁰ Bury, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Robin, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

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¹² One has to be careful to recognize the meanings of "ὄνομα". It means "term" in general, or "noun" in particular. It does not mean "proper name," though it covers proper names as well.

¹³ G. Vlastos, "The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*," *PR*, 63 (1954): 319-50.

¹⁴ R. E. Allen, "Participation and Predication in Plato's Middle Dialogues," *PR*, 69 (1960): 148.