"What's Beautiful is Difficult": Beauty and Eros in Plato's Hippias Major

Author: Santiago Ramos

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:105052

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2015

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.
“WHAT’S BEAUTIFUL IS DIFFICULT”:

BEAUTY AND EROS IN PLATO’S HIPPIAS MAJOR

a dissertation

by

SANTIAGO RAMOS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2015
“WHAT’S BEAUTIFUL IS DIFFICULT”:

BEAUTY AND EROS IN PLATO’S HIPPIAS MAJOR

SANTIAGO RAMOS

Boston College Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2015

Dissertation Adviser: Marina McCoy

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the role that eros in general, and philosophical eros in particular, plays in the search for the eidos of the beautiful in Plato’s Hippias Major. It defends the claim that noesis of the eidos of the beautiful can only be accomplished within the life of philosophical eros, that is, within the life of eros which is directed toward the good. As such this dissertation aims both to provide an interpretive key to the Hippias Major, allowing us to read the dialogue in a rich and novel way, and also to make the claim that the Hippias Major presents us with a picture of the interrelation between eros, philosophy, and beauty, and about how these three elements manifest themselves in human life. As such, some continuities and parallels can be found between it and the other two dialogues which deal most explicitly with beauty and eros, the Phaedrus and Symposium.

The first five chapters interpret a particular section of the Hippias Major according to role the eros plays within it, attempting to show that eros, both in general and in its unique
manifestation as *philosophical eros*, is a crucial mediating term for any comprehensive understanding of any section of the dialogue, and therefore of the dialogue as a whole. In each of these five chapters, I will articulate the role that *eros* plays within the search for obtaining a noetic glance at the *eidos* of the beautiful. The first chapter demonstrates how Socrates’s philosophical *eros* gives birth to the question about the beautiful itself within the context of a discussion about sophistry and money. The second chapter shows how Socrates’s philosophical engagement with Hippias’s definitions of the *eidos* of the beautiful generates a dialectic of ascent, allowing Hippias to expand his understanding of what counts as beautiful in a trajectory that mirrors Diotima’s ascent in the *Symposium*. The third chapter articulates the erotic significance of Socrates’s claim that the *eidos* of the beautiful inheres in being and not appearances. The fourth chapter gauges the erotic significance of Socrates’s and Hippias’s claim that the beautiful is good, and the good beautiful. The fifth chapter interprets the comic and tragic aspects of the dialogue in terms of philosophical *eros*, its rejection and fulfillment.

The sixth chapter will take stock of the overall interpretation of the *Hippias Major* developed in the first five chapters, and will present the overarching view about the relationship between the contemplation of beauty, on the one hand, and desire for possession of beauty and moral concern, on the other, which one can glean from the character and action of Socrates in *Hippias Major*. It will bring this view into a conversation with the notion of “liking devoid of interest” which is found in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. The conclusion of this dissertation will underscore the principle claim, that the philosophical search for the *eidos* of the beautiful can neither be separated from the *eros* which beauty inspires in a human being, nor can it be accomplished without one’s *eros* being directed toward the good, and that this philosophical search is marked by suffering and possible tragedy.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction** .......................................................................................................................... 1  
  *Status Questionis* ................................................................................................................. 4  
  Method and Terms .................................................................................................................... 8  
  Outline of this Study .................................................................................................................. 23  

**Chapter One: The Birth of Socrates’s Question** ................................................................... 26  
  Hippias and Socrates: Two Contrasting Characters ................................................................. 26  
  Socrates’s Philosophical *Eros* .................................................................................................. 42  
    The Interrogative Stance ....................................................................................................... 43  
    Socrates’s Interest in the Good ............................................................................................. 47  
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 49  

**Chapter Two: Dialectic and Ascent** .................................................................................... 50  
  Hippias’s Definitions and Socrates’s Responses ...................................................................... 51  
    Girl, Maiden, or Virgin (286d-289c) ................................................................................... 51  
    Gold (289d-291c) ................................................................................................................... 63  
    Human Life (291d-293c) ....................................................................................................... 74  
  Hippias’s Ascent ...................................................................................................................... 81  
  Socrates’s Analogical Way of Speaking about the Beautiful .................................................. 84  
  Socrates’s Requirements for a Proper Definition ................................................................... 85  
  Socrates’s Analogical Attribution of Beauty ........................................................................ 86  
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 92  

**Chapter Three: From Appearances to Being** .................................................................... 94  
  Socrates’s “Knowledge” .......................................................................................................... 96  
  The Beautiful is Radiant ......................................................................................................... 103  
  …Only to the Person driven by Philosophical *Eros* ............................................................. 128  
  Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 144
Chapter Four: The Goodness of the Beautiful ......................................................... 147

- The Erotic Shift ........................................................................................................ 148
- The Recognition of Beauty’s Goodness ..................................................................... 168
- The Relationship between the Beautiful and the Good ........................................... 174
  - Eros, Noesis, and the Good .................................................................................... 175
  - The Beautiful and Philosophy .............................................................................. 182
  - The Drama of Beauty and Goodness ..................................................................... 185
- Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 187

Chapter Five: Comedy, Tragedy, and Beyond .......................................................... 188

- Dénouement and Recapitulation .............................................................................. 191
- Comedy in the Hippias Major .................................................................................. 207
- Tragedy in the Hippias Major .................................................................................. 216
  - The Tragedy of Hippias ....................................................................................... 217
  - The Tragedy of Socrates ....................................................................................... 226
- Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 240

Chapter Six: Beauty, “Liking Devoid of Interest,” and Eros ..................................... 243

- “Liking Devoid of Interest” ..................................................................................... 245
- Contrast with Socrates ............................................................................................. 250
- Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 256

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 258

Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 271
I would not have been able to write this dissertation without the love and support of mentors, family, and friends. I would first like to acknowledge the generous support, patience, and care of my esteemed advisor, Dr. Marina McCoy, who went through many, many drafts of various chapters of this dissertation over the last few years, and always supplied me with meticulous, careful, and valuable advice. I would also like to thank Dr. Drew Hyland, who provided me with notes and comments on every chapter in this dissertation, as well as timely words of encouragement. I am grateful as well to Fr. Gary Gurtler, for taking the time to serve on my committee. As a whole, all three members of my committee have been invaluable partners in dialogue, as well as models of the philosophical vocation. I am also thankful to RoseMarie DeLeo, the Graduate Program Assistant, who was always patient in helping me to remember all the details involved in finishing the dissertation and graduating from BC.

I would like to thank my parents, Mario and Marina Ramos, for their ever-dependable love and support, and their welcome home. My sister Maria helped me in numerous ways, not least by letting me occupy her living room and balcony as I made the final edits of this dissertation. My brother Francisco has been a steadfast friend as well, and I am grateful for his letting me use his library card so that I could check out books at the KU library. My cousin Alejandro helped me to fight the stress of writing by being my personal trainer and gym companion. Lela me apoyó desde el Cielo.

I am blessed with many friends, and I owe them all a debt of gratitude. Gregory Floyd, Burke Thompson, and Nathaniel Peters were all three generous enough to let me stay in their apartment on those occasions when I had to return to Boston for some business in BC. As fellow
philosophy students, Greg and Burke have also proved to be wonderful dialogue partners and true friends throughout my years in the PhD program. I learned as much about philosophy from informal conversations with Rocco Sacconaghi and Andrea Staiti as I did in any official course that I took. Fr. Pietro Rossotti was a “spiritual guide” throughout the time it took me to finish the PhD. Amy Sapenoff, Everett Price, and Tim Herrmann: “human diversities.” Anthony Giacona always provided some folksy wisdom during the difficult times. I look to Mario Šilar as a model of the virtues proper to a philosopher. Fr. Antonio Lopez helped me to figure a few things out. Gregory Wolfe remains a great mentor and friend, who regularly takes time out of his 18-hour work days to answer my emails. El tío Alberto Reyes, siempre conmigo a través del “WhatsApp.” Paul Elie, mentor and friend, always provided a vitally important point of reference beyond academia. Gabriele Vanoni would always check up on me. Mike Emmerich provided a soundtrack. My nephews, JP Chiodini and Joe Lynch, would give me feedback on Boylston St. Andy Nelson would always put things under a new light. Dr. David Schindler wrote me two substantive emails that help me to understand a few problems in my dissertation. Apolonio Latar gave me a theological perspective. Fiona Holly, library scientist, used her skills to access some hard-to-find research papers. Professor Michael Novak told me to “get it finished!” Fr. Larry Bowers listened to a lot of my complaints and bought me a lot of beers. And last but most important: I am grateful to Lorenzo Albacete, for everything he has taught me.
Introduction

This dissertation will examine the principal function that *eros* has for making an adequate interpretation of the *Hippias Major*, in particular with respect to the goal that the dialogue sets out to accomplish. In arguing this, I am making a two-sided claim: first, that the concept of *eros* is a key to unlocking much of the meaning of the dialogue, and second, that the dialogue depicts something essential about the relationship between beauty, *eros*, and philosophy. In the *Hippias Major*, Socrates sets out to define “the beautiful itself,” which is identified as an *eidos*, or form, which causes a thing to be beautiful, “when added” (ἐπειδὰν προσγένηται, 289d). While in the *Phaedrus*, *Charmides*, and the *Symposium*, beauty is primarily spoken of as the object of *eros*, in the *Hippias Major*, it is an object of both *eros* (because beauty is portrayed as desirable and attractive), as well as *noesis* (given that the attempt to define the beautiful itself is also an attempt to know it). I will pursue the question of the role that the *eros* for the beautiful plays in the search for the *eidos* of the beautiful in the *Hippias Major*.

Ultimately, my argument is that the *Hippias Major* is a dramatic presentation of the idea that there cannot be *noesis* of the beautiful without *eros* for the good (i.e., philosophical *eros*). The dialogue shows us that while beautiful beings are often the object of *eros*, the intelligible form (*eidos*) of beautiful beings is only disclosed to the one who loves the good (i.e., the philosopher). By doing so, the *Hippias Major* follows the same path of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* in depicting the beautiful is an ally to the noetic aspirations of philosophical discourse. In a sense, the *Hippias Major* begins near the top of Diotima’s ladder and works backwards. Diotima says that the penultimate rung on the Ladder of Love is the place where the lover of the Good “gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom.
[ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ]” (210d, emphasis mine), a rung through which the lover must pass in order to reach the beautiful “itself by itself with itself” (ἀλλ᾽ αὐτὸ καθ᾽ αὐτὸ μεθ᾽ αὑτοῦ μονοειδὲς, 211b). In contrast, the Hippias Major begins its investigation of beauty by having Socrates posit that the beautiful itself “is something” (287c), i.e., an intelligible form distinct from its particular instantiations, and then proceeds to show (through dialectic and dramatic characterization) why only a particular kind of soul, one whose eros desires the good above all things, will be able to adequately approach that form, and be able to make any noetic insights into its nature.¹ In both dialogues, beautiful beings shine forth most radiantly—that is, in a way that most clearly communicates their eidetic nature—to someone who seeks to know the good, i.e., to the philosopher. More so than in Diotima’s discourse in the Symposium, the Hippias Major illustrates the corresponding practical and political claims that are required of the would-be knower of the beautiful itself. But the Hippias Major goes about presenting all of this in a way that is quite different from the mythological visions of Diotima’s discourse in the Symposium, or those expressed by Socrates in his second speech in the Phaedrus. Instead of grand visions, the Hippias Major gives us a meticulous dialectical inquiry into the different ways we use the word, “beautiful,” and concerns the multivalent dimensions of beauty as it manifests itself in human life. Most importantly, while on the one hand, Diotima’s ascent culminates in the “sudden” (ἐξαίφνης, 210e) encounter with the beautiful itself, an encounter which suggests that the tension between appearance and being has somehow been overcome, on the other, the Hippias Major depicts an erotic ascent toward the beautiful itself as it would take play out on this finite plane of human life, in which the encounter with the beautiful itself must always be mediated by appearance, and is therefore always partial, incomplete and, as I will suggest, marked by tragic suffering.

¹ Both quotations come from Alexander Nehamas’s translation of the Symposium.
Beyond pointing out these expository and genre differences between the *Hippias Major* and the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, however, it is also a goal of this dissertation to point to the deep philosophical kinship between the *Hippias Major* and these two more famous dialogues.\(^2\) In an effort to bring this kinship to light, I will cite passages from both the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* which contain arguments or situations that mirror and perhaps illuminate those which occur in the *Hippias Major*. I also hope to bring the *Hippias Major* into dialogue with contemporary aesthetics, by considering whether Plato’s treatment of beauty, knowledge, and desire in the *Hippias Major* can give us a new perspective from which to resolve the tension in modern aesthetics between pleasure and moral concern, on the one hand, and the Kantian notion of the “disinterestedness” of aesthetic contemplation, on the other. It is in conversation with the Kantian theory that the philosophical importance of the *Hippias Major* becomes most clear.

In what follows, I will lay out the necessary propaedeutic elements to my interpretation of the *Hippias Major*. First, I will make an examination of the *status quaestionis* with regard to the *Hippias Major* and the theme of *eros*. Second, I will outline the method I will apply in my own study of the topic. Third, I will sketch out provisional definitions of the key terms in my study. This will require a short treatment of *eros*, philosophical *eros*, and *noesis*, as well as a

---

\(^2\) An argument has already been made about the dramatic connection between these three dialogues, one which suggests that a deeper, philosophical kinship also exists. Drew Hyland writes: “Cleary [the *Hippias Major*] takes place in Athens, where Hippias is on state business, and since he could not have traveled safely from Elis (near Sparta) during the active periods of the Peloponnesian War, most scholars put the dramatic date of the dialogue as between 421 and 416 BC, that is, during the famous ‘peace of Nicias.’ This is especially noteworthy when we compare it with the dramatic dates of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Especially if we push the date of Hippias’s visit (and so this dialogue) toward its later range – that is, near to 416 – it means that Plato has Socrates engage in three dialogues during this approximate period, each of which deals thematically with the question of *to kalon*. For the *Symposium* can be dramatically dated with some precision to February, 416 BC (the occasion of the festival where Agathon won his first prize for tragedy); and the *Phaedrus* with less precision, as occurring between 418 and 416 BC. The Platonic Socrates, it seems, was at this point in his life (in his middle fifties) very concerned with the question of beauty.” See Drew A. Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 10.
longer excursus on the word to kalon, the central concern of the Hippias Major. Finally, I will make a brief outline of the six chapters which comprise my study.

Status Quaestionis

Before entering into the actual question of my dissertation, a brief note should be made about authenticity. The Hippias Major is one of a group of Platonic dialogues whose authenticity has been doubted in the last two centuries. Doubts about its authorship were raised by Friedrich Schleiermacher, mainly due to his judgment that the Socrates’s vituperation of Hippias in the dialogue “indisputably appears here under a far coarser form” than Socrates’s attacks of his opponents in other dialogues. Yet while Schleiermacher says that such vulgarity “may perhaps excite a suspicion in the minds of many as to the genuineness of the dialogue,” he does not in the end exclude it from the Platonic canon. Rather, he chalks up the moments of Socratic harshness to stylistic inconsistency precipitated by Plato’s use of the strange “unnamed friend” device in the dialogue. However, Schleiermacher’s followers went one further and did question the authenticity of the dialogue, thus inaugurating several decades of academic dispute about the issue. This dispute is nicely summarized by Paul Woodruff in his 1982 study of the Hippias Major, which accompanies his translation of it. Woodruff also makes an argument in support of Platonic authorship, an argument which seems to have convinced most scholars who have studied and written about the dialogue in his wake. With few exceptions, most scholars writing after Woodruff have operated under the assumption that the Hippias Major was written by Plato. I also follow this assumption. Moreover, the text is as rich in philosophical content as any

---

5 Perhaps the most notable exception is Charles Kahn, who has taken to criticize Woodruff’s book on just this point. See Charles Kahn, “The Beautiful and the Genuine: A discussion of Paul Woodruff, Plato, Hippias Major.”
Platonic dialogue and (as I will attempt to show) it can be brought into useful dialogue with other Platonic works.

Perhaps because that the dialogue’s authenticity was doubted for so long, in the twentieth century only a few scholars have attempted to make a comprehensive interpretation of the dialogue: Dorothy Tarrant, Paul Woodruff, Ivor Ludlam, Seth Benardete, Christopher Bruell, Maria Teresa Liminita, and David Sweet. None of these interpretations make an explicit investigation of the theme of eros, and indeed the topic is only mentioned briefly in Benardete’s and Sweet’s work. Indeed, no scholar has made an extensive treatment of the theme of eros in the Hippias Major. This is no doubt largely due to the fact that, as Seth Benardete points out, “Neither [Socrates nor Hippias] mentions the charm or attractiveness of the beautiful. The beautiful is not lovely. The word for sexual intercourse occurs, but not eros nor any of its cognates.” Notice, however, that Benardete seemingly presents us with an argument where the conclusion does not follow from the premise. It is indeed a fact that the word “eros” does not appear in the Hippias Major. But it does not necessarily follow that given this fact, the dialogue...

Translated with Commentary and Essay, Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 3 (1985): 261-287. In his own, book-length study of the Hippias Major (the only book-length study to come out after Woodruff’s), Ivor Ludlam chooses to take an agnostic stance on the question, though he does also supply arguments in favor of authenticity. See Ivor Ludlam, Hippias Major: An Interpretation (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1991). In one of the most recently-published pieces of scholarship about the Hippias Major, Drew Hyland does not rehearse the arguments in favor of authenticity, considering the matter to be either settled or moot (because of the high philosophical quality of the dialogue). See Hyland, Plato and the Question of Beauty, 6.

6 Dorothy Tarrant. The Hippias Major, attributed to Plato (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928).
7 Woodruff, Hippias Major, 94-103.
11 Maria Teresa Liminita, Il problema della bellezza-Autenticita e significato dell’Ippia Maggiore di Platone (Milan: CELUC, 1974).
tells us that “the beautiful is not lovely.” Instead, this is an assumption, and a dubious one. In the common sense of the ancient Greek word, kallos and to kalon carry a connotation of attractiveness and, therefore, of desirability.\textsuperscript{14} Even in English, it would be odd to have a discussion about beauty which was not also, in some implicit way at least, about desire. Since the Hippias Major is a drama, it would behoove a scholar to search for signs of eros in the characters and action, and not only in the words used. Moreover, in Plato an absence is often as significant as a presence. Hyland points out that the absence of any reference to beauty in the Aristophanic discourse in the Symposium sets up a contrast with Diotima’s speech which does mention the term; the upshot of this discrepancy is, according to Hyland, to highlight the essential importance of beauty for the fulfillment of eros.\textsuperscript{15} I will argue that a similar thing occurs in the Hippias Major: eros is not absent, but merely not mentioned. It is present insofar as it is enacted by both Hippias and Socrates, that is, insofar as it informs their actions and thinking depicted in the dialogue, and as a concept which underlies most of the definitions of the beautiful presented in the dialogue.

In searching for the erotic dimension of a dialogue which does not make an explicit theme of eros (in the way that the Symposium, Phaedrus, Alcibiades I, Lysis, and at times the Republic do), nor mention the word altogether (as many other Platonic dialogues do), I am aided by the growing scholarship which seeks to trace the erotic thread that runs through all of Plato’s works. Foremost among these is the work of Jill Gordon, who in Plato’s Erotic World argues


\textsuperscript{15} “It comes as a stunning recognition that Aristophanes’ is the only speech in the entire Symposium that does not so much as mention to kallos. The word or any of its cognates is missing entirely from his speech and his speech alone.” Drew Hyland, “The Whole Comedy and Tragedy of Philosophy; On Aristophanes’ Speech in Plato’s Symposium.” Norsk filosofik tidsskrift 48 (2013): 17.
that *eros* permeates all Platonic dialogues.\(^\text{16}\) Gordon describes *eros* as forming part of a cosmology, in which *eros* is “a journey from the origin of the cosmos and human origins, through various types of human self-cultivation, concluding with human destiny as a return to our origins.”\(^\text{17}\) But *eros* also manifests itself in the motivation that humans possess, to do the work of self-cultivation and to pursue the quest for their origins: “*Eros* shapes what we pursue and how we pursue it,” and “It directs the activities of the *psyche* to philosophy and its divine origins.”\(^\text{18}\) As a shaping and directing force, *eros* manifests itself as questioning, courage, matchmaking (or finding a lover), self-knowledge, and memory.\(^\text{19}\) Gordon also builds upon the fact that Socrates claims to have erotic expertise.\(^\text{20}\) Closer to our theme of the relationship between *eros* and *noesis*, Drew Hyland, David Roochnik, and David Schindler have all written extensively about the erotic structure of philosophical discourse and questioning, each in their own way showing how Plato’s dramatic depiction of philosophy is thoroughly erotic. Drew Hyland has written about the “interrogative stance” which is proper to Socratic discourse, a stance which is a manifestation of the erotic nature of human being.\(^\text{21}\) Roochnik has pointed out that philosophical discourse in Plato must be understood as having as its object not only “being as being,” but “being as being as desired.”\(^\text{22}\) He has also done work in distinguishing *techne* from

\(^{16}\) “Symposium, Phaedrus, Charmides, Lysis, Alcibiades I, and perhaps Republic are considered Plato’s ‘erotic dialogues’ because interlocutors discuss *eros*, and erotic relations among the interlocutors are dramatically portrayed. These dialogues, of course, shape scholars’ investigations of erotic desire in Plato’s work. But they also circumscribe those investigations. In actuality, Plato’s entire world is permeated with *eros.*” Gordon, *Plato’s Erotic World*, 1.


philosophical discourse, and grounds this distinction in part on the erotic nature of the latter.23 David Schindler’s recent work has developed a theory of Platonic philosophy as being “ecstatic” and “bonocentric,” meaning that it has an erotic structure and accepts that the standard for truth is not a correct, exhaustive, discursive account made by the philosopher, but an ever-distant ideal, the Good, which is the principle of the intelligibility of reality but which cannot be fully grasped by human consciousness.24 The work of all of the above-mentioned scholars will furnish the required hermeneutical tools which I will use to uncover the presence of eros in the Hippias Major. In other words, their work provides a way to see the work of eros in a text where the word is not explicitly mentioned, but where its characters are driven by it.

Method and Terms

About the method employed in this dissertation, the first things to point out is that the method takes into account not only the philosophical content of the dialogue (the arguments, elenchi, definitions, etc.) but also its dramatic content (characters, action, setting, allusions, etc.). The two dimensions of the text are, as far as the purposes of my interpretation goes, deeply interrelated.25 While attention will be paid to the exclusively philosophical content of the dialogue, by evaluating the arguments the Socrates and Hippias make in favor of a definition or a

---

25 In his critical treatment of Woodruff’s commentary of the Hippias Major, Ronald Polansky recommends looking for philosophical significance in the dramatic aspects of this dialogue. This method is required, Polansky argues, because the philosophical content of a Platonic dialogue can never be completely extricated from the dialogue form: “When, however, he [Woodruff] turns to assessing the interaction of the characters in the dialogue, he tends toward less minute inquiry. But the dialogue must be mined as strenuously for the evidence of an interpretation of the character of its participants as for the presuppositions of its arguments.” See Ronald Polansky, “Reading Plato: Paul Woodruff and the Hippias Major,” in Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings. Ed. Charles Griswold (New York: Routledge, 1988), 209. While we agree with Polansky on both his claim about the inextricability of the dialogue form from the philosophical content, as well as with his critique of Woodruff’s treatment of character, we will go further and analyze other dramatic aspects as well, especially action.
modification of a definition of the beautiful, as much or more attention will be paid to the way, and direction toward which, the dialogue develops, of the allusions which are summoned by the examples, and of the dramatic character (either comic or tragic) of the dialogue as a whole. The full philosophical meaning of the dialogue cannot be approached without taking into account these dramatic elements.

To explain more clearly what I mean by this, I appeal here to the distinction made by Rosemary Desjardins between external and internal examples (paradeigmata) in Platonic discourse.\(^\text{26}\) The external examples are those explicitly cited by Socrates or an interlocutor. In the *Hippias Major*, these examples will range from tools to animals to gods. These examples serve a function in the philosophical argument being made at that particular moment in the dialogue. But there are also internal examples, those “self-referential examples that are truly pivotal for this question of interpretation—that is to say, those examples Plato provides within the fabric of a concurrent discussion of the same topic.” There are three types of internal examples:

(1) Reference to action outside the dialogue.

(2) Clever introduction and clever juxtaposition of characters: “The actions and attitudes of each reflect, and are reflected in, their rather different ways of understanding the *logoi* that are here being discussed—and it is left to the reader to see (in light of their different behavior) in what sense their respective interpretations are to be rejected, in what sense maintained.”\(^\text{27}\)

(3) *Erga* (deeds) which help to interpret *logoi* (words): “Our understanding of love or the art of *logoi* in the *Phaedrus*, of division in the *Sophist*, of limit and the unlimited in the *Philebus*,


\(^{27}\) Desjardins, “Why Dialogues? Plato’s Serious Play,” 120.
of hypothesis in the *Phaedo*, of *episteme epistemes* in the *Charmides*, of discrimination and weaving in the *Cratylus*, of dialectic in the *Republic*, of *logos* in the *Theatetus* will all to a large extent depend on our awareness of the practical demonstration or *paradeigma* that Plato has taken care to provide within the dramatic action that constitutes the context of the discussion. It is awareness of this constant need for interpretation that drives Plato to adopt a special kind of vehicle for his philosophy—that of dramatic dialogue that will not be forced to rely exclusively on its vulnerable discursive content.”

All three types of internal examples are dramatic elements which exist to open up avenues of interpretation of the philosophical content of the dialogue. To give an example from the *Hippias Major*, well-clad Hippias’s physical beauty juxtaposed against Socrates’s ugliness form an internal *paradeigma* which conditions the interpretation of the relationship between beauty, knowledge, and appearances. If we did not take into account Socrates’s and Hippias’s looks, something would have been missed about Socrates’s statement that the beautiful itself causes a being to be, and not merely appear, beautiful (294a). By taking into account the detail about Hippias’s well-clad appearance, we can see that Socrates is not only making a point about the nature of the beautiful, but is also indirectly attacking Hippias’s claims to knowledge about beauty truly is. Thus the interpretation I advance in this dissertation will take into account not only the logical coherence of the definitions and arguments advanced by Hippias and Socrates, but also the wealth of external and internal examples which form the complex of meaning that is the dialogue. I believe that by looking at these examples, the presence of *eros* can be discerned in the dialogue as a necessary concept in the investigation of the *eidos* of the beautiful.

---

Having remarked about the method to be employed in this study, I would like to make a few comments about four principal terms which I will use throughout the study. This is by no means an attempt to define these terms exhaustively—they each will gain new layers of meaning in the course of the dissertation. Instead, I would like to sketch out what I take to be the general idea behind these terms, a general idea which will serve as a starting point for this dissertation.

The terms are: *eros*, philosophical *eros*, *noesis*, and *to kalon*.

*Eros* carries many meanings throughout the Platonic corpus. The simple meaning of the word is, of course, “love” or “desire,” but the word carries much philosophical significance for Plato. The entirety of the *Symposium* and half of the *Phaedrus* are devoted to uncovering this significance. To elaborate on what is stated above, Gordon’s work on *eros* offers one comprehensive view of the meaning of *eros* in Plato’s thought. More importantly, Gordon endeavors to show that *eros* is present in many Platonic dialogues which do not explicitly mention it by name.29 This presence can be discerned once one adopts the broad meaning of *eros* which Gordon sketches out in the introduction of her book: “a journey from the origin of the cosmos and human origins, through various types of human self-cultivation, concluding with human destiny as a return to our origins.”30 *Eros* is a force which compels a human being to pursue goods both human and divine, and it also manifests itself in how this pursuit is enacted in a human life: “*Eros* shapes what we pursue and how we pursue it,” and “It directs the activities of the *psuche* to philosophy and its divine origins.”31 *Eros* manifests itself as questioning, courage, matchmaking (or finding a lover), self-knowledge, and memory: in other words, all of

29 “Symposium, Phaedrus, Charmides, Lysis, Alcibiades I, and perhaps Republic are considered Plato’s ‘erotic dialogues’ because interlocutors discuss *eros*, and erotic relations among the interlocutors are dramatically portrayed. These dialogues, of course, shape scholars’ investigations of erotic desire in Plato’s work. But they also circumscribe those investigations. In actuality, Plato’s entire world is permeated with *eros*.” Gordon, *Plato’s Erotic World*, 1.
these human experiences are a sign of eros’s presence.\textsuperscript{32} Insofar as we see these experiences in it, we can discern the activity of eros in the \textit{Hippias Major}.

Beyond the rich collection of nuances and meanings in Gordon’s account of eros, one particular manifestation of eros plays a pivotal role in the \textit{Hippias Major}. It is a manifestation, or rather meaning, of eros which is found in the \textit{Hippias Major} and which runs parallel with Diotima’s account of the same in the \textit{Symposium}. In other words, a similar meaning of eros is at play in both dialogues. (Throughout my study, I will appeal to this parallel for gaining illumination about the \textit{Hippias Major}.) In the \textit{Symposium}, Diotima states that eros ultimately desires to possess the good, forever, but also that before that, it desires to possess everything from beautiful bodies, to beautiful souls, to laws, sciences, and the beautiful itself. What “possession” means, of course, differs according to the nature of each object: To desire a soul is to desire to have a soul as a companion; to desire to possess a science is to desire to know it.

A distinction exists between eros simpliciter, which can be for a beautiful body or a beautiful soul or any type of beauty, and philosophical eros, by which I mean eros which desires the good above all things, and which has subordinated all other desires to this overarching desire for the good. Moreover, the person with a truly philosophical eros recognizes that the good is something which exists in itself, and is not defined primarily by what is in his or her interest. It is, rather, something that one aspires to know as it is in itself. In other words, the philosopher is self-aware about her desire for the good as good. In the \textit{Hippias Major}, Socrates exemplifies philosophical eros, because his overarching and abiding concern is for the good, and because he has eros for the beautiful because the beautiful is good. On the other hand, Hippias’s eros is not directed toward the good, but ultimately toward power and self-affirmation. Another aspect to

\textsuperscript{32} Gordon, \textit{Plato’s Erotic World}, 7-11.
specifically philosophical eros is its questioning and interrogative nature, with respect to the causes (aitia) and forms (eide) of things. As we shall see (in Chapter One), Socrates’s approach to the beautiful is marked by this questioning nature. The significant differences between Hippias and Socrates, which we will examine throughout the course of this dissertation, will further elucidate the distinct nature of philosophical eros.  

The preferred term for the type of knowledge that Socrates wants about the beautiful is noesis. My preference is based on the fact that this word best captures the type of knowledge that Socrates sees himself as ultimately pursuing by the end of the dialogue, after the dialectic has refined and adumbrated the elusive definition of the beautiful which Socrates has failed (but not failed completely) to establish. However, as we will see, Socrates is never very precise about the nature of the knowledge that he is after. At first, the assumption seems to be that the eidos of the beautiful can be captured by discourse. But by the end of the dialogue, Socrates accepts his failure to define the beautiful itself, although this admission comes with a stated willingness to continue to search for it. It seems then that the stated question of the dialogue asks for a comprehensive, discursive account of the beautiful itself, but that the dialogue itself fails to deliver such a definition. In this dissertation we will see that, even though the dialogue fails in this particular way, and even though it ends in aporia, nevertheless the dialogue does yield

---

33 My use of the term “philosophical eros” as eros for the good comes from Hyland, who uses the term in Plato and the Question of Beauty, particularly in his chapter on the Symposium, where he argues that “acts of virtue” are the ultimate telos of the ascent toward the beautiful itself (59). Allan Bloom also distinguishes philosophical eros from eros more generally: “If Eros, put most generally, is longing, then the philosopher who pursues the knowledge he does not have could be considered erotic. He longs for knowledge. If the need to know is what is most characteristically human, then such philosophical Eros would be the privileged form of eros.” See Allan Bloom, Love and Friendship (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 432.

I am also aware of other philosophical approaches to Platonic eros which attempt to interpret the concept without direct recourse to the concept of the good. See, for example, Alfred Geier, Plato’s Erotic Thought: The Tree of the Unknown (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2002). To a certain extent, Nussbaum also attempts such an interpretation, when she refers to the “self-cancelling” nature of eros, in Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 176.
partial knowledge about the eidos of the beautiful. The term I use to denote this partial
knowledge is noesis: a “flash” of knowledge concerning the formal intelligibility of phenomena.
This concept of noesis comes closest to capturing the type of knowledge Socrates both claims to
have and to lack at the end of the dialogue: he claims to know some things about the beautiful—
some noetic flashes of its formal intelligibility—but he does not claim to possess a
comprehensive definition of it—that is, episteme. Socrates never actually gives us a technical
term for knowledge, beyond the common, oǐða (286c), and sophia, used to denote Hippias’s
sophistical wisdom (281a, 281b) and political wisdom (296a). But noesis does seem to best
capture the type of knowledge he still aims to pursue at the end of the dialogue. The word
appears in a negative sense, when Socrates and Hippias argue that some beautiful beings are
“unknown” ἀγνοεῖσθαι (294d). The issue of knowledge will be taken up in greater depth in
Chapter One and Chapter Three.34

My interpretation of the Hippias Major rests on a particular translation of the key term,
tò καλόν. Among scholars of Greek philosophy, there is a longstanding debate over the accurate
translation of this word, which has such great importance for philosophy. Depending on the
dialogue or treatise in question, tò καλόν has been translated into “the fine,” “the noble,” “the
admirable,” and, of course, “the beautiful.”35 Because this controversy is relevant to the Hippias
Major, I will make a critical appreciation of the controversy as I understand it, and will outline
my reasons for supporting the translation of tò καλόν as “beautiful.”

34 The distinctions I make between noesis and episteme in Plato in this section are grounded in the work of Hyland.
See especially the essay, “But What about the Ideas?” in Finitude and Transcendence.
35 An interesting summary and discussion of the different ways tò καλόν has been treated by translators of Plato
See also the response by Gabriel Richardson Lear in the same volume, which contains a rich symposium on tò καλόν: Gabriel Richardson Lear, “Response to Kosman.” Classical Philology (105) 2010: 357-362. In the first two
chapters of this book I will make use of both contributions to the symposium, as well as their respective responses.
The first thing to note is that the English word “beautiful” does not enjoy a unanimously-accepted definition among philosophers today. For some philosophers, the term is defined at least in part by the idea of the “aesthetic,” which implies that beauty is always tied to what the senses perceive (αἴσθησις). But if beauty is always aesthetic, then it would not make sense to speak of the beauty of wisdom, which is not perceived by the senses (this, in fact, is one reason why τὸ καλόν is not always translated as “the beautiful”: we should speak instead, some argue, of the nobility of wisdom). There are other philosophers who have argued that the beautiful can refer to spiritual and ideal realities as well as to physical ones, and that the problem lies in the modern notion of the aesthetic, which has limited the idea of the beautiful to those things which are first perceived by the senses.

This ambiguity over the English meaning of “beautiful” has sometimes had a confusing effect on the study of the Hippias Major. Scholars who have translated or commented on the Hippias Major have translated τὸ καλόν in different ways, and the way they translate it has affected their overall interpretation of the dialogue. For the most part, those who have translated τὸ καλόν as “fine” have usually defined beauty as aesthetic. These interpreters usually take the Hippias Major to be about something other than beauty. Woodruff writes that the dialogue is “not a treatise in aesthetics, and beauty is not its subject. The dialogue is concerned with commendation itself, and the logic of commendation.” Raymond, citing this same passage from Woodruff, adds that the Hippias Major “is bound to leave the student of aesthetics quite cold,”

---

37 Nehamas writes: “Although the word continued to be used, beauty itself was replaced by the aesthetic, which, completely isolated as it is with the rest of the world, promises nothing that is not already in it, is incapable of deception, and provokes no desire,” (Nehamas, Only a Promise of Happiness, 10). The aesthetic, according to Nehamas, differs from the beautiful in that it refers only to high art and certain sublime experiences, and sunders the experience of the beautiful from Platonic eros, and replaces the latter with the Kantian idea of “disinterested liking.”
38 Woodruff, Hippias Major, 110.
and believes that it would be more accurate to say that “Socrates wants to know what it is, in the most general way imaginable, for a thing to be an object of value. Beauty is only a species of value.” Both Woodruff and Raymond base their opinions on definitions of τὸ καλόν which are not “the beautiful.” In his own translation of the dialogue, Woodruff prefers “the fine” (though, as we will see below, he does not do this in his translation of the Symposium), and Raymond argues that “fine” or “admirable” are accurate renderings.

Other scholars have taken various other paths. One is to define τὸ καλόν as beautiful, but then to subsequently claim that “beautiful” is a term with various equivocal meanings. To give one example, Sider argues that the Hippias Major is indeed a treatise on beauty. But he also points out that τὸ καλόν has three meanings in Ancient Greece: it may refer to use, aesthetic beauty, or moral beauty. Sider, in his own study, chooses to focus on aesthetic beauty, and argues that the Hippias Major gives us the beginnings of a philosophical theory, but one that deals only with this restricted sense of beauty as aesthetic. Some scholars have chosen to preserve a simple, univocal sense of τὸ καλόν, usually (but not always) rendering it as “beautiful.” Seth Benardete, in The Being of the Beautiful, is (apparently) undisturbed by the philosophical and linguistic controversy over the subject matter of the Hippias Major, and offers an interpretation based on a rendering of “τὸ καλόν” as “the beautiful,” while treating the dialogue as if it were investigating the same “beauty” that is discussed by Socrates in the

40 Sider argues that the Hippias Major is one of the only dialogues with the “what is x?” format where the x is only partially ethical, and that “This alone should make us suspicious of any attempt to extract from the dialogue a theory of aesthetics which ignores ethics and morality. Nevertheless, this is what I intend to do.” David Sider, “Plato’s Early Aesthetics: The Hippias Major,” 75-76. Robert George Hoerber shares Sider’s view: “In brief, to kalon involves the concept of beauty on three standards: 1) the utilitarian; 2) the aesthetic; and 3) the moral.” See Robert George Hoerber, “Plato’s Hippias Major,” The Classical Journal 50 (1955): 184. Ivor Ludlam also adopts a view that distinguishes “aesthetic” from “moral” beauty, grounding this distinction in the difference between τὸ καλόν and the noun τὸ κάλλος, but he sees the Hippias Major as an attempt to show how the two words “should be synonymous” (113-116). Moreover, Ludlam himself seems to believe that they should be synonymous, too: “Beauty, whatever else one might say about it, pertains to perception, both sensory and intellectual” (113). See Ivor Ludlam, Hippias Major: An Interpretation.
Diotima section of the *Symposium*. In his own translation of the dialogue, David Sweet renders τὸ καλόν as “beautiful” and treats the dialogue as dealing with “beauty” as such, also drawing parallels with the *Symposium*. Joe Sachs’s translation also translates the term as “beautiful.” Christopher Bruell is alone among current scholars of the *Hippias Major* in founding his entire interpretation of the dialogue on a translation of τὸ καλόν as “noble.” Finally, David Wolfsdorf, while agreeing with Woodruff that “‘fine’ has a broader semantic range,” also believes “fine” to be “anemic,” and declares, “In fact, no single English word is satisfactory.”

My response to this plethora of interpretations is: If we wish to understand the *Hippias Major*, then we have to try to adopt Hippias’s and Socrates’s usage of “beauty.” Socrates and Hippias clearly see beauty as something which manifests itself in many different ways among many types of beings. Both characters also agree that the word, *kalon*, is capacious enough to encompass all these manifestations of beauty. If this word were not so capacious, then the philosophical question which both men will attempt to answer will be confused from the start. At the beginning of the dialogue, no claim has been made as to whether the word has a “univocal” meaning, or several “equivocal” or “analogical” ones. Rather, Socrates notes that Hippias claims to know what he is talking about when he talks about beauty, and Socrates would like to look more deeply into the issue. The dialogue is as much an inquiry into the limits of what we can call beautiful, as it is an investigation into its essential components. As we have already noted, Socrates and Hippias are able to use the term before knowing its essential definition, yet they

41 Seth Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful*, xi-xlvi.
both employ it in many different ways, attempting to test its limits as well as to discover its ultimate meaning. The dialogue is an invitation to reconsider what we take to be the possible range of applicability or attribution of that word, and as a consequence to discover its essential core. But this investigation can only be conducted with the common starting point that Hippias and Socrates acknowledge: that "beautiful" may refer to all kinds of beauty, and not exclusively to "aesthetic" or "physical" beauty.

In order to adopt this broader and properly speaking Socratic point of view on the beautiful, it is imperative that we first divest ourselves of this Kantian understanding of beauty as aesthetic. Only having done this, can we enter into a frame of mind in which "beauty" is something that can be predicated of spoons, women, ideas, sciences, statues, and actions, as it was in Plato’s culture, and as it is in the Hippias Major. The linguistic question of proper translation is secondary to the philosophical one. The key to liberating the beautiful from its qualification as "aesthetic" lies in a revised understanding of "appearance."

As noted above, the modern idea of the "aesthetic" reduces the range of applicability of the term "beautiful" exclusively to those objects which can be known through the senses. Yet it is very easy to see how "beautiful" in English refers to more than objects of sense perception.

---

46 This is how Hyland distinguishes the Socratic view of beauty from the Kantian notion of "aesthetic": "With the advent of the distinguishing in Kant and others of 'aesthetics' as a separate discipline from other disciplines ... beauty as an issue comes to be located fundamentally in aesthetics, and so, most basically, in art ..." Instead, “for the Greeks beauty begins, as it were, with the beauty of human bodies ...” Hyland, Plato and the Question of Beauty, 15. This is of course, as Hyland notes, only where our understanding of beauty begins. But the Greeks also appreciated the beauty of non-human bodies, even tools, as well as the beauty of actions and ideas. 47 Jessica Moss presents a similar argument for the consistent translation of τὸ καλὸν, but with regard to its use in Plato’s Laws: “We are most charitable to Plato if we take him to use the term in one sense only: all kalon things are kalon in the same way. On Plato’s view, this means that they all participate in one Form. Participation in this Form renders art beautiful, and actions and characters ethically fine, but these are not two different qualities. (Compare: participation in the Form of the Good makes food nutritious, and knives sharp, but on Plato’s view both are good in a univocal sense. Or: participation in the Form of the Large makes numbers high and cats fat, but this does not show that there are two distinct senses of ‘large’). Thus it is a mistake to ask which sense of kalon Plato has in mind at various points, or whether the ethical or aesthetic sense is prior.” See Jessica Moss, “Art and Ethical Perspective,” in Plato on Art and Beauty, ed. A. E. Denham (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 209. In Chapter 2, I will consider the question the “univocity” of τὸ καλὸν.
We can say, “Beautifully done,” to a student who has just derived the Quadratic Formula on the chalkboard; we can call that a “beautiful goal,” when a player scores from a free kick. We say that people have “beautiful souls.” We also say that a certain automobile “runs beautifully.”

When someone hits a particularly strong and straight drive on the golf course, people say, “Now that’s a beaut [sic].” Once, while riding a bus, I noticed a blind young woman climbing up the steps into the bus, led by her guide dog. She sat next to an old man who told her, “You have such a beautiful dog.” She responded with, “I know.” Obviously, they were both referring to the same dog, but to different aspects of that dog’s beauty: The old man to the dog’s looks, and the young woman to the dog’s nobility and trustworthiness. (It could not have been otherwise: literally speaking, she could not see the dog). Thus the English word, “beautiful,” may be used to communicate the idea of τὸ καλόν. In other words, a contemporary discussion of τὸ καλόν must adopt this broader sense of “beauty” which goes beyond the merely aesthetic, and the English word “beautiful” is more than up to the task.48

Unfortunately, many commentators use the terms “aesthetic” and “beauty” interchangeably, and claim that τὸ καλόν can be rendered as “beautiful” only in those cases when it refers to sensory objects.49 But the Hippias Major itself can help us to question this modern

---

48 Gabriel Richardson Lear makes a similar observation in his response to Kosman: “However, it does not strike me as strange to attribute beauty to wisdom or any other nonsensible thing, at least in principle. It is common to say that a person is beautiful, where what we are describing is his character. And mathematicians and scientists routinely describe the proofs and theories of their disciplines as beautiful. Moreover, as central a philosopher to the history of modern aesthetics as Hutcheson can speak of the beauty of proofs. So I simply deny that the concept of beauty is limited to what we can literally perceive.” Lear, “Response to Kosman,” 360.

49 See, for example, once again, Raymond: “In the Hippias Major alone it [τὸ καλόν] applies to everything from quails to customs to kitchen utensils, with no clear connotation of aesthetic value. A more reliable translation of kalos would be ‘fine’ or ‘admirable’, words which better reflect the versatility of the Greek. In asking after the essence of the kalon itself, Socrates wants to know what it is, in the most general way imaginable, for a thing to be an object of value. Beauty is only a species of value: the kalon ‘in appearance’ ” (Raymond, 32). This is an exercise in question begging: Raymond assumes that Plato has a notion of “value” similar to our own, a notion which, I would argue, is more abstract than is our notion of “beautiful.” Moreover, all of the objects discussed in the Hippias Major – even the most ideal ones, like the noble life (Hippias’s third definition) have to “appear” to the philosopher – that is, the philosopher must have a direct intuition of it at some point in his life in order to be able to judge it
concept of the beautiful as merely aesthetic, and we can use the *Hippias Major* to re-evaluate our own understanding of what beauty is and can be.\(^5\) Briefly put, we must be open to the fact that non-physical objects are also beautiful. Kosman writes: “it would be a will-o’-the-wisp to suppose that somewhere there is a translation that’s just right,” and that “the dream of an ideal translation … is vain.”\(^5\) Yet this is a problem for translators, not philosophers; both the Greeks in Plato’s time, and we in our own, have the same experience of seeing the radiance of just laws and beautiful landscapes; modern people admire the beauty of Greek painted ceramics, and I would wager that a Plato or a Socrates would feel the same frisson at hearing about Rosa Parks’s courage and sense for justice as would our schoolchildren today. In other words, there is a unitary phenomenon that we must investigate, and when referring to it, “the beautiful” is just as good a word as “τὸ καλὸν.”\(^5\)

The aesthetic can be transcended only by broadening our notion of “appearance.” If beauty is a phenomenon that is not merely aesthetic, then what kind of phenomenon is it? That

---

\(^5\) As Lear puts it: “It is, of course, true that Kant and the modern discipline of aesthetics limited beauty to perceptual appearances, but perhaps the thing to say is: so much the worse for their theories.” Lear, “Response to Kosman,” 360.


\(^5\) With this claim, I am aligning myself with the following scholars who have written commentaries on the *Hippias Major*: Drew Hyland, Seth Benardete, and David Sweet. It should also be noted that Woodruff, while opting for “fine” over “beautiful” in his translation of the *Hippias Major*, choses to use “beautiful” in the Diotima section of the *Symposium*, which he translated with Nehamas.
is, how does it appear to us, how do we become aware of it? In analyzing the essential components of τὸ καλόν, Kosman opts for a sense of the word “appearance” which goes beyond the sensory: “for Plato, appearance is not something separate from being, but simply a presentation of what is to a subject: being, as we say, making its appearance.” Beauty, he writes, is “what appears well,” or what “reveals the integrity of being and its proper appearance.” Beauty is a truthful and complete appearance. An object can appear to us in ways that go beyond the senses: that is, there is more than one way for an object to make an appearance.

The term “appearance” works well as a replacement for “aesthetic.” Beauty concerns appearances, though not necessarily aesthetic appearances. By “appearance” here, we mean the way a being presents itself to us. An idea also can have an appearance, as can a work of art that is not corporeal, like a poem. We can have an intuition of a non-corporeal being; and that intuition is a form of appearance. The beauty of a full life, as discussed by Hippias, requires the direct intuition of an idea. I can consider that idea—a full life—from different aspects (a life of action, a life with children, a long life, etc.) and each aspect is a different appearance of the same idea. As Nehamas writes, “Appearance and the physical are the names we use to denote what we already know in the world.” But things from beyond the physical world can also appear to us. The “eidetic variation” exercised by Hippias and Socrates is one in which they attempt to exhaust the term, τὸ καλόν. Socrates wants to measure its limits, and so be able to demarcate

55 Nehamas, Only a Promise of Happiness, 71. This statement by Nehamas should be coupled with another statement he makes in the same work: “Beauty is never detached from appearance but is not exhausted by it.” Nehamas argues that the beautiful in an object compels us to know it ever more deeply, to seek out new “appearances” of it.
them on a sort of philosophical map.\textsuperscript{56} They want to see it in all of its varied appearances, until they are able to find the one thing present in every type of appearance possible.\textsuperscript{57}

One important implication of this understanding of appearance is that the beauty of a body or a law (or anything else that is discussed in the \textit{Hippias Major}) is immediately grasped.\textsuperscript{58} The beauty of certain examples brought up by either Hippias or Socrates is not contested; what is contested is whether these examples constitute the definition of the beautiful. Several examples of beauty are found to be deficient, but they are never found to be ugly (with the exception, perhaps, of the first example, the maiden, who is found to be ugly, but only relative to the beauty of a god). The domain of the beautiful, the expansive map of possible legitimate uses of the term, is constantly expanded with each new example: in order to understand beauty’s essence it appears that we must see how many different objects can be attributed as beautiful. But once the object appears, its beauty is intuited without controversy. The controversy between Hippias and Socrates is their disagreement over what the beautiful \textit{is}, and not over particular judgments of beauty.

\textsuperscript{56} I believe that, in saying this, I am in full agreement with Hyland’s description of what Socrates and Hippias are doing. Hyland says that they are seeking a “definition,” that is, seeking to “comprehend (in the literal sense, to take entirely together) the meaning of a term, and to do so fully and adequately” (Hyland, \textit{Plato and the Question of Beauty}, 7). This “taking together” requires that one examine what things can naturally come together; that is, it requires an investigation into what sort of things can be called beautiful, so that we may examine what they all have in common and thus merit that common characteristic.

\textsuperscript{57} Of course, “appearance” carries with it an ambiguity found in both Greek and English: it may signal the way an object shines forth to an observer, or it may signal an illusion, a lie, about an object’s true nature. Such an ambiguity, however, need not prevent us from using the word here. The issue of appearances and illusion arises later in the dialogue, and we cover it in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{58} Cf. Lear: “The point, it seems to me, is not that beauty can be perceived, but that it is, like sensible properties, a property of which we are immediately aware.” See Lear, “Response to Kosman,” 360. Also Barney: “… the \textit{kalon} is what evokes the approval of the spectator rather than the desire of the agent: it represents a kind of value which is \textit{complete as it stands}. This completeness is perhaps one reason why Plato seems to think of the \textit{kalon} as by nature manifest or radiant, immediately experienced and easily recognizable.” See Barney, “Notes on Plato,” 370.
Outline of this Study

The forthcoming study is divided into six chapters. Each chapter corresponds to what constitutes a significant, unified moment in the philosophical drama of the *Hippias Major*. Moreover, each of these moments will be interpreted in terms of philosophical *erōs*.

In the first chapter, I will analyze the lengthy preliminary discussion in the *Hippias Major*, which precedes the posing of the question of the beautiful (281a-286c). I will do so in order to show how the discussion gives birth to Socrates’s question about the beautiful, and which factors in the discussion lead to making the beautiful the theme of a philosophical discussion. Briefly put, Hippias claims to be wise about matters both public and private, and he appeals to beauty as the value which certifies his wisdom. Socrates naturally desires to question Hippias about the value which the sophist uses to justify himself. Moreover, I will show that the birth of this question must be understood in terms of Socrates’s *erōs* for the good. It is Socrates’s desire for the good above all things, which manifests itself in the performance of asking questions, that naturally seeks know the beautiful itself.

The second chapter deals with the first three definitions of the beautiful, which are all formulated by Hippias (*παρθένος καλὴ*, “a beautiful girl,” 287c; *χρυσός*, “gold,” 289e; human life, 291d). In this chapter, I look at the arguments which Hippias uses to advance each of these definitions, as well as Socrates’s dialectical engagement with each. I also pay close attention to the allusions and implications that surround each definition and each counterexample which Socrates brings to the philosophical discussion, in the hopes of gaining a deeper understanding of what exactly is happening during this section of the dialogue. I will argue that what is happening
is a sort of “ascent,” akin in some ways to Diotima’s ascent, an ascent toward a deeper understanding of the beautiful itself.

In the third chapter, I will consider Socrates’s statement that the eidos of the beautiful makes things be beautiful “whether they are seen to be beautiful or not” (294c). This occurs at the moment when Socrates takes over the direction of the dialogue. Socrates begins his takeover by posing the question of the relationship between a beautiful being’s appearance and its nature as beautiful, a particularly complicated question given the fact that beauty is a quality most often associated with appearances. I will argue that in Socrates’s statements about the beautiful and appearances, we see something akin to the unique status that the Socrates of the Phaedrus affords the beautiful in his second speech: the beautiful is a form which is more “visible” to human beings than other forms. It is a form which appears radiantly to whoever directs his eros toward the good—that is, to the philosopher.

In the fourth chapter, I will explore the significance of the shift that occurs in the dialogue when the category of goodness enters into the dialogue (296c-297d). I will argue that this shift is best understood in erotic terms. The discovery that the beautiful is good makes it that much more certain that the disposition required to know (noesis) the beautiful itself is that of the philosopher, and not the sophist. It is the disposition in which one’s eros is directed toward the good. Only someone whose eros is directed toward the good has the relationship with being required to know the beautiful itself.

I will analyze the dénouement of the dialogue in Chapter Five, looking at the final moments of the dialogue according to the canons of comedy and tragedy. First, I will argue that the dialogue exposes Hippias’s and Socrates’s limitations with regard to the possibility of
knowing the beautiful itself, and that this is what produces the comedy of the *Hippias Major*. But I will also argue that the dialogue contains elements of tragedy in the stories of both Hippias and Socrates, and that through these tragic conventions, we can learn about the degree of limited success or finite transcendence which Socrates is able to achieve in his quest for the beautiful itself. Once again, philosophical *eros* will be the central term of my interpretation. Both Hippias’s and Socrates’s stories are tragic, but they differ from each other. The difference hinges on Socrates’s embrace of philosophical *eros*, an embrace which yields a limited noetic success.

In the final and sixth chapter, I will attempt to harvest the findings, as it were, of my reading of the *Hippias Major*. Having established that *noesis* of the beautiful itself is contingent upon *eros* for the good, I will explore the possibility that this Platonic account of the relationship between desire and aesthetic contemplation can be cast in such a way that is constructive for contemporary aesthetics. I will articulate the relationship between desire and beauty as it appears in the *Hippias Major*, and will place it in conversation with Kant’s notion of “disinterestedness.” I will suggest that Plato’s treatment of beauty and desire allows for both the uniqueness of aesthetic contemplation which “disinterestedness” safeguards, but also gives us an account of aesthetic contemplation that is connected to desire for the aesthetic object, and therefore in some ways more encompassing of the data of human experience than Kant’s account. This final chapter will, I believe, establish the significance of all the work that precedes it—that is, will give us the ultimate reason why another look at the *Hippias Major*, according to the theme of *eros*, is worth taking.
Chapter One

The Birth of Socrates’s Question

Socrates’s question, “‘Would you be able to say what the beautiful is?’” (ἔχοις ἂν εἴπεῖν τι ἔστι τὸ καλὸν;, 286d) is a major mark of philosophical eros in the Hippias Major. Philosophical eros (eros that seeks the good) makes it possible for Socrates to ask such a question. While both Hippias and Socrates speak about beautiful objects in such a way that shows that both have a “naïve” or “pre-philosophical” knowledge of the beautiful, it is Socrates’s philosophical eros, in contrast with Hippias’s art of sophistry, which will give birth to the question about the “beautiful itself.” In this chapter, I will outline the reasons why this is the case. First, through a close reading of Hippias’s and Socrates’s opening discussion, I will show how the difference between Socrates’s and Hippias’s understanding of wisdom and virtue establishes the difference between sophistry and philosophy as it plays out in this dialogue. This difference sets the stage for, and leads to, a discussion about “the beautiful itself.” Second, building on my analysis of the opening discussion between Hippias and Socrates, I will outline the erotic structure of Socrates’s philosophical engagement with Hippias, by focusing on Socrates’s activity of questioning (his “interrogative stance”) and his abiding interest in the good.

Hippias and Socrates: Two Contrasting Characters

The Hippias of the opening passages of the Hippias Major is at odds morally and intellectually with both the Socrates that emerges in those same passages, as well as the Socrates that we know from other sources within the Platonic canon. The interlocutors have clashing appearances, characters, occupations, and views of what constitutes wisdom and virtue. Moreover, Hippias’s and Socrates’s appearances hint at a more fundamental moral and
intellectual difference. This clash is only implied in the opening section; Socrates does not attack Hippias directly. But Socrates’s philosophical eros, as opposed to Hippias’s art of sophistry, provides a ground for a possibly intractable conflict, and a dramatic tension which endures for the length of the dialogue. The dramatic tension between these characters will lead to a discussion about wisdom and virtue; the tension will be relaxed by turning to beauty as a topic instead. But the concern for wisdom and virtue will remain latent throughout the dialogue. It is this concern which sets the stage for a discussion about the beautiful.

The first and most immediate difference between the two characters lies in their appearance, a difference which would probably have been evident to any Athenian reader with general knowledge about Socrates and Hippias, and which hints at more complex moral differences beneath the surface. When Socrates addresses Hippias as both beautiful and wise (281a), he is not being completely disingenuous about the former epithet. Hippias’s self-confidence, wealth, and popularity suggest that he is an attractive figure in appearance, in the way that self-confident, successful, and popular people often are. Socrates refers to Hippias as “beautifully dressed, beautifully shod, and famous for wisdom all over Greece” (291a). Hippias was also a diplomat, a job that requires a certain degree of attention and care for one’s physical appearance. One could say then that Hippias is beautiful to behold. The same could not be said about Socrates. The dialogue does not contain any description of Socrates’s appearance, but

59 I am not here attempting to contrast a general theory of philosophical eros with a general theory of the art of sophistry. I am only focusing on this particular manifestation of philosophical eros, and its confrontation with one particular manifestation of sophistry. On the task of defining “sophist” in the Platonic canon, see Marina McCoy, Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). McCoy writes that “…there is no unified account in the dialogues of a specific set of characteristics that define either sophist or rhetorician,” yet “Plato seems less concerned with offering definitions of the philosopher and sophist than with opposing through dramatic conflict the person of the philosopher, Socrates, to a number of different sophists and rhetoricians” (1-3). The Hippias Major is an almost quintessential example of such a dramatic confrontation.

60 “Hippias, who often served Elis as an ambassador, especially to Sparta (G. Hp. 281a-b), is represented as supremely self-confident…” Debra Nails, The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics (Hackett: Indianapolis, 2002), 168-169.
traditionally we know him to be ugly. Culling from various sources, Debra Nails describes Socrates as someone who “went about barefoot and unwashed; had bulging eyes that darted sideways and enabled him, like a crab, to see not only what was straight ahead, but that sniffed all around; large fleshy lips like an ass; an arrogant expression; and an intimidating swagger—which could be misinterpreted as condescending…” If Socrates is an attractive figure to his followers, it is in spite of his appearance, not because of it. This dramatic contrast between an ugly Socrates and a beautiful but anti-philosophical interlocutor is a trope that occurs more than once in the Platonic canon. It occurs in the closing sections of the Symposium, where the interlocutor is the beautiful Alcibiades, and the Hippias Major presents us with a similar dramatic contrast. Hippias, because he is a beautiful person, would presumably be an authority on the beautiful. Socrates, as an ugly man, would not appear to be such an authority. But the dialogue will, in due course, provide reasons to abandon these preliminary assessments.

As the opening discussion develops, we see other contrasting characteristics between Hippias and Socrates, characteristics which have to do with their respective ways of life, and which therefore cut deeper into the souls of both men. Early on (281c), we learn that Hippias is both successful politically (as an ambassador for the city-state of Elis) and financially (as a popular sophist). Socrates mentions both of these accomplishments and classifies the ambassadorial work as public, while the educational work (if we may call it that) is private (281c). This distinction will bear some significance later on in our discussion, because the beautiful is characterized in part by its “public” nature. At this point, however, we can see that

---

61 Nails, The People of Plato, 264.
62 On Alcibiades’ beauty and his other attractive qualities, see Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness, 165-166. “He was, to begin with, beautiful. He was endowed with a physical grace and splendor that captivated the entire city.”
63 “That is what it is like to be truly wise, Hippias, a man of complete accomplishments: in private (ἰδίᾳ) you are able to make a lot of money from young people (and to give still greater benefits to those from whom you take it; while in public (δημοσίᾳ) you are able to provide your own city with good service (as is proper for one who expects not to be despised, but admired by ordinary people)” (281c).
Socrates’s own life clashes with both of these points: Socrates is not financially successful, and he is not a politician. We must look closely at both of these points of contrast.

First, financially, Hippias towers above Socrates. “If you knew how much money I’ve made, you’d be amazed,” Hippias tells Socrates (282d). Visiting Sicily while he was still young, Hippias could make “much more than a hundred and fifty minas in a short time—and from one very small place, Inycum, more than twenty minas” (282e). The *Hippias Major* does not give us an explicit assessment of Socrates’s own wealth; for this, we can once again appeal to tradition, which tells us that Socrates was known to be poor. According to Xenophon, all of Socrates’s belongings and property amounted to no more than five minas.64 The *Apology* provides us with another point of reference. The fine which Socrates offers as compensation and punishment is 100 drachmae, or one mina.65 The financial disparity becomes even more acute when one considers that Hippias is approximately the same age as Socrates, and thus both men have had the same amount of time to accumulate wealth.66 Obviously, they have chosen to lead very different lives. The Socrates of the *Apology*, at the moment when he explains to the jury that he does not make money from teaching, names Hippias as an example of someone who does (19e-20a). The Socrates of the *Hippias Major* does not distinguish himself explicitly from Hippias. Yet one cannot help but read this line in an ironic tone, given the differences between the two men: “The mark of being wise, I see, is when someone makes the most money” (283b). If

---

64 “‘I suppose,’ said Socrates, ‘that my chance and all my property would bring quite easily five minas, if I chanced on a good buyer; but I know with some accuracy that your things would bring more than a hundred times that.” Xenophon, *Shorter Socratic Writings: “Apology of Socrates to the Jury,” “Oeconomicus,” and “Symposium,”* trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 44. Nails cites this source in order to illustrate Socrates’s poverty. It is unclear how much validity she gives it, however, because she simply says, “On Socrates’s poverty, consider Xenophon’s remark…” (Nails, *The People of Plato*, 264). Regardless of its historical precision, we can at least assume that Hippias’s wealth vastly overshadowed Socrates’s.


Socrates were to mean that statement in earnest, it would mean disavowing his whole philosophical enterprise and way of life.

Related to the issue of money is the psychological disposition which Hippias claims that money induces in a person. Hippias’s father and other citizens were “amazed and thunderstruck” (θαυμάζειν τε καὶ ἐκπεπλῆχθαι, 282e) by the amount of money that Hippias had made in Sicily. Hippias uses θαυμάζειν with respect to money, and this may be a provocative act, given that in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, the word is used to denote the origin of philosophy (ἀρχὴ φιλοσοφίας, 155d). Instead, Hippias uses it in a superficial way. Socrates will use it too, in an adjectival form, to express his shock at the fact that Hippias’s sophistical services were rejected by the Spartans:

*S.* Tell me this: from which of the cities you visit did you make the most money?

From Sparta, obviously, where you visited most often.

*H.* Lord no, Socrates.

*S.* Really? Did you make the least?

*H.* Nothing at all, ever.

To this, Socrates responds: τέρας λέγεις καὶ θαυμαστόν, ὦ Ἱππία (“That’s weird, Hippias, and amazing”). Socrates uses the word for wonder in the same way as Hippias does: to react to a financial matter. This time, however, it’s the fact that Hippias didn’t make money which induces wonder. It is an ironic riposte, followed by more irony. Socrates asks Hippias, “Tell me, isn’t the wisdom you have the sort that makes those who study and learn it stronger in virtue?” (283c). All of a sudden, Socrates compliments Hippias for teaching virtue. This is not something Hippias necessarily has claimed for himself. Hippias certainly claims to have taught young Greeks excellence in the particular fields of moneymaking and speech. But he has not claimed to be able
to give a student a moral education, that is, an education for the aim of obtaining the good in
one’s life.

Beyond the differences in financial well-being, the political side of Hippias, the “public”
part of his life, is another aspect of his personality which distinguishes him from Socrates.
Judging by the text alone, we can see that the difference between Hippias and Socrates and on
this score is clear: nothing in the *Hippias Major* would indicate that Socrates engages in politics
in the way that Hippias does. Hippias is an ambassador for a city-state in a politically
complicated time when Athens and Sparta were each attempting to increase their regional power
over the rest of Greece through alliances and conquest.67 His job would appear to be analogous
to that of a third world leader during the Cold War. Socrates, on the other hand, does not claim to
be anyone’s leader.

But the political distinction is more complex once we take into account the fact that
Hippias distinguishes himself from those thinkers which Socrates and Hippias considered to be
their common ancestors: Thales of Miletus, Anaxagoras, Pittacus, and Bias. Socrates mentions
them right after establishing a public/private distinction, and poses the question: “But Hippias,
how in the world do you explain this: in the old days people who are still famous for wisdom—
Pittacus and Bias and the school of Thales of Miletus, and later ones down to Anaxagoras—that
all or most of those people, we see, kept away from affairs of state?” (281c). Hippias responds,
“What do you think, Socrates? Isn’t it that they were weak and unable to carry their good sense
successfully in both areas, the public and the private?” (283c-d). Thales, Pittacus, and Bias were
among the Seven Sages of Greece, revered for their wisdom,68 and Anaxagoras, too, was

68 Diogenes Läertius lists them: “The men who were commonly regarded as sages were the following: Thales,
Solon, Periander, Cleobulus, Chilon, Bias, Pittacus. To these were added Anacharsis the Scythian, Myson of Chen,
considered to have been a thinker of some stature. For Hippias to refer to them as “weak” (ἀδύνατοι) is quite arrogant. Socrates, however, does not disagree with Hippias’s claims to superiority, at least not at this point in the dialogue. Instead, Socrates helps him to further cement his claim to superiority: “Should we say that your skill—the skill of the sophists (τὴν τῶν σοφιστῶν τέχνην)—has been improved in the same way, and that the ancients are worthless compared to you in wisdom?” (281d). Hippias agrees, and Socrates pushes further: “So if Bias came to life again in our time, Hippias, he would make himself a laughingstock compared with you people, just as Daedalus also, according to the sculptors, would be laughable if he turned up now doing things like the ones that made him famous” (282a). Hippias agrees once again. Socrates even contributes a small joke at Anaxagoras’ expense. Anaxagoras was once wealthy, but he lost all of his money because “there was so little intelligence [ἀνόητα] in his wisdom” (283a), punning on Anaxagoras’ idea of nous. Hippias, on the other hand, has been able to keep his money. Yet Socrates keeps pressing Hippias with questions about his wisdom and later, about beauty. His questions signal that Socrates is not altogether impressed with Hippias’s claims to wisdom. There are obvious gestures of Socratic irony, such as, “But none of these early thinkers thought fit to charge a monetary fee or give displays of his wisdom for all comers” (282c-282d). But it is also the case Socrates is not completely allied with the ancients, either.

The text does not explicitly tell us whether or how Socrates distinguishes himself from the ancient thinkers. It is hard to know whether the joke about Anaxagoras is only there to humor Hippias, or if Socrates truly found Anaxagoras lacking in intelligence. We know from other

---

70 Woodruff, Hippias Major, 39.
sources that elsewhere in the Platonic canon Anaxagoras’s thought is consistently attacked.\textsuperscript{71} We cannot find in the \textit{Hippias Major} the same sort of articulate understanding of Socrates’s own philosophical mission as we find in the \textit{Apology}, where he distinguishes himself from both the sophists as well as ancient thinkers by claiming to have a “human wisdom” (ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία, 20d). But we do know that, in practice, the Socrates of the \textit{Hippias Major} is already distinguishing himself from Hippias and his τὴν τῶν σοφιστῶν τέχνην merely by engaging him in dialectic. Moreover, the way in which he distinguishes himself from Hippias is not by practicing the philosophy of the ancients, which is interested a great deal in cosmology, but by inquiring about the practical and moral benefits of Hippias’s purported wisdom, his art of sophistry.

Before we go on to the difference between τὴν τῶν σοφιστῶν τέχνην and Socrates’s dialectic, however, there is one more thing to say about Socrates’s and Hippias’s reference to the ancient thinkers. The fact of the matter is that Socrates’s and Hippias’s are factually mistaken on three counts. Bias, Pittacus, and Thales actually did not keep “away from affairs of the state” (ἀπεχόμενοι τῶν πολιτικῶν πράξεων, 286c). Diogenes Läertius writes that during the siege of his home city of Priene, Bias was said to have tricked the besieging forces by fattening a couple of mules, and impressing upon the enemy the idea that Priene was so prosperous that even the animals were fat.\textsuperscript{72} From the same source we learn of another story, in which Pittacus of Mitylene challenges Phrynon, the general in charge of the Athenian army, to combat. He defeats him by using a net which he hid behind his shield.\textsuperscript{73} About Thales, we have even more intriguing stories, from different sources. Aristotle relates a story about Thales using his knowledge of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{71} Nails, \textit{The People of Plato}, 26.
\bibitem{72} Diogenes Läertius, \textit{Lives}, 44.
\bibitem{73} Diogenes Läertius, \textit{Lives}, 74.
\end{thebibliography}
meteorology to predict a rich harvest of olives; he invested in several cheap presses, and eventually made a fortune. This was said to be evidence of a philosopher’s ability to wield practical wisdom and become rich, should he wish to do it.\textsuperscript{74} He was not inferior to Hippias in moneymaking. From Herodotus we read that both Bias and Thales were involved in Ionian politics.\textsuperscript{75}

We cannot know whether Socrates and Hippias knew of the same stories recounted in Herodotus’ \textit{Histories}, much less Diogenes Läertius’ \textit{Lives}, but it would not be a stretch to say that, for the common Greek in Socrates’s day, the eminence of the Seven Sages came in part because of impressive feats that they had accomplished on behalf of their respective cities. The significance of this apparent inaccuracy on Socrates’s part, and Hippias’s agreement with it, is unclear. But we can at least see that the Socrates of the \textit{Hippias Major}, like Hippias, differs in character and lifestyle from what we read about Thales, Bias, and Pittacus in the few sources that we have. We could guess, perhaps, that Socrates here feeds Hippias with misleading information on purpose, as a test of his wisdom—a test Hippias fails.\textsuperscript{76}

But it is the differences between Hippias and Socrates which fuel their dialogue, much more than their own respective differences with the ancients. Given all the biographical differences cited above, we can now turn to the question of understanding Hippias’s wisdom, and

\textsuperscript{74} Aristotle, \textit{Politics}, 1258b39.

\textsuperscript{75} “He [Bias] proposed that the Ionians should pool their resources, set sail for Sardo, and then found a single city for all Ionians… This proposal by Bias of Priene was made to the Ionians after their defeat, but another good proposal had been put to them, even before the conquest of Ionia, by Thales of Miletus, a man originally of Phoenician heritage. He suggested that the Ionians should establish a single governmental council, and that it should be in Teos (because Teos is centrally located in Ionia), and that all the other towns should be regarded effectively as demes” (\textit{Histories}, 1.170). Herodotus, \textit{Histories}, Carolyn Dewald and Robin Waterfield trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 74-75.

\textsuperscript{76} In an article dealing with the passage in 281c, David Sider argues that the words “Pittacus and Bias” should simply be deleted from the text, because they were almost beyond a doubt the addition of a later scribe. Sider writes, “I do not believe that there was anyone in the fifth or fourth centuries who could have believed that Bias and Pittacus were apolitical” (181) including Hippias, Socrates, and Plato, and that “Apart from the passage under discussion, there is no ancient testimony of any date which classes these two with the notorious stargazers like Thales, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, etc.” (182). See David Sider, “The Apolitical Life: Plato, \textit{Hippias Maior}, 281c,” \textit{L’Antiquité Classique} 26 (1977): 180-183.
its link to the question of beauty. Ugly, apolitical, and poor, Socrates is intrigued by both the material success of the beautiful, political, and rich Hippias. Socrates wants to know the content of Hippias’s wisdom—τὴν τῶν σοφιστῶν τέχνην.

One crucial aspect of Hippias’s wisdom is that it justifies itself, and gives evidence of its efficacy, by earning Hippias money. Socrates will inquire whether this valuable, desirable thing—money—has a bearing on another valuable, desirable thing, virtue (ἀρετή). This juxtaposition of two valuable objects is the starting point of the dialectical confrontation between philosophy and sophistry which endures throughout the dialogue. Following this starting point step by step, we can learn the differences between Hippias and Socrates at their deepest, that is, philosophical, level.

The first thing which the text tells us about Hippias’s wisdom is that it earns him money. Socrates is the first to mention this (281c), and Hippias agrees (281d). Socrates then praises the sophists Gorgias, Prodicus, and Protagoras (282b-282d), who have also made a lot of money, right after telling Hippias, “You’re putting beautiful thoughts in beautiful words” (282b). Hippias responds with the story about the amount of money he made in Sicily and Inycum (282e). Socrates continues to praise him and attack the ancients. He concludes, “The mark of being wise, I see, is when someone makes the most money” (283b). At this juncture, however, Socrates introduces the topic of virtue into the discussion. Socrates introduces the theme virtue by first inquiring where Hippias has made the most money. “Tell me this: from which of the cities you visit did you make the most money? From Sparta, obviously, where you visited most often” (283b). Hippias responds that he has never made any money in Sparta. Socrates is amazed by this response, and introduces the word, virtue, without any immediately apparent connection to

77 Of course, in a deeper sense, Socrates is political: he cares for the polis as a philosopher. But here we are using the most conventional meaning of “political” – that is, directly involved with the affairs of state.
anything said before: “Tell me, isn’t the wisdom you have the sort that makes those who study and learn it stronger in virtue?” (283c). Hippias agrees: “Very much so, Socrates.” All of a sudden, Hippias has agreed with Socrates that his wisdom, his art of sophistry, makes more than money: it makes people virtuous.

After introducing virtue into the discussion, Socrates and Hippias also agree that the law of a city should be in harmony with it, i.e., that law should reflect what is good for citizens. Spartan law forbids “foreign education” (ξενικὴν παίδευσιν, 282c4). Socrates is able to convince Hippias that law, properly understood, is something that makes people good (284d), and that therefore “the Spartans are breaking the law” (285b). Bad law is not law at all. Woodruff writes that Hippias only agrees because, for him, this discussion with Socrates is meaningless, because Hippias does not believe in the value of philosophy.78 Hippias does seem to be able to teach in Sparta anyway, albeit probably for free. Socrates continues: “So we find the Spartans to be lawbreakers, and that on the most important issue, though they appear to be most lawful. So when they applaud you, really, Hippias, and enjoy your speech, what sort of things have they heard?” (285b-285c). With this question, we have moved from virtue to the specific subjects which Hippias teaches.

Hippias is unique among sophists for his expertise in astronomy and arithmetic, among other sciences.79 Socrates asks Hippias (285b-285e) whether the Spartans prefer astronomy (τὰ ἀστρα τε καὶ τὰ οὐράνια πάθη, “things about stars and movements in the sky”), geometry (γεωμετρίας), arithmetic (λογισμῶν), or poetry and music (τε γραμμάτων δυνάμεως καὶ

78 Woodruff, Hippias Major, 128-129.
79 Nails, “Hippias,” 168. This passage from Plato’s Protagoras, where Protagoras explains the substance of his art, also supports the claim that Hippias was different from the other sophists with regard to his knowledge of the sciences: “‘The others abuse young men, steering them back again, against their will, into subjects the likes of which they have escaped from at school, teaching them arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music, and poetry’ – at this point he gave Hippias a significant look – ‘but if he comes to me he will learn only what he has come for’” (318e), from Plato, Protagoras, trans. Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 13.
συλλαβῶν καὶ ρυθμῶν καὶ ἁρμονιῶν, “the functions of letters, syllables, rhythms, and harmonies”), and Hippias answers for each that the Spartans are too dense to understand or care about any of those lofty fields of knowledge (about geometry, for example, Hippias retorts that, among the Spartans, “Many of them can’t, even, well, count” [285c]). But he is proud to be knowledgeable about many subjects. His versatility is good for business.

An interesting contrast to Hippias’s attitude toward his own knowledge of the sciences is found in the Republic. The list of sciences discussed by Hippias and Socrates—astronomy, arithmetic, poetry, music—is not random. It is the same that is discussed in Book VII of the Republic. In that book, the task of developing a plan of education for the rulers of the ideal city leads to a discussion of the nature of dialectic. Such rulers would have to be lovers of philosophy, and would have to make “that ascent to what is which we shall truly affirm to be philosophy” (521b12-13). The Socrates of the Republic wants to know “in what way such men will come into being” (521b6-7), and “what studies have such a power” (521d) to make men lovers of wisdom. Glaucon and Socrates are seeking a course of study which would “by nature lead to intellection” and “draw men toward being” (523a1-3). In other words, they are seeking to make their rulers lovers of the unchanging intelligible realm, even though they (the rulers) will have to deal with the everyday world of politics—the world of coming to be and passing away—on a daily basis. Music (μουσική, 522a), calculation (λογίζεσθαί τε καὶ ἀριθμεῖν, 522a), geometry (γεωμετρίας, 526d), and harmony (ἁρμονίας, 531a), are discussed and affirmed as sciences that could help with this task. Astronomy is rejected for being a science which leads us to look—ironically—“downward” (529a8) toward the visible and not upwards toward “what is and is invisible” (529b4-5). The capstone of this education is “an overview which reveals the

80 Woodruff notes that similar lists appear in the Protagoras 318e and Gorgias 447c, but he does not make the connection with the Republic VII. See Woodruff, Hippias Major, 42. All translations from the Republic are from Plato, the Republic, Allan Bloom, trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
kinship of these studies with one another and with the nature of that which is” (537c1-3). The value of these sciences lies in their relation to their aid in fulfilling the task of leading mean to the unchanging being which is the Good.

The contrast between the way these sciences are discussed in the Republic and in the Hippias Major is instructive. In the latter, Hippias knows these sciences, but does not seem to care about their ultimate purpose, which is to contribute to knowledge of reality—that is, to philosophy. To be sure, nothing in the Hippias Major indicates that Hippias does not actually know astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, poetry, and music. But Hippias does not place those sciences in any specific order or scheme which contributes to an overall philosophical worldview, the way the Socrates of the Republic does. These sciences do not mean as much to Hippias as they do to the Socrates of the Republic. Instead, Hippias puts his knowledge of these sciences to use; he makes money off it.81 He is also quite ready to drop these sciences if they do not lend themselves to making money—if they are not, in other words, useful. The only thing that the Spartans do enjoy hearing from Hippias, and the only topic they seem to be able to understand, is “the genealogies of heroes and men… and the settlements (how cities were founded in ancient times), and in a word all ancient history—that’s what they most love to hear about. So because of them I have been forced to learn up on all such things and to study them thoroughly” (285e). Hippias is lettered in many things, but also capable of pursuing—for the sake of his audience, such as the Spartans—what we would today call professional development.

81 Gene Fendt seems to be making an argument along the same lines about this section of the Hippias Major, when he argues that the Spartans understand education to consist of “the practice of the communal virtues,” which is something that a foreigner like Hippias, who is not part of the community, cannot teach the Spartans. Hippias, instead, merely imparts information, which Fendt deems “valueless” (94), and is mostly out for money. However, I am not sure I would go so far as to say that Hippias is the dead white male at the secret heart of postmodern multicultural wen-based education” (95). See Gene Fendt, “Hippias Major, Version 1.0: Software for Post-Colonial, Multicultural Technology Systems,” Journal of Philosophy of Education 37 (2003): 89-99.
Here we see too that Hippias makes use of pleasure, and that he distinguishes pleasure from beauty. Hippias’s learning may be deep and wide ranging, but it is his delivery or the action of teaching which gains him much (if not most) of his fame. His teaching is, in a sense, *mellifluous*. It sounds good, and it gives pleasure. This is at least one reason why the Spartans enjoy hearing about those “genealogies of heroes and men.” (Another reason would probably be that the militaristic Spartans enjoy hearing about heroic deeds.) Yet Hippias distinguishes pleasure from “τὸ καλόν.” Socrates is the one who first makes this observation: “the Spartans enjoy you, predictably, because you know a lot of things, and they use you the way children use old ladies, to tell stories pleasantly (ἡδέως)” (286a). Hippias agrees, but adds: “Yes—and, good lord, actually about beautiful activities, Socrates.” The stories may be pleasurable to hear, but they are not about just any activities. They are about *beautiful* activities. Moreover, his speech is not only pleasurable, but beautiful: “Just now I made a great impression there speaking about the activities a young man should take up. I have a speech about that I put together really beautifully, and I put the words particularly well” (286a). To have put words well together is to have made them beautiful in their arrangement. David Sider reads this statement ironically, in part based on the fact that Hippias is reputed to have written a book titled the *Synagogê*, a hodge-podge of writings from other sources collected together by Hippias to form a dubious (and ugly) whole.  

---

82 Notice too that in this section of the *Republic*, a distinction is made between speeches which are “tales” and those which are “of a truer sort” (522a).

83 I have slightly altered Woodruff’s translation of ἡδέως to reflect that the word used is an adverb.

84 “In the case of the *Hippias Major*, where both the first and the last attempts to define τὸ καλὸν are essentially esthetic, and where the last definition concerns the harmonious relationship between parts and individuals, it would be foolish to refuse even to consider the possible relevance of Hippias’s introduction to (probably) his *Synagogê*: ‘It may be that some of this has been said by Orpheus, some briefly by Hesiod, some by Homer, and some by the rest of the poets; and some by prose writers both Greek and foreign. What I have done is to collect from all these writers the most important material of a like sort, and so will here produce a new and composite logos’ (B 6 DK). Since Clement quotes this valuable fragment to demonstrate what he takes to be a particularly egregious example of Greek plagiarism, it seems reasonable to suppose that the first readers of *Hippias Major* came to the dialogue not only knowing that Hippias’s writings (the *Synagogê* for sure, and of course all of his various published lists) were clearly composite in nature, but that he was also proud of them, claiming that thanks to his artistic arrangement of like with like the work was now ‘new’ and hence his.” David Sider, Review of *Hippias Major: An Interpretation* by Ivor
Sider’s interpretation is compelling, but we must also note that Nails argues that the Synagogê was probably written by a different Hippias.\(^5\) Regardless, the statement shows that Hippias is concerned with beauty, and that beauty is an important value in his profession as a sophist.

At this juncture in the dialogue, the beautiful emerges as a value with ambiguous meaning, distinct from pleasure, but not necessarily associated with goodness. As we saw above, Hippias refers to his moneymaking prowess as beautiful (282d). Socrates has referred to Hippias’s knowledge of sciences as beautiful (285c). Here we see Hippias refer to activities as beautiful. Presumably, these activities are virtuous ones. But Hippias has subtly turned away from the discussion of virtue. He tells Socrates that he will recite a speech to the Spartans in which Nestor gives advice to the younger Neoptolemus concerning “what activities are beautiful.” These activities are not beautiful because they make the young virtuous, but because they would make “someone most famous if he adopted them while young” (286b). These activities are taught by the elder Nestor along with some “beautiful customs” (286b). Hippias uses “beautiful” to qualify whatever it is that he likes—money or fame or customs. Socrates, it can be assumed, realizes this, and this is one of the reasons for redirecting his conversation with Hippias toward a discussion about the beautiful itself.

It is this juncture which Socrates believes to be the opportune moment to ask the question about the beautiful. If we retrace the steps which have lead us here, we can see that the question is born out of the contrast and clash between the two ways of life represented by each character, and Socrates’s philosophical eros for the good. Socrates engages Hippias’s claims to wisdom by

---


engaging him in dialectic about the relationship between sophistry and virtue. As we have seen, Hippias dodges this problem, and then continues to speak about his worldly successes, in particular by pointing out the beauty of his speeches and of those he counts as his disciples.

Motivated by Hippias’s own claim to knowledge about the good life and the validity of the technique of sophistry for acquiring it, Socrates questions him about the word which Hippias uses to indicate the desirability and value of his preferences (for money and fame) and of his glamorous lifestyle. It is, in other words, the term of praise which Hippias employs. This word is “the beautiful.” The two men will turn to discuss a philosophical question.

This philosophical question is born of an aporia Socrates claims to have recently come across in conversation with a friend. In fact, it is an aporia which Hippias is experiencing at this very moment, though he himself does not admit to it. An unnamed friend has posed the question to Socrates recently, a friend who “got me badly stuck when I was finding fault with parts of some speeches for being foul, and praising other parts as beautiful” (286d). The literary device of the unnamed, absent friend has much rhetorical depth. One of its functions is perhaps as a way of defusing the tension of the dialogue. It may also serve a pedagogical function, as a foil for Socrates and a model for Hippias. Before his absent friend’s questioning, Socrates models a proper philosophical attitude for Hippias. Hippias is not a philosopher. He is merely entertained by the question of the beautiful, and is willing to follow Socrates’s lead in attempting to answer it. The question, in its first expression in the dialogue, is stated as follows by the unnamed friend: “how do you know what sorts of things are beautiful and foul? Look, would you be able to say what the beautiful is?” (286d). Thus we see the question cast as concerning the ability to

86 For more on this peculiar literary device, which appears nowhere else in Plato, see Halsten Olson, “Socrates Talks to Himself in Plato’s Hippias Major,” Ancient Philosophy 20 (2000): 265-287. It is presumed that this unmentioned character is a fictitious portrayal of Socrates himself, as he will refer to him as “Sophroniscus’s son” toward the end of the dialogue (298b). I will reflect upon this device more in Chapter Five.
properly praise a speech, something which Hippias has already claimed to be able to do. But if Hippias truly knows what makes a speech beautiful, he must know at least something about the nature of the beautiful itself. This would also be true of Socrates, who has already used the word “beautiful” as a modifier for various things, including Hippias himself in the first line of the dialogue. Both Hippias and Socrates have primordial, practical knowledge of the beautiful. But Socrates believes that in order to justify the judgments made using the term, a deeper understanding of it is required.\(^{87}\) Moreover, Hippias’s presumption that he can answer the question without much trouble (286e) means that Hippias believes he somehow “controls” the beautiful, that is, that the beautiful can always be put to use for his sophistical art, for the sake of making money, and that it does not point to something beyond his own immediate advantage—for example, to the good as an ideal which lies beyond Hippias’s interests as he understands them. Socrates, in posing the question, will subsequently show that Hippias’s claims to expertise about the beautiful are dubious at best, and that the truth of the matter is that the beautiful itself, which causes beings to become beautiful, is also good, and therefore admits of a standard beyond the manipulative, rhetorical persuasion practiced by the sophists. Thus we see that, out of the contrasting lives of Hippias and Socrates, and through a Socratic inquiry into Hippias’s life based upon τὴν τῶν σοφιστῶν τέχνην, we have arrived at an inquiry into τὸ καλὸν.

**Socrates’s Philosophical Eros**

Having looked at the dialectical path which has taken Socrates and Hippias to the question of what the beautiful is, we can now examine the erotic structure of Socrates’s engagement with Hippias, and the way Socrates’s philosophical *eros* accounts for the birth of the

---

\(^{87}\) My analysis here is based on the article by Jacques Antoine Duvoisin, “The Rhetoric of Authenticity in Plato’s *Hippias Major,*” *Arethusa* 29.3 (1996): 363-388. As Duvoisin puts it, “the question ‘what is the beautiful’ arises from, and terminates in, an *aporia* concerning the possibility of praise” (367).
question of the beautiful. I will focus on two fundamental aspects of Socrates’s philosophizing in the *Hippias Major*, both of which have an erotic structure. First, there is Socrates’s interrogative stance, which manifests itself in ceaseless questioning, and which is essential to the way he engages Hippias. Second is Socrates’s interest in the good, which emerges during the discussion about law and virtue in Sparta, and which re-emerges later in the dialogue.

*The Interrogative Stance*

Socrates’s engagement with Hippias is conducted from an *interrogative* stance, which is the stance taken by a person who possesses philosophical *eros*. This stance consists of two parts, an acknowledgement of *lack*, and also the possession of an underlying *noetic insight* which makes the awareness of a lack possible. This interrogative structure reflects the structure of *eros* that we find in various passages in the * Symposium*. For example, Diotima calls *eros* the offspring of “poverty and plenty” (203c-e). In his engagement with Hippias, we see that Socrates both admits of a lack (“poverty”), and also possesses the required underlying noetic insight (“plenty”). (We might also consider the nature of Hippias’s own “stance” before the beautiful. Since it is characterized primarily by the goal of possessing and using beautiful beings for one’s own advantage, we might call his stance “utilitarian.”)

Socrates expresses his lack of knowledge when he makes an avowal of ignorance about the beautiful (286d). As the preceding section shows, this avowal of ignorance is also the recognition of an *aporia* about praising speeches as beautiful, an *aporia* which both Hippias and Socrates encounter, though only Socrates admits to having encountered it. Socrates starts from the notion that Hippias is “beautiful and wise” (281a), and his subsequent questioning of Hippias

---

reveals that much of what Hippias claims about the art of sophistry and its superiority as a way of life hinges on knowledge about the beautiful. In order to obtain knowledge about the beautiful, and in order to test Hippias’s claims to knowledge, Socrates assumes the interrogative stance, first by admitting to a lack. Moreover, the fact that questioning, interrogation, and dialectic are Socrates’s preferred methods of addressing this lack shows that Socrates does not only begin with a lack, but that his subsequent actions also express this lack. Questioning can only be done from the position of intellectual humility: Unless I am making a rhetorical move of some sort, whenever I ask a question in a philosophical discussion, I perforce admit that I don’t know its answer.89

Socrates’s sense of lack becomes more evident when we consider its contrast to Hippias’s comparatively arrogant behavior. Hippias claims to be wise; for him, the question about the beautiful “is not large” (287b). He is a speech-giver. He is known as a politician and sophist primarily for the beautiful speeches he gives, which can be about many different topics. Moreover, he is able to adjust the content of his speech in order to suit the interests of his audience (as he does with the Spartans). In his actions, Hippias is the exact opposite of the questioning, erotic Socrates. Socrates wants to know about Hippias’s wisdom, and he does not make big speeches. He is the driver of dialogue between himself and Hippias only because he

89 Gordon has done a lot of work to show how Socrates’s claim to erotic expertise and his claim to ignorance are in harmony with each other. “Socrates’s knowledge of erotic matters can be seen in his unrivaled capabilities in philosophical questioning. He understands the nature of the desirous searching for fulfillment, of the desire to reach beyond oneself, and of openness. Questioning is all of that. We are thus compelled to see that we encounter an erotic and eroticized Socrates in the dialogues much more frequently than we had supposed. Every time Socrates engages in question and answer, and especially every time he exhorts others to do so with him, he is displaying his erotic know-how and engaging in erotic activity.” Gordon, Plato’s Erotic World, 66. Roochnik has similar thoughts about the erotic nature of questioning: “The question is the animating force in philosophy, for it is the most erotic form of discourse with a logic all its own. To question is to seek an answer. Its being posed implies the answer is not possessed, not known, by the questioner. The questioner, however, does know that he does not know the answer, which is why he chooses to ask the question. Furthermore, the question assumes that an answer is desirable and, in some sense, possible. The question thus puts the questioner in a position in-between knowledge and ignorance. (Eros itself is described as being in-between the mortal and immortal at [Symposium] 202e).” David Roochnik, “The Erotics of Philosophical Discourse.” History of Philosophy Quarterly 4 (1987): 127.
has questions he wants answered. On the other hand, Hippias is an inert being, who would not be engaging in questioning if it wasn’t for Socrates. Hippias participates in Socrates’s philosophical quest, but with little enthusiasm.⁹⁰

At this point we have to describe the second part of the interrogative stance, which is the noetic insight that makes an awareness of lack possible. By this, I mean only that in order for it to be possible for anyone to pose the question, “What is the beautiful?”, one has to have a preliminary sense of the “beautiful.” This is, of course, a truth that Plato often deals with.⁹¹

Within the context of the *Hippias Major*, this noetic insight begins the normal, everyday acquaintance with the beautiful that both Hippias and Socrates share, and which is expressed in the way both men use the term. But the noetic insight also has to be of beauty as such, that is, of

---

⁹⁰ Ronald Polansky describes Hippias’s participation in Socrates’s philosophical inquiry in this way: “Admittedly Hippias is not especially enthusiastic (see, for example, 297b7-8), but there is little reason to think that he is saying anything other than what he believes to be the best answer and nearly none that he is doing this because he understands the futility of trying to answer Socrates.” See Polansky, “Reading Plato,” 200-209. This is argued in response to Woodruff, who writes: “He [Hippias] is not trying to answer the questions, he is trying to shut him [Socrates] up.” Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 129. Woodruff’s overall argument is that Hippias is aware of the “futility” of Socratic inquiry, which often ends in *aporia*. Hippias is somehow trying to sabotage the dialogue. I concur with Polansky in saying that there is not enough textual evidence to make such a strong claim about Hippias. Indeed, the mere fact that Hippias submits three possible definitions of the beautiful for discussion, and also sticks around to weigh the merits of Socrates’s four definitions of his own, indicates in the very least that Hippias is a willing participant of the philosophical venture. This does not mean, however, that he “believes” in philosophy as Socrates does, or that he understands what Socrates is trying to achieve with it. Indeed, if we can say anything at all about Hippias, it’s that his own way of living life as a sophist is dissimilar from Socrates in one crucial way: it is less about questioning than about making speeches and negotiating interests. It is noteworthy that Woodruff does not address this issue in his “Reply to Ronald Polansky,” in *Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings*. Ed. Charles Griswold (New York: Routledge, 1988), 210-214.

⁹¹ On Plato’s approach to the problem of preliminary knowledge, see Kelley L. Ross, “Non-Intuitive Immediate Knowledge,” *Ratio* 29 (1987): 163-179. Ross writes that the path from opinion to knowledge can only be secured if we posit (as he believes Plato does), a baseline of “non-intuitive” yet “immediate” knowledge against which any truth claims are measured. “The paradoxical heart of Platonic philosophy, then, is the thesis that knowledge of being and value is somehow obscurely present to everyone, even when explicitly held beliefs may contradict it” (169). I follow Ross to the following extent: I believe both Hippias and Socrates share a primordial knowledge of beauty, against which every purported definition of “the beautiful itself” is judged. Moreover, I call this knowledge *noesis* or noetic insight, because it is an incomplete insight into the formal characteristics of beauty. In calling it such, I am following Hyland’s notion of the “archaic *noesis*”: “the insight into what the matter for thought is, into how to begin our speaking.” See Drew Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 182. Woodruff asserts that Socrates and Hippias both claim to have some preliminary sense of what τὸ καλὸν means before they can actually discuss its essence. See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 138-140.
beauty as a formal structure (though not, necessarily, of a Form).\textsuperscript{92} This insight is made when Socrates convinces Hippias that the beautiful itself “is something” (ἔστι τι τοῦτο, 287c-d). This insight is the foundation of every other insight into the beautiful itself, e.g., that it causes a being to become beautiful when added (289d), that it causes a being to be, and not merely appear, to be beautiful (294a), and that it itself is good (297c). This founding insight is crucial, because it is the bit of “plenty” which makes Socrates aware of his lack of knowledge. It is the starting point for the new discussion which will test Hippias’s claims to comprehensive, definitional knowledge about the beautiful and, by doing so, also test the value of his way of life.

Two things need to be clarified with respect to this notion of noetic insight. The first is that there is no claim made in the dialogue about the comprehensive nature of this original noetic insight, nor even about the possibility building upon this original insight in order to obtain comprehensive, discursive knowledge about the nature of the beautiful. Socrates, in assuming an interrogative stance, is prepared to accept a poverty of knowledge, a degree of ignorance always standing alongside his partial knowledge about the beautiful. It is Hippias, on the other hand, who claims that the question isn’t difficult (287b).\textsuperscript{93} The second thing to clarify is that this original insight itself is not propositional or discursive, meaning that it cannot be put into words. It is a sort of flash or intuition that “the beautiful itself is something,” something not reducible to

\textsuperscript{92} I follow Woodruff and Hyland on the issue of the presence of the Forms in the Hippias Major: I don’t believe they appear in the dialogue. The issue will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{93} As Francisco Gonzalez puts it, “if one knows x in the way in which Socrates’s interlocutors claim to know it, that is, in a way that is final, dogmatic, and in no need of philosophical inquiry, then one should be able to define exactly what x is.” See Francisco J. Gonzalez, Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato’s Practice of Philosophical Inquiry (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 27. Thus, Hippias’s confidence in his ability to answer Socrates’s question is not a sign of Hippias’s trust in the power of dialectical inquiry, but rather an implicit dogmatic assumption about the knowledge that comes with being a sophist.
its manifestation in particular beautiful objects. While many things can be said of the beautiful itself, words cannot comprehensively encompass what the beautiful itself is.\footnote{Here I follow Hyland, who claims that the beautiful in the \textit{Hippias Major} lies beyond the scope of discursive knowledge. See the first chapter of Hyland, \textit{Plato and the Question of Beauty}. I am also building upon a non-discursive, non-propositional understanding of \textit{noesis}, as for example articulated here by Gordon: “non-discursive intuition, insight, or instantaneous ‘seeing’” (Gordon, \textit{Plato’s Erotic World}, 30). See also Travis Butler who, while arguing for a propositionalist account of Platonic epistemology, nevertheless finds it inevitable to include an original, founding insight which precedes dialectic: “… true beliefs about objects presuppose the kind of contact or ‘fixing on’ at issue. The fact that we can form true beliefs about an object seems more like part of the explanandum rather than an acceptable explanans” (25). Butler is ambiguous as to whether this “fixing on” is a noetic insight; he argues for the superiority of \textit{episteme} in Platonic thought (2). See Travis Butler, “Identity and Infallibility in Plato’s Epistemology,” \textit{Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science} 39 (2006), 1-25. A useful account of the different types of knowledge in Plato, with particular attention paid to “nonpropositional insight,” is found in Francisco J. Gonzalez, “Self-Knowledge, Practical Knowledge, and Insight: Plato’s Dialectic and the Dialogue Form,” in \textit{The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies}, ed. Francisco J. Gonzalez (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 155-187. My views here are perhaps most distant from the account of \textit{noesis} made by W. W. Tait, who argues (if I read him correctly) that noetic claims are claims about primary, foundational truths, see W. W. Tait, “Noesis: Plato on Exact Science,” in \textit{Reading Natural Philosophy: Essays in the History and Philosophy of Science and Mathematics in Honor Howard Stein on His 70th Birthday}, ed. David Malament (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2002), 11-31. But even Tait notes that if noetic insight is not drawn from empirical examples: “because the empirical examples do not adequately represent the structure” (19). Thus the primary truth which is the object of \textit{noesis} in some important way transcends experience, and this is something that Socrates also seems to believe about the \textit{eidos} of the beautiful in the \textit{Hippias Major}.}{94}

\textit{Socrates’s Interest in the Good}

It is not only Socrates’s interrogative stance which gives evidence of the central importance of \textit{eros} in the search for the “beautiful itself” in the \textit{Hippias Major}. Hippias is erotic as well, after all, by virtue of being a human person.\footnote{Pace Sweet, who claims that “despite the fact that Hippias begins his definitions with a beautiful body, just as Diotima begins her account of the ascent through stages of ‘beautiful’ with love of a beautiful body (\textit{Symposium} 210a-b), Hippias has no \textit{eros} himself.” Sweet, “On the Greater Hippias,” 352-353. Rather, what Hippias lacks is \textit{philosophical eros}, that is, \textit{eros} for the good. I believe that \textit{eros}, as depicted in the \textit{Phaedrus} and \textit{Symposium}, is an intrinsic property of human life itself, and not something that only philosophers possess. The distinction lies in that philosophers live their \textit{eros} in a different way, as I will show below.}{95} Hippias experiences lack and desire, and beautiful things please him. But Socrates lives his \textit{eros} with an awareness of, and desire for, the good. He does not live his \textit{eros} like Hippias does, that is, with an eye toward what is useful or remunerative, for what is “good \textit{for me}.” Rather, the \textit{Hippias Major} gives us evidence that Socrates possesses an interest in goodness as it is in itself. We see this first when Socrates begins to discuss virtue, in contrast with money (283b-e). We see it later on when Socrates argues that
the concept of utility only makes sense when it is associated with the good, that is, when it is useful for achieving some good (296d-e). We see it also when Socrates distinguishes lower pleasures from “beneficial pleasure” (303e). As we shall see in subsequent chapters, this abiding interest in the good, which I call “eros for the good,” or “philosophical eros,” plays a crucial role in conditioning the direction and the structure of Socrates’s engagement with Hippias and his inquiry into “the beautiful itself.” The interest in the good forces Socrates to move beyond his experience in order to uncover what a thing is in itself, including what the beautiful is in itself. Indeed, Socrates’s later claim (which Hippias shares) that the beautiful is good, and the good beautiful (297c) shows that Socrates sees a deep kinship between philosophical eros and the beautiful itself (a relationship we will examine in Chapter Four). But already at this early stage, we see that Socrates’s interest in the good conditions the types of questions he asks Hippias in the discussion which precedes the question of the beautiful. Moreover, Socrates’s question about the beautiful grows out of his concern to test whether Hippias, as a sophist, is truly “beautiful and wise,” because Hippias’s claims to wisdom include the ability to make and teach how to make “beautiful speeches.”

Socrates’s engagement with Hippias is thoroughly erotic, and it cannot be understood as a formal inquiry into a definition. His engagement is intelligible only within the context of an erotic quest for the good. It is this erotic quest which gives birth to the interrogative stance, and which conditions his subsequent questioning of Hippias. The interest in the good requires, as it were, an interrogative stance, because whoever desires the good, admits to lacking the good, and admits to a need to reach out and conform one’s self to the good. To desire the good means that I

---

96 My interpretation of this passage follows Woodruff’s: “Since the fine is good and the good fine (297c), when Socrates asks after the fine he is seeking nothing less than the knowledge of good and evil, the foundation of justifiable praise and blame.” Woodruff, Hippias Major, 141. Woodruff takes this passage to be of central importance to understand the dialogue. He claims that it provides the main motivation for Socrates’s interest in the beautiful.
don’t create the good, and the interrogative stance is the proper posture to take before something that one does not create, but rather must seek out. Moreover, the eros for the good that characterizes philosophical eros is also (as we shall see in Chapter Four) related to the beautiful insofar as the beautiful is good, and therefore desired by the philosopher.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to show that the question, “‘Would you be able to say what the beautiful is?’” (ἔχοις ἂν εἰπεῖν τί ἐστι τὸ καλὸν;, 286d), is born out of philosophical eros. Both Hippias and Socrates experience beautiful beings, and both Hippias and Socrates are, properly speaking, erotic (insofar as they are human beings). But only Socrates, as a philosopher, poses the question of what the beautiful is in itself. In other words, it is because of philosophical eros, which manifests itself in the interrogative stance and interest for the good, that Socrates is able to take build upon his preliminary knowledge (the original noetic insight) into the beautiful, and pose a philosophical question about it. Already at this point we see then a special relationship between philosophical eros and the beautiful as it is in itself: only a philosopher is able to interrogate the beautiful, to ask what it is in itself.
Chapter Two

Dialectic and Ascent

In the previous chapter, I argued that Socrates’s engagement with Hippias has an erotic structure, and a philosophical question is the ultimate expression of this erotic structure. It is Socrates’s interrogative stance and his interest in the good that allow him to pose the question: “What is the beautiful?” In this chapter, I will show that Socrates’s philosophical *eros* continues to play a role even when Hippias is ostensibly determining the course of the dialogue. Hippias’s definitions of the beautiful all miss some aspect of beauty as it manifests itself in beings, and this, I will suggest, is because Hippias’s *eros* is not philosophical: it is not interested in the good above all things. Instead, in Socrates’s responses to Hippias’s definitions, we see philosophical *eros* at work: Socrates is always refining the question about the beautiful, and providing the discussion with a wider sense for the types of beautiful beings which exist in the world. Socrates, in other words, while searching for the “beautiful itself,” and engaging Hippias’s definitions, is simultaneously making an ascent, which in some way parallels Diotima’s ascent in the *Symposium*.97

The method employed in this chapter will be to perform an *explication de texte*: I will follow the course of the dialogue and comment the various claims, definitions, allusions, and references, as they appear in the unfolding of the drama. My commentary will attempt to bring to light the way in which philosophical *eros* conditions and guides the dialectical inquiry unfolding in the dialogue, leading the discussion to mirror Diotima’s ascent. Following this textual

97 In looking at the interplay between Hippias’s definition and Socrates’s critiques of those definitions, I am following the advice of Tarrant on reading the *Hippias Major*: “One cannot stop at observing that a definition is rejected; one must observe also why it is rejected.” See Harold A. S. Tarrant, “The *Hippias Major* and Socratic Theories of Pleasure,” in *The Socratic Movement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 115-116.
interpretation, I will present a synthetic view of Hippias’s answers and Socrates’s responses to them. This chapter has two main sections. The first is an exegesis of 286d-293d, which will look at the different ways eros manifests itself in Hippias’s exchange with Socrates. Following the text itself, I will divide the exegesis according to Hippias’s attempted definitions of the beautiful. In the second section I will look at the way Socrates speaks about the beauty of different types of beings, and see that Socrates’s open-ended, analogical way of speaking about beautiful beings corresponds with the type of qualified ascent that Hippias makes in the dialogue.

**Hippias’s Definitions and Socrates’s Responses**

*Girl, Maiden, or Virgin (286d-289c)*

Hippias and Socrates’s discussion of Hippias’s first definition of the beautiful, παρθένος καλὴ (287e), suggests two things about the relationship between desire and knowledge of the beautiful itself. The first is that Hippias’s inadequate definition of the beautiful corresponds to a particular type of desire, epithumia, the unreflecting (i.e., not rational) desire for immediate pleasure, which skews Hippias’s understanding of the beautiful, as evidenced by his flawed definition. Second, the discussion is suggestive of an ascent. Socrates’s engagement with Hippias, which in the previous chapter we saw is marked by philosophical eros, attempts to persuade Hippias into adopting a broader view of the types of beings that can be called beautiful, and therefore of what may constitute the beautiful itself. This broadening of horizons is a necessary consequence of the philosophical inquiry into the definition of beauty, which also
requires that Hippias broaden the purview of his attention and love, beyond both *epithumia* and *eros* for one particular body.  

Hippias’s first definition fails to meet the standards for a definition that he himself agrees to prior to making it, and the reason for this appears to be that Hippias has a bias for associating the beautiful with carnal desire, that is, with *epithumia*. After the question of the beautiful is posed by Socrates, Hippias quickly comes to an agreement with him about two things: that it is by the beautiful *itself* that beautiful objects are made beautiful, and that the beautiful itself is something (287c). However, Hippias does not appear to agree with Socrates as to what would qualify as a general term like “the beautiful.” In his first attempt at defining it, Hippias opts to name a particular body as his definition of it: παρθένος καλὴ (287e). Whether one renders it “a beautiful maiden,” “a beautiful virgin,” or “a beautiful girl,” the phrase evinces sexuality and desire.  

From the very start, Hippias reminds us that beauty is linked with desire, though the type of desire animating Hippias is different from that which animates Socrates. Socrates is directed by *eros* toward the truth; Hippias appears to be lusting after bodies. His first definition bespeaks *epithumia*, a desire for pleasure and bodies which is tied to the appetites and is unchecked—or unenhanced—by reason. The difference between *epithumia* and *eros* lies precisely in the presence of reason. Whatever their mythological origins, both *epithumia* and *eros* manifest themselves in a human soul as desire for possession. The difference between them lies in the capacity that *eros* has to differentiate between types of objects to desire, and in its ability to desire “higher” objects, like knowledge of the sciences or political justice, which are

---

98 On the connection between *eros* and noetic aspiration and reason, see Drew Hyland, “*Eros, Epithumia, and Philia in Plato,*” *Phronesis*, 13 (1968), 32-46. “Looking forward to the “ascent passage” of the *Symposium*, the charioteer image of the *Phaedrus*, and even the cave analogy of the *Republic*, we could well suspect that it will be some element of rationality which will accomplish this enhancement of *Eros*” (36).

99 Woodruff translates it as a “fine girl,” Lamb as “a beautiful maiden,” and Benardete prefers a “beautiful virgin.” “Maiden” has the advantage of including both “girl” and “virgin” in its meaning.
beyond the purview of *epithumia*, a type of desire defined as being for immediate pleasure. 100

Both Hippias’s first definition and his arrogant attitude toward positing a definition evoke the lower type of desire. *Epithumia*, however, can be converted into *eros* and, through further step, into philosophical *eros*, and this conversion is what Socrates attempts to effect through his engagement with Hippias. The conversion of *epithumia* comes through the intervention of reasoning (*logos*) and dialectic, which broaden a person’s observation and understanding of the world, and by doing so, expand the possible objects and types of desire that the person may have.

There are two ways Hippias’s first definition evokes *epithumia*. The first way is by inviting us to contemplate the human body as a *sexual* body. Hippias isn’t talking about a merely formal or—to use a modern word—“aesthetic” contemplation of a young maiden’s body. The sexual dimension of his definition should not be neglected. His answer is roguish and, perhaps, a little shocking: *You know what’s beautiful? A beautiful young girl, that’s what!* Socrates understands this, but he isn’t shocked. His unnamed friend, Socrates says, would respond to Hippias by citing other examples of beauty that aren’t young girls, and would thus show that Hippias’s definition isn’t comprehensive enough to be the answer they’re looking for. Socrates’s friend would say: “Isn’t a beautiful mare a beautiful thing? The god praised mares in his oracle”

100 Here I am once again following Hyland, “*Eros, Epithumia, and Philia,*” 42. “*Eros* and *ἐπιθυμία* both desire – this is where the overlap – yet the reasoning ability of which *eros* is capable makes it higher.” Gordon argues for a difference in kind, not degree, between *epithumia* and *eros*: “Nor is *eros* one of the appetites in Plato’s psychology, so it must be treated distinctly from *epithumia*. In short, *eros* signals the divine, *epithumia* does not…. The closest term to Plato’s road use of *eros* is ‘desire,’ though it is a particular kind of desire.” See Gordon, *Plato’s Erotic World*, 6. Gordon and Hyland agree that *epithumia* is not part of the same continuum of desire wherein one also finds *eros* and *philia*. The two might be in disagreement on the definition of *eros*, however: Gordon attempts to define *eros* without overt reference to the good, a position which I do not take here, because of the important role that the good plays in the *Hippias Major* (as will become most clear in Chapter Four.) My argument here does not require that I take a stance on the question of the ultimate, ontological relationship between *eros* and *epithumia*. My interest is only in how the two desires manifest themselves in the action of the dialogue in question, and how these desires condition the ability to obtain knowledge about the beautiful itself. For both Gordon and Hyland, under the generally accepted definition of *epithumia* as “desire, yearning, passion, appetite” (LSJ), *epithumia* is something distinct from the noetic aspiration that is characteristic of philosophical *eros*, and both are, in a certain sense, incompatible with each other, because a soul must turn away from *epithumia* in order to focus on higher desires. Crucially and also for both scholars, *epithumia* does not exclude the possibility of such aspiration taking root in a soul.
Already we see how Socrates immediately attempts to expand the purview of their discussion by talking about other examples of beauty. But the example that he cites is also rife with sexual humor, evidence that he understands Hippias’s tongue-in-cheek definition. Greek sexual humor often made use of horse imagery as a phallic symbol, and the word for “mare” puns with Hippias’s own name (ἵππος, Ἱππίας).\(^\text{101}\) Elis, Hippias’s city of origin, was also known for its race horses.\(^\text{102}\) Socrates’s pun has the double function of jabbing at Hippias while also broadening the philosophical horizon of their discussion, because there is more than one way that a mare can be beautiful. It may be a beautiful animal, that is, a beautiful specimen of the species. Or it may be a beautiful animal for riding. This latter sense of τὸ καλὸν is closer to “fine” (as in, a fine horse for riding) than what we usually call “beautiful” in English.\(^\text{103}\) The ambiguity is instructive. Socrates pushes Hippias to accept as beautiful those objects which have some sort of use for human beings. This pushing, this broadening of horizons, is a manifestation of eros. It can also be construed as an ascent, from the contemplation of one body to that of many bodies.

A second way that Hippias’s first definition evokes epithumia would have been more obvious to a reader in Plato’s time than to a reader in our own, as it has to do with the common cultural assumptions that Greeks made about young maidens. The word παρθένος, whether we render it maiden or girl or virgin, was used by the Greeks to denote a young woman during her prenuptial period—usually a moment of great sexual attractiveness. At that stage of her life, a Greek woman was considered to be both beautiful and wild, untamed as yet by a husband. As

\(^{101}\) For examples of horse imagery and Greek sexual humor, see K. Dover, Greek Homosexuality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1989, 58-59. J. Henderson describes the use of horses as phallic symbols in The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 126-127. Horse-riding and sexual intercourse are often linked in American humor as well. The observation that Socrates is punning on Hippias’s name I owe to Professor Fabrice Hadjadj of the Institut Européen d’Études Anthropologiques Philanthropos, in conversation.

\(^{102}\) Woodruff, Hippias Major, 70.

\(^{103}\) For an analysis of the ambiguities of τὸ καλὸν, see Chapter 1.
Pierre Brulé argues in *Women of Ancient Greece*: “The idea that in the parthenos lies hidden a wild animal which has not yet been subjected to the process of civilization corresponds well with the Greek’s conception of feminine evolution. The tamer of the wild female is the husband; it is by taking the parthenos into his home as his wife that he civilizes her.” Arguing the same point, Sue Blundell writes: “In ancient Greece it was commonly believed that females in general were prone to excessive and uncontrolled behavior, and that they were therefore badly in need of male guidance, provided first by their fathers and later by their husbands.” Thus not only does Hippias evoke epithumia by speaking lustfully about young maidens, but young maidens themselves were said by the Greeks to be in the throes of epithumia. A parallel becomes visible here. Only a husband would be able to tame a parthenos and bring her to full womanhood, that is, to get her to act more reasonably, according to the standards of civilization; only a philosopher is able to tame epithumia and convert it into eros. A husband, in essence, would love the young maiden with a love that is deeper than epithumia—that is, with eros, which in the *Symposium* is linked not only to philosophy but also childrearing. The husband’s role is analogous to that of the philosopher: to take the lusty, desirous person and educate her to love the truth.

It is not only Hippias’s definition that evokes epithumia. His self-assuredness and arrogance also speak of it. Hippias’s utters his first definition of the beautiful with complete confidence that it will resolve the discussion: “never will I be refuted” (287e). Socrates, by refuting Hippias, shows us that this confidence is unfounded. In fact, Hippias is not meeting the minimum Socratic requirement for philosophy, which is the admission of one’s ignorance. This

---


requirement is erotic in the sense that it is the admission of a lack of, and need for, knowledge. *Epithumia*, being non-rational and unreflective, does not admit to a poverty or lack; it is simply a vector of desire, an instinctive force. Philosophy, as an erotic endeavor, can only be born when it is first honest with itself about this lack. Yet Hippias’s brazen attitude does not admit to such a lack; he wants to show Socrates that the philosophical problem at hand isn’t much of a problem at all. He isn’t posing a hypothesis but attempting to bring the discussion to conclusion. His answer isn’t humble, because it doesn’t recognize a need.

It is in contrast and reacting to Hippias’s *epithumia* and his first definition of the beautiful that we begin to see Socrates’s philosophical *eros* at work. The difference between the respective attitudes toward knowledge of and desire for the beautiful itself that exists between Socrates and Hippias becomes most apparent in their respective attitudes toward the positing of hypotheses. If to hypothesize is, as Jill Gordon writes, “already to express one’s limitation and lack of knowledge, since it is an exercise that necessarily rests on conditional claims,” Hippias cannot be said to be hypothesizing, because his belief that his first answer will settle the matter is evidence that he does not recognize the conditionality of his claims. He is still in the throes of *epithumia*. *Epithumia* desires objects and stays transfixed by them; as a human drive, *epithumia* will not expand its purview towards philosophical contemplation until reason somehow enters into it and transforms it into *eros*. Socrates, on the other hand, suggests examples of beauty not as exhaustive definitions of the beautiful, but as examples which point to the ever-elusive meaning of “the beautiful itself.” He recognizes, in other words, their conditionality: the beautiful mare is an example of a beautiful being which will serve as a stepping stone toward a

---

fuller dialectical engagement with the question of what the beautiful itself may be. It is not a
definition which will end the conversation.

A latent possibility for such a fuller dialectical engagement exists in Hippias’s first
definition, and in this possibility we get another sense of Socrates’s philosophical *eros* at work.
By invoking the human body of a young maiden, Hippias (and the *Hippias Major*) stands in
continuity with the two other Platonic dialogues which take up the theme of the beautiful, the
*Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. All three dialogues have a human body as the primary way that
*eros* is awakened in a human soul: the *Phaedrus* speaks of a boy, and in the *Symposium*, Diotima
speaks about a human body. A phenomenological argument can be made that a human person’s
erotic desire for truth in all its forms does not appear fully-formed in his soul, but must be
awakened through sexual desire for a beautiful body. When we behold a beautiful body for the
first time, we become aware of our capacity for *eros*. Our lack of beauty and goodness cannot be
felt without first witnessing its possible fulfillment standing before us. The assumption
undergirding this argument is that the desire for another human body—*epithumia*—is connected,
somehow, to the desire for philosophical contemplation—the highest stage of *eros*. Both the
*Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* contain images of a person advancing beyond their initial
*epithumia*, and becoming fully erotic. Hippias, too, will make an advance, albeit a stilted one, in
spite of himself. His *epithumia* will become broadened by reason.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, 54 and 83. In the latter passage, Hyland underscores the fact
that Diotima uses the word “necessary” in her claim that we must begin to love by loving a body.
¹⁰⁹ There is some debate regarding the logic of Hippias’s first definition. The stakes of the debate do not have direct
bearing in our own search for the presence of *eros* in the *Hippias Major*. We note it here, however, because it does
illuminate the philosophical dynamic at play in this part of the dialogue. A common philosophical critique of
Hippias’s first answer is that it confuses the general and the particular – a confusion common in Plato’s so-called
definitional dialogues, for example, in *Euthyphro* 5d. Hyland is among the commentators to take this stance:
“Hippias immediately confuses this [Socrates’s question] with something that is beautiful” (Hyland, *Plato*, 13).
Another version of this argument is found in Dorothy Tarrant, *The Hippias Major Attributed to Plato; With
One could argue something slightly different about the ascent passage of the *Symposium*: that its first step is not one of *epithumia*, but already of *eros*. In other words, in order for a person to be a candidate for the ascent, he or she must already have moved beyond *epithumia*. The ascent is, properly speaking, the ascent of *eros*, not of *epithumia* and *eros*. The lover of a single body at the first step of Diotima’s ladder is already generating beautiful *logoi* about the body he or she loves. This capacity to generate *logos* indicates that the person standing at the first step of

Contradicting this claim, Nehamas points out that that type of confusion does not appear to be the case in the *Hippias Major*, given that Hippias has already understood – or at least, claimed to have understood – Socrates’s distinction between the beautiful and a beautiful thing in 287c. Hippias honestly seems to believe that an example of a beautiful thing satisfies Socrates’s friend’s question. Nehamas offers other instances in Greek literature (from *Antigone* and *Hippolytus*) where a particular object is said to encompass the whole definition of an idea. Nehamas argues that it is not plausible that Hippias was confused about Socrates’s question and also confused about the difference between a general term and a particular term, or that by which objects are made beautiful, and a beautiful object. Hippias was probably not a “naïve nominalist,” as he puts it. He takes Socrates’s question seriously, but his answer does not satisfy Socrates, who is in search of a different type of answer. Given this interpretation of Hippias’s first answer, Nehamas translates παρθένος καλὴ καλὸν differently from what is found in the Woodruff translation. Instead of “a fine girl is a fine thing,” which is Woodruff’s rendering of the phrase, Nehamas puts it as “Being a beautiful maiden is (what it is to be) beautiful,” adding the bracketed phrase. Hippias is not speaking about a specific beautiful maiden, but about being a beautiful maiden; he believes that this being somehow encompasses the whole of what it means to be beautiful, and it somehow gives a meaning to the idea of the beautiful. As Nehamas puts it, Hippias’s use of “beautiful” in his response “is not a bona fide general term, but … it has a peculiar, strong sense, close to what we would mean by the expression, ‘is to be beautiful.’” See Alexander Nehamas, “Confusing Universals and Particulars in Plato’s Early Dialogues,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 29 (1975): 287-306. (His discussion of the *Hippias Major* occurs on pages 297-303.)

Bernadete’s interpretation of the same passage is almost the same as Nehamas: “Hippias says *parthenos kale kalon*. The adjective is feminine, the predicate neuter; and, according to Hippias, *kalon* is the same whether it has or does not have the article. Hippias says that a beautiful virgin is the beautiful, and he means that whatever is beautiful is the beautiful.” See Benardete, xxv-xxvi.

Woodruff disagrees with Nehamas (and, by association, Benardete), arguing that while Hippias does understand the question, he does not want to participate in its discussion, because he finds philosophy to be a pointless exercise. Woodruff finds it more likely to be the case that Hippias shares a Gorgian belief in the non-existence of formal ideas, and for that reason focuses only on concrete objects. As a consequence of these metaphysical beliefs, the sophist Gorgias only believes in partial definitions, because “he does not believe there is any common being underlying the various uses of” a term, like beautiful, or virtue. Partial definitions are not actually definitions, and Gorgias does not actually attempt to do philosophy and discover definitions. Woodruff believes that this is the likely reasoning behind Hippias’s first answer to Socrates’s question. Hippias and Gorgias were, after all, fellow sophists (though this is a weak argument, given the evident diversity of philosophical views among the sophists). With this answer Hippias is probably trying to trivialize or mock Socrates’s attempt to do philosophy. Moreover, Socrates’s response and critique of Hippias’s first definition is to show that it is insufficient as a general, all-encompassing term; he does not address it as being the type of answer that Nehamas has in mind. See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 50-51.

Regardless of the stance that one takes on this question, however, the effects of *eros* on Hippias’s first answer is clear. Hippias initiates a philosophical discussion by speaking about one specific body, and Socrates – as the erotic element in the dialogue – prompts Hippias to expand his consideration and contemplation to a wider array of objects, and this to a greater sense of possibility as to what the nature of the beautiful might be. Regardless of whether Hippias is trying to shut Socrates down by sabotaging the discussion, or whether he is attempting to answer his question in a colloquial way, or whether he actually is a naïve nominalist, the effects of *eros* remain the same.
the ascent is already erotic, and not merely in the throes of *epithumia*. But even if we adopt his view of Diotima’s ascent, the parallels with the *Hippias Major* still hold. Hippias may be said to have been in the throes of *epithumia before* meeting Socrates. Upon meeting Socrates, Hippias is able to say, “The beautiful itself is a beautiful girl,” and this phrase constitutes the first of many *logoi* that he is able to utter about the beautiful. Thus Socrates is able to bring Hippias to the point of being able to speak about beauty, and in doing so he prepares him for a possible ascent.

Socrates’s rebuttal of his first definition will force Hippias to make concessions and to advance beyond his *epithumia*, even though he might not be fully aware that he is doing so. Hippias’s conversion is gradual and incomplete; we cannot say that, at any given point in the dialogue, Hippias becomes truly interested in a philosophical approach to the question of the beautiful. But at this stage, Socrates does get Hippias to accept three important claims: that the definition of the beautiful must include many different types of objects; that a hierarchy of beautiful objects exists and that, in this hierarchy, the gods are above human beings; and that the human person has a unique place as the spectator of, or witness to, the beautiful. The first two claims are made explicitly, and the third one is implied. In different ways, all three of these claims reflect or echo aspects of erotic desire. The expansion of Hippias’s attention toward a greater horizon of objects is linked to the rational component of *eros*, which does not allow us to contemplate merely one body but to move on to other and greater bodies and beings; the establishment of a hierarchy of beautiful beings dovetails with the claim that erotic desire ascends to ever greater manifestations of goodness; the human being, as an erotic seeker, has a special place as a witness to the beautiful, given that he is both desirous of it and witness to its existence in different forms.
With regard to the first claim, Socrates convinces Hippias to expand his consideration of beautiful bodies first by summoning the image of a beautiful mare, which we discussed above. After this example, he also discusses a beautiful lyre (λύρα καλή, 288c) and a beautiful pot (χύτρα καλή, 288c). One development in this part of the discussion is to nudge Hippias into an understanding of the beautiful that is more oriented towards human action and human needs. A lyre, more than a mare, becomes beautiful by being useful to and used by human beings. However, it may also be beautiful in other ways. A lyre may be beautiful because it produces beautiful music, or because it simply looks beautiful. A pot is similarly tied to human use. Sider points out that χύτρα simply means a pipkin, or a small earthenware pot. Socrates is not necessarily referring to the beautiful painted pottery we see in museums today. He is most likely referring to an object for everyday use in the kitchen. In fact, Socrates does not mention any beautiful images on the pot, but instead refers to its form and function: “If the pot should have been turned by a good potter, smooth and round and beautifully (καλῶς) fired, like some of those beautiful two-handled pots that hold six choes, very beautiful ones—if he’s asking about a pot like that, we have to agree it’s beautiful” (288d-e). Notice that Socrates refers to what the pot can do: it can hold six choes (a Greek unit of measurement). Socrates refers to the object’s function when he attempts to describe its beauty, though certain visible aspects of the pot (its smoothness, roundness, symmetry) may also play a role in its being beautiful. In both cases—the lyre and the pot—we see an expansion of “the beautiful” to refer both to the look and the use of an object.

110 “Socrates makes no reference to painting on the pot, and the word he uses, chytra, when it is not used loosely for pot in general, refers to the most common kind of cooking ware. The chytra is so common, that it finds no place in Richter and Milne’s excellent little pamphlet on the names of Greek vases. There is sufficient evidence, moreover, to associate the name chytra with the rather globular (perhaps dumpy is a better word) pot found in great numbers in the Athenian agora and elsewhere. Although bronze examples are known, they are usually of clay; and not only where they not decorated with pictures, they were usually left unpainted, as the smoke from the fire in the kitchen would soon provide a black surface as dark as any glaze. There even seems to have been a proverb, ‘to paint a chytra,’ to indicate a useless effort.” Sider, “Plato’s Early Aesthetics: The Hippias Major,” 78.
As for the second claim, it is actually Hippias himself who argues for a hierarchy of beauty, and Socrates builds upon Hippias’s idea. Hippias accepts Socrates’s claim that these objects are also beautiful, but he will not allow that all beauty is equal. Hippias defends his definition by appealing to a hierarchy of value: “Even that utensil [i.e., a pot] is beautiful if beautifully made. But on the whole that’s not worth judging beautiful, compared to a horse and a girl and all the other beautiful things” (288e). The implication is that some objects are more beautiful than others, and thus more worthy of being called “the beautiful,” or at least, more worthy of being discussed in a serious conversation. Hippias believes that living creatures, like girls and horses, are more worthy of being called beautiful than mere tools. In effect, he is resisting Socrates’s nascent tendency to discuss the beautiful in terms of what is useful for human beings. Hippias believes that living creatures are more beautiful than tools. Socrates’s response will be to accept the notion that some beings are more beautiful than others—that is, he will embrace the idea of a hierarchy of beauty and expand the hierarchy to include the gods. His final refutation of Hippias’s first definition makes use of two interrelated aphorisms from Heraclitus, which he paraphrases. To gauge the philosophical significance of what Socrates is doing, we should quote them in full:

The fairest of apes is ugly in comparison with the human race … The wisest of men will appear like an ape compared to a god, in wisdom, in beauty, and in every other respect.  

These aphorisms constitute a hierarchy: apes-humans-gods, with gods at the top. The most beautiful ape is ugly compared to a man, but a man is but an ape compared to the beauty of the gods. Socrates draws an analogous hierarchy with the objects that he and Hippias have been discussing.

---

111 There is also the suggestive grouping of women with horses. It is evidence of the degree of misogyny prevalent in ancient Athens, where women were not held to be alike in dignity and intelligence as men.

discussing: “If you put the class of girls together with the class of gods, won’t the same thing happen as happened when the class of pots was put together with that of girls? Won’t the most beautiful girl be seen as foul?” (289b). What follows is that a girl’s beauty is relative, and therefore she is not completely beautiful in every instance. Her beauty is contingent upon her surroundings: if she happens to be in the vicinity of the gods, her beauty pales in comparison, and she may legitimately be called ugly. Such an incomplete or limited instance of beauty cannot be the answer to Socrates’s question.

By introducing the gods into the dialogue, Socrates establishes a divine standard for the beautiful, and defines the top of the hierarchy. Not only are the gods held to be superior to humans as a matter of Greek cultural prejudice. Reasons can also be adduced as to why they are superior, and those reasons carry philosophical weight. The divine qualities that human beings lack are immortality, permanence, and power. Unlike a human life, the life of a god or goddess does not end. Thus, if there is a general consensus among the Greeks that the gods are more beautiful than human beings, then immortality, power, and permanence must have something to do with beauty. Moreover, the divine standard not only allows us to say that some beings are more beautiful than others, but it also allows us to say that some beings are more worthy of human desire than others. Both Hippias and Socrates agree that the word “beautiful” appears to be more valid for some beings rather than others (for Hippias, girls and mares as opposed to lyres and pots; for Socrates, gods as opposed to girls). Implied in their judgment is that some things are more worthy of admiration and love—of eros—than others.

At this juncture Socrates’s implicit third claim comes into view: The human being retains a special place within his Heraclitus-inspired, ape-human-god hierarchy. It is the place “in between” beauty and ugliness, and also a place from which the human person is able to judge
whether something is beautiful or ugly. An ape could not do so, and a god would not care to do so. The human being is thus situated in a place quite similar to that of the lover in Diotima’s account of *eros*: ἐν μέσῳ ἐστίν, in the middle, shuttling between lesser and greater forms of beauty, or perhaps, advancing from one to the other.

By this moment in the dialogue, we can see that Hippias has already ascended from his *epithumia*-inspired first definition, and chosen to consider some of Socrates’s rebuttals to it. By “ascended,” I mean that he has expanded his sense for the possibility of what kinds of beings might be beautiful, and has therefore adopted a more open, erotic stance toward the question of what the beautiful itself is. In a sense, Hippias has allowed himself to become partially converted to philosophy. He has chosen, at least, to go along with Socrates a little while longer. Now he will try once again to define the beautiful.

*Gold (289d-291c)*

In the discussion of Hippias’s second definition, “gold” (χρυσός, 289e), the force of philosophical *eros* upon the search for the beautiful itself consists of bringing into focus the relationship between what it is that makes beings become beautiful, on the one hand, and a beautiful being’s appearance, on the other. In other words, during their discussion of the second definition, Hippias and Socrates will confront, in the most explicit way thus far in the dialogue, the question of whether a being’s beauty is a feature of appearance or of its being. (The question is revisited later on (294a), as we shall see in Chapter Three.) By arguing for beauty as something intrinsic to being, and not appearance, Socrates gestures to the erotic disposition required for the search for the beautiful itself: for a philosophical *eros* that goes beyond appearances to discover the truth about being as it is in itself. If Socrates is in search of true
opinion about the beautiful itself, this search will require a transcending of appearance in order to obtain it; that is, Socrates’s search will require the transcendence of the particular point of view, for a point of view that is adequate to what the beautiful is in itself.

The dialogue begins anew with Socrates restating his question according to the standard of being over appearance: “He’ll say: ‘If I had asked you from the beginning what is both beautiful and foul, and you had given me the answer you just gave, then wouldn’t you have given the right answer? Do you still think that the beautiful itself by which everything else is beautified and seen to be beautiful that form is added to it (προσγένηται ἐκεῖνο τὸ εἶδος)– that *that* is a girl or a horse or a lyre?’” (289d, Socrates is still reporting what his absent friend would say in response to Hippias’s attempts to answer his question). Having surpassed Hippias’s first definition, Socrates believes that his friend would refine the question. The problem is to discover the form (εἶδος) which, when added (προσγένηται), will make a being become beautiful, and be seen to be so. Obviously, one cannot “add” a girl, or a horse, or a lyre, to another object. Thus the question has become more philosophically precise: we are asked to find a definition of beauty which accounts for an object’s *becoming* beautiful. The word Socrates uses, προσγένηται, is a compound of γίγνομαι, meaning “to come into a new state of being.” We are looking for what it is that causes an object to come into the state of being beautiful.

Hippias posits an answer to the restated question which corresponds to a beautiful being’s appearance, and not to its being: gold (χρυσός, 289e). This is what, when added, will cause a being to become beautiful. It is unclear whether Hippias willfully or innocently misunderstands Socrates’s restated question; nevertheless, his answer once again bespeaks a reluctance to follow the philosophical erotic path, one that takes the seeker for truth beyond appearances. Socrates refutes Hippias by arguing that one must take into account the nature of each thing and discover
what is appropriate to it in order to understand the cause of beauty in a being (290d). Gold would be appropriate for some beings, but not for others. The dynamic between the interlocutors is similar to what occurred when they discussed the beautiful maiden: Hippias’s definition once again focuses on material reality, this time on a visible aspect or characteristic of a body; Socrates makes an effort to expand their dialogue to include a principle—appropriateness—which is not necessarily tied to the material aspect of beauty. The erotic impulse is at play in Socrates’s continued widening of Hippias’s horizons: Socrates will show him that there is a way in which the beautiful lies beyond the appreciation of the senses.

Before we proceed to explicate this section of the dialogue, however, we must go back to the passage cited above and comment on an important word whose presence should alert any close reader of Plato: εἶδος. Does this word refer to the Form of beauty, in the sense that Plato would use the term in the *Phaedo* or *Republic*? Or is it being used in a nontechnical way? The text does not present us with an explicit discussion about the Forms in general or the Form of Beauty in particular. Nor has anything leading up to Socrates’s use of the word prepared us for such a complex philosophical theory. The use of the word appears to be colloquial.113 Nevertheless, Socrates’s commitment, in this dialogue, to defining the essence of a phenomenon as elusive as the beautiful does send us on the same dialectical path which leads, in other dialogues, to the Forms.114 We cannot find any ontological theory in the *Hippias Major*, but we do find that Socrates’s prodding of Hippias opens up a horizon of through within which one can

---

113 Hyland argues that this use of εἶδος is “not even close” to Plato’s theory of forms, but that it does signal a search for a “connotative” definition of the beautiful, which is something that points to an essence. See Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, 16. Woodruff argues that this use of εἶδος is a more commonplace one, not bearing any of the philosophical significance which Plato gives it in other dialogues. See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 55.

114 I agree then with Woodruff when he writes that in the *Hippias Major*: “Plato has Socrates mark off a Form from its instances more systematically than in other dialogues of search,” with the added caveat that “the marking off is not presented as part of an ontological theory.” One could say that the Forms are *never* presented as a “theory” even in the *Phaedo* or *Republic*, but this is a separate issue. See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 168.
see the beautiful as a principle which can be thought about independent of its manifestation in material reality. In this section, the principle is “appropriateness.” This idea (to which Socrates returns once he has taken over the discussion in 293e) forces us to consider the possibility that the essence of the beautiful—a visible, sensory phenomenon—could lie beyond the realm of the sensible. Beyond this we cannot conjecture about the presence of the Forms in this dialogue without venturing into a large-scale interpretation of the whole of Plato’s philosophical trajectory—a very difficult task. In any case, εἶδος can mean “form” but also “that which is seen,” and Socrates will make use of both meanings—an invisible principle, and a visible trait or characteristic—in his rebuttal of Hippias’s second definition of the beautiful.

Hippias persists in thinking about the beautiful as a visible characteristic. His response to Socrates’s friend has the same blustery tone of someone who thinks they know what they’re talking about:

*H:* But if that’s what he’s looking for, it’s the easiest thing in the world to answer him and tell him what the beautiful (thing) is by which everything else is beautified and is seen to be beautiful when it is added. The man’s quite simple; he has no feeling at all for beautiful possessions. If you answer him that this thing he’s asking for, the beautiful, is just *gold*, he’ll be stuck and won’t try to refute you. Because we all know, don’t we, that wherever that is added, even if it was seen to be foul before, it will be seen to be fine when it has been beautified with gold. (289d-e)

Hippias has accepted the refined version of their question, but he has not advanced far beyond his initial point of view. There is no great progress from saying that the beautiful is a beautiful

---

maiden, to saying that the beautiful is gold. Hippias could have put it this way: “It’s her gold make-up”—perhaps she is Egyptian—“which makes her beautiful.” Hippias still identifies the beautiful with something physical. (We can speculate also that by invoking the color, “gold,” he is also invoking money and wealth—something Hippias has that Socrates lacks.) In responding to him, Socrates makes use of a common cultural touchstone, the work of the sculptor, Pheidias, known for his sculpture of Athena Parthenos inside the Parthenon. “The point is,” Socrates argues (saying what he says his friend would say), “that Pheidias didn’t make Athena’s eyes out of gold, nor the rest of her face, nor her feet, nor her hands—as he would have done if gold would really have made them be seen to be the most beautiful—but he made them out of ivory” (290b). If Hippias is right about what causes something to be beautiful, Pheidias’ reputation as a sculptor would have to be revised. But Hippias will not challenge the popular taste: Pheidias’ statue is beautiful, so therefore he must amend his theory: “We’ll say he made the statue right. Ivory’s beautiful too, I think” (290c). Socrates will push further: Pheidias didn’t craft the middle part (τὰ μέσα τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν) of Athena’s eyes with ivory, but with stone. He used stone “and he found stone that resembled (ὁμοιότητα) ivory as closely as possible” (290c). Socrates then introduces a principle: stone would be beautiful “when it is appropriate” (ὅταν γε πρέπω, 290d). Hippias agrees: “Whatever is appropriate to each thing makes that particular thing beautiful” (290d). Following this principle, Hippias is forced to concede that, given certain conditions, figwood could be said to be more beautiful than gold—for example, as the appropriate material with which to fashion a soup spoon (291b-c).

Socrates’s appeal to artistic taste (consistent with his earlier commendation of the work of the sculptor Bias [281d-282a]) is related to the philosophical importance of this passage, which has to do with judgment. The judgment of beauty in bodies (a judgment of taste, in
modern parlance) requires sensory observation (we must experience the object) but also a principle by which we determine whether the being we apprehend in experience merits being placed under the category of “beautiful beings.” That principle can be something linked to a sensory attribute (like gold), or a sort of measurement which can be applied to different types of beings (e.g., sculptures, spoons). “Appropriateness” is the latter sort of principle, applicable as it is to all kinds of beings. The claim that the appropriate is the cause of beauty in objects means that we may judge an object’s beauty using appropriateness as a principle by which to make that judgment. We may take one aspect of an object (e.g., Athena’s eyes, the material of a spoon, the cut of a piece of clothing) and judge whether the way it is fashioned is appropriate to the end for which it was fashioned. If it is indeed appropriate, then we may call it beautiful. (Note that “appropriateness” with regard to Greek sculpture does not necessarily mean “accuracy.” The “appropriateness” which corresponds to artistic taste is, of course, a vast topic, one which Socrates merely touches upon in this passage.)

With the introduction of the principle of appropriateness into the dialogue, we have reached a new level of philosophical sophistication: we are no longer merely speaking about bodies and sight, but also about principles whose application require more than a simple check with the eyes. Unlike the presence of gold color, “appropriateness” can only be determined through reflection, not just perception. It is worth noting, however, that πρέπω may also mean “clearly seen” or “conspicuous.” Socrates has chosen a principle which also evokes the sense of sight. But as a principle by which we can judge whether an object is beautiful, it could also apply to objects which are not bodies and cannot be experienced by the senses (such as beautiful laws, to which Hippias and Socrates refer in 298d). Perhaps their appreciation for the word’s versatility is the reason why neither Socrates nor Hippias comments on the ambiguity in their use
of “appropriate.” They use it to mean what is appropriate for a work of art (a sculpture), which implies an appropriateness in taste or for representing something accurately in an image. They also use it as appropriateness in a tool (a spoon), which means appropriate for the intended function of an object. Both uses, however, imply the existence of a human being which both makes and uses the beautiful object. (In cases where the object is not directly linked to human use, the principle becomes more questionable: What is appropriate within a beautiful landscape?)

In making this argument Socrates in effect reaffirms the third implicit principle that we discussed above, by giving the human being a special role when it comes to determining what is beautiful. The thrust of Socrates’s engagement with Hippias brings the focus back on the human being who has to judge whether something is “appropriate” for an object. “Appropriateness” is a principle that must be used or applied to understand the beautiful. It must be used by someone—a human being. The beautiful is linked to the human activity of judging. It has its seat in the human subject—it is an “event” of a sort, in a human life.

The importance of this last point shows up in high relief when we see how seemingly fruitless any reading of the *Hippias Major* becomes when one misses it. The conclusion of Christopher Raymond’s analysis of Hippias’s second answer is a case in point, worth examining here. Raymond proceeds by first defining a series of concepts and philosophical positions concerning aesthetic judgment which he will use to create categories with which to organize Plato’s thought. He eventually discovers that Plato’s thought does not fit comfortably into any of his categories. An aesthetic reason is “any consideration that supports an aesthetic concern.” An aesthetic reason could be, for example, the sense of urgency in a given piece of music. This reason has valence for some types of music (say, punk rock) but not for others (a lullaby). There are two philosophical positions with regard to aesthetic reasons: Holism holds all aesthetic
reasons to be variant, that is, that an aesthetic reason that has valence for one object will have
valence for only that object, and not necessarily for all objects. Atomism holds that aesthetic
reasons carry their valence universally: they make an object aesthetically valuable regardless of
context. Hippias, by claiming that “gold” is the universal cause of beauty in beings, shows
himself to be an atomist about aesthetic reasons, at least at this point in the dialogue (and at least
insofar as he is choosing to philosophize at all, which he is, but only because he is playing along
with Socrates).\textsuperscript{116}

Beyond these positions on aesthetic reasons, Raymond gives us two concerning aesthetic
judgment. The first position is called particularism, and it holds that the rationality of aesthetic
judgment does not depend on the truth of its principles. The generalist stance holds the opposite
view. Aesthetic principles are related to reasons, but they can be either contributory or absolute.
Absolute principles, by their very presence, make an object aesthetically valuable; contributory
principles merely give some reason to value an object aesthetically, though perhaps not enough
to make it valuable overall. Hippias (again, insofar as he is going against his usual way of life
and philosophizing) is a generalist about aesthetic judgment, and gold for him is an absolute
aesthetic principle.\textsuperscript{117}

These principles are easy to apply when it comes to Hippias’s views, as we have seen.
Though, strictly speaking, there is no mention of “principle” in the dialogue, one can interpret,
say, Hippias’s contention that “gold” makes objects become beautiful as the expression of the
idea that gold is an aesthetic principle. Raymond’s technical vocabulary can, in other words,

\textsuperscript{116} See Raymond, “The Hippias Major and Aesthetics,” 39. The claim that gold, in this dialogue, functions as an
aesthetic reason is supported by Sweet’s observation that “Gold has the virtue of possessing a value and an existence
independent of the things that are beautified by it.” See Sweet, “On the Greater Hippias,” 346. Certainly, Hippias
appeals to gold precisely because of this independent existence it has. As such, it functions as a so-called aesthetic
reason.

\textsuperscript{117} Raymond, “The Hippias Major and Aesthetics,” 40.
supply a hermeneutic which elucidates Hippias’s positions. But his vocabulary does not fully explain Socrates’s position. Raymond claims that the Socrates of the Hippias Major holds to a unique form of particularism when it comes to aesthetic judgment and holism when it comes to aesthetic principles. According to Raymond, particularists often take a holistic position with regard to reasons. They believe that aesthetic reasons only make sense within the context of a certain object, and they don’t believe that their rationality is contingent on the truth of those reasons. Moreover, Raymond claims that a particularist “would not be troubled by an inability to give an account of beauty” because beauty “does not figure into his picture of how aesthetic value works.”[118] The particularist has no need to appeal to something further, like beauty, to explain aesthetic value, because aesthetic value is rooted in a sort of idiosyncratic moment of valuation. We may argue that “urgency” or “gold” make an object beautiful, but asking why this is so is not relevant to the particularist.

Raymond builds upon his analysis of the Hippias Major in order to extrapolate a general theory of Plato’s views about aesthetic judgment and aesthetic reasons: “the Pheidias passage in the Hippias Major, taken in conjunction with passages from the Phaedo and Republic, supports a holistic conception of aesthetic reasons,” and: “Plato is an aesthetic particularist.”[119] But Plato is a particularist of a peculiar sort, Raymond argues, for a very important reason. A common particularist does not care about the “meaning” of the “beautiful,” but is only concerned with understanding the principles by which we can categorize something as “beautiful.” On the contrary, at least in the Hippias Major (which is what concerns us here) Socrates believes that understanding the nature of the beautiful is of paramount importance to understanding how an object becomes beautiful. The only “aesthetic reason” that Socrates accepts is “the beautiful” as

such. We should add that the “appropriate”, for Socrates, is not an aesthetic reason, but a principle which allows us to judge whether a being is beautiful, and whether we can categorize an object as beautiful. (The same will go for the other principles that Socrates discusses once he takes over the dialogue, as we shall see in the next chapter.) It is different in kind from Hippias’s “gold.” In essence, the two answers mirror the personages in the dialogue: Hippias’s attachment to appearances and wealth (gold), and Socrates’s preference for dialectic and ideas (the appropriate).

Socrates’s response to Hippias’s second definition works only to deepen the mystery of what exactly makes an object beautiful, and of what the beautiful is, in and of itself. Raymond concludes: “The value of the Platonic notion of the beautiful is not, as far as I can see, that it inspires us toward abstract reflection. It reminds us, rather, that beauty is elusive, and will always resist being contained in rules and formulae.” But this does not go far enough in explaining the philosophical importance of Socrates’s response to Hippias. Socrates’s point does not leave us at mere skepticism or bewildered before the mystery of the beautiful. He points to the fact that the beautiful is intimately linked to the subject who beholds it. It cannot be understood without some reference to human action, or to human life. The modern formal categories of “aesthetic reasons” and “principles” do not reflect this dimension of Socrates’s inquiry.

There is, however, one modern thinker that may help us to better understand this passage in the *Hippias Major*. With his attention to the place of human perception in making an account of what the beautiful is, Socrates anticipates, in an oblique way, the aesthetics of Kant. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant advances a theory of aesthetic judgment which is particularist and is

---

120 As Raymond puts it, “If a property appears beautiful in a certain context, that is never due to the nature of the property; it becomes beautiful only by sharing in the form of the kalon itself.” Raymond, “The Hippias Major and Aesthetics,” 46.

121 Raymond, “The Hippias Major and Aesthetics,” 47.
neither holistic nor atomistic, because it does not appeal to aesthetic reasons. Aesthetic judgment is, instead, both subjective (or particularist) and universal; it does not rest on any concepts or attributes. The elements which make an object beautiful cannot be described. An aesthetic judgment is both an interior experience and one can be wrong about it—but since the judgment is not about any of the attributes of the form being contemplated, it cannot be described. I can only say: “This flower is beautiful,” and another subject can agree or disagree, but we cannot argue against each other in any meaningful way. The ultimate principle that makes something be beautiful lies beyond the realm of experience, within the noumenal world of the supersensible.

It can only be pointed at. The sign of a correct judgment is a communal agreement between rational beings, who all agree that something is beautiful—for example, popular approval of Pheidias’s statue of Athena.

Of course, a great chasm exists between Plato’s thought and Kant’s, but we can see some similarity in their views on aesthetic judgment in the passage discussed here. Both Plato and Kant agree that it is not a particular attribute which makes an object beautiful, but that the beautiful inheres in an object wholly. For Kant, the principle by which an object is judged to be beautiful cannot be articulated, and Socrates, who in this section attempts to articulate it as the appropriate, will soon change his mind. Both thinkers seem to claim that the beautiful is both an intelligible cause of the beautiful in beings, but cannot be known through articulated

---

122 “A judgment of taste, on the other hand, is merely contemplative, i.e., it is a judgment that is indifferent to the existence of the object: it [considers] the character of the object only by holding it up to our feeling of pleasure and displeasure. Nor is this contemplation, as such, directed to concepts, for a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (whether theoretical or practical) and hence is neither based on concepts, nor directed to them as purposes.” Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 51.

123 “As for the subjective principle—i.e., the indeterminate idea of the supersensible in us—as the sole key for solving the mystery of this ability [i.e., taste] concealed from us even as to its sources, we can do no more than point to it; but there is nothing we can do that would allow us to grasp it any further.” Kant, Critique of Judgment, 213-214. Emphasis mine.
principles. Just as Kant’s theory of judgment opened up his thought to a whole world of complicated conjectures on the nature of the supersensible, so too does Socrates’s refutation of Hippias’s second definition open us up to greater philosophical vistas about the relationship between human life and the beautiful which will be explored in depth once Socrates begins positing his own answers to the question of the beautiful. The dialogue that Socrates has begun with Hippias has forced Hippias to consider the beauty of an ever greater assortment of objects. The *eros* of Socrates’s inquiry has brought Hippias to an appreciation of the beautiful that lies beyond his initial notions about it.

*Human Life (291d-293c)*

The third and final definition proposed by Hippias involves the introduction of an axiological theme into the dialogue about the beautiful. As such, it mirrors another step upon the ascent toward the beautiful itself as it is proposed by Diotima (Diotima’s ladder starts with bodies and advances up to the beauty of souls as well as those laws which form souls). “Would you like me to tell you what you can say the beautiful is—and save yourself a lot of argument?” (291b). Hippias’s arrogance has not abated, despite the humbling treatment he has received at the hands of Socrates. But now Hippias thinks he can make a winning move. The answer that should finally satisfy (or at least silence) Socrates is the following:

---

124 Hyland’s *Plato and the Question of Beauty* makes a similar claim about the *Hippias Major* and other works on the Platonic canon – in fact, this is one of the major ideas which the book aims to articulate. Nehamas echoes us here: “At this point, Kant and Plato converge: just as nothing we know is enough to prove that something is beautiful, everything we love is always a step beyond our understanding. The pleasures of the imagination are pleasures of anticipation, not accomplishment.” Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, 76. The second sentence is an interpretation of the first. To say that we cannot “prove” that something is beautiful is not to be a skeptic about the existence of beautiful objects, according to Nehamas. Rather, he points out that no attributes may be appealed to in an argument for an object’s beauty. Only direct intuition will tell us whether an object is beautiful. This intuition invites us to look more deeply into the sources of this object of beauty that we are beholding. But those sources are always a bit beyond our grasp. At this point in the dialogue, neither interlocutor has admitted that the sources are beyond our grasp. But by the end of it, they may have changed their minds.
I saw, then that it is always most beautiful, both for every man and in every place, to be rich, healthy, and honored by the Greeks, to arrive at old age, to make a beautiful memorial to his parents when they die, and to have a beautiful, grand burial from his own children. (291d-e)

The complete, fulfilled human life of a Greek male is what it is to be beautiful. The word “beautiful” is used as part of the definition, and Hippos does not care. He has not taken seriously Socrates’s requirement that the definition of beauty include a causal explanation of what makes an object become beautiful. Yet despite this, Hippos’s final definition constitutes a definite philosophical ascent. With it, Hippos introduces an axiological dimension to the question of the beautiful, as his definition is the first occasion in which the two interlocutors return to the question of a life well lived, which animated their conversation from the very beginning. Thus the philosophical eros of Socratic inquiry broadens the debate about the nature of the beautiful to include a consideration of the relationship between the beautiful and a life well lived. Neither interlocutor mentions “the good” as a theme, but the ground has been cleared for its appearance later in the dialogue.125

Given this new axiological dimension, it is odd to see, in this section, one of the most violent passages in the dialogue. This passage also, however, brings to relief the fidelity that Socrates has to philosophy as an activity. Socrates argues that his absent friend (who, we recall, has been driving the discussion all along, according to Socrates) would be so disgusted with Hippos’s third answer that “If he happens to have a stick, and I don’t run and run away from him, he’ll try to give me a thrashing” (292a). Moreover, Socrates agrees that Hippos’s third definition is so bad, that violence is warranted: “Should I tell you why I believe he’d have a right

125 Woodruff’s translation does not make clear that “beautiful” in this passage appears both in the comparative—“... it is always most beautiful ... (καλλιστον)”—but also as an adverb. The word καλῶς is used both to modify the act of being buried by one’s offspring (περιστείλαντι), as well as providing a funeral (περιστείλαντι). Thus we see that beauty is, for these two Greeks, a term that can be used to denote the way that things manifest themselves, or stand out and “shine,” before an observer.
to hit me if I gave that answer? Or will you hit me without trial too? Will you hear my case?” he tells Hippias (292b). The strangeness of this passage lies in that Socrates appears to claim that power can be used for, or may be on the side of, philosophy. Socrates’s friend is impatient because of Hippias’s lack of philosophical understanding. He would use force to promote philosophy, and Socrates ostensibly agrees with him. What a contrast from the opening passages of the Republic, where Socrates prefers persuasion to force (327c)! Still, it seems instead that Socrates is using the fictitious “friend” as foil in order to model a proper philosophical attitude for Hippias. In response to this possible violence, Socrates chooses to keep philosophizing, obeying his eros for the good, which requires him to seek out a true opinion about the beautiful itself, that is, an adequate definition. Socrates here seems to be saying that he would not cower in fear before anti-philosophical power. The question of violence and power will return once Socrates discusses beauty as power (296c).

In order to see just how much more philosophically rich Hippias’s third answer is—and in order to justify our claim that with it, Hippias makes an ascent—we should compare the substance of his third definition of the beautiful with two similar ideas in the philosophical canon, from Aristotle and Kant. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle argues that a happy life must be a complete one, and that one cannot judge a life to be happy, but only to have been happy (1100a5-6). Like Hippias, Aristotle also considers the role of one’s ancestors and offspring when assessing whether a life has been happy (1100a30-31, also 1101a1-39). Surely, Aristotle would not hesitate to call a complete and happy life beautiful (kalon).

Kant, in the Critique of Judgment, makes a related point. In section 17, “On the Ideal of Beauty,” Kant writes that “It is man, alone among all objects in the world, who admits of an ideal of beauty, just as the humanity in his person, [i.e., in man considered] as an intelligence, is
the only thing in the world that admits of the ideal of perfection." This is because only man can “determine his purposes by reason,” and fulfill them through action. We can imagine an ideal fulfilment of his purposes, and thus craft an ideal beautiful man, or beautiful human life. Other objects—mansions, trees, gardens (to name those cited by Kant)—are insufficiently determined by concepts. We simply do not know enough about their nature to craft an ideal. But we do about man, because man is a reasonable creature able to understand and pursue his moral fulfillment. Hippias’s definition, which includes the moral aspects of fulfilling one’s duty to the city and to one’s family, has much in common with Kant’s view.

A closer look at Hippias’s third answer, however, reveals some important differences between it and the Aristotelian and Kantian examples. As a whole, Hippias’s view is not tethered to any rigorous philosophical argument. Aristotle attempts to judge whether a life has been happy as a whole, and this whole is composed of achieved virtues as well as circumstantial, contingent sufferings. Only once both have reached an end in death can we judge life as a whole. The criterion by which we judge this is the fulfillment of virtues within a life, in spite of the adversities or misfortunes which may have occurred during it. Kant, on the other hand, does not here use the language of virtue, nor does he speak about grasping a life as a whole, but rather of fashioning an ideal of beauty out of a human life. Yet this ideal also has to do with the fulfillment of a man’s rational capacity for exercising a good will. Like Aristotle, he sees moral fulfillment as the key to understanding life as a whole.

These examples from Aristotle and Kant allow us to see Hippias’s definition in a clearer light. Hippias’s definition is in line with their philosophical concern over a life well lived, and all

---

126 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 81.  
127 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 81.
three thinkers agree in calling such a life “beautiful.” Moreover, all three speak of a life
considered as a whole. But the contrast also shows us the relative intellectual poverty of
Hippias’s views. Hippias’s understanding of life as a whole does not appear to be linked to
morality or virtue in a philosophically rigorous sense. It does have an axiological dimension,
because Hippias does value this life above all others. But its value consists of two things—
wealth and honor—which are more likely to come from luck than from virtue.\[128\] (Incidentally, in
the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle states that wealth and honor are not worthy of being the final
end of one’s life.\[129\]) Moreover, the “beautiful memorial” has something to do with the virtue of
respecting one’s parents (and being respected, in turn, by one’s children), but it is unclear how
such a virtue fits into Hippias’s view of the whole. At the very least, we can say that Hippias’s
view of life as a whole is not as clearly based on moral fulfillment as it is for Aristotle and Kant.
This is significant (and not merely an unwarranted comparison between a Platonic character and
two philosophers who came after him) because it shows us that Hippias’s view of life as a whole
does not include a philosophical ideal of flourishing, but rather a more traditional, Greek political
ideal of fulfilling one’s duty to the state. Unlike Socrates’s lifestyle, Hippias’s ideal life, as stated
here, would not raise the eyebrow of the Athenian political elite. In fact, his definition mirrors
the ideals of that elite.\[130\] One could also argue that Hippias does not even give us a view of life
as a whole at all, because he does not identify a unifying element that would under which we

---

\[128\] Here I am building upon an observation made by Sweet, “On the Greater Hippias,” 347: “The emphasis is on
physical well-being, on honoring and being honored, but there is no mention of the soul or of what the virtues’ of
such a man should be, neither that of courage, the most Spartan beauty, nor that of wisdom, the virtue Hippias prides
himself on. And the only ‘beautiful pursuit’ the man is said to engage in actively is the beautiful burial of his
parents.”

\[129\] 1095b13-1096a10.

\[130\] Tarrant writes that, with the third definition, Hippias explains the beautiful “in terms of the archetypally desirable
human life according to Greek tradition. We have a glimpse of that which is ‘fine’ not merely because of its
delightful appearance or its utility, but of something that is fine qua end: the final object of striving for any ordinary
Greek.” See Tarrant, “The *Hippias Major* and Socratic Theories of Pleasure,” 119.
could unify all the particulars that form a life. The wholeness is implied, but we can find no concept under which life becomes whole, and as a whole, beautiful. Unlike Kant and Aristotle, who held rational moral inclination and virtuous flourishing, respectively, as the unifying elements to an ideal human life, Hippias does not present us with any unifying element. What he has given us is the most unique and strange of all the answers to the Socratic question in the *Hippias Major*. He has forced us to consider what the relationship between beauty and life as a whole may be, and he has deepened the discussion by bringing to it an axiological dimension.

In his swift and short response to Hippias’s third definition, Socrates reasserts two claims from earlier sections of the dialogue and also introduces a new theme into the dialogue. All three topics have a bearing on philosophical *eros*. Socrates re-asserts the need to understand the definition of the beautiful as something which causes a being to become beautiful, and he also makes use, once again, of the hierarchy of beauty which includes the gods. Socrates also makes a new claim, relevant here because of its echoes with the *Symposium*, about the temporal nature of the beautiful.

First, Socrates restates his earlier requirement, that the definition of “the beautiful” include that which causes a being to be beautiful “when added” (292d). The definition of the beautiful, in other words, must be a causal explanation. Socrates reports what his friend would say: “Aren’t you capable of remembering that I asked for the beautiful itself?” Socrates continues: “For what when added to anything—whether to a stone or a plan or a man or a god or any action or any lesson—anything gets to be beautiful?” (292d). This passage echoes the one in 289d, and uses the same verb, προσγίγνομαι, “to attach oneself to” or “add,” to denote the

---

131 Benardete argues along these same lines: “The phrasing thus gives the illusion of a whole while the definition is in fact episodic.” Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful*, xxxii.
relationship between the beautiful object and that which causes it to be beautiful. Thus Socrates reinforces his understanding of what a proper and satisfying answer to the question of the beautiful would have to be.

Second, Socrates also reasserts the hierarchy which he introduced earlier in the dialogue, between gods and human beings. Hippias’s third definition does not meet Socrates’s requirement of universality, because it cannot include, for example, the life of Achilles (292e). Achilles’ mother, Thetis, is a god; therefore, Achilles will never bury her, because she will never die. Hippias does not dispute Achilles’ beauty, just as he did not dispute Socrates’s earlier assertion that the most beautiful girl is ugly compared to the class of gods. Instead, he replies: “But I didn’t mean it [the definition] for the gods” (293a). Socrates adds (in his unnamed friend’s voice): “Apparently you didn’t mean it for the heroes either,” namely Achilles, or any hero who has a god for a parent. Socrates also cites other heroes with divine parentage: Herakles, Tantalus, Dardanus, and Zethus (293a-b), as well as Pelops, the son of Tantalus (and lacking divine parents) as a point of contrast: why would the definition of the beautiful apply to Pelops and not to his father?

Third, the novelty in this section lies in that Socrates introduces time into the discussion. Socrates asserts that the definition of the beautiful must be something which always is and always will be beautiful. Hippias defends his third definition by arguing that “I know perfectly well that what I said is beautiful for everyone—everyone will think so” (292e). But Socrates questions even this. He asks whether a human life will be beautiful, as well as whether it always has been beautiful. Hippias believes that his definition is valid in both the past and future. This theme is dropped almost immediately, but the exchange leaves us with an interesting thought from Socrates’s absent friend: ‘ἀεὶ γάρ που τό γε καλὸν καλὸν’ (292e), “For that which is
beautiful always and for everyone.” With this, Socrates alludes to a way of being beyond the concrete manifestations of beauty that have been discussed thus far in the dialogue, including that of a human life. Woodruff argues that the “always” in this passage is not temporal. Yet there is enough in the sentence to at least make the claim that the answer to the question, “What is the beautiful?” must have a permanent stability in time. The gods, for example, are always considered to be beautiful, and they are permanently in being. Whatever causes a being to become beautiful must cause it to remain beautiful.

However unique Hippias’s third definition may be, Socrates has less to say about it than the others. The drama shifts quickly with Socrates’s announcement (293d) that his unnamed, absent friend, apart from rejecting other’s philosophical theories, sometimes proposes his own. And so Socrates will take over the discussion.

*Hippias’s Ascent*

Socrates’s dialectical engagement with Hippias’s definitions of the beautiful has the result of broadening the latter’s understanding of what the beautiful might be. Socrates’s questions about Hippias’s definitions, in other words, have forced Hippias to consider the possibility that the beautiful inheres not only in sexually attractive bodies, but also in tools and animals, musical instruments and even noble lives. This expansion of Hippias’s horizons is a movement of the soul akin to what we find in the Diotima section of the *Symposium*. Diotima speaks of a soul moving from the love of one body, to the love of all bodies, and from the love of all bodies, to the love of laws and institutions and sciences. Hippias goes from the notion of

---

132 Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 61. Woodruff also compares this passage with *Symposium* 211a and its description of the form of the beautiful, but he does not find enough similarities to argue that the two passages are directly related. See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 73-74.
beauty as the *epithumia* for an attractive female body, and “ascends” to consider the beauty of other types of bodies and even of the notion of a noble life.

A more detailed tracing of Hippias’s and Socrates’s dialectical steps illuminates the “ascending” dynamic that they take. Hippias begins by declaring, *first*, a beautiful maiden to be the definition of the beautiful, *second*, a principle (a visible one: gold, an invisible one: appropriateness), and *finally* a value (a human life, well-lived). Each answer corresponds to a different levels of being, if we accept Diotima’s scheme of placing non-bodily entities (e.g., principles and laws) above bodies (i.e., maidens), and if we place a value (i.e., human life) above both. Moreover, this ascent is a product of Socrates’s questioning. Socrates prompts Hippias to broaden his mind about what types of objects can be considered beautiful—from maidens to pots, works of art to heroic lives. He also prompts Hippias to change his answers and to seek after greater truthfulness. Hippias also agrees with Socrates’s suggestion of a hierarchy of beautiful beings, wherein the gods are at a higher position than human beings (though the very top of the hierarchy has not been defined nor even inquired about). Because Socrates plays such an obvious role in Hippias’s ascent, we can say that the latter is caused by Socrates’s philosophical *eros*. Hippias is philosophizing in spite of himself, because he has allowed himself to be led by a philosopher.

Recapitulating the plot of this section of the dialogue, we can see how this ascent happened. The Hippias of the *Hippias Major* is initially in thrall to *epithumia*, which is a form of desire that orients him toward bodies. This orientation is also part and parcel of his character, which appears to be mostly concerned with material reality. Hippias does not affirm much, beyond the judgment that a maiden is beautiful, gold makes some things beautiful, and a full human life full of honors and fulfilled duties is beautiful. That is, Hippias’s three answers are at
least as much mere affirmations concerning those things which Hippias personally holds to be especially beautiful, as they are attempts at answering Socrates’s philosophical question. It is true that Hippias accepts Socrates’s challenge, and goes along with the discussion. But by only naming bodies—either persons, or physical attributes—he does not approach the question in a truly philosophical way. His materialistic stance is not a philosophical stance but rather an anti-philosophical one: he does not appear to be open to the possibility that a higher type of concept or explanation is possible, which would satisfy Socrates’s question. Yet with every answer he poses, Hippias becomes philosophical because he heeds Socrates’s prompting responses. In other words, he performs an ascent. (Whether this conversion to philosophy will remain a permanent

---

133 By characterizing Hippias’s worldview as “anti-philosophical,” we do not mean to imply that it is without its own doctrinal content, but merely that it is opposed to the type of inquiry that Socrates engages in the Hippias Major. As to what the doctrinal content of Hippias’s own views might be, we have two theories, from Woodruff and Sweet. Woodruff’s theory is that Hippias is a follower of Gorgias’ school of skepticism. Gorgias is traditionally held to have been a proponent of skepticism both about the existence of reality and of our ability to know and communicate about it even if it does exist. Woodruff argues that the Gorgian skepticism about our ability to know reality does not allow Hippias to make any general claims about an underlying being (or nature) of the beautiful, but instead forces him to stick to concrete examples—even if, with his third example, Hippias is stretching the bounds of what an “object” or “body” could really be. Woodruff argues that Hippias sticks to concrete examples precisely because of this Gorgian skepticism. It should be noted, however, that the Gorgian skepticism does not commit Hippias to any overarching philosophical views about being. See Woodruff, Hippias Major, 117.

On the other hand, by calling Hippias a “materialist,” Sweet does commit Hippias to a philosophical view about being. If Hippias limits his definitions to concrete bodies which are beautiful, it is not because he doesn’t believe in general concepts, but also because he believes that bodies are the only beings that exist. Socrates’s question, Sweet writes, raises three issues: “whether or not many things can be understood in terms of one, what the causal relation between those many and the one is, and what the status of one is with respect to being.” The first issue deals with the ancient problem of the one and the many. The second deals with the “added” quality of beauty, which causes an object to be beautiful, and which we have seen Socrates mention twice in this dialogue. The third has to do with the ontological status of whatever the answer to Socrates’s question might be.

Hippias, as a materialist, would have a brief response to these three issues. He believes, Sweet writes, that “only things in being are bodies. Beauty is any beautiful thing.” Therefore, all beautiful things cannot be understood in terms of one; the problem of the one and the many is not resolved, or rather, the many are affirmed and the one is rejected. Hippias also does not attempt to make a causal account of how an object becomes beautiful—he simply gives examples, because only the many “are.” Finally, Hippias does not give an ontological account of “the beautiful itself.” It makes sense, then, that Hippias would be tied to the form of desire which is most closely associated with physicality and bodies: ἐπιθυμία. See Sweet, “On the Greater Hippias,” 345. (See also Hoerber, 183: “We should observe that he [Hippias] is merely giving examples of what is beautiful to him and that his concepts of beauty are essentially on the level of materialism.”) In any case, it is difficult to assign a stable philosophical position to Hippias, whether he be Gorgian or materialist. The point is that Hippias is resisting the activity of philosophy, and is resisting the ordering of his eros towards goodness and truth.
feature of Hippias’s life is something that only the dénouement of the dialogue will reveal, and which I will discuss in Chapter Five.)

The crucial point here is that Hippias’s ascent is made possible because of the *eros* of Socratic philosophical inquiry. Without Socrates’s pressing Hippias, without his engaging him in dialectical examination, Hippias would never have opened his mind. Moreover, it is this particular theme of the beautiful that also has a special “broadening” effect. Socrates’s invitation to look at the beautiful in a philosophical way, and his invocation of the beauty of various beings, helps Hippias to gradually expand his horizons. In short, both Socrates’s philosophical discourse and the theme of his philosophical discourse provoke Hippias to rise toward an erotic engagement with the world around him.

**Socrates’s Analogical Way of Speaking about the Beautiful**

My argument in the preceding section has been that Socrates’s dialectical engagement with Hippias’s definitions of the beautiful results in an ascent by Hippias, which parallels some of the steps on Diotima’s ladder. In this section, I will dissect one of the conditions for the possibility of this ascent: Socrates’s open-ended attribution of beauty to different kinds of objects. In his responses to Hippias’s three definitions, Socrates uses the word, “beautiful” in an elastic way; he is able to attribute the beautiful to all sorts of beings, from tools to gods. The priority is always with reality, that is, with the beings that Socrates actually sees. Any way of speaking is a way of speaking that Socrates adopts only because he believes it is adequate to the beauty that he is attempting to describe. The best way to describe the way that Socrates speaks “the beautiful” is to call it *analogical*. An analogical way of speaking about the beautiful is open to speaking about the beautiful both as one thing, and as one thing that appears to us in many
different ways. The beautiful is at once univocal (it refers to one thing, which Socrates and Hippias are attempting to discover) but it also manifests itself in different ways in different beings. By allowing himself to be led by Socrates, Hippias effectively adopts this analogical way of speaking about beauty, because he accepts all of the ways Socrates uses the word, and never disputes any of his particular judgments about what may be beautiful. Socrates’s analogical way of speaking makes the ascent possible because it is already philosophically oriented toward an ascent. In other words, Socrates’s analogical way of speaking corresponds to his philosophical eros. In this section, I will first look at Socrates’s criticisms and objections to Hippias’s definitions, and consider how his criticisms and objections open up the question of just what kind of term “the beautiful” would have to be in order to satisfy Socrates. Second, I will articulate the way in which Socratic discourse on the beautiful is “analogical.”

Socrates’s Requirements for a Proper Definition

Socrates’s responses to Hippias’s answer rely on three arguments. The first is that none of Hippias’s answers include an explanation of what causes something to be beautiful “when added.” Implicit here is the idea that a definition of the beautiful should contain such an explanation. Second, Hippias is looking for a definition with universal scope—that is, a definition that can encompass every possible type of beautiful object, from maidens to spoons to human lives considered as a whole. Related to this point is the third one: Socrates is looking for a definition of the beautiful that has permanent validity, for everyone at all times.134

134 Woodruff lists the criteria differently. According to him, Socrates is looking for a definition that (1) explains the fineness of fine things in such a way as to justify praise for them, (2) is fine itself, and (3) occurs in every fine thing. Moreover, he adds three more Socratic criteria which arise as the dialogue develops: the definition must (a) be the logical cause of fineness, (b) must under no circumstances be foul, and (c) must be one and the same in all cases of fineness. See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 150. (a) is a development of (1), and I mention it above. (b) is related to (2),
We can easily see how none of Hippias’s answers met these criteria. A beautiful maiden does not have causal power, does not have universal scope, and it is not always valid to claim that she is beautiful. Comparing her to a god, she is found to be relatively ugly. Gold does not meet any of these criteria, either, but the damning argument against it is its lack of universality: Gold can make some things more beautiful, but not all. Lastly, a human life also lacks universality: such a definition would not encompass the lives of the gods.

Hippias’s threefold failure to answer the question of the beautiful inspires another question: that of the type of term would satisfy Socrates’s criteria for a definition. It would have to be univocal, because Socrates has already affirmed that the beautiful itself “is something” (ἔστι τι τοῦτο, 287c). But it would have to also account for the manifold ways that this word may be predicated accurately of different beings in the world. It would also have to account for the way in which Socrates is able to summon so many different examples of beauty—from mares to noble lives. It would have to be a term which lends itself the possibility of ascent—that is, it must be as intelligible to speak about the beauty of spoons (tools) as of noble lives (virtues). Is Socrates using the word “beautiful” in an intelligible way? Is there a conceptual or logical framework with which we can understand the intelligibility of Socrates’s use of the word?

Socrates’s Analogical Attribution of Beauty

My claim is that the best way to characterize Socrates’s manner of speaking about the beautiful is that it is “analogical.” Contrary to various other views, I am not claiming that Socrates has a specific form of predication in mind. Instead, “analogical” is merely the best and is also mentioned above. (3) is implied by (a). I will dispute (c) at the end of this chapter, by arguing that Socrates accepts, implicitly, a version of analogical predication.

135 See Woodruff, who argues that Socrates’s requirement that “the beautiful” be a univocal term precludes him from finding the correct definition of it. “… Socrates holds the unity requirement because he knows know other way to
word we have for describing the way that Socrates talks about the beings he sees before him. I am not claiming that either Socrates nor Plato are adopting a rigorously methodical form of predication, and that Socrates as a literary character is speaking with a logical consistency that Hippias does not have. Rather, I am trying to be descriptive of the way Socrates uses the word, “beautiful.” His manner of using the word is open-ended, elastic, and applicable to many types of beings. I will employ logical jargon to deepen our understanding of the implications of this way of speaking. We will also see, however, that Socrates is not completely consistent in the way he speaks about the beautiful. Indeed, Socrates is not consistent logically because he is not attempting to build a system of rigorous logical predication; rather, he is describing a reality that he sees before him in many different forms. Socrates is pointing to the fact that the beautiful itself is “added” to many different types of beings, making each of these beautiful in a way that corresponds to the nature of each being.

In order to describe Socrates’s discourse, we can first make use of one type of analogical attribution, which Aristotle describes in the *Topics*. A term is “analogous” when it can be applied to more than one object. If one compares, e.g., “round” as applied to both a baseball and an arching hilltop, in either case one is using the term “round” in a way that is both similar and different to the other case: roundness in a hilltop is both similar and different to roundness in a baseball. Absolute similarity (identity) would mean the term being applied is univocal; absolute difference would mean it is equivocal. This dynamic of similarity and difference also holds if the

---

satisfy his purpose in definition. He does not have available the Aristotelian conception of focal meaning, or the Wittgensteinian tool of family resemblance, either one of which could have gathered together various ways of being fine. Instead, he has to choose between extreme accounts of the matter; he can either list different ways of being fine without connecting them (in the tradition of Gorgias), or he can insist on there being simply one way of being fine.” Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 156-157. On the same question, Benardete writes: “Predication of beauty is in the literal sense metaphor.” See Benardete, *Being of the Beautiful*, xvii.


87
analogy is made with reference to a “focal meaning.” Aristotle’s notion of a focal meaning requires a focal term around which all other predications are made. Another term for this type of predication captures its structure: it is a core-dependent homonymy. A term—say, “health”—can be used in different but interrelated ways. Here is an example (from the *Stanford Encyclopedia*):

Socrates is healthy. (1)

Socrates’s exercise regimen is healthy. (2)

Socrates’s complexion is healthy. (3)\(^{137}\)

Statements 2 and 3 derive their meaning from statement 1; that is, they are either indicative of Socrates’s health, or contribute to it. A similar type of logic is at play in Socrates’s and Hippias’s usage of “beautiful” in the *Hippias Major*. At times, the focal meaning appears to be anthropocentric: beautiful things are beautiful insofar as they appear useful for human beings. Therefore, mares and spoons and statues are beautiful insofar as they please or are useful for human beings in a certain way. But there are other times, in Socrates’s use of the term especially, when a focal meaning is more difficult to find. The following passage (from a later point in the dialogue than the section I have been treating in this chapter) gives us one instance where “beautiful” is used in an analogical way, while its focal meaning in “beautiful” is elusive.

Socrates attempts to defend his definition of the beautiful as “ability” (or power) or “usefulness” (τὴν δύναμιν καὶ ταῦτα τὰ χρήσιμα, 295c) in the following way:

And that’s how we call the whole body beautiful, sometimes for running, sometimes for wrestling.  
And the same goes for all animals—a beautiful horse, rooster, or quail—and all utensils and means of transport on land and sea, boats and warships, and the tools of every skill, music and all the others; and, if you want, activities and laws—*virtually all these are called beautiful in the*

\(^{137}\) Shields, “Aristotle.”
In this passage, Socrates appears to be describing such a dynamic of similarity and difference that is proper to analogical attribution: a rooster is beautiful in a way that is both the same and different from the way a law is beautiful. A being’s nature is always different, but beauty is always in some sense the same. Socrates expresses his concern for the unchanging dimension of beauty when he says that all beings are said to be beautiful in the same way. Yet the word σχεδόν, “nearly” or “almost,” is the key here, because it indicates the possibility of analogical attribution, that is, of a negotiation between same and difference in every different type of being. If Socrates meant to express the idea that the beautiful, as a term of attribution, is purely univocal, he would not have used that word. Rather, Socrates takes into account the nature of every being in order to determine the way in which its beauty (i.e., usefulness), manifests itself. However, a focal term is not easy to find. If the focal term were beauty as useful for human beings, then why is a rooster also beautiful? Some of the items on Socrates’s list could be roped into an anthropocentric focal meaning—boats, warships, even horses for horseback riding. But others—roosters, quails—do not easily lend themselves to such a focal meaning.

Even before this passage, however, the dialogue provides us with a definition of the beautiful which implies analogical attribution. The notion of appropriateness also evokes analogy: what is appropriate for making a beautiful statue of Athena may not be appropriate for a statue of Zeus. The appropriate is understood only with reference to what is the same and what is different in every being. A beautiful statue of Athena and Zeus both require the same materials,
but different colors. Understanding the beauty according to the principle of appropriateness requires an analogical understanding of the beautiful. Once again, however, its focal meaning is elusive. Is beauty-as-appropriateness the same thing as taste, which is defined according to a particular human culture? Or does its appropriateness depend on the particular nature of an object (e.g., Athena requires different colors because of properties inherent to Athena, not because of cultural standards of taste). The *Hippias Major* does not settle the matter here.

A more accurate summary of the above would be to simply say that Socrates does two things with the word, “beautiful.” First, he consistently applies the word “beautiful” in an analogous way, that is, in a way that retains a degree of sameness and difference in every application. Second, he sometimes appeals to a focal meaning, and sometimes he does not. But Socrates’s inconsistency, if it is right to call it that, is due to the fact that he keeps his horizon open. He wants to be able to consider the beauty of beings both in their relation to human life (i.e., in relation to an anthropocentric focal meaning), and as they are in themselves (such as the beauty of gods, which has nothing to do with usefulness for human beings). The philosophical impulse moves a soul beyond its own experiences; an erotic search for the beautiful itself will necessarily encounter both beings beautiful for human beings, and beings beautiful in themselves. The interrogative stance, which (as I argue in Chapter 1) is one characteristic of philosophical *eros*, is open to new possibilities of what the beautiful might be. Socrates is inconsistent only if one adopts the standard that beauty must be encapsulated in one type of attribution. Instead, the inconsistency is a sign that Socrates’s understanding of beauty is always conditioned by those objects he encounters.

Of crucial importance for our purposes here is the fact that analogical attribution, which we see in the *Hippias Major*, is also a requirement for an “ascent” to take place. Whether it refers
to a focal meaning or not, analogical attribution has the effect of opening up the discourse about
the beautiful, and making an “ascent” possible. Analogical attribution dovetails with usage of
“the beautiful” implied in Diotima’s “ascent” passages. In order to make an ascent, I would have
to call a human body beautiful, and then several other bodies (of different types, but all
beautiful); second, I would have to judge a soul to be beautiful as well, in a very different way.
From there, I would have to discover the beauty of laws, and scientific principles, etc. The
implication is that beauty “happens” in all different levels of being, yet something remains the
same. Socrates’s manner of speaking about the beautiful and the beauty of beings in the Hippias
Major and Diotima’s way of doing the same in the Symposium are, in this respect, essentially the
same. A person is led by eros to perceive the beauty of all kinds of objects, and it is Socrates’s
and Hippias’s eros which allows them to do the same in the Hippias Major.

To be sure, text of the Hippias Major does not ever make a theme of the “forms of
predication.” Nor does the idea of analogical attribution appear explicitly in the philosophical
writings of Plato. What the preceding reflections accomplish is a descriptive account of
Socrates’s usage of the term, “the beautiful,” as well as of the logic of that usage. These
reflections allow us to see a similarity between Socrates’s and Hippias’s dialogue in the Hippias
Major and Diotima’s in the ascent passage of the Symposium. Socrates’s way of speaking about
the beautiful and beautiful beings is de facto analogical because it is ascending and erotic.
Moreover, Socrates’s speaks in a way that is not univocal or equivocal, but analogical, only
because this is the best way to approach the multiplicity of beings that are beautiful in the world.
In this context, reality dictates speech. Socrates is not worried about the internal consistency of
his discourse of predication so long as it describes the beautiful as he experiences it. At this point
in the dialogue, when the main objective on Socrates’s part is the broadening of Hippias’s horizons, nothing more is required.

**Conclusion**

In *The Imaginary*, his phenomenological treatise on the imagination, Jean-Paul Sartre makes the following remark about the *Hippias Major*, which gives us a concluding perspective on the dialogue as a whole, and this section in particular. In a section analyzing the relationship between image, thought, and illustrations of thought, Sartre writes:

Socrates asked Hippias, “What is beauty?” and Hippias responded “It is a beautiful woman, a beautiful horse, etc.” This response seems to me to mark not only an historical step in the development of human thought but also a necessary step (although the habit of reflection can curtail it) in the production of a concrete individual thought. The first response of thought naturally takes the form of the image.138

The *eros* of Socratic inquiry, on the other hand, takes us not necessarily beyond images per se, but beyond concrete sensory experiences of beauty, and toward moral or theoretical entities (e.g., noble lives). The *eros* of Socratic inquiry, in other words, takes us in a philosophical direction. The impetus or drive behind his questioning constitutes an ascent, of sorts: from sexuality, to an appreciation of the beauty of other types of beings—from mares, to spoons, to noble lives. At least in this, admittedly very general, sense, the dialectical trajectory which Hippias takes (at Socrates’s prompting) parallels that of the initial movements of Diotima’s ascent passage in the *Symposium*. Socrates is motivated by an *eros* of inquiry, and his questions inspire philosophical thought and demand philosophical answers. Hippias, whose life and profession are opposed to

---

philosophy, and whose character is (at the beginning of his encounter with Socrates) dominated by *epithumia*, nevertheless makes an ascent by allowing himself to be led by philosophical *eros*. 
Chapter 3

From Appearances to Being

So far in the *Hippias Major*, we have seen philosophical *eros* play a role as an implicit motivator of action. We have seen how the question of the beautiful is born out of philosophical *eros*, and how Socrates’s engagement with Hippias, before and after the posing of the question of the beautiful, bears an erotic structure (Chapter 1). We have also seen, in Socrates’s response to Hippias’s three definitions of the beautiful, how philosophical *eros* has the effect of opening up new vistas of possibilities for exploring what “the beautiful itself” might be, in a way that bears similarities to Diotima’s ascent in the *Symposium* (Chapter 2). In this chapter, as we venture into the part of the *Hippias Major* when Socrates decides to present his own definitions, we will see *eros* emerge, not only as a motivator of action, but as a necessary requirement for making any insights into the nature of the beautiful itself. More specifically, will see how only a person driven by philosophical *eros* (such as Socrates himself) has the adequate disposition to make any such insights. It follows that Hippias will make insights into the *eidos* of the beautiful only to the extent that he adopts Socrates’s philosophical stance—that is, unless he lives his *eros* in an interrogative stance, and with an interest in the good.¹³⁹

This thesis is founded primarily on Socrates’s statement that to search for the beautiful itself means to search for that which, “by coming to be present,” makes things *be* beautiful, and not merely *be seen* (*φαίνεσθαι*) to be beautiful (294a). This statement (to which Hippias eventually assents) implies that it is possible for a human being to make an insight into the beautiful as it is in itself. This implication raises the following questions. First: Given that our

¹³⁹ We continue to use *eidos* interchangeably with “the beautiful itself,” as is justified by Socrates’s usage in 289d: “Do you still think that the beautiful itself by which everything else is beautified and seen to be beautiful when that form (*τὸ εἶδος*) is added to it – that that is a girl or a horse or a lyre?”
initial knowledge of the beautiful comes only from beautiful appearances (e.g., maidens, pots, and virtues) is it possible to pass from knowledge that certain objects are beautiful, to an insight into the beautiful itself as being something both distinct from beautiful objects, and also that which causes beautiful objects to be beautiful? This question leads to a second one, which strikes at the very heart of this dialogue. Hippias and Socrates come to an agreement early on that “the beautiful itself is something,” and this agreement formed the foundation of their dialogue.

Socrates is now effectively putting that foundation into question. How could they know about the existence of the *eidos* of the beautiful, of “the beautiful itself,” which they are searching for, if neither Hippias nor Socrates had, at that point, claimed to have moved beyond appearances? Or, conversely, could Hippias and Socrates be said to have (somehow) *already* passed from appearances to being right at the beginning of their dialogue, in merely becoming *aware* that “the beautiful itself is something”?

Addressing these questions requires three steps. First, I will expound upon the operative notion of “knowledge” in the *Hippias Major*. This will allow for a clearer picture what then is meant by a correct account of the beautiful itself, one that corresponds to being and not appearances. Second, I will argue for the following claim, the first half of the thesis stated above:

*The passage from beautiful appearances to the beautiful itself is made possible by the fact that the eidos of the beautiful manifests itself in appearance more readily, and more clearly, than other forms.* As I aim to show, this “special” status that the beautiful has is expressed in this statement: “Then if the appropriate makes things be seen to be more beautiful than they are, it would be a kind of deceit (ἀπάτη) about the beautiful, and it wouldn’t be what we are looking for, would it, Hippias?” (294a). Third, I will defend the notion that only the philosopher has an adequate disposition with which to make an insight into the *eidos* of the beautiful. The reasoning
for this is as follows: Only the seeker driven by philosophical eros has the desire to know (however unfulfillable this desire might be) the truth beyond appearance and of being itself, and thus only the erotic seeker can make sense, and make use, of the radiant nature of the beautiful. Only the philosopher seizes the possibility opened up by the beautiful, which manifests itself more clearly than other forms in appearance. Thus the drama of the Hippias Major hinges on the pressing fact that Hippias will never be able to know the beautiful unless he follows Socrates and becomes a philosopher. If he merely dwells in appearance—if he continues to enjoy beautiful speeches disconnected from truth, and beautiful dress disconnected from a concern about the beauty of his soul—he will never be able to see the beautiful as it is in itself. On the other hand, Socrates has been driven by philosophical eros from the beginning—that is, his questioning leads him to desire knowledge beyond appearances already from the very beginning of the dialogue, and this is why he is able to ask the question about the “beautiful itself.”

*Socrates’s “Knowledge”*

My claim in this chapter is that philosophical eros is required for knowledge of the beautiful itself. In order to make this argument, the term “knowledge” needs to be clarified. I believe that the notion of knowledge operative in the Hippias Major is noesis, as opposed to episteme—that is, a flash of insight, as opposed to a demonstrable and exhaustive account of what the beautiful itself is. In what follows, I will articulate why I believe this to be the case.

First, we should take stock of the terms for different types of knowledge which appears in the text. First and foremost is sophia, in the adjectival form, sophos. The word makes its appearance in the very first line of the dialogue: “Here comes Hippias, beautiful and wise! How long it’s been since you put in to Athens!” (Ἰππίας ὁ καλός τε καὶ σοφός: ὡς διὰ χρόνου ἡμῖν κατήρας εἰς τὰς Ἀθήνας, 281a). This word, of course, can be used to refer both to the knowledge
of craft, or to the shrewdness that is proper to a wealthy sophist. It may also refer to the higher wisdom that Socrates is after in his philosophical work. The juxtaposition between *sophia* and beauty at this initial point in the dialogue suggests that the two concepts will have a bearing on the other. On the one hand, Hippias claims to have wisdom about beauty, insofar as he claims to know how to speak beautifully, and gain money from doing so. On the other, Socrates seeks a different kind of wisdom about beauty, the type of wisdom which makes an insight into its intelligible nature. Soon after, Socrates brings up the question of what it means to be truly wise (τὸ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ σοφόν, 281b). While at this early point in the dialogue, Socrates is busy flattering Hippias for his purported wisdom and material success, it will soon become clear that his wisdom will be tested, rather than taken for granted. The way it will be tested is by measuring its capacity to explain what the *eidos* of the beautiful is. Thus with this word, *sophia*, the dialogue introduces the stakes at the heart of this dialogue, and also indicates something of the type of knowledge that the dialogue is after: a knowledge that is both related to life (insofar as *sophia* includes a sense of prudence), but also one that is separate from the shrewdness and skill of the sophists (because Socrates makes clear that the technique of the sophists will be rejected in favor of a philosophical investigation of the beautiful itself140).

Further confirmation that the understanding of *sophia* which Socrates favors is one which is tied to philosophy and not to sophistry comes when he uses the word again much later in the dialogue: “Good! Then doesn’t it follow from these points that, by god, wisdom is really the most beautiful thing of all, and ignorance the foulest?” (296a). Wisdom, the most beautiful thing, is wisdom about how to best run a city, that is, how to run it according to sound principle. But the location of this exclamation in the dialogue suggests that this sound principle is one that is linked to wisdom about the good—Socrates’s exclamation comes right before he begins to speak

---

140 As I argue in Chapter One.
about the beneficial, and eventually the good, as guiding standards for the proper exercise of power. The arrival of the category of goodness constitutes a shift in the dialogue (which I discuss in Chapter Four).

The word *techne* appears with the reference to the “skill of the sophists” (τὴν τῶν σοφιστῶν τέχνην, 281d). A close reading of the ensuing passages will show the manifold skills of which Hippias boasts, and which constitute the whole of his “sophistical” art.\(^\text{141}\) However much Hippias elaborates on this art, and however much Socrates indulges Hippias by listening and congratulating him for the same, the thrust of the dialogue will eventually lead to placing this art or skill on trial. With every criticism that Socrates makes of Hippias’s inadequate definitions of the beautiful, the latter’s boasts to wisdom become ever more doubtful. Thus balance between the two meanings of *sophia*, which I discuss above, is tilted toward philosophical wisdom; that is, the type of wisdom that the dialogue shows to be more viable for the task of making some sort of insight into the nature of the beautiful itself is shown to be philosophical wisdom rather than the art of sophistry. Thus the dialogue favors philosophical wisdom over and against the *techne* of sophistry, at least with regard to the task of obtaining knowledge about the nature of the beautiful itself.

The verb *noein* only appears in the negative form, ἀγνοεῖσθαι (294d). However, the context in which the word is used suggests that *noesis* is the type of knowledge which most properly describes what Socrates is after. All of those “customs and activities” which are both “thought and seen to be beautiful” (πάντα τὰ τῶ ὄντι καλὰ καὶ νόμιμα καὶ ἐπιτηδεύματα καὶ δοξάζεσθαι καλὰ, 294d) are not always incontrovertibly beautiful; often, Socrates argues, there is much strife and contention about them, because they are “unknown” (ἀγνοεῖσθαι, 294d). Hippias concurs, using the same word. Socrates’s speech in this passage associates being “unknown”

\(^{141}\) See Chapter One for a more extensive discussion of the art of sophistry in the *Hippias Major*.
with being “unseen” and “not thought.” In other words, a beautiful object can be seen to be
beautiful or not be seen to be beautiful, and it would be the same thing to say that it can be
known to be beautiful, and not known to be so (ἀγνοεῖσθαι). To see the eidos of the beautiful in
the appearance of a beautiful object (e.g., a custom or activity) is to know it (noesis). Thus this
passages suggests that the proper term for the type of knowledge that Socrates is after—the
knowledge that makes insights within beautiful objects as to the nature of that which causes them
to become beautiful (i.e., their eidos)—is noesis.

The importance of noesis in the dialogue is also suggested by Socrates’s phrasing of his
question about the beautiful. This phrasing does not make use of technical philosophical
vocabulary. Socrates does not explicitly state that he is after a comprehensive demonstrative
account, or episteme, of the beautiful.142 The initial phrasing of the question (286c) uses a more
common verb for knowledge, οἶδα. The way in which Socrates phrases his question is open-
ended. He phrases it (or his imaginary friend does) in terms of giving an account: ἔχοις ἂν εἰπεῖν
tί ἐστι τὸ καλὸν ("Could you be able to say what the beautiful is?" 286d). He also phrases it in
terms of an explanation for the root cause of all particular instantiations of the beautiful: ταῦτα
πάντα ἃ φῃς καλὰ εἶναι, εἰ τί ἐστιν αὕτο τὸ καλὸν, ταῦτ᾽ ἂν εἶπη καλὰ;’ ("Come now, Socrates,
give me an answer. All those things you say are beautiful, will they be beautiful if the beautiful
itself is what?” 288a). Also, as we have already seen, his question rests upon a premise, “the
beautiful itself is something” (ἔστι τι τοῦτο, 287c-d). It follows that this premise can only be
classified as a noetic insight, a “flash” which forms the foundation for further dialectical inquiry
into the beautiful itself. It is a noetic insight into a formal structure which exists independently of

142 Here I am going by Hyland’s account of episteme, in Hyland, Finitude and Transcendence, 192.
its particular instantiations. As noted above, the type of insight that sees the *eidos* within the beautiful object is *noesis*.\(^{143}\)

From all the above claims, we can see that Socrates does not necessarily ask for a comprehensive, demonstrative account (an *episteme*) of the beautiful, but rather that his question is open-ended and non-technical in expression. Moreover, since his question is founded upon a noetic insight, we can reasonably infer that *every* knowledge claim that Socrates makes in the *Hippias Major*, as well as the object of his question—an account of the beautiful itself—is *noesis*.

More support for this inference can be seen further into the dialogue. All of the subsequent claims that Socrates makes with regard to the beautiful in the *Hippias Major*—such as that it is a form (*eidos*) with causal power (289d), which causes a being to be, and not merely appear, to be beautiful (294d), and which is “father” of the good (297c)—can only be understood as a deepening of the original noetic insight that the beautiful itself *is something*. These claims are all founded upon this initial insight, and are not intelligible without it. It would not make sense, for example, to argue that the beautiful itself is an *eidos*, if it were not also something in itself. It would not make sense to distinguish the causal power of the beautiful as corresponding to being and not appearances, if the beautiful were not already something in itself. The initial noetic “flash” into the formal structure of the beautiful is the source and foundation of all subsequent knowledge about the beautiful, and this knowledge can only be characterized as *noesis*.

But there is more to the concept of *noesis* than the solitary or static insight into a formal structure. The idea that Socrates and Hippias “deepen” their understanding of the founding noetic insight implies that *noesis* is a type of knowledge which admits of degrees. The initial noetic

\(^{143}\) See Chapter One for a discussion of the definition of *noesis* in Plato.
insight does not yield comprehensive or absolute knowledge about the beautiful itself, but rather the knowledge that there is a formal structure, independent of appearances, of which we can deepen our knowledge through dialectical inquiry and dianoia, or discursive reasoning. All of the claims which Socrates makes about the beautiful (that it is an eidos with causal power, etc.), are discovered in a process of dialectical inquiry conducted with Hippias, which is nevertheless founded upon, and conducted in light of, the original noetic insight. Thus there is no contradiction between the notion of noesis—knowledge coming through an immediate insight—and the notion that knowledge comes at the end of a dialectical process. In order to see how the two can come together, it is helpful to adopt Hyland’s distinction between “archaic noesis” and “telic noesis.” While the founding noetic insight is the “archaic” foundation for further inquiry, and insight into what the matter for thought is, the “telic” insight is the product of the refining and elucidating work of dialectic which is performed in the Socratic dialogue, and is the “final or culminating insight toward which speech hopefully leads us, but which again is not reducible to the speech itself.” An important corollary to this is that an ultimate, “absolute” noesis is impossible, because it would entail a comprehensive knowledge of a formal structure, and such an accomplishment does not seem to be possible within the finite horizon of understanding available to a human being. (It would perhaps entail something like the journey to the heavenly realm which we see in the Phaedrus. Or, to put it in Cartesian terms, it would entail a certain, “clear and distinct” idea of what the eidos of the beautiful is, something which Socrates never claims to have). The erotic structure of philosophical questioning is, in fact, a reflection of this finitude: the philosopher asks questions because he is both the bearer of a founding noetic insight and also because he is aware of the incompleteness of his knowledge about the matter

144 Drew Hyland, Finitude and Transcendence, 182.
145 Drew Hyland, Finitude and Transcendence, 182.
146 As Hyland puts it, both the archaic and telic noeses are “partial.” Hyland, Finitude and Transcendence, 192.
which the noetic insight gives but a glimpse. Therefore, every time Socrates or Hippias claim to
“know” something about the beautiful as it is in itself (e.g., that has causal power or that it is
good), this knowledge corresponds to an incomplete noetic insight into the beautiful, an insight
which has come about through repeated experiences of beautiful beings. These repeated
experiences bring the philosopher to an awareness of certain traits, which he then is able to
name. He does not know that these traits are “certain,” in the Cartesian sense. But he knows that
they form a consistent, trustworthy part of his experience of the beautiful. That said, his
knowledge about the beautiful does not amount to an “absolute” account or a quasi-Hegelian
absolute consciousness of the beautiful itself. The philosopher is both “rich” and “poor”—rich in
insights, but short of absolute knowledge.

If the type of knowledge that Socrates is after is an ever-deeper noesis of the eidos of the
beautiful, then this has a special bearing on the theme taken up in this chapter: appearances and
being. Socrates argues that the eidos of the beautiful is a property of a beautiful object’s being,
not its appearance. This means that any noesis of the beautiful itself is a noesis of something as it
is beyond appearances, although it is, at the same time, an insight made within appearances. It is
a type of knowledge that seeks a non-perspectival standpoint, or rather, a standpoint from the
perspective of the object to known, rather than the knower. However, the philosopher, in his
noetic aspiration, can never find this standpoint, nor know the object as it is in itself. The
philosopher can only ever make noetic insights into the object’s nature based on what its
appearances reveal.

This distinction between appearance and being is already foreshadowed in the implied
distinction between true and false opinion which undergirds Socrates’s question from the very
beginning (if you are asking “What is the beautiful?”, it is implied that there are true and false
answers to this question). At the point of the dialogue I treat in this chapter (294a), this
distinction between true and false opinion is recast in terms of appearance and being: appearance
is false, and being is true. The beautiful corresponds to being, and not to appearance. A wrong
opinion about the beautiful is an account of the beautiful itself would be one which only takes
into account a beautiful object’s appearance within a particular perspective, and a correct account
is one which touches upon the beautiful object’s being. However, here lies the rub: Since the
beautiful manifests more brilliantly than most forms do in appearance (as I will argue in the
following section), the philosopher who is seeking after the eidos of the beautiful will have an
easier time making noetic insights about it. Beauty is, as it were, “friendly” to the philosopher.

**The Beautiful is Radiant**

Socrates states explicitly that whatever the eidos of the beautiful may be, it should not be
associated with that which deceives; that is, if it is present in a being, then that being more than
likely should appear beautiful as well.\(^{147}\) Socrates lays the foundation for this claim first when he
rejects the “appropriate” as a definition of the beautiful on the grounds that it may be deceptive:
“Then if the appropriate makes things be seen to be more beautiful than they are, it would be a
kind of deceit (ἀπάτη) about the beautiful, and it wouldn’t be what we are looking for, would it,
Hippias?” (294a). Appearances cannot make a beautiful being appear more beautiful than it is,
and they cannot make a being appear to be beautiful if it is not beautiful in itself. The claim is
further established in this exchange: “S: Is it impossible for things that are really beautiful not to

\(^{147}\) This interpretation of this section of the dialogue may sound odd at first, but as we shall see, it is found
indifferent forms in other commentaries of the dialogue. Making the point most explicitly is, perhaps, Joe Sachs’s
commentary, which claims that, in the Hippias Major, “One criterion of the beautiful, then, may be that it belongs
only, or more properly, to things that reveal rather than conceal what they are.” This notion that “revealing” rather
than “concealing” is an essential attribute of the beautiful is later cast by Sachs in terms of “accessibility”: “[the
beautiful is] an activity with the twofold property that allows access to the enjoyment of the beautiful.” See Sachs,
Plato and the Sophists, 26-27. In this chapter, I attempt to understanding this essential attribute of “revealing” and
“access” in terms of philosophical eros.
be seen to be beautiful, since what makes them be seen is present? H: It’s impossible” (294c). What “makes them be seen” to be beautiful is both the beautiful itself and the human observer. Both come together in a radiant appearance of the beautiful itself. This unique property of the beautiful—that it shines forth and communicates itself to the human observer more readily, and more brilliantly, than other forms—is one which Socrates affirms but does not explicitly justify, though it plays a key role in understanding how a person would be able to discover the eidos of the beautiful. In order to make an insight into the eidos of the beautiful, one must aim to know a beautiful being as it is in itself. This type of knowledge, noesis, is always incomplete, precisely because it is impossible to know what an object is like in itself, beyond appearances. We can only ever know a beautiful object as it appears to us, and any insight into the eidos of the beautiful is made based on those appearances. Any noetic insight made into the eidos of the beautiful therefore is an insight that will always fall short of capturing with comprehensiveness the nature of the eidos. It will always be incomplete, a striving for knowledge beyond appearances that cannot actually go beyond what the appearances themselves reveal.

Nevertheless, Socrates does seem to hint at something when he says that the eidos of the

---

148 Hyland argues that with this second passage, Socrates shifts “the sense of phainesthai (unannounced, of course) away from the sense of mere seeming to the more positive sense of appearance.” See Hyland, Plato and the Question of Beauty, 21. According to my interpretation, Socrates is not so much shifting from one sense to another as he is overcoming the ambiguity of phainesthai. An appearance can entail both an object “seeming” like something it is, or “seeming” like something it is not; Socrates (so we argue) is saying that the beautiful will always seem to be what it is in itself.

149 Hyland argues that Socrates never provides a justification for this belief: “…Socrates assumes that the fact that beauty might be deceptive on this definition is enough to refute it. He seems unwilling to accept that beauty might very well, at least some of the time, have something to do with deception or illusion. He does not argue against this impossibility but simply asserts it. Should we accept it without argument? This is hardly obvious.” See Hyland, Plato and the Question of Beauty, 20. I will attempt to provide a justification for Socrates’s assumption in Chapter Four, arguing that Socrates’s view that the beautiful is good provides a ground for trust in the beautiful – although the notion of beauty’s goodness itself actually does lack justification.

150 D.C. Schindler has a useful formulation of this same problem in his study of Plato’s Republic: “If knowledge is going to be possible, it will require a kind of relation that is at the same time a non-relation, or manifestation of what is non-manifest, as non-manifest.” That is, knowledge of an object as it is in itself begins with a relation between knower and object (which we call “appearance”) but must attempt to know the object as it is known in itself, independent of any relation (independent of appearances). See D.C. Schindler, Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason, 122.
beautiful has nothing to do with deceit, and that it cannot make an object appear to be beautiful when it is not in fact beautiful. The beautiful itself has a certain radiance for Socrates, and this radiance makes it easier for the philosopher to make insights into the *eidos* of the beautiful when looking at beautiful objects. In order to see how this is so, we must first comb the text to unearth the basic claims that Socrates makes about being and appearances, and the radiant nature of the beautiful. Having done this, we can move on to elaborate and develop the reasons why the beautiful, thanks to its radiant nature, is able to mediate the passage from the appearance of beauty to the beautiful itself.

Socrates makes several substantive claims concerning being, appearances, and the radiant nature of the beautiful, in one relatively short, but dense, passage (293e-295a). The setting of the scene which immediately precedes this passage is important because it involves the moment in which Socrates decides to assume the leadership of the dialogue and begin to propose his own definitions of the beautiful. This “restart” provides important context to his subsequent claims. Socrates tells Hippias that his (Socrates’s) imaginary friend will scold him (Socrates) for not be able to define the beautiful correctly (after having refuted three possible definitions from Hippias). The imaginary friend would instead propose a return to a definition which was briefly entertained in the preceding discussion about the definition of the beautiful as “gold” (289d). This definition is: the beautiful as the “appropriate” or “fitting.” Earlier in the dialogue, Socrates notes that gold “makes things be seen to be beautiful when they’re appropriate [πρέπει]” and Hippias responds that perhaps the appropriate may be the *eidos* they are looking for (290d). But the definition is dropped after a few lines; Socrates uses it mostly to debunk “gold” as a possible definition. Now, Socrates’s imaginary friend suggests a return to it (or rather, he would suggest such a thing), and Socrates decides to steer the dialogue in this direction. Socrates will continue
to control the direction of the dialogue from this point onwards until its conclusion. “I’ll show you” (293e) he says, signaling that he has taken the reins of the discussion.

The return to a discussion of the appropriate is the occasion for Socrates to lay down some essential elements to their investigation into the beautiful itself, essential elements which we will parse below. But already the discussion about the appropriate gives hints of the discussion to come. The Greek word at play, πρέπη, comes from the verb πρέπω, which may mean both “to be conspicuously fitting” and “to be clearly seen.” Socrates and Hippias quite clearly use the term in the sense of “fittingness,” as they refer to the fact that a spoon made out of fig is more fitting for stirring soup than one made out of gold (291b-c). However, the other meaning of the word must resonate as well, especially to a Greek audience. That resonance has a philosophical import. As we saw in Chapter 2, the term already signals a departure from Hippias’s definitions up to that point: “a beautiful maiden” (287e) and “gold” (289e). Those definitions are oriented toward the visual (gold) or perceptual in a greater sense (beautiful body). The appropriate, on the other hand, is not something one can see or touch; it is a principle by which certain things are made to conform with their purpose or to conform with a certain “look.” Wood is appropriate for a spoon, and a tuxedo is appropriate for a formal dinner. Thus to propose the appropriate as the definition of the beautiful is to take one step away from the purely “perceptual” or vision- and body-oriented view of beauty that Hippias has been espousing up to that moment.151 Yet the appropriate is still tied to appearance in a way that, as we will see below, Socrates finds to be a problem.

151 G.M.A. Grube makes a similar interpretation of this part of the dialogue: “Hippias’s first definition of ‘beauty,’ as a beautiful maiden, is plainly only a particular concrete example of beauty. When this is pointed out he proposes gold, which is, no doubt, still a particular concrete, but it would not at once appear to be so to an untrained mind, since gold is beautiful in combination with a large number of different things. This gives Socrates an opportunity to make plain that προσγίγνεσθαι when applied to ideas, is not to be understood in the literal physical sense, that the universal is not something which is added to the particular from outside.” “From the outside” I take to mean, “appearance.” Socrates is making a point about form and being, not about appearance. See G.M.A. Grube, “The
Socrates begins to establish claims about appearances, being, and the radiant nature of the beautiful when he asks the following question: “What do we say about the appropriate? That it is what makes—by coming to be present—each thing to which it is present be seen [φαίνεσθαι] to be beautiful, or be [εἶναι] beautiful, or neither?” (294a). The question is the ground upon which Socrates will make distinctions about appearance and being. Hippias responds: “I think it’s what makes things be seen to be beautiful. For example, when someone puts on clothes and shoes that suit him, even if he’s ridiculous, he is seen to be more beautiful” (294a). This is an interesting response, because Hippias himself is said to be well-clad (“you’re so beautifully dressed, beautifully shod…” 291a). It is self-serving, but in a provocative way. Hippias seems to value appearances more than reality. Regardless, the phrase also implies a lack of proportional correspondence between moral character and physical beauty: one may appear beautiful (because of fitting clothing) while still being ridiculous (γελοῖος, “mirth-provoking, ludicrous, absurd”). Socrates does not like the possibility of such discordance at all: “Then if the appropriate makes things be seen to be more beautiful than they are, it would be a kind of deceit [ἀπάτη] about the beautiful, and it wouldn’t be what we are looking for, would it, Hippias?” (294a). This statement suggests that the beautiful is never deceptive in appearance, or that, somehow, the two things do not go together, beauty and deception. It is, I contend, a key sentence in the 

Logic and Language of the Hippias Major,” Classical Philology 24 (1929): 370. Likewise, David Wolfsdorf, writing in a more analytical idiom, observes: “…Socrates describes the Ff relation as one of addition (προσγένησις). He clearly does not mean that the physical attachment of F to f particulars makes them beautiful. But Hippias’s conception of F and of the Ff relation appears to be quite concrete. Under the influence of the verb ‘κοσμεῖται,’ which Hippias interprets to mean is adorned, and the word εἶδος, which he interprets to mean visual aspect or appearance, Hippias takes Socrates to be asking him to identify the kind of physical thing that when added to other objects, beautifies them. … Thus, the Ff relation is conceived as one of physical contiguity.” Wolfsdorf allows for the possibility that Hippias moves beyond this corporeal understanding of beauty: “…arguably by the time Hippias proposes his third definition, he no longer conceives of the definiendum as corporeal; consequently, he would not conceive of the Ff relation as corporeal... Certainly when he proposes his third definition, Hippias cannot have a corporeal conception of τὸ καλὸν in mind. Nevertheless, he might revert to one later in the investigation.” See David Wolfsdorf, “Hippias Major 301b2-c2: Plato’s Critique of a Corporeal Conception of Forms and of the Form-Participant Relation,” 248-249.
eidos of the beautiful appears to be more easily accessible in appearances than other forms, and as a consequence it is easier for the philosopher to make insights into its nature. Hippias never explicitly says that he agrees with it, but he also never attacks it. He chooses to accept it, at least, as a premise to the rest of their discussion. His next response to Socrates will be to say that the appropriate makes things “both be beautiful and be seen to be beautiful, when it’s present” (294c, emphasis mine). The hedging involved in that statement gives the sense that Hippias is trying to have it both ways: he wants to know what may follow from holding the premise that the beautiful is radiant, but he will not clearly declare himself to be a believer in the claim.

But before Hippias makes this last statement, Socrates makes a relatively long speech where he makes several claims about the beautiful and its radiant nature. Also, right after Hippias makes this last statement, Socrates establishes several other claims, to which Hippias gives his implicit assent, inasmuch as he does not contest them. He is, at the very least, allowing Socrates to make his claims, uninterrupted. The complexity of all of these claims requires that we look carefully at almost every line in this passage, and that we divide the claims into two groups, those which concern the eidos, and those which concern appearances. This division is prefigured by Socrates’s statement that he is searching for the cause of being, and not of appearances: “S: We must try to say what it is that makes things be beautiful [τὸ δὲ ποιοῦν εἶναι καλά], whether they are seen to be beautiful or not, just as I said a moment ago. That’s what we’re looking for, if we’re really looking for the beautiful” (294c).152 This implies that being and appearance could have different causes, a belief which he attempts to justify in the subsequent claims. Together, these claims support the notion that the beautiful is radiant and open to philosophical inquiry in a special way, and that thanks to this radiance, the eidos of the beautiful

152 Slightly modified from Woodruff’s translation. I added the word “be” to emphasize εἶναι.
is more readily accessible to the philosopher who is searching for it within the beautiful objects that appear before him.

Concerning the *eidos*, Socrates makes the following claims. First, as we have already seen, the *eidos*, “the beautiful itself,” is that which causes a being to be beautiful. Second, the *eidos* causes a being to be beautiful *in itself*, not relative to the observer. The *eidos* gives an object an intrinsic property, one which Socrates compares with the concept of extension: “S: I thought we were looking for that by which all beautiful things are beautiful. For example, what all large things are large by is the projecting [τῷ ὑπερέχοντι, also “the excess”]. For by that all large things—even if they are not seen to be so—if they project they are necessarily large [or excessive]” (294a-b). In other words, beauty is not a property that only makes sense in a relation, like the size of one object compared to another. I deem something to be large or small relative to my size. But extension, or projection, is something intrinsic to any object insofar as it occupies space.153 Third, *by itself*, the *eidos* does not cause a being to appear to be beautiful. The *eidos* is a necessary, but not sufficient cause to the beauty of an object. Socrates asserts this by using the appropriate as a possible cause of the beautiful: “Therefore, if the appropriate is what makes things beautiful, it would be the beautiful we’re looking for, but it would not be what makes things be seen to be beautiful. Or, if the appropriate is what makes things be seen to be beautiful, it wouldn’t be the beautiful we’re looking for. Because that [i.e., what we’re looking for] makes things be; but *by itself* [μόνον] it could not make things be seen to be and be, nor could anything

---

153 Socrates’s analogy of “largeness” is questionable. Is not largeness a concept that only makes sense *relative* to something else? An elephant is large relative to a mouse, but small relative to the Moon. Nevertheless, it does seem that Plato or Socrates believes that largeness can be an absolute magnitude or form in and of itself. Nothing in the text would indicate otherwise. Benardete makes sense of Socrates’s analogy by saying that it refers to “the eidetic big,” that is, largeness or bigness as a formal concept, and not as it is manifest in reality (where it would become relative). See Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful*, xxxv. Woodruff notes a parallel between this passage and *Phaedo* 102b-c. See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 65n19. A more striking parallel is found in 102d, where Simmias speaks of “the greatness in us will never admit the small or allow itself to be exceeded” (τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν μέγεθος οὐδέποτε προσδέχεσθαι τὸ σμικρὸν οὐδὲ ἐθέλειν ὑπερέχεσθαι). (Quoted from Fowler’s translation.)
else” (294d-e, emphasis mine). This is also an argument for the earlier claim that being and appearance have different causes. The *eidos* causes a being to become beautiful, but a being appears to be beautiful only because of a combination of both the *eidos* and some other element, which has yet to be identified.

Based on this last claim, we can see that although the *eidos* causes a being to be, and not be seen, to be beautiful, it does have a bearing on its own appearance. Socrates states: “I still have some hope that the beautiful will *make itself be seen* for what it is (295a, emphasis mine),” implying that the beautiful contributes to its own appearance. What does this contribution consist of? It consists of its radiant nature. The *eidos* of the beautiful never makes an object appear to be more beautiful than it is—it does not contribute to confusion or deception about the degree of beauty an object has: “Then if the appropriate makes things be seen to be more beautiful than they are, it would be a kind of deceit (ἀπάτη) about the beautiful, and it wouldn’t be what we are looking for, would it, Hippias?” (294a). Whatever the beautiful itself is, it is shows itself forth in appearance in such a way that this showing-forth does not make an object appear more beautiful than it is. But Socrates takes it one step further. Whenever the *eidos* of the beautiful is present in a being, it is impossible for that being not to be seen to be beautiful: “S: Is it impossible for things that are really beautiful not to be seen to be beautiful, since what makes them be seen is present? H: It’s impossible” (294c). (To support this, we may also add this exchange from earlier in the dialogue: “H: I’ll tell you. I think you’re looking for an answer that says the beautiful is the sort of thing that will never be seen (φανεῖται) to be foul for anyone, anywhere, at any time. S: Quite right, Hippias. Now you’ve got a beautiful grasp of it.” [291d]. To say that the beautiful will never be seen to be foul is another way of saying that it will never deceive.) In describing the contribution that the *eidos* makes to its own appearance, we can see that the ground for
distinguishing appearance from being is deceit: being corresponds to truth, and appearance may or may not communicate truth (there is no necessary connection between truth and appearance, in other words—except in the case of beautiful appearances). Moreover, we can see one reason for claiming that eidos causes a being to be, and not be seen to be beautiful. If it merely caused a being to be seen to be beautiful, then it would be deceptive, because it would not communicate something about what the being actually is. But, according to Socrates, the beautiful itself does not make an object appear to be more beautiful than it is, and when it is present in an object, that object is seen to be beautiful.

With regard to appearances, Socrates makes the following claims. First, human beings can be in error about whether an object is beautiful. That is, human beings can make an incorrect judgment about the appearance of a beautiful object: “S: Then shall we agree to this, Hippias: that everything really beautiful—customs and activities both—are both thought [δοξάζεσθαι] to be, and seen [φαίνεσθαι] to be, beautiful always, by everybody. Or just the opposite, that they’re unknown [ἀγνοεῖσθαι], and individuals in private and cities in public both have more strife and contention [ἔριν καὶ μάχην] about them than anything? H: Much more the latter, Socrates. They are unknown” (294c-e). Second, if beautiful appearances were to have the same cause as beautiful beings, then human beings would never be wrong about whether some objects are beautiful or not: “S: They wouldn’t be, if ‘being seen to be’ had been added to them. And that would have been added if the appropriate were beautiful and made things not only be but be seen to be beautiful” (294d, emphasis mine). That is, Socrates claims that the reason for human “strife and contention” over the beautiful is due to the fact that the cause of an object’s being beautiful is different from the cause of an object’s appearing to be beautiful. The former is the eidos of the beautiful. The latter is the eidos plus some other element, as we have already seen.
Taken together, these claims appear to contradict the claim that the eidos of the beautiful is radiant in appearance, that it is more readily accessible in appearance to the philosopher. However, as we will see below, the two claims are reconciled in a proper understanding of the cause of appearance, which is the third claim about appearances that Socrates makes: The cause of appearance is the eidos of the beautiful, plus the human observer herself. This is implied by the first two claims. There is “strife and contention” about beautiful objects because individuals and cities do not perceive them or perceive them incorrectly; the objects remain ἄγνοιεῖσθαι, that is, “un-perceived” by human beings. When these same human beings turn to a beautiful being and notice and acknowledge its beauty, then that beauty appears. Or, to put it another way, that human beings turn toward a beautiful being is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for that “appearance” to occur.

The beautiful itself causes a being to be beautiful, and the beautiful itself plus the human observer (or something about the human observer) causes a being to appear to be beautiful. But before we become too content with this tidy theory, we must take into account something Socrates says that appears to contradict it. He says that the cause of appearance may be the appropriate, that is, that the appropriate is a possible and reasonable hypothesis for a cause of the appearance of the beautiful.: “S: Let’s choose whether we think the appropriate is what makes things be seen to be, or be, beautiful. H: It’s what makes things be seen to be, in my opinion, Socrates. S: Oh dear, it’s gone and escaped from us, our chance to know what the beautiful is, since the appropriate has been seen to be something other than the beautiful” (294a). This claim poses the following problem: if the appropriate is a possible cause for beauty’s appearance, then where does that leave the observer? Is the observer a necessary (but not sufficient) cause of beauty’s appearance?
Gathering these claims together, we can make the following summary: The *eidos* of the beautiful (the beautiful itself) causes an object to be beautiful. It causes an object to be beautiful in itself, not relative to any human observer. However, in doing so, the *eidos* announces its presence in that object’s appearance, i.e., in its relation to a human observer. But the *eidos* by itself does not *cause* the object’s “appearance.” Nevertheless, the beautiful itself seems to command a certain power over its own appearance: it does not cause appearance (not by itself), but it will always announce itself, radiantly, in appearance. *Socrates believes that this must always be true.* The reason for this is not made explicitly clear anywhere in the *Hippias Major*, though at the end of this chapter, and in the next one, we will conjecture as to what that reason may be. Furthermore, on the “appearance” side, human beings are at least part of the “cause” of a beautiful object’s appearance, insofar as an appearance is a relation to a human observer; an appearance is an appearance to someone. Thus human beings are a necessary condition for an object’s appearance (they are not a *sufficient* condition because the presence of the object is also necessary).\(^{154}\) However, human beings may disagree about whether an object is truly beautiful or not (beautiful objects inspire “strife and contention” [ἔριν καὶ μάχην]). Here we reach the first impasse in Socrates’s words, one of three that are found in the above statements.

The impasses all concern the cause of an object’s appearance, and the claim of beauty’s radiant nature. First, how do we reconcile the claim that the beautiful manifests itself radiantly in

\(^{154}\) Commenting on this same passage, Halsten Olson has a useful explanation about how an observer can be considered a “cause” of an object’s appearance: “Consider again the octagon. Though having eight sides is what makes a place figure an octagon, having eight sides does not always make such a figure seem, or be seen, to be an octagon. Some octagons are entirely unobserved. And some observers are inattentive. Someone who fails to notice the presence of eight sides as he observes a plane figure will not take even the first step toward recognizing it as an octagon, even if he has firmly in mind the analysis that an eight-sided figure is an octagon. Even the possession of an analysis cannot protect us against the errors of inattention.” In other words, even knowledge of the *eidos* of the beautiful does not mean that one is experiencing the appearance of a beautiful object in one’s life. Only in the presence of both a human observer and a beautiful object can we say that a beautiful object has an “appearance.” Beyond this, Olson’s crucial notion of “attentiveness,” which he does not develop, will become important in our own interpretation of this passage, below. See Olson, “Socrates Talks to Himself in Plato’s *Hippias Major,*” 277.
appearance, as well as the claim that human beings are (at least in part) the cause of an object’s appearance, while also holding that human beings can be wrong (and suffer strife and contention) about which objects are beautiful? By claiming that the beautiful itself is “radiant,” do we not mean that the eidos of the beautiful is readily accessible to the human observer, and that therefore there should not be too much “strife and contention” over whether objects are beautiful? Second, how can we claim that the beautiful itself does not cause an object’s appearance, while also holding that the beautiful itself always manifests itself radiantly in appearance? There would seem to be a causal relationship lurking within that “always,” one that Socrates either does not accept or overlooks. Moreover, how do we reconcile the claim that the beautiful does not cause its own appearance, with Socrates’s confidence that the beautiful “will make itself be seen” (ἐκφανήσεσθαι τί ποτ’ ἐστίν, 295e)? Socrates’s statement would seem to indicate that the beautiful has a way of causing its own appearance. Finally, what are we to make of Hippias’s statement (which Socrates accepts) that the appropriate causes a being to appear to be beautiful? Would not that entail the possibility of deception with regard to beauty—of beings which, because they are appropriate in appearance, appear to be, but are not in fact, beautiful?

The first three of these impasses can be resolved with the subtle but significant nuance in Socrates’s statement about the cause of being and appearing: “by itself [μόνον] it [the appropriate] could not make things be seen to be and be, nor could anything else” (294d-e). Neither the appropriate, nor any other candidate for the eidos of the beautiful, could by itself make things both be and be seen to be beautiful at the same time. The beautiful itself cannot cause its own radiant appearance by itself. But this does not rule out that it causes its appearance in tandem with some other cause—namely, the human person. The beautiful manifests itself radiantly always in appearing before human beings. Therefore, there is no contradiction in saying
that the beautiful does not cause its own appearance, but that it also always appears, radiantly. Whenever it does appear, it appears because it is manifesting itself before a human being. Both the beautiful object and the human observer are necessary conditions for an “appearance” to occur. Moreover, even though that appearance is always radiant, accessible to the human observer, this does not mean that human observers will always take advantage of this accessibility, of this radiant nature. They perhaps won’t hold up their own end of the bargain, and they will not look for the eidos of the beautiful. They may be inattentive.\textsuperscript{155} The word that Socrates uses to indicate the ignorance of human beings before beautiful customs and laws is ἀγνοεῖσθαι, which literally means the “not perceived” or “unknown.” If human beings were to choose to look, to turn toward the beautiful, and to search therein for an insight into the eidos of the beautiful, then they would be met with (and become partial cause of) a radiant, accessible, self-disclosing appearance of the beautiful itself. Lastly, the beautiful can be said to “make itself seen” precisely because of its radiant power; whenever it is seen (i.e., whenever a human observer turns attentively toward it), it is likely that it will be seen (because it is radiant).

The peculiar problem of Socrates and Hippias agreeing that the “appropriate” may cause a being to “appear” to be beautiful, and thus be deceptive, does not actually challenge, but rather further validates, the above claims. When a human person is concerned with appropriateness, he is not concerned with the beautiful as such. Recall that Socrates asks: “Is it impossible for things

\textsuperscript{155} “…some observers are inattentive.” Olson, “Socrates Talks to Himself in Plato’s Hippias Major,” 277. Also, Sean Kirkland notes that phainesthai, “appearing,” creates a phainomenon, or “appearance,” that is formed by equal participation from observer and observed. Notice too that his understanding of phainomenon does not find within it an ambiguity between “seeming” and simple “appearing” or “shining forth,” but includes both by admitting that a phainomenon may be erroneous, incomplete, etc.: “Thus, a phainomenon or ‘appearance,’ as always an appearance of something to someone, entails a connectedness between the observer and what presents itself to the observer via the movement of appearing. Moreover, this movement can occur and a connection between the observer and what is presenting itself can thereby be established, even if the appearance does not wholly and completely reveal or manifest what appears there. ‘What is’ can present itself to us even by way of obscure, oblique, indirect, partial, multiple, or self-contradictory appearances.” See Sean D. Kirkland, The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato’s Early Dialogues (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012), 26.
that are really beautiful not to be seen to be beautiful, since what makes them be seen is present? (294c).” A person who is concerned with appropriateness is not present before the beautiful in an attitude of desiring to know it as beautiful, and in an attitude of desiring to know the nature of that which causes it to be or become beautiful. He is only concerned with using the beautiful object. The Greek verb πρέπω, as we saw above, means “to be clearly seen; to be conspicuous.” It may refer to a tool which works well (a spoon), or clothing which fits the occasion (wedding dress). Either way, the word is always used to refer to the aspect of an object relative to a human being. The “appropriate” always only refers to an object as it relates to human projects or human uses. It is not employed to signify something about an object as it is in itself, independent of human interests. Therefore, it could never be employed to speak about the eidos of the beautiful as it is in itself. As we saw above, the central problem this part of the dialogue posits is the very possibility of knowing the eidos of the beautiful as it is in itself, because this eidos is responsible for the beautiful object’s being, not its appearance. Anyone who is concerned with appropriateness is not going to be concerned with what an object is like in itself, but only with what an object is like with relation to human use. (Notice too that Socrates later goes on to reject utility as a definition of the beautiful [296d].) If one is interested in answering Socrates’s question about getting to know the eidos of the beautiful, one is necessarily not interested in what is appropriate, but rather in what is inherent in an object independent of appropriateness.156

156 Nickolas Pappas makes a useful comparison between Plato and Kant on the issue of appropriateness, likening the appropriate to what Kant calls “dependent beauty,” i.e., beauty that is contingent on a concept and not purely on form. “Kant calls the beauty that is appropriateness ‘dependent beauty’ (Critique of Judgment, section 16). Such beauty threatens to become a species of the good. Within the accepted corpus of genuine Platonic works beauty is never subsumed within the good, the appropriate, or the beneficial; Plato seems to belong in the same camp as Kant in this respect.” See Nickolas Pappas, “Plato’s Aesthetics,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/plato-aesthetics/. However, I do not agree with Pappas’s conclusion that the reason why the appropriate is an inadequate definition of the beautiful is because it is associated with the good. For more on this, see Chapter Four.
Having combed the text and resolved its apparent impasses, we can now elaborate the reasons why the radiant nature of the beautiful is what makes it possible for appearances to disclose the *eidos* of the beautiful. This requires that we develop the ontology that lies beneath Socrates’s distinction between being and appearance as they relate to the beautiful. This ontology will allow us to see why only philosophical *eros* can make this insight into a beautiful object’s being from within the beautiful object’s appearances, and it will also deepen our grasp of how, despite the radiant nature of the beautiful, beautiful objects still create “strife and contention” among human beings.

The ontology of the beautiful espoused by the Socrates of the *Hippias Major* is that of the beautiful as radically objective. The beautiful is objective because it inheres in a being, not in that being’s appearance. It modifies a being’s way of being, not its way of appearing before others. The beautiful is present within an object, and not within the observer. The beautiful “resides” within an object, and it is not a value projected onto an object by an observer. Nor is the beautiful reducible to the effect (emotional or physical) that it may have on an observer. But this objectivity has an attribute that is crucial for philosophy: its objectivity does not exclude relativity. The beautiful includes a relation to the observer, which we call “appearance.” The beautiful manifests itself radiantly in appearance. This is because, while the passage from appearances to being constitutes a philosophical problem, appearances are also *part of* being, in the sense that a being may manifest itself before an observer.\(^{157}\) The maiden, the spoon, the noble life, the works of Pheidias—all of these examples are easily identifiable as “beautiful” by Socrates and Hippias. Their beauty is *apparent*. The beautiful, while it inheres in being, appears when a human observer turns toward it. Moreover, whenever it does appear, it always appears

---

\(^{157}\) Schindler argues: “while appearance is in some respect opposed to being, being is not opposed to, but rather inclusive of, appearance. The κοινωνία with others is part of being, taken as a whole…” Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason*, 114.
generously, in such a way that its nature, or eidos, shines forth and makes insights into it possible for the human observer.

We can sharpen our sense of the radical objectivity of Socrates’s understanding of the beautiful by contrasting it with a philosophical notion of the beautiful that is its complete opposite. In the closing pages of The Imaginary, Jean-Paul Sartre sketches a radically relative ontology of the beautiful. For Sartre, “the real is never beautiful,” because any object perceived as beautiful is only perceived as such because it has been reconstituted and recast as beautiful by an act of imagination on the part of the subject.¹⁵⁸ The imagination apprehends an object in a particular way, and an object becomes beautiful only due to that mode of apprehension. This mode of apprehension is called “aesthetic.” The object’s beauty has nothing to do with the object itself. Once it is apprehended, the object becomes “irreal,” that is (according to Sartrean terminology), an image of itself. Sartre writes: “As for aesthetic enjoyment, it is real but is not grasped for itself, as produced by a real color: it is nothing but a manner of apprehending the irreal object and, far from being directed on the real painting, it serves to constitute the imaginary object through the real canvas. … This does not come from some mysterious way, that we are sometimes able to use, of apprehending the real. It is simply that the aesthetic object is

¹⁵⁸ Sartre, The Imaginary, 193. For an analysis of this passage in the book, see Thomas R. Flynn, Sartre: A Philosophical Biography (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 134-136. It is interesting to note that elsewhere, Sartre expresses the view that the beautiful is, as a concept, something essentially negative: “Beauty is a veiled contradiction.” A contradiction to what? It is difficult to tell from the context (this line is thrown in at the end of a literary essay) but it appears to be precisely a contradiction to the human desire for happiness, to the project of human fulfillment. But this “contradiction” is a necessary part of a view of the beautiful that considers the beautiful to be nothing more than a value projected by human desire. It is nothing real, it is an illusion. Therefore, it is a “contradiction.” Notably, this was written around the same time as The Imaginary. The later was published in 1940, while the literary essay was published in 1938. See Sartre, “On John Dos Passos and 1919,” in We Have Only This Life to Live: The Selected Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre, 1939-1975. Ronald Aronson and Adrian van den Hoven, ed. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), 16. For another version of Sartre’s ontology of beauty, consult Camille Paglia: “How did beauty begin? Earth-cult, suppressing the eye, locks man in the belly of mothers. There is, I insisted, nothing beautiful in nature. Nature is primal power, coarse and turbulent. Beauty is our weapon against nature; but it we make objects, giving them limit, symmetry, proportion. Beauty halts and freezes the melting flux of nature.” Camille Paglia, Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emil Dickinson (New York: Vintage, 1991), 57.
constituted and apprehended by an imaging consciousness that posits it as irreal.” For Sartre, anything can be beautiful, even a death in a bullfight.\footnote{Sartre, The Imaginary, 191. Emphasis mine.}

According to the terminology of the *Hippias Major*, Sartre’s account of the beautiful is exclusively concerned with what causes a being to be seen to be beautiful. He rules out the possibility that the beautiful has anything to do with being. That which causes a being to be seen to be beautiful is a particular mode of apprehension: an “imaging consciousness” that posits an object as irreal, valued, and therefore “beautiful.” For Sartre, as for Hippias, to be seen to be beautiful is what it means to be beautiful. There is nothing intrinsic to an object that qualifies it for the status of beauty; all that is required is that an observer apprehend the object aesthetically.

In contrast with Sartre’s ontology, for Socrates the beautiful is something that wholly inheres within the beautiful being, whether it is a spoon or a maiden or a sculpture crafted by Pheidias. The *eidos* of the beautiful in an object has nothing to do with its being seen by this or that person, but precisely by the presence of the beautiful itself, of the *eidos* of beauty, within the being in question. Therefore, the beautiful can never be construed as a value projected onto an object by an observer. Nor can a beautiful object be beautiful merely because of its manner of involvement in appearance before someone. The beautiful is never beautiful because somebody thinks it is beautiful or admires it; rather, the beautiful is admired because it is beautiful. (Whether it ought to be admired is a separate question.) Moreover, whatever we may feel before a beautiful object because of its beauty, and whatever attitude we may adopt before it because of its beauty, must be at least in part conditioned by the beautiful object itself.\footnote{Sartre, The Imaginary, 191.} That is to say, my relation to the beautiful, mediated by appearance, is always partially determined by the beautiful itself. Socrates agrees with Hippias that “a beautiful girl is a beautiful thing” (287e), because a
beautiful girl commands admiration; Socrates only disagrees with the implied notion that a
beautiful girl is the *eidos* of the beautiful. Socrates also believes that Pheidias’s statue of Athena
commands admiration (290a-b), and that political wisdom is beautiful and therefore to be
admired (296a). The structure of admiration, then, weighs heavily on the side of the beautiful
object, which has its own force of attraction. No doubt that the proverb with which this
dialogue concludes also expresses, among other things, the sense for the objectivity of the
beautiful: “What’s beautiful is hard” (304e). Beyond the *Hippias Major*, we can see the same
structure of admiration in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates says that when one sees “a godlike face
or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like
those he felt at the earlier time then he gazes at him with the reverence due to a god…” (251a).
The “divinity” of beauty means, among other things, that the beautiful is radically sovereign and
*other* than the human observer. To be sure, we “see” beauty, and beauty appears to us; but the
beauty in appearance originates in the being of the beautiful object.

The validity of Socrates’s ontology of the beautiful bears itself out in experience. The
encounter with a beautiful object always has the quality of newness about it. The sense of beauty
comes a moment before the desire: I meet a beautiful woman first, and then I desire her. I don’t
project feelings onto someone. (Or if I do, I eventually become aware that my feelings of desire
are inauthentic, and—therefore—not indicative of a real encounter with beauty.) The
mountainous landscape, the beautiful piece of music, the wonderful caterpillar making its way
across a tree branch, all of these things come from the outside, and shock me. They command

---

162 As Paula Gottlieb puts it, “… the good cannot simply be what anyone happens to desire, nor the things that are
not good nor beautiful at all. What is good, then, is not simply what is desired, but what is desirable. Similarly, what
is beautiful is not simply what is admired, but what is admirable. Therefore what is good is what deserves to be the
object of desire (*boulesis*, *epithumia*/general *eros*), and what is beautiful is what deserves to be the object of *eros*…”
163 In a similar vein, Fragment 31 from Sappho: “How like a god I feel he is/this man, when he sits close…” Both
the *Phaedrus* passage and the Sappho fragment are quoted from the Nehamas and Woodruff translation.
attention. They command *reverence* or *awe* or even *terror* because of a quality they have which does not come from my own consciousness. In a similar vein, the beautiful objects are often accompanied by a felt sense of “being found.” They feel like at least partial, at least temporary, answers to the erotic drive, to that part of the human person that seeks beauty. The objectivity of the beautiful object manifests itself in this sense of achieved discovery that accompanies them.

Having laid out Socrates’s view of the absolute nature of the beautiful, we can see more clearly what Socrates means by appearances. Beauty is not a value projected onto an object by an observer; instead, the *eidos* of the beautiful makes an object be beautiful. Therefore, if an object appears, its appearance implies a communication of its own essence outward toward whoever is experiencing the appearance. The arrow of communication originates in the object, and heads toward the observer. The observer, however, has an essential role to play: the object defines its appearance, but the appearance itself does not take place without an observer who witnesses it. An appearance is thus a *phainomenon*, an event that happens when an observer turns toward a beautiful object. Socrates uses the verb, φαίνω, “to bring to light,” when talking about the beautiful (e.g., φαίνεσθαι [294a] and ἐκφανήσεσθαι [295a]). *Phainomena* are always of particular beautiful objects. *Phainomena* are also always “positional,” that is, they are *glances* (accurate or inaccurate, deceptive or probing, more or less, but never absolutely, complete) that reveal an object in the world. They are not mere images (like the εἰκόνες at the lowest part of the Divided Line), but moments when a person sees something in her experience. In this sense, they are like beliefs or opinions, because they always involve the observer taking a stance and saying,

---

164 Kirkland emphasizes the fact that *phaino* means “light,” and that this nuance further deepens the objective side of *phainomena*: “The original meaning of appearance indicated by dokein and phainesthai is … a movement toward the observer out of darkness and into the light that establishes a connection between what appears and the observer.” See Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning*, 27.
“This is beautiful,” implying that he or she believes this to be the case. Whenever Hippias and Socrates speak about spoons or maidens or sculptures, they speak about these as instances of the beautiful which can be identified as such. They are never spoken about in a theoretical way as pure images or εἰκόνες. Hippias and Socrates speak about real beings qua beings-that-appear; they are not spoken about as phenomena considered in their phenomenality. Appearances for Socrates and Hippias are always glances at a pot, a work of art, a woman, a noble life. Even if these objects are not actually present in the action of the dialogue, Hippias and Socrates both make references to experiences they have had with pots, art, women, and noble ideals. These memories are memories of phainomena: memories of events in which Socrates or Hippias beheld a beautiful pot, work of art, woman, or ideal. (If I were staging the dialogue, I would bring these objects onto the stage, and would not need to change a word of the text to justify my doing so.) Most importantly, appearances are not necessarily sensory appearances (as we argue in Chapter One). Beautiful things may appear in different ways, and many different types of beings may be beautiful. That Socrates believes this becomes clear when he and Hippias discuss Hippias’s third definition of the beautiful. When Hippias describes a noble life, one where a man is “rich, healthy, and honored by the Greeks” (291d-e), Socrates, along with the reader,

---

165 While my claim only pertains to the *Hippias Major*, other scholars have argued that the predominant meaning of *phantasia* in Plato always includes belief. Allan Silverman argues that a “full-fledged Platonic *phantasia*” is “a kind of belief” (135), something distinct from mere sense-perception (*aisthesis*) (125). That is, implicit in the very notion of appearance is the assent, however small, to a certain belief (whether erroneous is irrelevant). See Allan Silverman, “Plato on ‘Phantasia,’” *Classical Antiquity* 10 (1991): 123-147. Similarly, Rachel Barney writes that Plato has a “judgmental account” of appearance, by which she means an account of appearances in which “what constitutes an ‘appearance’ is not some bare sensory stimulus but a judgment that something is the case – or at least an inclination so to judge, which can reasonably be interpreted in psycho-dynamic terms (as by Plato) as a preliminary judgment passed by some lower cognitive authority” (288). See Rachel Barney, “Appearances and Impressions,” *Phronesis* 37 (1992): 283-313. Both Silverman and Barney appeal to the *Sophist* in making their arguments, and Barney also cites the *Republic* Book X.

166 There is a distinction to be drawn here between perception and memory, both of which are interrelated by distinct types of phenomena. For the purposes of my current discussion, however, I think that the phrase, “memories of phenomena” works to convey what I am trying to say.
experiences an appearance of a whole life, in all of its moral aspects.\textsuperscript{167} This description is not a sensuous appearance, but it remains an intuition of something that is beautiful.\textsuperscript{168}

Given this understanding of appearances, we can venture to ask how one might be able to, through appearances or within them, make insights about the \textit{eidos} of the beautiful (that is, make insights which deepen our founding noetic insight that the beautiful itself is something). All of our knowledge of beautiful beings come from appearances. Socrates and Hippias know about beautiful sculptures and maidens and spoons. In the past, these beings have all appeared before them, in their radiant beauty. What the two men must do is make an insight into that which causes all of these beings to be beautiful: the \textit{eidos}. But to grasp the \textit{eidos} of the beautiful requires that they somehow understand the beautiful as it is in itself \textit{independent} of any appearance, or somehow prior to and causal of appearance. This is why Socrates draws the distinction between \textit{being} and \textit{being seen} (294a), making it clear that he is searching for “that by which all beautiful things are beautiful.” “Beautiful things,” that is, instances of the beautiful that are disclosed to human beings in appearance, must have an \textit{eidos} that exists independently of appearances, which causes beings to become beautiful when “added” (289d). This journey from appearances to the \textit{eidos} itself can only be bridged by a privileged insight into the \textit{eidos} that somehow overcomes the limitations of perspective and the incompleteness of appearances. It can only be bridged by something which reconciles the relativity of my experience of the beautiful

\textsuperscript{167} Wolfsdorf agrees that this description by Hippias amounts to a non-corporeal definition of the beautiful. This would mean, then, that the appearance we are given in the text is of non-sensuous beauty: “Certainly when he proposes his third definition, Hippias cannot have a corporeal conception of τὸ καλὸν in mind.” Wolfsdorf, \textit{“Hippias Major 301b2-c2: Plato’s Critique of a Corporeal Conception of Forms and of the Form-Participant Relation,”} 249.

\textsuperscript{168} Ludlam makes the same point, that \textit{phainomena} cannot be reduced to sensuous phenomena. Critiquing Woodruff, he writes: “Beauty, whatever else one might say about it, pertains to perception, both sensory and intellectual. We have already had occasion to see that Woodruff rejects the aesthetic roots of the word καλὸς … This mistake is compounded by restricting \textit{παθενθῆ} to the field of visual perception. Of course not all beautiful things are seen to be beautiful. This does not mean that they are really beautiful, but that they are perceived to be beautiful by means other than sight.” See Ludlam, Hippias Major: \textit{An Interpretation}, 113.
with the *eidos* of the beautiful itself, which causes a being to be, and not merely appear, beautiful.

The radiant nature of the beautiful is what makes this bridge possible. The radiant, showing-forth nature of the beautiful is what makes the *eidos* accessible. Another way to put this is that the *eidos of the beautiful is itself the bridge*. That it is never allied to deceit means that we are always given visual confirmation of the presence of the *eidos* of the beautiful within a beautiful object’s appearance. It is in the nature of the beautiful to always communicate and show forth its own presence in appearance.\(^{169}\) The beautiful will always be “true” in appearance. As Hans-Georg Gadamer says about the beautiful as it is presented in the *Phaedrus*, “The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real.”\(^{170}\) In the *Hippias Major*, the bridge can be more accurately described as that which covers the chasm between the *eidos* of the beautiful and its manifold appearances.

The Socrates of the *Phaedrus* is more emphatic than the Socrates of the *Hippias Major* about the unique status of the beautiful as the bridge between *eidos* and appearances. The contrast helps us to see the fuller implications of this unique status that the beautiful enjoys. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says:

> Justice and self-control do not shine out through their images down here, and neither do the other objects of the soul’s admiration; the senses are so murky that only a few people are able to make out, with difficulty, the original of the likenesses they encounter here. *But beauty (κάλλος) was radiant to see at that time when the souls, along with the glorious chorus (we were with Zeus, while others followed other gods), saw that blessed and spectacular vision and were ushered into the mystery that we may rightly call the most blessed of all* (250b, emphasis mine).

\(^{169}\) As Benardete puts it (referring specifically to the *Hippias Major*), “The beautiful is the impossible union of the eidetic and dimensionality.” That is, the union between the ideal form of the beautiful, and our human, three-dimensional experience of beautiful beings. See Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful*, xxxv.

Also:

Now beauty (κάλλος), as I said, was radiant among the other objects; and now that we have come down here we grasp it sparkling through the clearest of our senses. Vision, of course, is the sharpest of our bodily senses, although it does not see wisdom. It would awaken terribly powerful love if an image of wisdom came through our sight as clearly as beauty does, and the same goes for other objects of inspired love. **But now beauty alone has this privilege** (νῦν δὲ κάλλος μόνον ταύτην ἔσχε μοῖραν), to be the most clearly visible and the most loved” (250c-e, emphasis mine).\(^{171}\)

These passages describe the beautiful as having a special mission with regard to human beings. This mission has both an erotic and noetic dimension. Its erotic dimension involves attraction: the beautiful attracts the admiration of human beings because of its radiance. The noetic dimension lies in the beautiful making “visible” those things which cannot be seen with “bodily senses”—the ultimate “objects of the soul’s admiration.”

C.D.C. Reeve calls this special mission or capability beauty’s “incandescence,” grounding this claim on insights from the *Republic* as well as the *Phaedrus*.\(^ {172}\) Parsing what he perceives to be the differences between the good, the beautiful, and the other forms as they are presented in the Platonic canon, Reeve argues that Platonic characters such as Adeimantus and Glaucon cannot “distinguish the advantage of being beautiful from those of seeming beautiful,” because

---

\(^{171}\) Both passages quoted from the Nehamas and Woodruff, translation. Both passages employ the noun, κάλλος, rather than the adjective, καλός, which is more often used in the *Hippias Major* to refer to the beautiful. As stated in the Introduction, these words are distinct, though related. Nevertheless, for the philosophical problem at hand, and given the argument about translation that I made in the Introduction, we can claim that both words refer to the same phenomenon which, in English, we call “beauty.”

\(^{172}\) C. D. C. Reeve, “Plato on Begetting in Beauty.” In *Plato on Art and Beauty*, ed. A. E. Denham (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 142-172. John Sallis, also writing about the *Phaedrus*, makes a similar remark: “To men the beautiful shines, not simply by itself, not immediately, but only through beautiful things, only through its ‘earthly’ images,” yet nevertheless, the beautiful “names the way in which being itself shines forth in the midst of the visible.” See John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996) 156. Similarly, Gordon says that in Socrates’s vision in the *Phaedrus*, “Beauty is the object of eros, and the beauty of the ordered visible world, most especially heavenly bodies, incites human investigation, which can lead back to noetic insight.” Noetic insight is insight into the *eidos* which is the source of appearances. See Gordon, *Plato’s Erotic World*, 36.
the various forms of virtues, such as justice, temperance, wisdom, as well as beauty, are “reputation-reality indifferent.” The good, however, is unique in not being reputation-reality indifferent: we cannot be satisfied with anything but an actual good, though what the good actually is remains elusive. Thus the good is “explanation-elusive.” Between the “reputation-reality indifferent” forms which generate virtuous living, and the “explanation-elusive” good for the sake of which we live our lives, stands the beautiful. Building upon *Phaedrus* 250b, Reeve argues that the beautiful is also unique, because it alone manifests itself in a clear image of itself in the world, “because it itself can be seen blazing out in a way that other forms do not.” This “pre-eminent visibility” is called “incandescence.”

The incandescence (or, as I call it here, radiance) of the beautiful does not enjoy such lofty mythical treatment in the *Hippias Major*, but it does shine just as brightly. That is, in the *Hippias Major*, the beautiful has the same capacity to guide the seeker of truth from appearances to being itself. The logical upshot of this idea can be seen by contrasting different types of truth claims. For me to say, “Elizabeth is strong,” depends completely on Elizabeth’s strength in relation to me (that is, her appearance before me). About her strength, I may be wrong or I may be right. I may perhaps be deceived by Elizabeth’s appearance into thinking she is stronger than she actually is. Either way, her appearance will ultimately confirm or deny whether she is strong: she can hit me and I will feel it. Her appearance will communicate a truth about herself. However, this type of truth—“Elizabeth is strong”—is only *relative* truth, and not truth with regard to either the *eidos* of strength or the *eidos* of Elizabeth, but only of these with relation to me at a particular moment in time. The claim, “Elizabeth is just,” on the other hand, does require knowledge of the *eidos* of justice, and as such it does pose the problem of appearance and being:

---

173 Reeve, “Plato on Begetting in Beauty,” 143.
174 Reeve, “Plato on Begetting in Beauty,” 144.
175 Reeve, “Plato on Begetting in Beauty,” 145-146.
how does Elizabeth’s justice manifest itself before me? (This, of course, is the problem tackled by Socrates in the first two books of the Republic.) But the claim, “Elizabeth is beautiful,” has a unique status. It is a claim about eidos that is greatly aided by appearances. I can confirm it if I take her appearance seriously. I can confirm it in my experience of Elizabeth; in a perceptive glance or touch. That is, Elizabeth’s appearance (her manifestation relative to me) communicates something absolute about Elizabeth and about the eidos of the beautiful itself, because in Elizabeth I see something of the eidos of the beautiful. Elizabeth’s beauty is “incandescent.”

Another example can perhaps provide further clarity about incandescence. Imagine attending a symphony performance, and being seated in an inexpensive seat, way in the back, atop a balcony. You can barely make out the performers in the orchestra. Looking at the orchestra, you are casually deceived by appearances. A violinist may look like a woman, and is actually a man with long hair. A viola might be indistinguishable from a violin. Even the sound of the performance might be imperfect, if the acoustics of the symphony hall are not of a good quality. Yet insofar as the music does appear to you, that is, insofar as you can hear it, it will communicate its beauty to you. You may not know whether that man (or woman) is playing a violin (or viola), but you do know that, for example, Beethoven’s Ninth is a beautiful piece of music. This is because its beauty is incandescent.  

Another objection to the idea of beauty’s radiance can be stated as follows. Do we not encounter objects which, to borrow a line from Wordsworth, are “by distance made more sweet,” i.e., are seen as beautiful due to its shifting or otherwise deceptive appearance? An old house might look more beautiful from a distance, where its colors are seen brightened by the sun, than up close, where the peeling paint and rotting wooden frames are more visible. But the claim here is that the beautiful is radiant and incandescent in appearance only to a person driven by philosophical eros, i.e., to the seeker of truth, to a person who has oriented her eros toward an interrogative stance with regard to wisdom (and crucially, as we shall see in the next chapter, toward the good). The seeker of truth goes to the house in an effort to know the truth about it. She will not rest satisfied with the appearance of the house as it appears in the gleaming sun. She will seek out more than one appearance of it, in her effort to get to the truth about it. One can imagine a more complex example of this dynamic: for example, of a music lover who spends a lot of time listening to a particular composer, in an attempt to come to a judgment about whether his music is beautiful.
At first blush, the above claim about beauty’s radiance or incandescence may appear to be at odds with the textual evidence as well as with common sense. First, with regard to the text, Socrates and Hippias have already accepted that the beautiful itself, that by which objects become beautiful, “is something” (287c-d). This implies that both Socrates and Hippias have had at least an intimation of the *eidos* of the beautiful, because they know enough to know that it exists. Their knowledge of the beautiful has transcended appearances at least insofar as they know that the beautiful itself “is something.” But neither Hippias nor Socrates has claimed to have transcended appearances at this juncture of the dialogue. Second, with regard to common sense, Socrates and Hippias both agree that there is much “strife and contention” surrounding beautiful laws and customs (294c-e). This means that people do not always agree on whether certain laws and customs are beautiful. But how can this be, if beauty is incandescent, and gives sensory evidence of its own *eidos* in appearance? As we stated above, the immediate answer is that the strife and contention is due to the fact that beautiful beings are “unknown” [ἀγνοεῖσθαι]. They are simply not seen, and no one can agree on the beauty of things that are not seen. It is true that Socrates never disputes the beauty of any of Hippias’s examples of beauty, nor vice versa. But do we not see beautiful things all of the time—only to have our neighbor come to tell us that we are wrong, and that the thing we hold to be beautiful is not, after all, beautiful? Why does the radiant nature of the beautiful not help us then?

The answer to both of these objections is found in philosophical *eros*. The incandescence of the beautiful only helps the one who is searching for the *eidos*. Only the person who has an *eros* for being its, and desire to transcend appearances, will actually be affected by the “pre-eminent visibility” of beauty. Only a philosopher, who wants to know the truth, will find in the beautiful the bridge that will lead him to his beloved.
…Only to the Person Driven by Philosophical Eros

The beautiful is radiant in its appearance, but this fact matters only to those who care about the truth. The *eidos* of the beautiful discloses itself more clearly to perception than other forms do, but this is good news only to those who are trying to understand the *eidos* of the beautiful. The *Hippias Major* is not an essay about the beautiful, but a staging of Socrates’s pursuit of the *eidos* of the beautiful—of Socrates’s pursuit, that is, of the object of his *eros*.

Above, I argued that the two causes of the beautiful appearance are the beautiful itself and the human observer who turns toward the beautiful. But here we will see that this observer must have a particular disposition, if he is to see the *eidos* manifesting itself in appearance. He must *desire* to know it; he must live his *eros* philosophically. Without philosophical *eros*, the *eidos* does not appear. The radiant appearance of the beautiful makes it possible for a human being to know the beautiful itself, but human beings must desire this knowledge first. Thus knowledge proceeds only from erotic desire, that is, from a desire that points beyond itself, rather than to itself, in the quest for knowledge. Noesis happens only in a life of philosophical *eros*.

177 Ludlam underscores the noetic import that appearances have in the *Hippias Major*: “In the argument following the Questioner’s proposal, Socrates equates φαίνεσθαι with δοξάζεσθαι, opposing both these terms to ἀγνοεῖσθαι (294c8-13). The opposite of ἀγνοεῖσθαι is νοεῖσθαι. It would seem, then that φαίνεσθαι here implies ‘to appear through good reasoning’.” See Ludlam, *Hippias Major: An Interpretation*, 177. My purpose here is to emphasize that *eros* is a necessary requirement for “good reasoning” to take place. As Ludlam himself says elsewhere in his book, “One of the conclusions we can draw from this dialogue seems to be that the wise man can sense and perceive things as they really are in the world of phenomena” (181). A wise man is a “lover of wisdom”; love is a requirement for wisdom. The phenomena disclose “what they really are” only to one who first desires to know what they really are.

178 Discussing the *Symposium*, Hyland writes: “Far from our erotic experience of beauty being ‘blind’ or irrational, it is infused with reason. This is the crucial difference, as I have indicated previously, between *eros* and *epithumia* (desire), the latter of which we shall see in the *Phaedrus* is explicitly characterized as irrational… Eros is inherently rational; only as such can philosophy itself be erotic at the core …” See Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, 54. If in his essay, Hyland begins with *eros* and discovers its rationality, here we have taken the opposite (but complementary) route: we began with Socrates’s rational search for the *eidos* of the beautiful, and have discovered its erotic nature.

179 Roochnik usefully summarizes the importance of *eros* for noesis according to the Socrates of the *Symposium*: “To vary the Aristotelian formula, the object of Platonic discourse is not being as being, but (being as being) as object of desire. There can be no undisturbed theory of the real for Plato. Instead, Diotima tells us that as philosophers our *logos* gives voice to a desire for the real.” The same could be said for the Socrates of the *Hippias*
lived and fully cultivated philosophical *eros* is rare in human beings. As we shall see below, Socrates has it, and he enacts this desire in the dialogue, both in the way he conducts his investigation into the *eidos* of the beautiful, as well as in the pedagogy which he employs with Hippias. The reason he is even able to pose the question of “the beautiful itself” is because he is philosophical and has transcended appearances from the very beginning. In contrast, Hippias has *eros* for fame and money, but does not orient his *eros* toward philosophical wisdom or the good, and he does take an interrogative stance—though, at moments, we see him being tugged a little in the direction of philosophy by Socrates.

In the *Hippias Major*, Socrates’s philosophical *eros* for knowledge of the beautiful, a desire which is ecstatic and other-oriented, a desire which is open to experiencing new instantiations of the beautiful and to abandoning its own prejudices for the sake of understanding the beautiful, manifests itself with particular clarity in three moments in the dialogue. Each of these moments marks an occasion for Socrates make another clarification about the nature of the truth that he desires to know; each moment further clarifies the conditions for *noesis* of the beautiful itself. Moreover, with each moment Socrates deepens his point, that the knowledge they seek is knowledge of the beautiful as it is in itself, not relative to an observer. As such, each moment is also an erotic movement toward the *eidos* beyond appearances, culminating in the third moment, which establishes that the beautiful manifests itself radiantly in appearances.  

The first of these moments occurs when Socrates establishes that the beautiful itself “is something,” orchestrating a conversation between Hippias and Socrates’s unnamed, absent
friend. First, he convinces Hippias that it is by justice that people are just, and that justice “is something.” He makes the same argument with regard to wisdom and goodness. Wisdom is that by which wise people become wise, and wisdom itself is something. Goodness is that by which the good become good, and goodness itself is something (287c). Hippias affirms: “They are [something]” (οὖσι μέντοι, 287c). The same should hold for the beautiful. “S: ‘Then all beautiful things, too, are beautiful by the beautiful, isn’t that so?’ H: Yes, by the beautiful. S: ‘ … by that being something?’ H: It is. Why not?” (287c-d). This moment marks the first movement in the erotic passage from appearances to the eidos. Socrates has effectively claimed two things in this passage. The first is that he has a desire to know the beautiful as it is in itself, beyond its manifold appearances or manifestations in reality. The second is that he has a desire to make this investigation according to the demands that the investigation itself makes. That is, the method of his journey—from instantiations/appearances, to the thing itself which is revealed in instantiations/appearances—is to be determined by the thing itself, that is, by that which is revealed in the instantiations/appearances. Whether Hippias makes the same movement is in question. He agrees with Socrates, but he merely appears to do so: he is not convincing, and he does not seem to weigh the significance of the philosophical claims that Socrates is making. Rather, he seems to be playing at philosophy, just to see where Socrates will take him.

The second important moment in the development of this dialogue occurs when Socrates further qualifies the terms of his investigation with Hippias, by saying that what they are looking for is that which causes a being to be beautiful when “added.” Socrates claims this during the culmination of his response to Hippias’s first definition of the beautiful (a beautiful girl or maiden), a response that has also summoned beautiful mares and lyres to the discussion. “Do you
still think that the beautiful itself by which everything else is beautified [κοσμεῖται]\(^\text{181}\) and seen to be beautiful [καλὰ φαίνεται] when that form [τὸ εἶδος] is added [προσγένηται] to it—that that is a girl or a horse or a lyre?” (289d). Hippias reacts to this statement by suggesting that the form they are looking for is “gold.” Socratic eros thus makes another movement, by identifying a form, the eidos, as the object of its search. Moreover, the eidos is said to be that which makes things appear to be beautiful (καλὰ φαίνεται), and which generates beautiful arrangement (κοσμεῖται). Socrates thus anticipates the distinction he will make later on in the dialogue between appearance and the eidos. Already he is saying that the search for the beautiful itself is a search beyond appearance, for the causes of those very appearances. Already, indeed, Socrates is beholding beautiful beings (mares, lyres, girls) and seeing through them toward that which causes them to be the way they are, toward that which makes them be beautiful. He does not know what that might be, but at this point, he has seen that it is a form, and that it has a causal power of an undetermined sort. Hippias, while again expressing agreement with Socrates, does not appear to understand Socrates’s point. “Gold” is still a part of appearances; it is a color that modifies an object’s appearance, not its being. Instead, the word that Socrates uses to describe the relationship between the eidos of the beautiful and a beautiful object is προσγένηται, a compound word rooted in γίγνομαι, the Greek word which denotes coming into being, “to happen truly,” “to be born,” and not merely to appear or seem. Even if we take the secondary, connotative meaning of “gold,” that is, money or value (a meaning that the wealthy Hippias probably wishes to evoke), even then we are only left with a beauty that is relative to the observer. Gold (that is, money) is valuable for me, as currency for my use, and is not worth

\(^{181}\) Interestingly, Woodruff himself renders this word “beautified.” The word κοσμεῖται, taken with καλὰ, can be rendered: “arranged beautifully.” Woodruff does not opt for “finely arranged,” and instead breaks with his consistent refusal to render to kalon as “beautiful.” This is probably because κοσμεῖται refers to physical beauty – what Woodruff would call “aesthetic.” See Chapter One for a critique of this view.
anything in itself. Thus, while Socrates has taken another erotic step deeper into the truth about the beautiful, Hippias has only feigned it, or attempted it and failed. As argued in Chapter Two, Hippias is following Socrates on an as-if basis, not fully committing himself to the truth claims that these steps involve.

The third moment comes when, as we saw above, Socrates makes it even more explicit that their search is “what makes—by coming to be [παραγενόμενον] present—each thing to which it is present” be beautiful (294a). Once again we see a compound with γίγνομαι, this time in participial form (παραγενόμενον). But now, more clearly than before, Socrates declares that the search for the eidos which causes things to be beautiful and not merely appear to be so, though the eidos itself must also be sought through appearances because we only know about the beautiful by first experiencing beautiful objects in the world. The cause of a beautiful maiden’s beauty is something distinct from her appearance, though our access to it comes through her appearance. The cause of a beautiful spoon’s beauty is something beyond its uses, but it must be encountered in its uses. That is, the cause of the beauty of a beautiful object is something which exists in itself, not relative to my experience of the beautiful, but I only have access to it within the experience of a relation to the beautiful object. As we saw above, Hippias agrees, once again, even going on to Socrates to dismiss the “appropriate” as the correct definition of the beautiful (294e). After this point, Hippias allows Socrates to take command of the dialogue and pose his own possible definitions of the beautiful. He becomes more passive while Socrates becomes more active. Philosophical eros takes center stage in the dialogue, as Socrates enacts the erotic quest to make an insight into the eidos beyond appearances, that is, to make a noetic insight of the beautiful itself as it is in itself. Moreover, he enacts this step now with full conviction that the
*eidos* will manifest itself radiantly in appearance, which helps and, in a metaphorical sense, “rewards” his erotic search.

These three philosophically-erotic moments in the *Hippias Major* are not so much three methodological advances or points in an argument, as they are dramatic moments when Socrates gains a clearer understanding of his own erotic search for truth. They are all moments in which Socrates’s attention is turned away from the beautiful as it exists relative to himself (or to Hippias or the reader) in his experience of beautiful objects, and toward the question of what it is in itself, as an *eidos* which inheres within these objects. To be sure, all three moments involve an advance in philosophical precision and as such, they are moments of advances in *noesis*. But these moments of noetic progress are inextricable from their erotic context. In all three moments, the ecstatic nature of the erotic search is re-established. The search is always for something *other*; whatever the beautiful is, it is not something that is reducible to my emotions or whims or lesser desires (*epithumia*). Moreover, with every moment the fact that the search entails a desire to move *beyond* appearances is also laid bare. Whatever the *eidos* of the beautiful is, it is not reducible to its manifold appearances in reality. Of the three, the third moment is most important, because in it Socrates relates that the beautiful itself aides the erotic search by being radiant. He does not defend this point, however, but sees it as self-evident.

There is another thing that these three erotic moments establish, but which can only be seen with clarity after the third moment: the dynamic of poverty and plenty. This dynamic which, as the Socrates of the *Symposium* tells us, is proper to *eros*, manifests itself in the *Hippias Major* in a unique fashion, as the dynamic between, on the one hand, Socrates’s desire to get to the root cause of beauty in beautiful beings (his search is an admission and expression of poverty, as we saw in Chapter One) and, on the other hand, an encounter with the beautiful as it
manifests itself radiantly in appearances (this is “plenty”—_eros_ finding an answer to its quest within an appearance that is more than an appearance, because it discloses the _eidos_). Without this dynamic, there is no question (_poverty_: “What is _that_, the beautiful?”) and no answer (_plenty_: the radiant appearance of the beautiful, which makes it hospitable to making an insight into the beautiful itself). Indeed, without it there would be no dialogue.

Given this dynamic of poverty and plenty, an instructive comparison can be made between these three moments in the _Hippias Major_ and one key moment in the _Symposium_. In the latter dialogue, before he begins to relate the story of meeting Diotima and learning the truth about _eros_, Socrates, addressing Eryximachus, smugly declares: “In my foolishness, I thought you should _tell the truth_ [τἀληθῆ λέγειν] about whatever you praise, that this should be your basis, and that from this a speaker should select the most beautiful truths and arrange them suitably” (198d, emphasis mine). Socrates makes this declaration right before he launches into his own contribution to the symposium, that is, his own attempt at “telling the truth” about _eros_. But his way of going about this task will first be to engage Agathon in a round of questioning in which, among other things, he gets Agathon to agree that to love something implies a lack of that thing which one loves (200b). Already the form of Socrates’s approach to “telling the truth” admits of a lack: questioning implies lacking the truth, and questioning is (as we saw in Chapter 1), an expression of _eros_. Moreover, Socrates enacts the erotic dynamic of poverty and plenty by both admitting he has a desire to know about _eros_, and also accepting what he will receive from the priestess Diotima.\(^{182}\)

This declaration of allegiance to the truth is the point of contact between this passage in the _Symposium_, and the three erotic moments in _Hippias Major_. By “truth,” I do not mean truth

\(^{182}\) Moreover, there is no form of _eros_—Diotima does not initiate Socrates into a vision of “_eros_ itself,” but of beauty itself. _Eros is metaxu_, in the middle between the divine (forms) and mortal (phenomena). Socrates’s knowledge of _eros_ is not a “formal” knowledge.
as an achievement, an “absolute noesis,” but truth as a guiding ideal of philosophy, always incompletely attained. In both dialogues, Socrates sees it necessary to declare his allegiance to the truth before enacting an erotic search for the truth about the subject at hand. In the Symposium, Socrates admits to learning about eros from Diotima, which implies that he did not know about eros before he met her. Before “giving” his audience the wisdom that he has received from Diotima, and before enacting (or rather, re-enacting) the erotic journey which took him (poor, with a question) to Diotima for answers (the plentitude which he was to receive), Socrates sees it necessary to say that this erotic journey and his recounting of it is faithful to the truth about eros, as opposed to any beautiful speechmaking about eros that is not expressive of truth. Similarly, in the Hippias Major, Socrates has a question (his poverty), and he considers definitions from Hippias which fail to satisfy him (more poverty), but he also has the beautiful itself which does not deceive (his plenty), and within this context, he sees it necessary to assert and re-assert his fidelity to the truth beyond appearances, as a necessary requirement for engaging in a search of the beautiful itself. In both the Hippias Major and the Symposium, Socrates enacts an erotic search, and in both dialogues he sees the need to declare himself on the side of the truth as an important part of this erotic search.

These three moments in the Hippias Major show us a Socrates whose noetic search is tied up with his eros for the truth. The eros for the truth is what allows him to advance from the dynamic of poverty and plenty toward the beautiful itself which, because it discloses itself radiantly in appearance, is both the path and the end of Socrates’s philosophical search. Moreover, these moments show us that Socrates has been a philosopher from the very beginning, and that this is why the question of the beautiful was born (see also Chapter One).
In contrast with Socrates, Hippias is erotic—he is desires beautiful objects, and this desire is manifested in his love of honor and excellent statecraft, as well as beautiful speeches—but it is not philosophically erotic. It is not oriented towards that which causes beautiful beings to become beautiful, nor is it interested in the good as it is in itself, beyond the self-interest and advantage that Hippias can gain from it. Therefore, Hippias cannot truly engage the question of what the beautiful is in itself, beyond appearances. He is not interested in finding the cause for the appearances within the appearances. He may indeed contest and cause strife over the beauty of objects, and this is because he cannot behold beauty for what it is in itself. At best, we can argue that Hippias attempts, at times, to adopt Socrates’s erotic standpoint, though he never full internalizes it and only makes an aborted “ascent” (see Chapter Two). For the most part, Hippias is attached to beautiful objects in a way that precludes his advancing beyond them toward the form that makes them beautiful. His sense of the beautiful is always tied with his own interests (which are political or financial) and his own pleasure. In other words, he cannot move from a relative notion of the beautiful (beautiful beings in relation to him), to an attitude wherein he can ask the question about what the beautiful is in itself. Only Socrates is able to bring him to consider adopting this attitude. And even though he gives notional assent to Socrates’s erotic declarations, Hippias cannot existentially bring himself to define the beautiful in any way that does not betray a relative, self-interested notion of the beautiful. His first definition, “a beautiful girl is a beautiful thing” (287e), made after he has accepted Socrates’s premise that the beautiful itself “is something” (287d), does not cohere with the substance of that agreement. A beautiful girl is something, indeed, but she is not the type of “something” they are looking for. Nor is “gold” (289e) the form which causes a being to become beautiful, but rather only something which changes an object’s appearance (either in color or in value). Likewise, the sense for the
beautiful that “gold” inspires is one of self-interest: gold can make me shine beautifully before others, or gold can make me rich. Finally, Hippias’s third definition of the beautiful as an honorable life (291d-e), hinges on a sense of honor that is very worldly (see Chapter Two). It too gives evidence of an understanding of the beautiful as ultimately about one’s self, and the way one looks before others. “Beauty is something I can use for my advantage.” Telling in this regard are Socrates’s reasons for rejecting this third definition: “it is beautiful for some, but not for others” (293c). That is, the honorable life (in the particular way that Hippias conceives of it) has a beauty that is relative to certain people. A true eidos of the beautiful commands universal assent, because its validity is not relative to that of any particular observer—though the observer must be one whose eros is directed by philosophy.

One way to look at Hippias’s approach to the beautiful is by looking at the notion of charm. Charm is an object’s sensory or emotional appeal. Hippias appears to be more susceptible to beauty’s charms than Socrates. Well clad and well shod (291a), a teller of interesting stories (285e), and declaimer of beautiful speeches (286a), Hippias is thoroughly charmed by beauty and is charming himself. The beautiful maiden is charming: just thinking about her titillates, and by summoning her image, Hippias is no doubt attempting to titillate Socrates. In order to truly love a maiden for her beauty, one would need to consider her as a whole person—not as a titillating image. Gold is charming, both as jewelry and as money. One

---

183 According to the Kantian understanding of the term, charm (Reiz) has nothing to do with beauty as such: “Any taste remains barbaric if its liking requires that charms and emotions be mingled in, let alone if it makes these the standard of its approval.” The main discussion on charm is found in §13, “A Pure Judgment of Taste is Independent of Charm and Emotion.” See Kant, Critique of Judgment, 69. I would not argue that the same is true for Socrates or Plato in the Hippias Major. The distinction between beauty’s charms and the beautiful is not found in the text. However, there is a distinction between an approach to the beautiful which seeks to understand it according to its own formal intelligibility (philosophical eros), and one which only enjoys or makes use of beautiful beings (Hippias’s approach). Chapter Six takes a deeper look at this distinction.

184 Sweet points out that, in contrast with the Symposium, the Hippias Major points out the ways in which beauty does not lead to an ascent, but rather “tempt[s] one to fix one’s gaze upon the charming appearances.” See Sweet, “On the Greater Hippias,” 355.
cannot understand the value of gold, in either sense, without making a self-referential judgment: it looks good, or it is useful for buying stuff. Finally, the honors that Hippias lists in his third definition are all honors that impress others, or that benefit one’s self: “… it is always most beautiful, both for every man and in every place, to be rich [self-interest], healthy [self-interest], and honored by the Greeks [impressive to other, and therefore of interest to myself], to arrive at old age, to make a beautiful memorial to his parents when they die [impressive to others], and to have a beautiful, grand burial from his own children [self-interest]” (291d-e). If this definition were indeed to be “most beautiful, both for every man and in every place,” it is not so because it contains an eidos that stands in itself beyond appearances, but only because it is a list of achievements and customs which any man striving for success should seek to obtain.

The pursuit of the eidos of beauty is something which requires a certain detachment from beauty’s charms. It requires placing one’s self before a beautiful object in an attitude of philosophical inquiry, instead of a utilitarian or pleasure-seeking attitude. This different attitude is what Hippias ultimately does not adopt. Hippias does not show an inclination to travel with Socrates beyond every immediate example of beauty that they are discussing; it is almost always Socrates who brings up a new example of beauty, such as a statue of Pheidias or a god or a spoon. Employing Kantian jargon, one would say that Hippias is incapable of taking a “disinterested” stance, but in Socratic terms, one should say that Hippias is not philosophically erotic. (There is a big difference between disinterestedness and eros, of course, which we will explore in Chapter Six.) Both Hippias and Socrates are able to appreciate the charms of beauty, but only Socrates takes the next erotic step of positing the question of the formal intelligibility of beauty, and of not giving up on that question, seeing its pursuit as worthwhile even if inconclusive (as we shall see in Chapter Five). Instead, Hippias is more like what in today’s
language we call an “aesthete”: someone who enjoys beautiful works of art but does not have a very deep grasp about what they mean in a moral or philosophical sense. He is never wrong about whether certain objects are beautiful (Socrates and Hippias never dispute the beauty of particulars, only the definition of the beautiful itself), but he sees each object as a beautiful *this* or beautiful *that*, not as an instance of the beautiful itself.

Part and parcel of his inability to adopt a philosophical standpoint is Hippias’s inability to accept the dynamic of poverty and plenty without which the philosophically erotic journey to the *eidos* of the beautiful cannot be made. First off, he does not accept his own poverty. He cannot see that he is beautifully dressed, but that he lacks knowledge of the beautiful. It does not bother him that he speaks beautifully, but cannot speak the truth about beauty. He boasts from the beginning that “… the question is not large” (287b). Consequently, he cannot accept the plenty that reality gives him: the radiant disclosure of the beautiful itself in the realm of appearances. Since he does not enter into this give-and-take dynamic, and because he is not philosophically erotic, he cannot know the beautiful.

Exactly what inhibits Hippias from becoming a philosopher is unclear. Certainly, he desires, to a certain degree, to follow Socrates, or at least to entertain a dialogue with him for a sustained amount of time. However, his inability to comprehend Socrates is perhaps actually a reluctance to take him seriously. (Hippias may not be wise, but he is certainly *clever* enough to understand Socrates.) Hippias therefore does not seem to be too interested in truly tackling the question of the beautiful. His motives are, to a certain degree, inscrutable. Either way, however, he serves as a foil to Socrates, and as such, he helps us to see more clearly that the *eidos* of the beautiful only discloses itself to an erotic being. However, we can glean something more about Hippias’s character from the two aspects of Socrates’s attitude toward him, two aspects of what
we may call an “erotic” pedagogy, designed to help Hippias to take interest in and ultimately seek after the *eidos* of the beautiful. These two aspects are: attention, and vulnerability.

The purpose of attention is to educate the soul to turn away from charm and toward the beautiful itself. The radiance or incandescence of the beautiful means that the eidos of the beautiful is somehow more clearly manifest, more clearly visible, within particular beautiful objects. Whoever desire to get to the heart of what makes beautiful objects beautiful must turn their attention to way which beautiful objects appear. Therefore, attention is a virtue of paramount importance. It is not an innate capacity, but a moral conditioning, which requires a certain kind of inculcation, performed on one’s self by another. In the *Hippias Major*, Socrates is constantly turning both Hippias’s, and the reader’s attention toward an ever-expanding list of beautiful objects. From works of art, to gods, to lower animals, to tools or ships or roosters, Socrates finds it useful to draw attention to the wide range of beauties which inhabit the world of appearances. He does not believe that appearances encumber our understanding or focus on the beautiful as it is in itself, beyond appearances. He does not advocate detachment from appearances. Even though he seeks the *eidos* beyond appearances, he summons more appearances to the discussion than Hippias does. However—and this it the crucial distinction—Socrates summons all of these appearances within the context of an erotic interest in coming to know the *eidos* of the beautiful. He wishes to make a noetic insight into the source behind the appearances. Even though he has no choice but to stay within the appearances, and he does not want to stay there in the sense that he wishes to know something beyond them. For him, the appearances are fragments of evidence, or pieces of evidence, about the *eidos* itself. They are necessary steps on the erotic journey, but not that journey’s destination (despite the fact that, in this sublunary realm, the destination cannot be reached, or rather, the destination does not lie
Attention, however, is essential to Socrates’s search. Moreover, the “strife and contention” (ἔριν καὶ μάχην, 294d) which results when beautiful beings are “not perceived” (ἀγνοεῖσθαι, 294d) is a sign of a lack of attention: discord comes when everyone tries to promote their relative view of the beautiful, to have it overcome other relative views, instead of paying attention to what the beautiful is in itself, i.e., independent of particular points of view.

Attention to the beautiful precedes the discovery of the *eidos* of the beautiful, because without attention first, there would be nothing to discover. Once one turns one’s attention to beautiful objects, however, one can recognize the beautiful, because it is radiant. The person who wishes to make a noetic insight into the beautiful must adopt the ethic of a seeker, that is, an erotic stance before the beautiful, and this includes the willingness to pay attention to any source of beauty whenever it appears in one’s experience. Taking this into account, we can see how a dispute over the beauty of an object—a debate, say, between my neighbor and me over the beauty of our local cathedral—should be resolved: By paying close *attention*, in attendant expectation of an answer from the object itself.

Looking at the text, we can see in greater detail how this education to attention takes place. Ever since the beginning of their discussion in the beautiful, Socrates has effectively been teaching Hippias how to be attentive. Earlier in the dialogue, he broadens Hippias’s mind about the beauty of objects which Hippias had never before considered to be beautiful—for example,

---

185 On this point, I differ with Kirkland’s understanding of Socrates’s attitude toward appearances, at least as it pertains to the *Hippias Major* (his book deals with so-called “early” or “definitional” dialogues, the *Hippias Major* among them). Kirkland writes: “The Socrates of the early dialogues is then a strange, peculiarly ancient Greek kind of *phenomenologist*, one who approaches the earnest opinions of his interlocutors about virtue and attempts to clarify what exceeds those opinions even in already presenting itself by way of them. As suggested above, then, Socratic philosophy would not be aimed at objective being, but rather at phenomenal being – at ‘what virtue is’ understood as that which has always already presented itself in the everyday appearance of virtue. Socrates wants nothing more than what we already in some sense ‘have’.” See Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning*, 27. Kirkland’s interpretation of Socrates’s attitude toward appearance, it seems to me, over-emphasizes the “plenty” side of the poverty-plenty dynamic (“what we already in some sense ‘have’”), and does not do justice to the Socratic injunction to move beyond appearances. Perhaps this shortcoming is due to the lack of attention with which he treats the notion of *eros*, which he defines in a Heideggerian manner as “nothing but this concerned relatedness at a distance that we have associated with *aporia*” (227n).
wooden spoons (290d). Later on, Socrates brings to Hippias’s attention several other beautiful beings: the beauty of tools, animals, warships, and other powerful objects (295d-e). He also brings to Hippias’s attention the claim that the beautiful itself (whatever that may be) causes various goods to come into being (297e). Moreover, Socrates explicitly rejects the notion that the beautiful could be the “useful”, but that it must be useful for some good, thus going against a notion of the beautiful that is relative, to one that must conform itself to an outside standard of goodness (296d-e). Socrates tries to discipline Hippias’s mind by prodding him to consider the beauty of things he has never thought about, and to think about the nature of the beautiful in a more complete, and philosophically rigorous, way. The conversion to philosophical eros which might slowly be happening in Hippias’s soul is a function of a greater attentiveness to the wide range of beautiful objects which, before his encounter with Socrates, Hippias was not able to recognize. Hippias is, in effect, adopting the ethic of a philosophical seeker—though, as we have seen above, it may all be on an “as-if” basis. Nevertheless, Socrates is at least trying to educate him to adopt an open, interrogative stance before the truth about the beautiful itself.

From a renewed attention toward beautiful objects comes a sense of vulnerability before them. By bringing beautiful objects to our attention, Socrates is also showing us that we are, in a sense, vulnerable before them. As we saw above, Socrates’s ontology of the beautiful indicates that there is a distance between beautiful object and human observer. This distance allows for certain feelings to bubble up in the observer: awe, lust, and other passions. Our sense before the beautiful is one of beholding something both radically attractive and something which I do not define, but that in some respects defines me, insofar as it presents itself as something I want. Since it is both attractive and sovereign in itself, it has a measure of power over me. The beautiful girl or the great work of art is quasi-worshiped for this reason: she is inescapably
attractive, and therefore I am vulnerable before her. The beautiful inspires *eros* and this means that *eros* influences our feelings (of vulnerability) as much as it inspires our action (to philosophize, to discover).\(^{186}\) One sees this vulnerability at play in the care that Socrates takes to define and redefine the question at the heart of the dialogue: he knows that, whatever the beautiful itself may be, it is something that is outside of his own ideas about it, something which has its own properties and which Socrates must strive to discover. Socrates is vulnerable before the beautiful because he desires to know it; Hippias does not acknowledge vulnerability just as he does not really accept that the question at hand is difficult (“... the question is not large”, 287b).

The calls to attention and vulnerability which are implicit in Socrates’s engagement with Hippias both work to summon, within the soul, an *eros* for truth beyond appearances. But the “success” of this enterprise is always incomplete, because as a noetic insight into the beautiful itself will always be incomplete. Socrates loves the beautiful, so he is able to approach it philosophically and come to insights about it. Hippias loves himself first and foremost and the beautiful only insofar as it benefits himself. Therefore, he cannot know the beautiful, though Socrates gives him an opportunity to change his character into one that loves the truth. Ultimately, both Hippias, as well as the reader of the *Hippias Major*, must choose whether or not to follow Socrates down the philosophically erotic path. The rewards of doing so are plentiful.

**Conclusion**

\(^{186}\) Elaine Scarry argues that there is a discrepancy between the “radical vulnerability” assigned to the beholder of beauty in the past (especially in Ancient Greece) and the “aura of complete immunity” they are given today. She argues, “the vulnerability of the perceiver seems equal to, or greater than, the vulnerability of the person being perceived.” These observations are certainly borne out in the *Hippias Major*. See Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 73-75. Commenting on the *Symposium*, Marina Berzins McCoy notes one specific way in which *eros* is vulnerable: “*Eros* is always vulnerable to loss.” The beautiful object before me is not permanent; it will not always make an appearance in my life. Because I am in love with it, I am also weakened by the prospect of its leaving me. See Marina Berzins McCoy, *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Literature and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 121.
One way of summarizing what the *Hippias Major* argues about appearances, philosophical *eros*, and the beautiful, is by showing how the dialogue allows us to interpret these famous lines from Sappho: “Some think a fleet, a troop of horse/ or soldiery the most beautiful sight/ in all the world; but I say, what one loves [*ἔραται*].”\(^{187}\) A relativistic interpretation of this line would argue that it points to the fact that whatever one chooses to love the most is *ipso facto* the most beautiful thing. The *Hippias Major* gives us an alternative way of reading it, one which gives much more importance to that word, *eros*: the most beautiful thing is the beautiful itself, the *eidos* of the beautiful, which can be seen only by the person living philosophical *eros*. The most beautiful thing is the absolute beautiful thing, the *eidos*: and the *eidos* can only be known by a seeker driven by *eros*. But not everyone loves like Socrates loves—that is, with the intensity and desire for truth which takes one to the highest beauty.

This is the picture of the human experience of the beautiful that emerges from the *Hippias Major*: We encounter beautiful things in the world. We become enchanted, enthralled. We feel vulnerability before them. We also have a desire which compels us to investigate their source, to uncover that which makes them be the way they are. When we follow up on this desire, when we let our investigations into the world become driven by this desire, we discover that those beautiful things reward us in an interesting way, by giving us an appearance of itself more radiant than that of other objects. What exactly makes this appearance “more radiant” cannot be explained on its own terms, at least not at first. Perhaps, it is impossible to do so with words.\(^{188}\) Regardless, our desire (*eros*), in its encounter with beautiful beings (in their radiant

---


\(^{188}\) This is Hyland’s thesis, that by showing us how difficult it is to define the beautiful, Plato us is pointing us toward the ultimate non-discursive nature of philosophical knowledge. Hyland interprets the proverb with which Socrates concludes the *Hippias Major* – “Beautiful things are difficult.” as he translates it – as an acknowledgement of this non-discursive end to the search for a verbal definition. See Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, 26.
appearance), has already taken us beyond ordinary experience, toward a deeper engagement with
reality which we may call *philosophical*: a love of wisdom for the *eidos* which is the source of
appearances, beyond appearances. The beautiful discloses itself, partially, incompletely,
tenuously—and only to lovers of wisdom.
Chapter Four

The Goodness of the Beautiful

Philosophical *eros* is the force behind Socrates’s questioning (Chapter One); it gives birth to his question about “the beautiful itself” (Chapter One); it manifests itself with every Socratic effort to make that question more precise and clear (Chapter Three); and it guides Socrates’s engagement with Hippias’s definitions of the beautiful (Chapter Two). In the last chapter, I articulated a more fundamental significance of *eros* for the question of beauty, a significance which stands independent of Socrates’s character and action in the dialogue; briefly put, there can be no *noesis* of the beautiful itself without philosophical *eros*. More than that, the beautiful itself “rewards” *eros* by manifesting itself radiantly in appearance. In this chapter, I will show that the relationship between “*eros* for” and “*noesis* of,” as well as beauty’s radiant appearance, is grounded in beauty’s goodness.

The notion of goodness or the good, which up to this point had only been hinted at in Socrates and Hippias discussion of virtue and teaching (283c-e) and implied in their discussion of a beautiful Greek life (291d-293c), is a key to interpreting the dialogue as a whole. Once it is brought up again in a more explicit way by Socrates, it produces a shift in the way both Hippias and Socrates understand the beautiful. The shift begins from the point where Socrates asserts, “the useful-and-able for making some good—that is the beautiful” (296d) and is completed when he, along with Hippias, rejects this definition, but only because such a definition fails to encompass the fact that the beautiful is good, and that the good is beautiful (297d). In this indirect way, almost by a sort of *via negativa*, Socrates and Hippias suggest that the beautiful is good, and that the good is beautiful. The upshot of this shift is to provide the ground for the
claim I argued for in the last chapter. It is philosophical *eros* precisely as *eros* for the good which is decisive for making a noetic insight into the *eidos* of the beautiful. *Noesis* of the beautiful itself is only possible within a soul whose *eros* is directed toward the good. This shift, which I will argue is an *erotic* shift, gives us a new perspective from which to address those three questions which were left open in the last chapter: Why are only some souls philosophical? Why is beauty radiant? What do we love when we love the beautiful “beyond” appearances?

My argument in this chapter has three parts. *First*, I will articulate the erotic shift as it appears in the dialogue, and show how the shift allows us to make a fresh interpretation of some of the events and dialectical themes preceding the shift. *Second*, I will show how this shift also conditions and redirects the subsequent dialectical inquiry and dramatic action in the dialogue. *Third*, I will attempt to articulate with greater detail the relationship between *eros* for the good and the *noesis* of beauty that is suggested by the erotic shift. Briefly put: In order to know the *eidos* of the beautiful, I must love the good, because by loving the good, I learn to love a thing as it is in itself, and will desire to *know* it as it is in itself, independent of appearances. To love the good means to be a philosopher.

*The Erotic Shift*

The task here will be *first* to articulate how the shift comes about in the dialogue, what it consists of, and why it is “erotic,” and *second*, to see how the shift illuminates some of the dialectical themes and dramatic events which precede it in the dialogue. Both of these points will make evident that the “erotic shift” is an axial moment in the *Hippias Major*. ¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Sweet also argues that a turn occurs in this section of the *Hippias Major*: “Therefore, Socrates first changes Hippias’s proof by asserting that if power is beautiful, wisdom is most beautiful of all. This step can be drawn by inference from the fact that the definition started in the mind, but wisdom is especially difficult in that it combines
The introduction of the good into the dialogue is a new datum which demands a corresponding adjustment on the part of Hippias and Socrates. This adjustment, or shift, reorients Hippias’s and Socrates’s philosophical discussion toward the good. It is therefore a shift that Hippias and Socrates undergo together. But the shift also has an effect on our (the reader’s) understanding of Hippias as a sophist. Up to this point, Hippias and Socrates have searched for a definition which would make sense of their variegated experiences (i.e., the manifold appearances) of the beautiful—a definition, in short, that is completely dependent upon, and relative to, their perspective on the beautiful. But the good stands outside of relative or personal perspective. One does not define the good out of whim or desire, but rather seeks to conform oneself and one’s desires to it. If the beautiful is good, then the beautiful is defined by something outside of personal perspective and interest. Instead, the good points us beyond what is immediately apparent, and toward an ideal which we might not understand, but which commands our attention and respect precisely because it is good. In the words of Reeve, the good is “explanation-elusive,” while still being the commanding ideal for erotic striving, and in particular for philosophical striving, which is erotic striving that is aware that its overarching interest in other with interest in self. Socrates’s subsequent fear (296a) may be based on his recognition that Hippias’s wisdom is finally wisdom for oneself. Therefore he completes his argument by attaching the beautiful as useful and powerful to helpful and good.” See Sweet, “Introduction to the Greater Hippias,” 351. The “fear” that Sweet refers to in 296a is unclear, because Socrates does not explicitly express a fear. Sweet probably means that Socrates fears the idea that the beautiful is power, and that it is only power. The most important element in Sweet’s interpretation here, however, is his notion that Socratic wisdom is at odds with Hippias’s wisdom because it is not only about “oneself” but ordered towards something outside of the self. It is this other-oriented structure, akin to “intentionality” as I will argue below, which indicates an erotic turn in the Hippias Major points to the central role that eros, as desire for the good, plays in an philosophical approach to the question of the beautiful. In a similar vein, Christopher Bruell argues that the Hippias Major forms part of a “turn” that takes place through several so-called “early” dialogues, which taken together as a whole constitute an education in how to “turn another toward philosophy.” The Hippias Major plays a part in this by helping to exhort the student “to seek to know the identity of the noble pursuits (to which we my then dedicate ourselves) or the noble objects (worth as such of our devotion).” This interpretation (which is contingent in part on Bruell’s translation of τὸ καλὸν as “noble”) is in its general thrust akin to my own interpretation presented in this chapter, though I find the “turn” within the drama of the dialogue itself, rather than envision the whole dialogue to be part of a turn which happens over several different works. See Bruell, On the Socratic Education, 75.
desire is the good. As such, the erotic shift consists of a move away from appearances and toward being. It affirms the ontology of the beautiful that has already been implied in the dialogue: the beautiful inheres in an object, not in a value projected by an observer. The shift also shows us why the *eidos* of the beautiful is radiant before philosophical *eros*—to a soul, in other words, who desires the good and is seeking the beautiful itself. The shift opens up a new way of understanding both Hippias and Socrates, and their respective approaches to the question of the beautiful.

The shift happens in two main stages. The first stage is the turn from a definition of the beautiful as the “useful” or powerful, to one of the beautiful as the “beneficial.” This constitutes a shift from an anthropocentric or self-centered definition of the beautiful, which claims that the beautiful is somehow the product of the human being’s actions and projects and power, to an erotic one. This erotic definition is based in large part on the intentional nature of *eros*. This latter definition recognizes that the beautiful is defined not only by its relation to the human person, but also by a standard not defined by the human person, with which a human being has an intentional relationship. This intentional relationship is to be understood not only in terms of the projection of desire for an object (which is nevertheless an important part of what *eros* is), but also in terms of that which is desired—the good—which in a certain way conditions *how* it is desired. To put it another way, if I have genuine *eros* for the good, I am prepared to divest myself of my ideas of what the good might be, and to conform myself to what the good actually is, and to those things which are actually good; I will not rest content with the mere appearance

---

190 See “Plato on Begetting in Beauty,” 142-144.
191 On the notion that *eros* has an intentional structure, see Schindler, “Plato and the Problem of Love,” 206, and Roochnik, “The Erotics of Philosophical Discourse,” 117-118. *Eros* is always *eros* of something, and philosophical *eros* is *eros* of the good.
of goodness, but only with actual goodness. To desire the good is then to allow the good to define my desire, because I must desire what actually is good, not what I perceive or opine it to be. The beneficial, or beneficence, is a term which contains this intentional structure in its very definition, because as a concept it includes both goodness in itself, and goodness relative to a person. If I seek for the beneficial, I seek to conform myself to a standard of what actually in itself is good for me.

The second stage of the shift consists of the further refinement and eventual rejection of the definition of the beautiful as the beneficial. The definition is revised from “beneficial” to that of the beautiful as “maker” of the good, and finally to “father” of the good. This final definition is rejected because it places the beautiful above or in any case outside the good, and this would contradict the truth (as Hippias and Socrates believe it) that beautiful is good. Thus, in rejecting this final definition, Socrates and Hippias affirm that the beautiful is good—a new affirmation in the dialogue. Since the beautiful is good, it follows that it is also beneficial, even if the beneficial

---

192 This I take to be Reeve’s point when he argues that, of all the forms discussed by Plato in the Republic, the good is the only one which is not “reputation-reality indifferent.” That is, unlike, say, temperance, the good cannot be faked. See Reeve, “Plato on Begetting in Beauty,” 143-144.

193 The point that the “beneficial” is both an absolute and relative concept is made quite convincingly by Schindler, in his discussion of Book I of the Republic, where the term is introduced to modify Thrasytmachus’s definition of justice as the advantage of “the stronger”: “Socrates immediately remarks (339a-b) that Thrasytmachus’s answer bears a strong resemblance to the one he himself would have given had Thrasytmachus allowed him, namely, that justice is ‘the beneficial’ (τὸ συμφέρον). Thrasytmachus claims that the difference is, indeed, slight, while Socrates states his intention to investigate it further. The difference turns out to be revealing. One could say, initially, that what the phrase ‘for the stronger’ adds to the definition Socrates would be willing to accept is a relative condition. To refuse the addition is to make justice beneficial in an absolute and unqualified sense – not, of course, in a way that excludes relation, for it would make no sense for something to be beneficial without being beneficial for someone or something – but in a way that does not restrict that relation to one class, to the exclusion of others.” Schindler, Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason, 67-68. The word which Schindler renders as “beneficial”, τὸ συμφέρον, is not the same one that is used in the Hippias Major. That would be ὠφέλιμος. However, the logic of Schindler’s argument is still applicable for the Hippias Major: the “beneficial” is a concept that has both absolute and relative content. Something is beneficial to someone: that “something” is the absolute dimension of the concept, and the “to someone” is the relative dimension. The beneficial is an excellent “bridge” term between appearances and being.
as such is not what defines the beautiful. With this affirmation, the shift is completed. Most importantly, the relative (or relational) as well as the objective nature of the beautiful is retained: if the beautiful is good, it is both something objective (good in itself) and something relative (good for me). The relationship with the beautiful is erotic: intentional and other-oriented.

The first stage of the shift begins with Socrates digressing once again, after having rejected the appropriate as a possible definition of the beautiful, and having established that the beautiful is that which causes a being to be, and not merely appear to be, beautiful. Socrates now goes back to reporting the abuse that his imaginary friend would heap upon him, because of his continued inability to give an adequate definition (295a-b). Hippias insists that if he were to go “off and looked for it myself—in quiet—I would tell it to you more precisely than any preciseness,” (295a), but Socrates, while agreeing that Hippias could undoubtedly do such a thing, begs him, “But for god’s sake, find it in front of me, or look for it with me if you want, as we’ve been doing” (295b). The method for discovering the beautiful remains the same: to look, pay attention, and discuss. However, the shift will change this method. For the person who seeks the eidos of the beautiful, it will no longer be enough to look for instances of the beautiful and attempt to craft a connotative definition, which takes account of all of the instances. The definition must also always include the good.

---

As Hyland points out, the fact that a definition of the beautiful has not been reached does not mean that a truth about the beautiful has not been reached. Discussing “power,” but with a logic that is applicable to any definition, he writes: “… perhaps ‘power’ is indeed insufficient as a definition of the beautiful. It hardly follows that the issue of power is not a central feature of any adequate understanding of the beautiful. … the context of or the demand for a definition of a complex issue such as beauty seems more to close off than to open up an adequate understanding of the term.” See Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, 21-22. The fact, then, that the definition “the beautiful is the beneficial” is ultimately rejected does not mean that the claim, “the beautiful is good” has been rejected. In fact, the rejection of the definition that the beautiful is beneficial was the occasion of the affirmation that the beautiful is good. Woodruff argues the same thing: “When he [Socrates] calls a virtue beneficial he is not defining it, but stating one of its guiding properties.” See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 187.
Having convinced Hippias to remain with him and keep searching for a definition, Socrates makes his next claim: the beautiful is “whatever is useful” (ὅ ἂν χρήσιμον ἦ, 295c). But Socrates’s understanding of usefulness is not very broad. Most of the examples Socrates draws up to illustrate this definition have something to do with what is useful for human beings. There is, in other words, a distinctively anthropocentric, or self-centered, slant to this definition.

Beautiful eyes (καλοί, φαμέν, οἱ ὀφθαλμοί) are eyes which are useful for seeing—they are able to do the task that they exist to accomplish (295c). The whole body (τὸ ὅλον σῶμα) can also be said to be beautiful and to be so “in the same way” (οὕτω), “sometimes for running, sometimes for wrestling.” Branching out to the greater animal family, Socrates says that a beautiful horse, or rooster, or quail can also be beautiful. But the anthropocentric focus returns with the mention of utensils and tools (obviously “useful”), as well as means of transport on land and sea, boats and warships (whose use, ostensibly, is war and killing—activities not necessarily, nor even very often, linked to goodness). Tools of every skill (ταῖς ἄλλαις τέχναις), including music, are beautiful, along with “activities and laws” (τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα καὶ τοὺς νόμους, 295c). All of these beings manifest beauty as a function of their usefulness.

In giving examples of utility, and despite his anthropocentric focus, Socrates remains consistent in the wide-ranging analogical way he speaks about the beautiful. Almost anything can be beautiful. The first meaning of “use” for Socrates has to do with the teleology of an organic being, or part of an organic being: the eye. Thus use, and therefore beauty, are said to abide in phusis. From the teleology of a sense organ, Socrates extrapolates the teleology of the body, though Socrates implies that that teleology has to do with activities—running and wrestling—that human beings enjoy, as opposed to strictly biological functions (e.g., nutrition or

---

195 See Chapter Two for more on this theme.
reproduction). Socrates’s teleology of the body is at least as much about cultivating human pursuits, like art and sport, as it is about the biological telos of human life. This type of teleology is not the only one at play, however. Practical teleology, concerning the consequence or goal of action, is also evoked by the mention of utensils and tools, modes of transport, and musical instruments. Thus Socrates claims that the beautiful is also found in techne. Finally, a practical moral teleology is hinted at with the mention of law: law is useful for justice, and as such (Socrates implies), it is beautiful. There is also beauty in nomos. Socrates’s understanding of beauty is inclusive of many of the types of beings which form part of Diotima’s Ladder: bodies, art, and laws.

A notable omission in Socrates’s list of useful and beautiful beings and activities is philosophy itself. As an activity, philosophy is useful for determining the truth about beings. It is therefore the only activity that has the power to bring us the truth about the beautiful itself—the truth about that which, when added to a being, makes it become beautiful. Yet it does not occur to Socrates to mention philosophy at this juncture of the dialogue. He does, however, mention philosophy indirectly, but only after he speaks about the beautiful as beneficial: “wisdom is the most beautiful thing of all” (296a), Socrates says, and he subsequently claims that wisdom is beautiful, and therefore good. The eros for the good that is required to know the beautiful is precisely philosophy. It is a necessary “ability” one must have in order to approach the question of the beautiful itself. But this becomes clear only after the shift has been completed. For the shift to take place, the notion of beauty as δύναμις must be overturned.

Further into the first stage of the shift, we encounter what amounts to a gesture of great provocation, as well as a significant philosophical development in the dialogue, when Socrates attempts to capture the essence of the beauty of this diverse group of beings (including instances
of phusis, nomos, and techne) with one term: δύναμις. His argument distills all usefulness under the one concept of ability, or power (both translations are valid): “S: So what’s able to accomplish a particular thing is useful for that which it is able; and what’s unable is useless. H: Certainly. S: Then is ability fine, but inability foul? H: Very much so…” (295e). To claim that the beauty of such a diverse group of beings could be captured by the term δύναμις is provocative because the list of beings which Socrates calls beautiful is so broad, each having a unique “utility.” Socrates brings each type of utility together by claiming that usefulness in itself cannot be understood without reference to the concept of power: “So what’s able (τὸ δυνατὸν) to accomplish a particular thing is useful for that for which it is able; and what’s unable is useless” (295e). Eventually, Socrates’s definition becomes power itself: “S: Then is ability (δύναμις) beautiful, and inability ugly? H: Very much so” (295e-296a). This ability or power, however, is mainly human ability or power. Usefulness or utility are always used with reference to specific tasks, projects, or any other sort of clearly-defined end. An object’s usefulness is measured by its success in achieving its appointed end. But power is a much more open-ended concept. Power can refer to the ability one has to define one’s own ends; power can refer to the ability to make things become useful for specific ends. Moreover, power does not need to be “defined” by a particular purpose or end. One who has power is able to change his or her surroundings. One could say that, the more power one has, the less one is defined by one’s surroundings, or by ends and purposes that are “given” from outside oneself, by nature or political authorities or any other influential force. But is it advisable to wield power in this way—that is, without caring for outside influences and authorities? Should power, in other words, be at the service of something distinct from the interests and whims of the soul? Should it be for something? The question of human power eventually summons the question of goodness.
By bringing all forms of usefulness under the umbrella of “power,” Socrates makes it possible to ask the question of what usefulness is ultimately for. If it is merely “for” human desires, then it is nothing more than whatever a human being is willing at any moment. Instead, if the usefulness is “for” achieving some good, then it is also involved with something both relational (good for me) and objective (good in itself). If power is for the good, then power is really a manifestation of eros, and not really an exertion of the human soul but a response to a good that the soul desires. The philosophical question that δύναμις poses is this: does power truly meet the criteria that Socrates already has set, that is, that the eidos of the beautiful inhere in a being, and not merely make something “appear” to be beautiful? On the one hand, we have seen that the concept of power implies the question of goodness, because it implies the question of what the power is useful for. On the other hand, power can also be used to overcome the need for goodness and the need for knowledge about the eidos of beauty. If beauty is power, then it does not need to be determined by any eidos; it could be whatever the person wielding power wishes it to be. If power does not accept a defining standard outside of itself, then it is on the side of appearances.

Socrates seems to indicate that he is aware of this by how quickly he revises the definition. He measures power against the ideal of wisdom in politics: “The most beautiful thing of all is to be able politically powerful in your own city,” Hippias says, and Socrates responds, “Good! Then doesn’t it follow from these points that, by god, wisdom (σοφία) is really the most beautiful thing of all, and ignorance the foulest?” (296a).\(^\text{196}\) Political power must admit of a standard outside of itself. Political power must be wise in order to be beautiful. But this wisdom is not just any wisdom. It is certainly not the wisdom that has made Hippias rich. Instead, we see

\(^{196}\) Translation slightly modified: I changed “politically able” to “politically powerful” to enhance the sense that Socrates is talking about a moral check on political power.
that wisdom must be *good* to be wise, and good according to an objective standard, rather than merely the standard of self-interest, i.e., “good for me”: “Then here’s what got away from us: the able-and-useful without qualification is beautiful. And this is what our mind wanted to say, Hippias: the useful-and-able for making some *good* (ἐπὶ τὸ ἀγαθόν τι ποιήσατ)—that is the beautiful” (296d, emphasis mine). The utility of something is measured according to its ability to produce a good. It is, in other words, measured by its ability to meet a standard outside of itself. (Even Hippias’s wisdom, which is self-interested, eventually must recognize a standard of goodness outside of itself, if it is to be beneficial. This is what Socrates attempts to explain to Thrasymachus in Book I of the *Republic*.)

Therefore, power is beautiful only insofar as it allows itself to be defined by wisdom and the good. Power must conform itself to wisdom and the good; it must obey it. Otherwise, power is merely self-assertion, and does not recognize an essential component to the beautiful, that is, the good. “So the beneficial (τὸ ὠφέλιμον) appears to be the beautiful we wanted,” Socrates says, concluding the first stage of the reversal. Power without reference to the good is mere appearance in the sense that it is the expression of the observer, and that it expresses only the desires or whims of the observer. It does not attempt to know or revere an object, but merely to control it. Instead, if the beautiful is power to achieve a good, then the beautiful is at least in part defined by something outside of power, by an essence that is good, and must be discovered to be good. This discovery requires that the observer move beyond his own interests and power, in order to be able to put his power to “good” use.

A contrast with a modern perspective allows us to see Socrates’s argument with power in high relief. Socrates’s critique of power, and his insistence that the beautiful is both powerful but also good, sounds almost like an anticipation and rejection of Nietzsche, who often expressed a
notion of the beautiful as power. In *The Will to Power*, we can find sentences that could logically fit into the *Hippias Major* as elaborations of the definition of beauty as δύναμις: “… ‘becoming more beautiful’ is a consequence of enhanced strength. Becoming more beautiful is the expression of a victorious will, of increased co-ordination, of a harmonizing of all the strong desires, of an infallibly perpendicular stress.”¹⁹⁷ Beauty is power, and power in a human being means (among other things) strength, as well as the victorious grasp of desired things. At its heart, however, power is the ability to change the world: “Likewise our love of the beautiful: it also is our shaping will. The two senses stand side-by-side; the sense for the real is the means of acquiring the power to shape things according to our wish. The joy in shaping and reshaping—a primeval joy! We can comprehend only a world that we ourselves have made.”¹⁹⁸ This last line encapsulates precisely why power is on the side of appearances: power does not need to know the world, because it can reshape it. The real is a means for acquiring power, rather than something to be known. The world can be changed by the powerful man; the powerful man does not search the world for beautiful beings, but merely creates them. For Socrates, power implies the question of what power is good for, and therefore can lead one to goodness. For Nietzsche, power creates goodness.¹⁹⁹

The beneficial overturns the power because it takes away its primary position as that which defines the beautiful. To be sure, while the beautiful is not power, it is *powerful*: the

---

¹⁹⁹ Similar thoughts are found in *The Twilight of the Idols*: “[Man’s] feeling of power, his will to power, his courage, his pride—are all diminished by ugliness and increased by beauty …” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols: Or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*. Duncan Large trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 53. See also this passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “When power grows gracious and descends into the visible: I call such descending beauty. And I desire beauty from no one as much as I desire it from you, you man of power …” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*. R.J. Hollingdale trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 141.
beautiful has power over the seeker of the beautiful, but this is a persuasive power, the power of goodness. It is not a power imposed upon a human being, but is rather the power of erotic attraction. In a sense, it is not power at all, because it does not manifest itself as a force moving a human being, but only as being the object of the human being’s erotic desire, a desire intrinsic to human existence, and not imposed upon human beings by an outside force. If beauty were mere power in a merely coercive sense, then those who wield the most power would essentially be the ones who get to define the beautiful. But if power must be beneficial in order to be beautiful, this means that power must bow before a standard outside of itself. Moreover, the beneficial is a better definition of the beautiful because, unlike power, the beneficial has both an objective and a relational (or relative) dimension. It has an objective dimension because it is defined by its goodness, but it also has a relational dimension because it must benefit *someone*. Therefore the beneficial meets the criteria for a definition that Socrates set when he claimed that the beautiful must lie in being and not (only) in appearance, and it also is a concept that is open to *eros*, because of its relational dimension which allows for an intentional relationship between *eros* and itself. To know the beneficial, one must reach beyond the immediate interests, opinions, and judgments that one must have, in order to learn and conform one’s self to an outside standard. This reaching-beyond is perhaps always incomplete, or always must be re-verified and re-accomplished. Yet it remains an intrinsic part in the life of anyone who wishes to act well, in accordance with the good. The erotic shift in the *Hippias Major* is thus a turn away from self-assertion (beauty as power), and toward a relationship that is both erotic and ecstatic, that forces one to strive to understand something outside one’s own thoughts (beauty as good for me and good in itself). An erotic relationship is between the soul and something other than itself. It is a desire for goodness outside of one’s self. If beauty is beneficial, then my striving for the *eidos* of
the beautiful is in a fundamental sense other-directed, and defined outside of myself. In striving for beauty, I am striving to conform myself to the good.

It is part of the genius of the *Hippias Major* in general, and of its employment of the poetic device of the reversal in particular, that it both gives space for the proto-Nietzschean idea of beauty as power, and also presents a philosophical and dramatic way of transcending it. Socrates clearly believes that power untethered to anything beyond itself cannot be beautiful, because the beautiful is something independent of appearances and human desires. The space to elaborate on these arguments is made possible in part by the dialogue format, which allows Socrates to make claims, draw them out toward their logical conclusion, and then watch them fail. But in particular, it is the force of the erotic shift which challenges the definition of beauty as power, because it also challenges Hippias’s own exercise of power. The shift has a literary dimension, which communicates more than philosophical arguments. It also communicates the dramatic forces underlying the arguments. Specifically, the shift is a shift not only of the argument that Socrates is having (mostly with himself) over whether the beautiful is useful and powerful, or useful and powerful for something; it is also a shift in Hippias’s understanding of politics. By arguing that political wisdom is the most beautiful wisdom, and also saying that political wisdom must be good if it is to be beautiful, Socrates is implicitly critiquing any notion of politics that does not take goodness and beauty into account. If Hippias does not understand the beauty is good, then he is not politically wise. In fact, he may be dangerous for the city.

Before we can fully gauge how the reversal affects Hippias, however, we must conclude relating the second stage of the shift. The second stage begins with a refinement of the definition of the beautiful as the power to achieve some good. Socrates goes on to articulate how this beneficial power works. The relationship between the beautiful and the good is a “causal” one,
but of a very special sort. Socrates uses four words to describe the relationship: τὸ ποιοῦν, τὸ γιγνόμενον, τὸ αἴτιον, and πατρός. Each captures a distinct nuance in the relationship. Socrates asserts that whatever is the maker is also the cause: “And the maker (τὸ ποιοῦν) is nothing else but the cause (τὸ αἴτιον), isn’t it?” (296e). Thus the cause in question has something to do with the act of making. But the text allows us to see more than that. The product of this making is referred to as τὸ γιγνόμενον, that which has come-to-be, the same word which Socrates employs to describe the effect that the *eidos* of the beautiful has on the object in which it inheres (289d). The term τὸ γιγνόμενον appears in (among other places) 297a: “Then the thing that *comes to be* and the maker are different things” (emphasis mine). Socrates thus characterizes the distinction between that which is made (the good) and that which brings it into being (the maker, that is, the beautiful). But by using the term τὸ γιγνόμενον, Socrates is also describing the product of this “making” in a specific way. That product is something new and unprecedented. Commenting on this same passage, Giovanni Casertano uses the word “born”: “[ποιεῖν] then is a relative concept, because the cause (τὸ αἴτιον) is that which produces (τὸ ποιοῦν) something, and this something is something which ‘is born’ (τὸ γιγνόμενον), because at first it was not [in existence].” The beautiful begets; it generates new things. It begets the good the way that a father (ὁ πατρός) begets sons and daughters. Thus the biological metaphor of fatherhood is foreshadowed and aided by the gerund τὸ γιγνόμενον.

---

200 See Giovanni Casertano, “Causa (e concausa) in Platone,” *Quaestio: Annuario di storia della metafisica* 2 (2002): 7-32. The above quotation is my translation of a section of the following passage: “Esso è legato ad una sfera, a quella del ποιεῖν, per cui la causa appare come la messa in moto di un processo che porta all’apparizione di un qualcosa che prima di quel processo non esisteva. Si tratta quindi di un concetto relativo, perché la causa (τὸ αἴτιον) è ciò che produce (τὸ ποιοῦν) qualcosa, e questo è un qualcosa che ‘nasce’ (τὸ γιγνόμενον), perché prima non c’era.” Casertano, “Causa (e concausa) in Platone,” 8. Casertano goes on to argue that the conceptual link between ποιεῖν and γίγνεσθαι becomes more explicit in other dialogues where Plato discusses causality. Casertano, “Causa (e concausa) in Platone,” 9-10. See also Blackson, who believes that the “productive” meaning of τὸ αἴτιον operates throughout the dialogue as a whole: “Plato has only one official view in the *Hippias Major* on cause and definition and the connection of these topics in explanation. He claims that ‘causes’ are ‘producers.’ Plato does not say that some *Aitia* are productive causes and other *Aitia* are logical causes, and he does not say that ‘Aitia’ and its cognates have multiple senses” (10). Thomas A. Blackson, “Cause and Definition in Plato’s *Hippias Major*,” *Philosophical Inquiry* 14 (1992): 1-10.
We can infer that, as the *eidos* of the beautiful has the capacity to beget goodness, every beautiful being, which bears this *eidos*, exercises this capacity according to this nature. The examples that Socrates and Hippias have already discussed testify to this “generative” power. A maiden is to be given over to marriage, in order to generate the next generation of human beings. But she also generates a new life for herself, and her future husband. The beautiful spoon, used to stir the soup, creates a good situation for a human being: nourishment and pleasure. Likewise, the lyre: music that elates the soul. Broadly speaking, a beautiful being is able to bring about a new event, situation, or being which enriches human life. The beautiful has the effect of making life better, indeed *good*, for human beings. Socrates’s claim here also has another possible implication: the beautiful may also inspire a human desire to make something good happen, or to participate in goodness in some other way.

At this point, however, we come across a possible contradiction, or impasse, in the shift. How can it be that beauty is both defined by the good, but also productive of it? This difficulty would not have appeared had we stuck to the definition of the beautiful as beneficial. As we have already seen, the beneficial has both relative and absolute dimensions and therefore it is indicative of an erotic relationship between the seeker of beauty and the beautiful itself. The trouble starts with the metaphor of beauty as the “father” of the good. Fatherhood reverses the erotic relationship that the beneficial established. Fatherhood, at first glance, appears to be characterized by power. A father stands above his progeny; a father does not have to conform itself, in any sense, to what he has himself brought into being. Rather, the form of the progeny comes from the father; the father forms his offspring. Most importantly, Socrates argues that a father is not his son, however alike the two may be. If the beautiful is the father of the good, it cannot itself be the good.
Yet this is a poor understanding of what constitutes fatherhood. A father is most definitely related to his progeny, and while the father and child are each autonomous in their existence, they are also part of each other by virtue of kinship. The father and the child each have an insight into the other’s autonomous existence because they share common roots. Thus the relationship between father and child preserves the relational or relative dimension to the beautiful that is of central importance to Socrates. Fatherhood implies something shared in common between father and progeny. This also means, then, that the beautiful can both be good and be the father of the good. The relational part of the good makes this possible.

Nevertheless, Socrates will reject the definition of the beautiful as the father of the good, because it would not allow for the complete identification of the beautiful with the good. The beautiful is good, and the good is beautiful, plain and simple. Socrates affirms a deep kinship between beauty and goodness on the one hand, and the creation of life and works of art and beautiful customs and virtues, on the other. Socrates’s argument is as follows: If the beautiful is the maker, cause, or “father” of the good, could it still be said to be good? No, because a cause is not the same thing as its effect: “S: Then see if this is beautiful as well: the father is not a son and the son is not a father. H: Beautiful. S: The cause is not a thing that comes to be (γιγνόμενόν), and the thing that comes to be is not a cause. H: That’s true. S: Good god! Then the beautiful is not good, nor the good beautiful (297a-b).” Socrates and Hippias both agree that this outcome should be rejected: “S: So are we happy with that? Would you like to say that the beautiful is not good, nor the good beautiful? H: Good god, no. I’m not happy at all with it” (297c). The objection could be made that a being can be both cause and effect—that is, that something can be
self-caused, and that the beautiful could both be the cause of, and be itself, the good. But this objection cannot apply to the very specific understanding of “cause” (τὸ αἴτιον) that Socrates has in this passage, which is clearly defined by the ability to give birth. One cannot give birth to one’s self. Socrates’s notion of cause in the *Hippias Major* is akin to the birthing metaphor employed by Diotima in the *Symposium*: in both dialogues, the beautiful is associated with creation. In the *Hippias Major*, by using the fatherhood metaphor, Socrates claims a creative power in the beautiful, rather than a mechanistic relationship, between beautiful beings (or images, or works of art) and good acts. In rejecting the fatherhood metaphor, he is not rejecting the birthing capacity of the beautiful. Once again, he affirms an attribute (the birthing capacity) while rejecting a metaphor (fatherhood) and a definition (“the beautiful is the beneficial”).

We should not overlook the strangeness of this new claim: *the beautiful is good, and the good beautiful*. The claim does not say that the *eidos* of the beautiful is the *eidos* of the good, or

---

201 Hyland calls the conclusion that the beautiful cannot be both cause of the good and good in itself is “unjustified,” though he admits that the Greek notion of αἴτιον adds a nuance to Socrates’s argument that the English rendering does not capture: “This step [that nothing is self-caused] is even more problematic with the Greek aition than the English “cause,” for which the very notion of a ‘self-cause’ would at least be a complication here.” See Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, 25n12. I argue above that it is precisely the meaning of αἴτιον as modified by the fatherhood metaphor which justifies Socrates’s argument. My interpretation is closer to Hoerber’s: “Although beauty and good are not necessarily interchangeable terms, identical in essence, there is no need to deduce, as Socrates does, that each may not have the other as an attribute – beauty may be a good thing and the good may be a beautiful thing, without implying that each term is identical in essence.” See Robert G. Hoerber, “Plato’s Greater Hippias,” *Phronesis* 9 (1964): 154. As I will argue below, I believe that a fruitful way of interpreting the *Hippias Major* involves taking an agnostic stance toward the precise relationship between beauty and goodness on the ontological level, and to focus instead on how the two concepts relate to each other in action. Ludlam also argues that Socrates commits a fallacy: “The conclusion does not follow from the premise. The main conclusion which should be drawn from this premise is that τὸ ἄγαθον is καλὸν (being a product of τὸ καλὸν), while τὸ καλὸν is not ἄγαθον (not being a product, but the producer, of τὸ ἄγαθον).” See Ludlam, *Hippias Major: An Interpretation*, 127. But the conclusion that Ludlam takes to be valid is premised on the idea that beauty is a sort of quality that is transferrable from father to son, or from some sort of productive relationship. Socrates is not speaking of beauty in this way, at least not in this section of the dialogue. He is merely saying that the beautiful is good, and the good beautiful, but this implies nothing about the type of quality or being that goodness and beauty are, and nothing about how it may be transferred. He only speaks of giving birth to goodness, using the biological diction of fatherhood.

202 Any parallels drawn between the birthing metaphor in the *Symposium* and the fatherhood metaphor in the *Hippias Major* should take into account the many layers of meaning found in the former. For a discussion of the various interpretations of “pregnancy” in the *Symposium*, see the chapter titled “I, a Man, am Pregnant and Give Birth,” in Stella Sandford, *Plato and Sex* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010). As the discussion makes clear, the female gender plays an important role in Diotima’s account. Nevertheless, the capacity to give birth broadly speaking is extended, by Socrates, to the male gender.
that the definitions of both goodness and beautiful are one and the same; the ontology behind the
claim is murky. Socrates appears to be speaking about qualities: the beautiful is good in quality,
and the good is beautiful in quality. The Greek shows us that Socrates does not speak about “the”
beautiful or “the” good. If the beautiful is the father of the good, then, Socrates says, the logical
consequence would be: οὐδὲ ἄρα τὸ καλὸν ἀγαθόν ἐστιν, οὐδὲ τὸ ἀγαθόν καλὸν (297b-c).203 The
Greek says, “Neither is the beautiful good, nor is the good beautiful,” but Socrates does not say
that the good is not the beautiful and the beautiful is not the good. He is not setting down a
deinition of either the good or the beautiful, but simply naming an attribute that each has.
Curiously, neither Socrates nor Hippias (who stands in agreement with everything stated) finds it
necessary to present an argument defending this view. Yet the claim is contestable, complex, and
centrally important to the dialogue, and I will elaborate upon it later in this chapter.
Provisionally, however, the claim can be justified with a simple argument: both Socrates and
Hippias believe beautiful beings to be objects of desire (we all desire maidens, works of art,
cooking utensils, and noble lives), and therefore each believes beautiful objects are good. Human
beings desire an object because they believe that object to be good, either instrumentally or as an
end in itself. But does this also justify the inverse claim that the good is beautiful? This second
claim would imply that all good objects, which are good because they are desired, are also
beautiful because they are desired. There is no room, in Socrates and Hippias’s worldview, for an
object that is both desirable and not beautiful. Beauty and goodness are, if not the same eidos, at
least a sign of each other’s presence in a being. They each have the quality of the other. When I
am in the presence of beauty, I am also in the presence of goodness, and vice versa.204

203 Lamb translation.
204 Woodruff interprets these passages along the same lines as I do, though he does not find them significant: “What
Socrates implies is that the fine is good, and that the good is fine. In the context these are strict predications and
With the claim that the beautiful is good, the second stage is complete, and we have reached the consummation of the shift. Notice that no proper definition of the beautiful has been reached. Regardless, new claims have been made about the beautiful: that it is beneficial because it is good, and that it cannot be mere utility or power. Moreover, the ontological structure of the beautiful is once again disclosed. The beautiful, as good, is beneficial, but it is also good in itself. Therefore, the beautiful inheres in a being; it is not a value projected onto a being. This shift, however, is not only a shift in the immediate discussion that Hippias and Socrates have been having in this moment of the dialogue. It is also a shift in the entire dynamic of the dialogue, of the dialogue as it has been taking place thus far. This becomes clear when we take stock of how the shift casts Hippias’s career as a sophist in a new light, by challenging his claims to wisdom and virtue.

In their preliminary discussion, Socrates calls Hippias “Beautiful and wise” (281a), and lionizes him for his successful public work as an ambassador, as well as his lucrative private work as a sophist (281b-c). Hippias is much obliged, and regales Socrates with talk of his successful career. However, the one sore spot in Hippias’s otherwise stellar trajectory as a sophist has been his inability to break into the Spartan market: the Spartans do not allow foreign teachers because of their laws which forbid “any education contrary to established customs” (284b). This topic of conversation opens up a more serious discussion about the relationship between law and goodness. Laws ought to be “beneficial,” and those laws which fail to make men good are not truly lawful (284d). Despite his claims that his teachings make men stronger in entail that fine things, in being fine, are good, and vice versa. Now fine things, for Socrates, are beneficial, and that means they produce good things. But the good things they produce are, in being good, fine. So we have the odd pair of results: in being beneficial, fine things produce fine things, and good things produce good things. To say that those are uninformative is an understatement.” See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 188. Perhaps the reason why Woodruff finds the above uninformative is that he does not see the way in which Socrates’s identification of the beautiful and the good has a bearing on his dramatic encounter with Hippias, as we shall see below.
virtue (ἀρετή, 283c), Hippias is nevertheless prohibited from teaching the Spartans simply because he is foreign.

A central part of the shift hinges on the notion of political wisdom: the most beautiful power is political wisdom, Socrates says (296a), and power must be power to achieve some good if it is to be beautiful (296d-e). It follows that political power, must be wisdom about the good, and about governing cities well. Hippias also claims to have political wisdom, inasmuch as he claims to be successful in his public role as ambassador from Elis. He also claims be able to bring his “good sense” to both the public and private realms, unlike Thales, Pittacus, and Bias (281c). The bridge between these two realms must be that which Hippias sees as good, or most valuable. Now, Hippias does not appear to reject the idea of goodness, at least insofar as he claims to teach virtue (283c). But his notion of virtue is not grounded in an objective value. Instead, it is grounded in relative value: Hippias boasts about the money he has made in Sicily (282e), and does not dispute Socrates’s statement, “The mark of being wise, I see, is when someone makes the most money” (283b). Money is not valuable in itself, but only valuable because it allows the person who has a lot of it to obtain whatever he or she desires. It is a form of power. Hippias believes that virtue lies in making money, and therefore that the beautiful speeches his pupils are able to make (286b) are the reflection of a sophistical education that sees moneymaking as the ultimate sign of virtue, or perhaps virtue itself. Moreover, whatever political wisdom Hippias has, it must be based on this relative, monetary view of virtue. For Hippias, virtue is power, and beauty is a manifestation of power. Therefore, because it grounds beauty and wisdom in an objective goodness, the shift directly challenges Hippias’s enterprise as a sophist. He does not seem to be fully aware of this; in fact, as we have seen, he agrees with
Socrates that the beautiful is good, and the good beautiful (297c). Nevertheless, the entire thrust of the discussion from this point on goes against the grain of Hippias’s career as a sophist.

The revelation that beauty is good shifts the movement of the dialogue, by establishing a new standard by which to understand the nature of the beautiful and with which to judge Hippias. It also confirms that the beautiful is part of the object, not a value projected by a seeker of the beautiful. But the shift also comes in tandem with a moment of recognition: From now on, the desire to know the eidos of the beautiful must be one and the same as the desire for goodness. The way forward in the dialogue is to continue the search for the eidos of the beautiful, but in a way that is guided by the goodness of the beautiful.

The Recognition of Beauty’s Goodness

The main effect of the erotic shift in the Hippias Major is Socrates’s and Hippias’s explicit recognition that the beautiful is good, and the good, beautiful. Whatever the good itself might be, it is beautiful, and whatever the beautiful itself might be, it is good. This recognition has a philosophical and dramatic impact on the rest of the dialogue. Philosophically, the recognition of beauty’s goodness (the more immediately relevant part of the shift, for Socrates and Hippias) reveals that the search for the eidos of the beautiful is eudaimonistic, in the sense that it is both ordered toward the good as an end, and also blessed with good fortune in execution (recall that the first meaning of εὐδαιμόνιον is “blessed” or “fortunate”). Thus the goodness of the beautiful suggests that the reason why the beautiful discloses itself radiantly to the erotic being is because of its goodness good. The desire for goodness cannot be satisfied with anything but actual goodness, and the beautiful, by being both radiant and good, allows the erotic seeker to have an easier time spotting a good. But the recognition of beauty’s goodness has more than a
philosophical meaning; it also has dramatic repercussions. As we shall see, their subsequent discussion about the beautiful is conditioned by the awareness that the beautiful is good, and it has a bearing on the conclusion of the dialogue itself (as we shall see in Chapter Five).

There are textual indicators which hint at the significance of the shift for the rest of the *Hippias Major*. Michael Davis points out that the word ἐκεῖνος is “a common idiom used to indicate a sudden recognition” in Greek literature, and among the examples they cite which makes use of this idiom is the reversal passage *Hippias Major*. Socrates says, “Then here’s what go away from us: the able-and-useful without qualification is beautiful. *And this, Hippias* [ἐκεῖνο, ὦ Ἱππία, emphasis mine], is what our mind wanted to say: the useful-and-able for making some good—*that* is the beautiful” (296d-e). This seems to indicate that the erotic shift is not merely a philosophical clarification or qualification of the definition of the beautiful, but a significant development or axial moment in the drama of the dialogue, which has effects on its resolution. With this statement, Socrates does more than modify the latest definition of the beautiful. He recognizes a whole new dimension to the beautiful—its goodness—that had not been perceived or acknowledged before. Whatever the beautiful may be, any definition of it must include a reference to this goodness. This fact gives Hippias and Socrates’s search a more definitive direction.

The effect of the erotic shift and the recognition of beauty’s goodness becomes immediately clear during the discussion of the next, and final, definition of the beautiful that the interlocutors consider: the beautiful as the pleasant “through hearing and sight” (διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς καὶ τῆς ὄψεως, 297e). The pleasant through hearing and sight is the seventh and final definition.

---

205 Michael Davis, Introduction to the *Poetics*. Aristotle. Translated by Seth Benardete and Michael Davis (Notre Dame, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), 9n31. Davis finds the same phrase in *Poetics* 1448b17-18.
206 Translation modified to bring together “this” and “Hippias.”
of the beautiful, and it is the one which inspires the longest discussion. Before the shift, every posited definition (a beautiful maiden, gold, a noble life, the appropriate) was an attempt to capture a multiplicity of experiences of the beautiful all under one term. The definitions were dropped when counterexamples were brought up by Socrates, which demonstrated that the definition did not cover every manifestation of the beautiful. The horizon for crafting and rejecting the definitions was the same: the experience of the beautiful as Hippias and Socrates know it. The shift makes this insufficient, because no matter what Socrates or Hippias have experienced about the beautiful, they must include the beneficial as part of the beautiful. This is a sign of the eudaimonistic character of their search: it is conditioned by the good, and it is guided by it. It is unclear whether they have experienced the beautiful as good. Either way, they claim to know that it is good. The change in approach manifests itself most clearly in Hippias and Socrates’s discussion of the beautiful as pleasure through hearing and sight at the moment when Socrates distinguishes higher pleasures from lower ones (303e). Pleasures through hearing and sight are the best and most harmless pleasures; they are above other pleasures which involve the flesh. According to Socrates’s imaginary friend, the best way to classify them, and thus to define the beautiful, is “beneficial pleasure” (ἡδονὴν ὠφέλιμον, 303e). The shift conditions the final discussion of the final definition: it brings about a conclusion that would not have been possible before the reversal. The beautiful, even if it is pleasure, must be ordered to the good in some fashion. Even if the beautiful is not defined by its beneficial nature, it is still beneficial in some fundamental way that Socrates cannot ignore.

The definition of the beautiful as “beneficial pleasure” also restores the erotic aspect of the search for the eidos of the beautiful. Pleasure is defined by the observer: pleasure is what I call to good feelings that I experience. The beautiful as pleasure is, then, the beautiful as defined
by appearance. But the erotic shift—the same one which occurs in the shift from beauty as power to beauty as power to achieve some good—happens when the pleasures in question are said to be “beneficial.” Pleasures by hearing and sight (unlike pleasures of the flesh) are pleasures associated with music and art. These pleasures are pleasures which may edify, that is, communicate some good. They are pleasures which may conform themselves to a good standard outside of the observer’s own sense of pleasure. These pleasures, in other words, are acquired by any observer who wishes to have the ability to appreciate them. They are pleasures that are “good for me,” and I must change myself so that I may be receptive and appreciative of them. The definition of the beautiful itself as “beneficial pleasure” reaffirms the erotic relationship at the heart of this dialogue: whatever the beautiful may be, it must be “beneficial,” and this requires that I go out of myself, and beyond my experience of appearances, to grasp what it may be.

There is another way that erotic shift and consequent recognition of beauty’s goodness conditions the latter parts of the dialogue. In the speech with which he concludes the dialogue (304d-e), Socrates thinks about what his imaginary friend will tell him when he hears about his (Socrates’s) failure to discover the definition of the beautiful: “So when I go home to my own place and he hears me saying those things, he asks if I’m not ashamed that I dare discuss beautiful activities when I’ve been so plainly refuted about the beautiful … ‘Look,’ he’ll say, ‘How will you know whose speech—or any other action—is beautiful presented or not, when you are ignorant of the beautiful?’” Socrates believes that his sort of abuse is actually good for him: “But I suppose it is necessary to bear all that. It wouldn’t be strange if it were good for me (ὠφελοίμην). I actually think, Hippias, that associating with both of you has done me good (ὠφελῆσθαι). The proverb says, ‘What’s beautiful is hard’—I think I know that.” Socrates uses
the verb ὠφελέω, “help, aid, succor,” related to the word he uses earlier to describe the beautiful as beneficial (ὠφέλιμόν, 296d). The search for the beautiful itself has both an objective and a relational dimension. Its objective dimension is captured in that word, “difficult.” Difficulty is a relational concept—something is difficult for me—but it presupposes an encounter between myself and an object that is completely other, that is not in harmony with my desire to know it or use it (therefore, I call it “difficult”). The relational dimension of the search for the beautiful is captured in the idea that is good for me, that builds up my character and wisdom. This imaginary exchange between Socrates and his absent friend states a question that lies at the heart of this dialogue: How can one identify beautiful beings without knowing the definition of the beautiful? The answer to this question lies in Socrates’s affirmation that the dialogue itself has “done me good.” The question is a variation of Meno’s Paradox: How can I recognize what I am searching for before I have found it? What this exchange suggests is that, in the case of the Hippias Major, the goodness of the beautiful itself is a partial answer to this question, or at least, a necessary component of a complete answer. The eros for the good opens me up to good things, among them, beauty.

Socrates’s statement that the search for the beautiful is “good for me” implies a harmony between eros for the good and beauty’s goodness. Socrates, as a philosopher, is someone who directs his eros toward the good. Because the beautiful is good, this suggests that Socrates’s eros for the good and his search for the eidos of the beautiful somehow coincide (I will attempt to articulate how this is so in the following section). The good is what accounts for the radiant appearance of the beautiful, because the good has an objective or intrinsic (good in itself), as well as a relative or relational (good for me, beneficial), dimension. Therefore, Socrates’s search for the eidos of the beautiful is facilitated by beauty’s goodness, and his search has been “good
for him,” regardless of his friend’s chiding. The moment of recognition opens up a search for the beautiful itself that is eudaimonistic. It is marked by good fortune; it bodes well for the erotic seeker. Moreover, the goodness of the beautiful, in opening itself up to the erotic seeker, makes noesis of itself possible. The dénouement of the Hippias Major is marked by this eudaimonistic turn that is occasioned by the recognition of beauty’s goodness.

By far the most self-evident aspect of the erotic turn, however, is also the most easily missed: the goodness of the beautiful means nothing to a being which is not driven by philosophical eros. The goodness of the beautiful is a piece of knowledge relevant only for someone who is searching for the good. The beautiful itself appears before philosophers only, that is, to persons who are in search for and attuned to the formal structure behind beautiful beings. Hippias learns from the recognition only insofar as he becomes philosophically erotic, like Socrates. The goodness of the beautiful means something to someone who desires the good; only such a being is able to see the beautiful because of beauty’s goodness. The life of the erotic seeker is a life of pursuit of a real good beyond the appearance of goodness; in the midst of this pursuit, the beautiful appears to the seeker. Socrates exemplifies this kind of seeking in the Hippias Major: he shows concern for the virtue of citizens in his preliminary discussion with Hippias, and he repeatedly shows his inclination to seek for truth beyond appearances (as we saw in Chapter Three). Thanks to the erotic shift, we can see that his search is not in vain. Hippias, on the other hand, remains in an ambiguous situation. His highest value is a relative one (money), and his soul is divided into a private realm that cares for the art of sophistry, and a public one which ostensibly deals with the goodness of his city, Elis. But his fragmented self is one which does not recognize itself as such; Hippias believes he is whole and complete because he is rich.
Hippias has not made the decision to follow Socrates and embrace the goodness beyond himself, an embrace that would require a philosophical way of life.

This embrace of philosophy is possible for Hippias, as it is for anyone. One needs only to embrace philosophical *eros*; to desire the good. For the person who makes that choice, the subsequent path is blessed. This does not mean that the philosopher is able to have complete demonstrative knowledge of the beautiful (*episteme*), nor some sort of “absolute noesis” of the formal structure of the beautiful. But it does mean that only the philosopher is attuned to the formal structure which informs beautiful beings. Only the philosopher has a noetic insight into the goodness of the beautiful, because only he desires the good.

**The Relationship Between the Beautiful and the Good**

The erotic shift, and its consequences, sheds light upon the relationship between the beautiful itself and the good as it is presented in the *Hippias Major*, in three ways. First, it shows us why *eros* for the good is necessary for achieving *noesis* of the *eidos* of the beautiful. Second, it presents us with a notion of the beautiful as a sort of lodestar for the questioning philosopher, sign of the moral and theoretical fruitfulness of the philosophical life. Third, we are able to see why Plato chose to depict this revelation is in terms of action, that is, in dramatic terms. The *Hippias Major* does not give us enough to construct a metaphysical theory of the good and the beautiful. What it does give us is a Socrates who enacts a discovery of this relationship, through a dialogue with Hippias.

---

207 Of course, scholars have attempted to construct such a system (or at least, a basic account), in commentaries of the *Republic*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Interestingly, many scholars have argued that the beautiful and the good (as it is presented in these three dialogues) are essentially the same thing. See, for example, Roochnik, “The Erotics of Philosophical Discourse,” 118: “Eros, Diotima says, has as its object ‘beautiful things’ (204d3). Quickly, and without argument, she substitutes ‘the good’ for ‘the beautiful’ (204e1).” Also, Charles Kahn: “In terms of the psychology developed in the *Republic*, the phenomenon of falling in love involves not only the physical desire of
Eros, Noesis, and the Good

Eros for the good is necessary for making any noetic insight into the the eidos of the beautiful. On the one hand, we have philosophical eros, which leads us to ask questions, to posit the existence of a formal principle informing beautiful beings, to posit also the possibility of obtaining noetic insight of this formal principle, and which also desires the good (both the good in particular beings, and the good as the formal expression of a general overarching desire). On the other, we have beautiful objects in their various manifestations and degrees of attractiveness, objects which stand apart from the observer and open up a space for desire and vulnerability on the part of the observer. The task before us is to see how these two realms are brought together in the erotic shift.

The starting point for helping us to solve this task is the figure of Socrates himself as he appears in the dialogue. Socrates unites within himself all of the elements we are trying to unite: he encounters beautiful beings, he asks about their formal principle, and he desires the good. As epithumia or lust, but also a metaphysical element that properly belongs to the rational principle that desires what is good, that is to say, what is good-and-beautiful.” See Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 268. Finally, A. E. Taylor: “There can, at least, be no doubt that the ‘form of good’ [in the Republic] is identical with the supreme Beauty, the vision of which is represented in the Symposium as the goal of the pilgrimage of the philosophic lover. Hence, though it is true that the name ‘form of good’ occurs nowhere but in the central section of the Republic, it would not be true to say that the object named does not appear in the Symposium with much the same character.” See A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1927), 287. Finally, Gadamer, commenting on the Philebus: “Thus, in the intrinsic connection between the good and the beautiful … we can see an indication that ‘the good,’ which is at the same time ‘the beautiful,’ does not exist somewhere apart for itself and in itself, somewhere ‘beyond.’ Rather, it exists in everything that we recognize as a beautiful mixture.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Beautiful in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*. P. Christopher Smith, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 115. My purpose here is not to argue for an essential identity between the good and the beautiful, nor to make any other such metaphysical claim. Rather, I want to capture the relationship between the good and the beautiful as it is presented in the action that the Hippias Major portrays. My views here are more in line with attempts to describe the relationship between the good and the beautiful in terms of function. For example, see White, who argues that beauty plays a “secondary role” with respect to the good in the Symposium: “Beautiful things and Beauty itself provide a needed environment for the creation of the good” (153). F.C. White, “Love and Beauty in Plato’s Symposium.” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109 (1989): 149-157. Also consonant with my approach is Dorothea Frede’s argument that the good provides “a fairly abstract principle of general fittingness and proportion” which allows the mind to grasp the formal intelligibility of particulars. See Dorothea Frede, “Plato on what the Body’s Eye Tells the Mind’s Eye,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999): 191-209.
such, he represents philosophical *eros*. It follows then that an account of how the good figures into the philosophical quest for the beautiful itself must be recounted in terms of Socratic action. In order to do this, I will appropriate two terms from Maurice Blondel’s philosophy of action: *mobile* and *motive*.208 “Motives are ideas that draw to action. Mobiles are forces or impulses that incline us to act.”209 The two concepts are mutually dependent. According to Blondel, a motive always reflects a mobile, because the ideas we have for actions always have a root cause in the experience of sense perception or animal instinct for preservation of some sort. But the relationship is reciprocal: the best human life (the philosophical one) cannot be lived according to mobiles. A mobile must become a motive for the fullness of human rationality to become expressed in an act. A mobile, that is, must become a proper idea, and for this to happen, we must think critically about our impulses and desires.210

---

208 Alternate ways of describing the goodness of the beautiful which do not take the dramatic and erotic into account inevitably give an incomplete picture of the *Hippias Major*. Woodruff’s claims, “Although Socrates does not say outright in the *Hippias Major* that the fine is beneficial as pathos rather than *ousia*, his believing such a thing would explain the tension between his rejection of the proposed definition and his treatment of the fine as beneficial…” Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 184. But this theory, while plausible, fails to address the erotic dynamic of questioning and the event reversal and recognition, which reveals the goodness of the beautiful to Socrates and Hippias. Likewise, we could consider Schindler’s interpretation of the *Symposium* for the *Hippias Major*; namely, that the good functions as a final cause of *eros*, while the efficient cause is beauty. See Schindler, “Plato and the Problem of Love,” 207. While this theory is attractive, it ultimately raises the burden of proof on the interpreter of the dialogue, because it requires that one give a metaphysical account of how this “causality” functions. Such an account could perhaps be sustained by Diotima’s myth in the *Symposium*, but not by the *Hippias Major*.

209 Quoted from Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 610-611.

210 “…motives are ideal representations of what the mobiles at work in our psychic makeup would have us do. There is no motive that is real for us unless it corresponds to something indigenous in our nature. … At the same time, however, no mobile is truly a mobile for human action unless it is taken up by thought as an idea or a motive. Merely instinctive impulses, or the power of images, are not enough for an act to be human. There has to be some quickening of ideation from a motion higher than impulses of animal life or the attractions of desire.” Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life*, 610-611. See also the original work: Maurice Blondel, *Action*. Oliva Blanchette, trans. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004): “Mobiles are valid only through the motive that they prepare and propose for themselves” but “But the motive itself is no longer a motive, if it does not in turn become a ‘mobile’” (113). Leo Strauss articulates the relationship between love and the good that comes close to what I am attempting to express here: “All human love is subject to the law that it be both love of one’s own and love of the good, and there is necessarily a tension between one’s own and the good, a tension which may well lead to a break, be it only the breaking of a heart.” See Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 35.
Applied to the *Hippias Major*, these terms illuminate the relationship between philosophical *eros*, beauty, and goodness in this way: beautiful beings are mobiles, and the good is a motive. The beautiful itself, the *eidos* of the beautiful, assimilates the mobiles into the overarching motive.

Socrates and Hippias both experience beautiful things as mobiles, and they both love them (*eros*). Hippias betrays an attraction for beautiful maidens, and he also enjoys beautiful speeches. Likewise, Socrates enjoys the beautiful maiden as much as Hippias does—at least, we have no reason for thinking otherwise, and in other dialogues (such as the *Phaedrus* and the *Charmides*) he admires beautiful bodies. He also has a penchant for good soup, music from the lyre, and the works of Pheidias. Both Socrates and Hippias feel *eros* before these instances of beauty, and they both desire to possess them or join themselves to them. These instances of beauty “mobilize” the two Greek men through their attractiveness. But Socrates also expresses his *eros* in a way that Hippias does not: he asks about the formal structure which causes them to be the way they are, i.e., beautiful. This difference has the effect of making Socrates take a distinct attitude toward the beautiful than Hippias. Take, for example, the case of the beautiful maiden. For Hippias, the maiden is an object of lust, with an only tangential relationship to the philosophical question that Socrates is asking Hippias to answer. For Socrates, on the other hand, the maiden’s beauty is an individual instance of the *eidos* of the beautiful, and Socrates is able to incorporate her beauty into a greater search for the beautiful itself.

This “greater search” that Socrates engages in is the *motive*. The greater search is a search for goodness, the desire for which drives his philosophical life. To desire goodness is to be erotic, that is, to desire knowledge about being beyond appearances, to become other-oriented, to ask questions, and to *shift* one’s attention from the aim to know not only what is good for me, to
what is good in itself. Thus, after the erotic shift, Socrates is able to bring all of his experiences of the beautiful under the concept of goodness: power, which includes all sorts of beings, can be beautiful only if it is beneficial. The same goes for pleasures: they are beautiful insofar as they are beneficial. Goodness is a motive under which all mobiles are collected and transformed into a full human action, which is the philosophical act of questioning.\footnote{Hyland writes that “the Good is not so determinate, not an answer, again, but an issue.” Hyland, \textit{Finitude and Transcendence}, 194. Hyland’s commentary has to do with the \textit{Republic}, but it also applies to the \textit{Hippias Major}. Goodness is Socrates’s abiding issue during the dialogue, and its connection to the good only serves to heighten the stakes of the search for the beautiful itself. Moreover, as I argue here, the good has a bearing on the development of that search. See also Woodruff: “[Socrates] expects the definition of the fine to make it both beneficial and good. If the fine were otherwise, he would have no interest in knowing what it is.” Woodruff, \textit{Hippias Major}, 187.}

The beautiful itself is what allows Socrates (or anyone who has directed his \textit{eros} toward the good) to unite mobiles and motive into action. The beautiful itself is, in turns, both mobile and motive. It is a mobile in its \textit{instantiations}: it is the beautiful beings which \textit{eros} desires. It is a motive because it is good. If one’s \textit{eros} is directed toward the good, one begins to enquire about the intelligible causes of beings, about the formal principles which make beings be what they are. If one’s \textit{eros} is directed towards the good, and one begins to ask the question of what causes beautiful beings to be beautiful, then one will begin to see that these beautiful beings, these mobiles, are \textit{good}—which is what happens to Socrates in the erotic shift in the \textit{Hippias Major}. In other words, to become motivated by the good causes a shift in one’s attitude toward beautiful beings: it causes one to begin to see them as instances of the \textit{eidos} of the beautiful, and therefore as good (because the \textit{eidos} is good). As good, these mobiles have a relational and objective aspect: they are good for me, and in themselves. In this way, they form a bridge between \textit{eros} for particulars (mobiles) and \textit{eros} for the good (the motive). Thus the goodness of the beautiful allows philosophical \textit{eros} to move from admiring a beautiful maiden, to asking what causes that
maiden to be beautiful, and to incorporating the question of the beautiful maiden’s beauty to the overarching philosophical question of what the beautiful itself is.

An important part of this dynamic of motive and mobiles in the *Hippias Major* is that the goodness of the beautiful is a *given* motive.²¹² In other words, beautiful beings *mobilize*, the goodness of the beautiful *motivates*, and the *eidos* of the beautiful mediates between the two, but we are never told why Socrates and Hippias believe that the beautiful is good (and thus a motive). As we saw above, the goodness of the beautiful is something that the dialogue presents as merely true, and quickly agreed upon by Hippias and Socrates (297c-d). Socrates does not present us with a definition or an equation of the *eidos* of goodness and beauty, but is merely ascribing a quality (goodness) to another quality (beauty), and vice versa. The goodness of the beautiful is a datum, revealed by the drama of the dialogue, and which reorients the discussion about the beautiful. However, we must go deeper into the reasons behind this datum, in order to see why it is accepted by both Socrates and Hippias, as well as to see why their agreement that the beautiful is good is a superficial one based on equivocal understandings of goodness.

In the first section of this chapter, I outlined a simple argument in defense of Socrates’s claim that the beautiful is good: A beautiful object is an object of desire; therefore, it is good. We desire something because we believe it is good for us. Moreover, Socrates does not appear to believe in the existence of objects that are both desirable and *not* beautiful. All desirable objects are beautiful, therefore all good objects are beautiful. Hippias can agree with all this because he too finds maidens, noble lives, works of art, and even well-made spoons to be desirable. Now,

²¹² For Blondel, motive is an idea, an “ideal representation of what the mobiles … would have us do.” In the *Hippias Major*, this “ideal representation” is not a construction and abstraction of the experience of the beautiful, but rather a property that Socrates simply ascribes to the beautiful as it is in itself. See Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 610-611.
however, we can see that this is only a partial explanation. Insofar as Socrates and Hippias have taken different attitudes toward the beautiful, they each have a different understanding of what it means to claim that the beautiful is good. They agree that the goodness of the beautiful is a given datum, but each has a different understanding of what this means. Only Socrates understands the goodness of the beautiful as a motive.

For Hippias, a beautiful object is good because it is good for him. Hippias does not philosophize, so he does not concern himself with goodness in itself. Hippias’s go-to examples for beauty, as we have already seen (in Chapter Two and Three) always involve self-interest and a relative perspective. Hippias dwells in the relative, in what lies in his self-interest. His understanding of the goodness of the beautiful is this still very much tied to utility, and the goodness of the beautiful is a given datum only because, practically speaking, whatever I desire, I desire because I believe it to be good for me. Hippias does not, in other words, recognize a “motive,” but rather believes in the relative goodness of mobiles. He is not fully aware that goodness implies the existence of a standard outside of one’s own measure. (At least, until the moment he chooses to follow Socrates more seriously.)

On the other hand, there is only one explanation as to why Socrates believes that the beautiful is good: he has had an insight into the eidos of the beautiful. Socratic eros enjoys both poverty and plenty. Part of Socrates’s “plenty” is his knowledge that the beautiful is good. The intuition of the goodness of the beautiful is a fruit of his philosophical life, his erotic search. As stated in the last chapter, the beautiful “rewards” such erotic seeking by appearing radiantly. There is no other way to account for the knowledge that Socrates claims to have. The insight is incomplete—it is a noetic insight—because it does not comprehensively define the eidos of the beautiful. But clearly, Socrates has had an experience of the beautiful which has communicated
to him that beautiful beings are good. This is not a certainty in a Cartesian sense: Socrates does not claim to have a clear and distinct idea of what the beautiful itself is. But it is a trustworthy claim, insofar as Socrates says that all beautiful beings are good: “what’s beautiful is good.”

Socrates claims, as we have already seen, that philosophical questioning about the beautiful is good for him (304e), even though beautiful things are “difficult” (χαλεπὰ) and therefore distinctly other. He also claims that the beautiful is good. Therefore, the goodness of the beautiful must have both a relative dimension (the search is good for me), as well as an objective dimension that is proper to the “difficult” nature of the beautiful (that is, to what it is in itself, beyond the relative perspective). Moreover, to be able to claim, as Socrates does, that beautiful things are obscure (“difficult”), while also claiming that they are good, is quite a philosophical package. It means that Socrates does not know much about the beautiful things, but that he does know one very important thing about them. The knowledge must be the result of some insight that Socrates has gained in his erotic life as a philosopher (indeed, juxtaposing the claim of beauty’s goodness with its “difficult” nature somewhat echoes the “in-between-ness” of eros, its way of being both poverty and plenty). Socrates’s philosophical eros gives him a sense of the goodness of the beautiful in itself. Nevertheless, the erotic search is incomplete, and beautiful things, as well as the eidos of the beautiful, are still difficult, not fully known. Hippias and Socrates have different understandings of beauty’s goodness. Hippias understands only the relative dimension: beauty is good for me. Socrates has a glimpse of both the absolute and relative dimensions of beauty’s goodness. For both, the goodness of the beautiful is a given datum, but it is a motive only for Socrates—again, until the moment that Hippias chooses to follow Socrates.
Having established that the relationship between *eros* for the good and knowledge of the beautiful, and the role that the goodness of the beautiful plays in this relationship, we can move on to a further examination of another, related claim that Socrates makes about the beautiful: its radiance. While philosophy, as *eros* for the good, desires to understand the *eidos* of all kinds of phenomena, Socrates suggests (as I argue in Chapter Three) the beautiful itself stands out as particularly helpful to philosophy, because it does not usually take part in deception. Now we must see why this is so, in light of what we now know about the goodness of the beautiful.

*The Beautiful and Philosophy*

The upshot of the preceding section can be stated in this way: The appearance of the beautiful in human experience is always good for human life. The beautiful spoon, the beautiful maiden, the beautiful human life, the beautiful work of art—these are all manifestations of beauty that are good for human projects, human flourishing, and human happiness. They all can contribute, according to their own proper capacities and purposes and ends, to the human good. Moreover, it could also be conjectured that the experience of a beautiful object inspires in a human person the desire to partake in goodness, or to produce it in some way. Most importantly, the beautiful itself is always radiant and as such, it is a boon, a sign, and a lodestar for the philosopher, who seeks the truth beyond appearances as well as the good life. This has one big implication for philosophy: Because the beautiful is good, Socrates’s search for the *eidos* of the beautiful is at once a moral and a theoretical search.  

213 Nickolas Pappas has argued, “The fundamental datum in understanding Platonic beauty is that Plato sees no opposition between the pleasures that beauty brings and the goals of philosophy.” This the dialogue tests the validity of this “fundamental datum,” by having Socrates and Hippias both agree to it, but also enacting a response to this datum in the drama of the play. I will spell out the full development of this drama in Chapter 5. See Nickolas Pappas, “Plato’s Aesthetics.”
This implication can be seen for the following reasons. Socrates’s noetic insight into the 
eidos is contingent upon his moral character as much as it is his dialectical acumen. The Socrates 
of the Hippias Major, then, gives us a dramatic illustration of the idea that philosophy is a way of 
life. The beautiful will manifest itself only to the one who seeks goodness as much as 
knowledge. The distinction between theoretical knowledge and practical virtue—a distinction 
which is necessary and useful in certain contexts—does not hold when one seeks to know the 
beautiful. For the philosopher, then, the beautiful is the phenomenon which makes his life whole: 
it allows him to unite his moral character with his theoretical pursuits. The beautiful thus also 
invites Hippias to bring his whole life, both his “public” work in politics and his “private” 
teaching of the art of beautiful speech, under the common roof of eros for the good. “Being 
beautiful (kalos) means in the first place being presentable and refers to what can be seen in 
public,” Gadamer writes. If he is to fully embrace the beautiful for what it is in itself, Hippias 
must abandon his notion of a “private” self, different from a public one.

Within the context of this discussion about the relationship between philosophy and the 
beautiful and the unity between moral and theoretical inquiry, it becomes evident that the 
validity of the claim that the beautiful is good—that is, its importance for the philosophical 
project in the Hippias Major—becomes more apparent after it undergoes philosophical 
questioning. Is the beautiful good? How could Hippias not contest this controversial claim? He 
does not, but I can easily summon many counterexamples of “evil” beauty which would contest 
the claim. The cultural archetype of the femme fatale provides one counterexample to Socrates’s 
doctrine of the goodness of the beautiful: A woman who appears to be beautiful, but who 
ultimately leads a lover to his demise. To give another example, we often learn that many of the

people in our society who appear to be the most beautiful—those who appear on the cover of glamour magazines, the actors and actresses and models—are often plagued by addiction, loneliness, and emotional breakdowns. Or perhaps we may marvel at the beautiful, dark, powerful storm clouds in the distance, without thinking that they may produce destructive tornadoes. A beautiful shiny apple might hold a worm. Everywhere, we see that beauty can be deceptive, an active camouflage for phenomena that is ultimately contrary to what is good for human life. Yet Socrates does not consider these phenomena, even when confronted with a Hippias who is at once beautifully clad and also a sophist with little respect for truth and goodness.

Upon further analysis, however, we can see that the above examples are not instances of “evil” beauty, but examples of beauty at odds with human goodness. The distinction is crucial. A femme fatale will appear to be beautiful, and there is nothing that makes us doubt her actual, physical beauty. The beauty that we see in a femme fatale’s appearance is just as true as her evil machinations. What is jarring is that she is evil, and also beautiful: her moral character contradicts the promise of beauty. For some reason, human beings often associate beauty with goodness. The very association of beauty with something immoral or adverse to the human good intuitively seems “off” to us, like a mistake in the very fabric of reality. Otherwise, the femme fatale would not be provocative or scary. Likewise, a famous actress remains beautiful even if her spiritual life is in shambles. Again, what is jarring is the disjunction between beauty and moral goodness. We have a default expectation that a beautiful actress should have a good life. A beautiful sky that is also a menacing sky astonishes us for the same reason: beauty should not threaten human life. Even a worm-eaten apple feels like a betrayal of what a shiny apple ought to be. We call beauty deceptive only when it is at odds with human projects, with the human desire
for good things to happen. But we never truly question beauty qua beauty. If anything, these examples deepen our conviction of the “givenness” of beauty’s goodness, of the axiomatic nature of the claim that both Socrates and Hippias take for granted, because we perceive them as exceptions that prove the rule: beauty is good, except for these few instances where beauty’s goodness is contradicted by unknown causes. These examples of beauty at odds with human goodness, then, are not necessarily instances where the appearance of beauty masks actual ugliness, or where beauty itself masks evil. Rather, they are examples of moments when the beautiful itself enters into appearance, and gets mixed up with the non-beautiful. A discerning eye—the eye of a philosopher—is able to see the beautiful itself in the mixture. Once again, philosophical eros is the key.

A final, ancillary point about beauty and goodness, based on Socrates’s claims, is the following: Beauty inspires the mind to think about, and contemplate, the good. Beauty brings the good to mind: Something that shines before us in a beautiful way places us in the frame of mind where we can contemplate goodness. This is another way in which beauty is an aid to philosophy: it summons within the soul the desire for the good.

The Drama of Beauty and Goodness

The above sections should make clear why the best way to express the dynamic between eros, beauty, and goodness, at least as it is presented in the Hippias Major, is through drama. That is, through the literary depiction of action. The dramatic dialogue is not merely a literary device that Plato uses to make an exposition of certain philosophical truths. Rather, dramatic dialogue is the way in which these truths become known by Socrates and Hippias. The dramatic form allows us to see not only the relationship between beautiful things, the beautiful itself, and
goodness; they also allows us to see why the question about the beautiful itself is born in experience, and why, in the course of attempting to answer the question in a philosophical manner, the question of the good becomes inescapable. As I have already shown, in the *Hippias Major* Socrates shows us that the question about the beautiful itself is neither purely theoretical nor purely practical or moral. The question of the beautiful unifies these elements of life which modern thought has rent. Plato gives us a picture of the question as it is lived, and shows us that in life, what we today call theoretical and practical are unified in the experience of philosophical questioning.

Nowhere is the lack of a practical/theoretical or moral/theoretical divide made more evident than in the way that Socrates speaks about politics in the dialogue. The central political statement in the *Hippias Major* comes right before erotic shift, during the discussion about power. It is made by Hippias: “The most beautiful thing of all is to be politically powerful in your own city, and to be powerless is the foulest of all” (296a). Once the beautiful is seen to be beneficial, this statement acquires a new meaning. The search for the beautiful is now a search for the best way to rule over a city. The “practical” question of politics becomes dependent on a “theoretical” philosophical question. Most importantly, the effort to demonstrate to Hippias that the beautiful is something in itself, now acquires a political significance. If the beautiful is something in itself, then everything else follows: that it is beyond appearances, that it is good, and that it is good for me. Therefore, Hippias will have to change his way of doing sophistry, if he aims to serve the city of Elis well as an ambassador. He will have to become a philosopher. Notice that this political point is illustrated *dramatically* in the dialogue. The character of Hippias, with his specific political background, carries a certain dramatic significance when he is put head-to-head against Socrates in a philosophical discussion. The political significance of
their philosophical discussion is not argued for, but illustrated: the dialogue shows us that there are political consequences when our political leaders are ignorant about goodness and beauty. More will be said about these consequences in Chapter Five.

**Conclusion**

The *Hippias Major* becomes a different work after the good breaks into it. The political question of virtue and the proper education for citizens was a concern which, until this point, seemed to be disconnected to the discussion about the *eidos* of beauty. Instead, the dialogue, which begins after the discussion about cities and politics and virtue, appears as a vector in a particular direction: Socrates inquiring into the nature of the beautiful. In Hippias, he has a foil: Hippias provides Socrates with hypotheses as well as questions of his own, which help Socrates to refine the question of the beautiful. Hippias obliges Socrates, but only to a point. He never embraces philosophy. He sometimes follows Socrates down the dialectical path, as we saw in the transition from Hippias’s second definition the third one. But he remains in an ambiguous state.

But now, the arrival of the good challenges this ambiguity. If the question of the beautiful is linked to the good, and therefore to politics and to the way a person should live, then Hippias’s must make a choice. The dialogue takes on a new urgency, because while before it was merely about a question that Hippias chooses to entertain, now it is about a question which has a bearing on the way that Hippias—and everyone else—lives his life. The practical and the theoretical merge after the erotic shift. In order to make a noetic insight into the beautiful, one must direct one’s *eros* toward the good—that is, one must live like Socrates.
Socrates does make some progress in his dialogue with Hippias: his investigation has given birth to the question about the beautiful itself, thus disclosing that the beautiful itself is something (Chapter One), something that causes a being to become, and not merely appear, beautiful (Chapter Three), and something that is good (Chapter Four). This progress is best understood in terms of philosophical eros. Before Socrates takes over the discussion, Hippias’s definitions are all centered upon sense experience, or the political and financial self-interest of a sophist (Chapter Two). Once Socrates takes over the dialogue, the search for the eidos of the beautiful is shown to be one and the same as the love for the good. In order to know the eidos of the beautiful, one must love the good; there is no noesis of the beautiful itself without philosophical eros.

Yet the Hippias Major ends in aporia. Socrates and Hippias fail to comprehensively articulate the eidos of the beautiful, though they are left with a few noetic insights about it. These insights are trustworthy, because they are born out of both their experiences of beautiful being (though they are not certain, in a Cartesian sense of being clearly and distinctly true, or in the sense of episteme, that is, of demonstrable and discursive reasoning). This fruitful yet inconclusive ending to the dialogue is captured in the proverb which Socrates quotes in the final lines of the text: χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά, translated variably as “Beautiful things are difficult,” or “hard to bear,” or simply, “Beautiful things are hard.” This proverb, along with the dénouement of the dialogue, leaves us with a question about Socrates and Hippias’s respective stances or attitudes towards the discussion that has just happened. Does Hippias truly see anything useful or true to
have come out of it? If so, why doesn’t he follow Socrates in the path of philosophy (304a)? As for Socrates: does he see himself as being in the same position with respect to knowledge about the beautiful, that he found himself before his dialogue with Hippias began? How does he respond to Hippias’s eventual rejection of philosophy? These questions all emanate from a central one, which brings together the notion that there can be no *noesis* of the beautiful itself without *eros* for the good, together with the aporetic ending of the dialogue. That question would be: At the end of the dialogue, has anything true been said about the nature of the *eidos* of the beautiful—anything which, in other words, transcends beautiful appearances and touches upon the beautiful itself?

Since, as we saw in the previous chapter, the question of the beautiful itself is one which unites both so-called “theoretical” as well as “practical” concerns, and since philosophical *eros* becomes manifest in the dialogue as it is enacted by Socrates, it is reasonable to look for answers to the above questions in the dialogue’s comic and tragic elements. More specifically, the comic and tragic elements bring to relief the success or failure of Socrates’s philosophical search for the *eidos*, as well as both Hippias’s and Socrates’s assessments of this success or failure. My reading of the *Hippias Major* suggests that the dialogue contains elements of both comedy and tragedy, but that its meaning cannot be encompassed by either of these literary categories. The theme of the beautiful and the attributions that Socrates has made of the beautiful, allow us to see the *Hippias Major* in a different light, as a uniquely philosophical drama.215 My reading suggests

---

215 Only a few commentators have attempted to examine the *Hippias Major* according to the canons of tragedy and comedy. Ludlam classifies the *Hippias Major* as a philosophical dialogue which is neither comic nor tragic, that aims not at producing “emotional catharsis” but rather “philosophical enlightenment, which is, after all, the main aim of a philosophical dialogue.” See Ludlam, *Hippias Major: An Interpretation*, 182-184. Woodruff calls it a “comic dialogue” on the cover of the later edition of his translation: *Two Comic Dialogues: Ion and Hippias Major*. In his commentary, he writes: of the “unusually marked comedic element in the *Hippias Major.*” See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 99. Hyland agrees with Woodruff: “It is instructive that one of the leading translations of the *Hippias Major* is entitled, *Two Comic Dialogues: Ion and Hippias Major.*” But whereas Woodruff bases his
that the comic elements reveal the limits of Socrates’s and Hippias’s dialogue and quest for knowledge of the beautiful, but also that both Hippias and Socrates are tragic figures, albeit each of a different sort. Hippias incurs a tragic fate which is related to his rejection of philosophy, while Socrates incurs a tragic fate as a result of his embrace of philosophy. Ultimately, however, Socrates’s tragic fate is one which gives evidence of a degree of fulfillment of philosophical eros, that is, of the achievement of partial knowledge of the beautiful, which gives it a quality of consolation that Hippias rejects as impossible. In other words, Socrates’s story is tragic but also one which obtains a limited transcendence of those limits indicated by the comic element of the dialogue. Looked at from one angle, Socrates’s story is actually not tragic at all. To a certain extent, the conclusion of the *Hippias Major* transcends both comedy and tragically precisely because of its philosophical content, which can be understood in terms of philosophical eros, and its fulfillment in the search for the eidos of the beautiful.

This reading requires several steps. First, I will show how the final section of the *Hippias Major*, which begins with a discussion about one final possible definition of the beautiful (pleasure of hearing and sight), recapitulates the entire dialogue, and culminates in Hippias’s return to his original, anti-philosophical position. At the same time, this dénouement also shows us that Socrates’s own stance toward the question of the beautiful remains steadfast: he believes that his engagement with Hippias has done him good, and he remains in a philosophical quest for the beautiful itself. This analysis of the final passages will put is in a position to consider the judgment that the dialogue is comic primarily upon its comedic conventions, Hyland sees the source of comedy in the paradoxical nature of Socrates’s pursuit of definitions: “Perhaps the real Platonic comedy is not in this or that particular dialogue but in the larger Socratic pursuit of definitions; and perhaps we are to see that it is comic through the constant failure of such efforts, yet Socrates’s own persistence in continuing the effort.” See Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, 25. My argument here will indirectly address the reasons for Socrates’s persistence: a sense of fulfillment that he receives – at least in the dialogue treated here – from the pursuit of the question of the beautiful. Gregory Vlastos writes about the denouement of the dialogue: “the gravity of the denouement... has never been properly appreciated in the scholarly literature.” He goes on to refer to it as “tragic.” See Gregory Vlastos, *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 71-72.
dialogue as a whole in light of its dramatic conclusion. Second, I will consider the overall philosophical significance of the comic elements in the dialogue. The comic elements bring to light the sense of limitation which surrounds the inquiry into the eidos of the beautiful. In doing so, the comic elements force the reader to consider which of the two interlocutors has the more reasonable and compelling attitude towards this limitation. Third, in similar fashion, I will consider the philosophical meaning of the tragic elements both Hippias’s and Socrates’s stories. The tragic elements bring to relief the different consequences that both Hippias and Socrates undergo as a result of their respective attitudes toward their failure to define the beautiful. Hippias rejects philosophy, because it is useless; Socrates embraces it, finding within it a modicum of consolation. Both decisions incur certain consequences. In this last section, I will make a few remarks about what my interpretation of the Hippias Major might contribute to the debate over the relationship between Plato’s dialogues and classical Greek tragedy. The questions raised by this debate also illuminates the Hippias Major in a particular way, by allowing us to see the degree of certainty reached by Socrates in the Hippias Major with regard to the beautiful, which is the justification for his philosophical path. It also helps us to see the nature of Hippias’s rejection of that path.

Dénouement and Recapitulation

The dénouement of the Hippias Major begins with Socrates positing one final possible definition of the eidos of the beautiful: a specific set of pleasures, those which cause pleasure “just through hearing and sight” (μήτι πάσας τὰς ἡδονὰς, ἀλλ᾽ ὁ ἂν διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς καὶ τῆς ὄψεως, 297e). This final definition is not only one last, unique attempt at answering the question of what makes an object become beautiful when added. It is also a definition which sets up a recapitulation of the entire dramatic and philosophical trajectory of the dialogue, and this
recapitulation culminates with both Hippias and Socrates staking out their final positions with respect to whether the question the *eidos* of the beautiful might be answerable, or even worth the trouble of asking. Hippias attacks Socrates’s philosophical method, preferring to return to the relationship with, or stance before, beautiful beings that he had before the discussion started. On his part, Socrates both acknowledges his failure to answer the question, but also believes that endeavoring to answer it has done him good. A close reading of the dénouement and recapitulation will allow us to consider the dialogue as a whole from the vantage point of its conclusion, and from this vantage point it will be possible to discern the comic and tragic dimensions of the dialogue.\(^{216}\)

The dénouement and recapitulation begin with the collapse of the definition of the beautiful as the “beneficial.” Socrates decides to make one final attempt to answer the question of what makes an object become beautiful, even though he admits that their failure to do so is “laughable” (γελοιότερος, 297d). He admits to being stuck, and Hippias says that he himself has nothing to say, though he still boasts that “I’m sure I’ll find it [the answer] when I’ve looked [σκεψάμενος]” (297e). He is thus also admitting to not having completely followed Socrates down the philosophical path, or to not have done so with full conviction. Nevertheless, Socrates tells him that he cannot wait for Hippias to look, because “I have such a *desire* [ἐπιθυμίας] *to know* [εἰδέναι]” (297e, emphasis mine).

It is striking to see the word ἐπιθυμίας in the context of Socrates describing his own inclination to pursue a philosophical question. It is not a word that Plato often uses to refer to the desire for knowledge. When it appears in a Platonic text, the word usually denotes a desire born

---

\(^{216}\) Schindler notes that a final moment of recapitulation is a common feature of Socratic dialogues. He cites as examples Book X of the *Republic*, *Parmenides* 166c, *Lysis* 222e, and the *Statesman* 311b-c. See Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason*, 290.
out of instinct, or an inclination toward carnal gratification. In other words, it usually refers to a desire that is neither born out of, nor tempered by, rational reflection. In the *Laws*, the word is used to refer to the desire for fame, but this use is less common. The more common meaning is that of instinctive or carnal desire, a meaning evoked by Hippias’s first definition of the beautiful, “a beautiful maiden” (as I argue in Chapter Two). By using this word now, Socrates appears to be signaling the beginning of a recapitulation of the entirety of the dialogue: from *epithumia* (evoked by Hippias’s first definition), to *eros* for truth and the good. The discussion over the definition of the beautiful as a kind of pleasure also recapitulates the philosophical and dramatic trajectory of the dialogue, by shifting from a definition of pleasure understood without reference to goodness, to a definition of the beautiful as “beneficial pleasure” (303e). Socrates repeats the shift from defining the beautiful itself in a self-referential or self-interested way (pleasure is always defined in a self-referential way: pleasure is for me or for you, but never something in itself, like goodness), to a definition that requires my conformity with an outside standard (beneficence). It is the same shift that occurs earlier in the dialogue (as outlined in Chapter Four).

Socrates’s and Hippias’s discussion of the final definition of the beautiful involves five dialectical moments. The first of these involves the following noetic insight, made by Socrates: the beautiful has something to do with pleasure, but only those pleasures of the higher sort (those

---

217 See Hyland, “Eros, epithumia, and philia in Plato,” 32-46. In attempting to make a connotative definition of *epithumia* as it appears in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, Hyland argues that the word usually connotes a carnal or instinctive desire, not governed by *logos*: “ἐπιθυμία, a lower passion, contains virtually no rationality” (37). In defining the word as “desire, yearning,” the LSJ cites three Platonic passages, both which use the word to denote passionate desire. In the *Cratylus*, *epithumia* is said to come as a power in the *thymon* (spirit or heart): “τῇ γὰρ ἐπὶ τὸν θυμὸν ιούσῃ” (419d). In the *Phaedo*, it is used to designate desires of the body: “τὸ σῶμα ἐπιθυμιῶν” (82c). Finally, in the *Phaedrus*, the word is used to designate sexual intercourse between lovers: “τῆς ἐπιθυμίας συνεῖναι” 232b. The upshot of these readings is that the *epithumia* usually designates carnal or instinctive desire, and is not commonly associated with the desire to philosophize.

associated with hearing and sight, 298a). The first moment thus also includes a judgment that there is a hierarchy to the types of pleasures that a human being can have. In the second moment, Socrates distinguishes the pleasure of hearing and sight from an added quality which gives these their beauty. Neither Socrates nor Hippias believe that it is the pleasure itself of hearing, or the pleasure itself of sight, that gives these their beauty, but an added quality which both share (300a-b). The third moment is a digression concerning the existence of continuous properties: that is, properties which are shared by a pair of objects but not by each individually. Hippias believes that no such properties exist, and criticizes Socrates for believing so. In this moment, Hippias also engages in a critique of Socrates’s philosophical method, and effectively drops out of the search for the eidos of the beautiful (301a-b). In the fourth moment, the dialogue returns to the question of pleasure, and Socrates affirms that, while discontinuous properties might exist, the beautiful would not be one of them. However, “pleasure through hearing and sight” is a discontinuous property, and so the definition must be dropped (303c-d). The final moment concludes the discussion of pleasure, by revising the definition “pleasure through hearing and sight” to “beneficial pleasure,” only to drop that definition for the same reasons that Socrates and Hippias dropped the definition of the beautiful as beneficial power (304a). By examining these moments, we can see how Socrates once again affirms the central importance of philosophical eros for approaching the question of the eidos of the beautiful, and also see how Hippias ultimately rejects Socrates’s invitation to philosophize.

The first moment of the dialectic reveals that Socrates’s definition of the beautiful as pleasure carries with it the seeds for an eventual “erotic shift” toward beneficence, similar to the one which occurs in the shift from “power” to “beneficence” (296-e).219 From the outset,

---

219 See Chapter Four.
Socrates believes that only certain kinds of pleasures, those associated with sight and hearing, are possible candidates for being the *eidos* of the beautiful: “If whatever makes us be glad, not with all the pleasures, but just through hearing and sight—if we called that beautiful, how do you supposed we’d do in the contest?” (εἰ ὃ ἂν χαίρειν ἣμᾶς ποιῇ, μήτι πάσας τὰς ἡδονὰς, ἀλλ᾽ ὃ ἂν διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς καὶ τῆς ὄψεως, τοῦτο φαίμεν εἶναι καλὸν, πῶς τι ἂρ᾽ ἂν ἀγωνιζόμεθα;., 297e). Socrates singles out these specific pleasures because they are associated with the arts: “Men, when they’re beautiful anyway—and everything decorative, pictures and sculptures—these all delight us [τέρπει ἡμᾶς] when we see them, if they’re beautiful. Beautiful sounds and music altogether, and speeches and storytelling have the same effect” (298a). Socrates will set these pleasures up in contrast against those pleasures which are gained from eating (i.e., taste), smells, and sexual intercourse (τὰ ἀφροδίσια, 299a). Later on, Socrates will call these pleasures (those of sight and sound) “harmless” (ἀσινέσταται, 303e) before calling them “beneficial” (ὠφέλιμον, 303e). Thus in the first moment, Socrates makes two claims: Socrates has a noetic insight about the beautiful—he believes it is associated with pleasure in some way, a way which might indicate that pleasure has to do with its very *eidos*. Second, Socrates believes that there are two types of pleasure, some of which are lower and possibly harmful, and some of which he thinks are higher than others, and these higher ones are the ones properly associated with the beautiful. With this second point, Socrates sets us up for an eventual turn toward beneficence.

It should be noted that the equation of “harmless” with “beneficial” is not logically warranted; it is the fallacy of “confusing a contradictory with a contrary.” ²²⁰ Socrates does not offer a justification for this move, and Hippias does not object to it. The passage hints at a notion of pleasure that differs from that presented in the *Philebus*, a notion which includes pleasures

---

which cause harm and some which do the opposite. It is a theory of pleasure that Socrates does not develop, however. Regardless, this also is not the first time in this section when Socrates makes a dialectical move without offering justification. He acknowledges that a definition of the beautiful built around the concept of pleasure would exclude certain types of beautiful beings which cannot be perceived, namely, customs and laws (τοὺς νόμους τε καὶ τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα, 298c-d). But he enjoins Hippias to set this objection aside, and to “stay with this account” (ὑπομείνωμεν τοῦτον τὸν λόγον, 298d). Both of these moves suggest that Socrates is more interested in showing the connection between beauty, pleasure, and goodness, rather than in formulating a definition of the beautiful that will meet the demands of precision required by sound reasoning. His contention seems to be that any pleasure which is beautiful is only beautiful insofar as it is good. To get to the heart of Socrates’s dialectical move here, we need to understand just how a pleasure can be “beneficial.”

The erotic shift towards beneficence does not occur because Socrates believes that pleasures of sights and sounds are morally edifying, whereas smells, tastes, and sexual pleasure are not. This is a tempting conclusion to draw from the two-tier structure of pleasures that Socrates sets up, and it would have the added bonus of giving us an instance in which Plato writes words in favor of music and painting, which could be set up as a contrast to the criticism and vituperation that the two (ostensibly) undergo in the Republic. Instead, a more cautious reading of this passage indicates that Socrates is not necessarily arguing for the positive character-building power of pleasures associated with sights and sounds, but rather noting that these pleasures, if nothing else, at least provide for a distance between the person and the pleasurable object. Smells, tastes, and sexual congress all involve direct touching; the flesh must be involved for the pleasure to take place. These pleasures are of the most self-referential sort,
because they are direct, unmediated experiences of excitement. On the other hand, pleasurable sights and sounds, especially in the refined form of painting and music, require the mediation of distance to be fully absorbed. The pleasure of sights and sounds cannot occur without the viewer or listener distancing herself from the object of pleasure. This implies that the viewer or listener will perforce recognize the existence of this object, must accept that it is other that himself. This is a basic element of eros: the recognition that my desire is for something other than myself. Distance is also an essential element of the poverty-plenty dynamic that constitutes eros. Eros is always at a distance from its object of desire, and no matter what, it will always be at a distance from absolute satisfaction, at least within this life. The incompleteness of eros is represented by distance. Thus the other-oriented turn which is implied in Socrates’s redefinition of the beautiful as “power,” to that of “beneficial power,” is recapitulated in the turn from “pleasure of hearing and sight,” to “beneficial pleasure,” and this recapitulation is prepared for by Socrates’s singling out those types of pleasures which require mediation and distance from those that do not. Of course, the above account does not hold absolutely. One may lose himself in the ecstasy of music, and not remember the “other” at all (e.g., the Dionysian intoxication that Nietzsche celebrates). Also, the fact that sex is pleasurable does not (and most would say, should not) imply that one forgets where the pleasure comes from, i.e., the other person. In fact, care for the other person is an important part of sex; more than that, it is a sign of eros, which is kindled precisely in the desire for another person. These objections are true, and one could assume that Socrates would have accepted them. Nevertheless, there is a phenomenological point which is contained in Socrates’s remarks, and which holds up regardless of the above objections: the issue of distance. Even if sexual pleasure is, strictly speaking, as much of an occasion for other-turning and eros as contemplation of a beautiful painting, nevertheless, Socrates wants to emphasize that
a constitutive element in *eros*, the distance between self and other, is absolutely required in the contemplation of a painting. While one may be a bad lover, and disregard the other, one cannot contemplate a painting without taking a few steps back. Having carved out this distance between object and person, Socrates will eventually place the good before the person.

Another important event that happens in this first dialectical moment is the moment of recognition that occurs when Socrates reveals the identity of his hitherto unnamed “friend” who has been a pressing force in the dialogue up to this point. Socrates wonders whether the definition of the beautiful as the pleasant through hearing and sight might please his friend, given that the definition does not include (as I noted above) beautiful customs and laws (298b). In fact, the definition would exclude many of the things that Socrates and Hippias have already agreed to be beautiful, among them special skills, an honorable life, and beneficial power. Nevertheless, Hippias (in a statement which betrays how loose his attachment to the rigor of philosophical discussion truly is) believes that such inconsistencies might “slip right past the man” (298b) and then asks Socrates what this man’s name is. “Sophroniscus’s son” (298b) is Socrates’s response. Hippias would likely know that Socrates is Sophroniscus’s son. With this revelation, Socrates becomes more transparently himself, a philosopher. It was Socrates all along who had the caustic, violent criticisms of Hippias’s failed definitions of the beautiful. Socrates was more than the innocent, fumbling foil to these violent criticisms. He was expressing them. Now, philosophical *eros* has a face, and Hippias will have to make a final decision about where he stands with regard to it. Socrates reveals himself right before the conclusion of the dialogue, as if preparing himself for his final statement with regard the value of the philosophical dialogue he and Hippias have conducted. Socrates reveals himself as the first step toward his big finale.
The second moment of the dialectic is another movement toward beneficence. Socrates believes that it is not the actual pleasure of hearing or sight that makes something be beautiful. Rather, it is a quality added to both. If pleasure through sight were what caused something to be beautiful, then pleasure through hearing would never be beautiful, and vice versa. The *eidos* of the beautiful must be one thing, and that thing must be pleasure through hearing *and* sight. If instead it was only one of the two types of pleasure, then it could not be the other. If it is *both*, then it must be a quality that both pleasurable sight and hearing *share in common*. “They have some thing that itself makes them be beautiful, that common thing [τὸ κοινὸν τοῦτο] that belongs to both of them in common and each privately,” Socrates says (300a-b). That is, the quality that makes something beautiful must inhere in both pleasurable sights and pleasurable sounds, and must be fully present in both equally. Hippias agrees (300b). This second moment is another movement toward beneficence because it involves another step away from immediate pleasure. Not only does Socrates imply that distance is integral to the experience of beauty, but also he affirms that pleasure by itself is not the beautiful itself, but rather a quality which certain types of pleasure (those of sight and sound) always carry. Once again, Socrates takes us a step away from pleasure, within the dialectic of the beautiful as pleasure.

The third moment of the dialectic is a digression wherein Hippias and Socrates lay out their philosophical cards. That is, Hippias comes out against philosophy, and effectively drops out of the dialogue, and Socrates reaffirms his conviction that the dialogue and philosophical inquiry in general are worth having. The digression begins with a disagreement over the existence of properties which can inhere in two objects only when considered as a pair, but not to each individually—properties which, for the sake of this discussion, I call “discontinuous”
Socrates believes that the beautiful through hearing and sight is a property that inheres in both types of pleasure as well as in each individually. Hippias affirms that this is so, and indicates that a property which inheres in both, but not in each individually, could not exist: “Socrates, no one will know more beautifully than you whether I’m playing or not, if you try to say what these things are that are seen by you plainly. You’ll be seen to be saying nothing. Because never shall you find what is attributed to neither me nor you, but is attributed to both of us” (300d).

Nevertheless, Socrates insists that such properties do exist, even though their existence is irrelevant to the debate over pleasure through sight and sound as constituting the *eidos* of the beautiful. Why does he believe the point to be so important?

The response to this question lies in the enterprise of philosophy itself. Right after Socrates reaffirms his belief in the existence of discontinuous properties (300e), Hippias launches into a comprehensive condemnation of Socrates’s philosophical method. He begins by questioning Socrates, thus turning the tables: “Your answers seem weird again, Socrates, more so than the ones you have me a little earlier. Look. If both of us were just, wouldn’t each of us be too? Or if each of us were unjust, wouldn’t both of us?” (301a). Socrates agrees. Then the attack becomes more pointed:

But Socrates, you don’t look at the entireties of things, nor do the people you’re used to talking with. You people knock away at the beautiful and other things by taking each separately and cutting it up with words. Because of that you don’t realize how great they are—naturally continuous bodies of being. And now you’re so far from realizing it that you think there’s some attribute or being that is true of these both but not

---

221 I am adopting the terminology of continuous and discontinuous properties as defined by Wolfsdorf. “Continuous properties” is a property such that, “if two entities ... separately possess the property, then the two entities conjointly possess that property, and vice versa.” A discontinuous property is a property such that “if two entities separately possess a property, then the two entities conjointly do not possess that property, or vice versa.” See Wolfsdorf, “Hippias Major 301b2-c2,” 221-222.
of each, or of each but not of both. That’s how unreasonably and unobservantly and foolishly and uncomprehendingly you operate (301a-c).

Later, Hippias will reiterate his complaint against Socrates, telling him that his speeches are nothing but “flakings and clippings of speeches” (304a). Hippias’s invective is an invective against philosophy itself. This is clear for two reasons. The first is the fact that Hippias treats Socrates like a common sophist, rather than an ignorant man in pursuit of knowledge: “I know how everybody who’s involved in speeches operates” (301d), Hippias tells Socrates after the latter responds to the above diatribe. The second reason is that Hippias believes that any attempt to analyze beings, or to describe them according to various characteristics (to cut them up with words, as Hippias puts it) is foolish, because beings are naturally continuous, though it is unclear what this might mean. Socrates’s method yields false knowledge, or in any case, a type of speech that is inelegant and probably useless.222

222 A few attempts have been made to reconstruct Hippias’s “continuity theory” of being. See Wolfsdorf, “Hippias Major 301b2-c2,” 221-255, which among other topics, engages those arguments in Michael L. Morgan, “The Continuity Theory of Reality in Plato’s Hippias Major,” Journal of the History of Philosophy 21 (1983): 133-158. Both of these papers attempt to reconstruct Hippias’s theory, and one main difference between Wolfsdorf’s and Morgan’s respective reconstruction lies precisely on the status of the beautiful: “I disagree with Morgan that Hippias … conceives of τὸ καλὸν as an οὐσία” (Wolfsdorf, “Hippias Major 301b2-c2,” 236). Wolfsdorf argues that the beautiful is never hypostasized in Hippias’s mind, but that it only refers to “that which is beautiful” (238). This would mean that, in the final instance, Hippias has never really followed Socrates, and never truly believed that the beautiful itself “is something” (287c), a claim to which Hippias explicitly assents at the beginning of the dialogue (287d). The “continuity theory” expresses, perhaps, what Hippias really thinks. I would agree with this claim, though it is also important to consider the fact that Hippias does consider the possibility that the beautiful itself “is something.” Beyond this, my argument here does not depend on a reconstruction of Hippias’s beliefs, but only with the upshot that his beliefs are anti-Socratic, and incompatible with the search for an eidos of the beautiful beyond appearances. Other commentators plainly state either that Hippias is a materialist, or that Hippias’s theory has the distinguishing feature of being a form of materialism (that is, a denial of the reality of any formal categories or spiritual entities). As such, they support Wolfsdorf’s side of the argument. Sweet does not attempt to reconstruct Hippias’s theory, but he does argue that Hippias has a “tendency to distort the arguments in the direction of objects of sense.” See Sweet, “Commentary,” 354. Raphaël Arteau McNeil finds Democritus’s atomist materialism to be a useful hermeneutical tool with which to understand Hippias’s argument with Socrates: “Qu’Hippias se fasse ici l’écho du matérialisme tel qu’il fut élaboré par Démocrate ou non, il n’en partage pas moins les mêmes prémisses fondamentales: l’Un es Multiple, et cette multiplicité d’unités premières se fonde, en dernière analyse, sur les corps du réel” (446). See Raphaël Arteau McNeil, “Platon, critique du matérialisme: le cas de l’Hippias majeur,” Dialogue 46 (2007): 435-458.
The reason why Socrates must defend discontinuous properties is they are part of philosophy, that is, because they are a part of the “cutting” that Hippias says is impossible. Socrates must reject what he calls Hippias’s “continuous theory of being” (διανεκέει λόγῳ τῆς οὐσίας, 301e). Socrates defends discontinuous properties by drawing a numerical example: “Then if each of us is one, wouldn’t he also be odd-numbered? ... Then will both of us be odd-numbered, being two?” (302a). That is, each individual is one, and thus odd, but put together, the individuals form a pair, and thus are even. Socrates’s example shows that any full understanding of reality requires continuous properties, and also (and this point is crucial) that these properties are not necessarily physical properties (as numbers are not).

Still, Socrates does not believe that the beautiful is a discontinuous property: “I think it’s a great absurdity for both of us to be beautiful, but each not; or each beautiful, but both not, or anything else like that” (303c) he says later on. This means that Socrates believes the beautiful itself to be both something, and something that is not a number or discontinuous. This is important because it means that the beautiful itself is a general term that can be understood both when applied to a particular or to all particulars taken as a whole: beauty lies both in the eidos and a beautiful flower. Thus Socrates confirms that beautiful beings are part of a greater general eidos, and beautiful beings, particular instantiations of beauty, as they manifest themselves radiantly to the human observer, are able to provide noetic glimpses of this greater general eidos. Notice too that pleasure, by itself, is less likely to hint at a greater general eidos than beauty is. Beauty shines forth and communicates a certain eidetic structure; pleasure is inherently

---

224 Cf. my discussion about appearances and deception in Chapter Three.
self-referential, and one can be tempted to define it in a completely self-referential way: pleasure simply is what pleases me.

Pleasure begins to point beyond itself in the fourth and fifth dialectical moments. In the fourth moment, the definition of pleasure through hearing and sight is dropped precisely because it is a continuous property. Socrates says that “‘Through sight and hearing’ makes both beautiful, but not each” (303d). He thus contradicts the previous statement to the contrary made by Hippias (300b). The fifth and final moment consists of reassessing the definition of the beautiful as pleasure of hearing and sight. “What do you say that is—the beautiful in both pleasures, which made you honor [τιμήσαντες] them above others and call them beautiful?” asks Socrates, in the voice of the imaginary third person (which, Hippias and the reader now know, is Socrates).²²⁵ The answer is that these pleasures are “harmless” (ἀσινέσταται). Socrates asks Hippias if he can think of another distinguishing factor, and Hippias says that he cannot, that these pleasures really are “best” (βέλτισταί εἰσιν, 303e). From there, Socrates will derive the definition of the beautiful as “beneficial pleasure” (ἡδονὴν ὠφέλιμον), which is then almost immediately dropped because, as Socrates says, this definition “comes down to the earlier account. The good would not be beautiful, nor the beautiful good, if each of these were different” (304a). With this, the final definition has been exhausted, and none other will be suggested by either interlocutor.

Thus the erotic shift is complete: we have turned from a definition of the beautiful that begins with pleasure and ends in beneficial pleasure, that is, from a definition of the beautiful that is self-referential, to one that must conform itself to an ideal outside the self. As we have

²²⁵ I have changed Woodruff’s rendering of τιμήσαντες as “value” to “honor,” which I believe is more Greek and less modern.
seen, Socrates affirms that the *eidos* of the beautiful causes a being to be, and not appear to be, beautiful. As we saw in Chapter Four, *dunamis* is not an adequate definition of the beautiful because power is on the side of appearances. Whoever is powerful is able to change being, and is not compelled to conform herself to a standard outside of its power. Moreover, power is power for *me*, it is about what I can accomplish. Beneficial power is a different concept altogether, because it is power in harmony with the standard of goodness, which is a standard I do not define. The same applies for pleasure. Pleasure by itself is self-referential, and has to do with what I feel to be pleasurable. Pleasure is an appearance, in other words. But beneficial pleasure is a pleasure that must be measured against a standard of beneficence or goodness that I do not define. Candy is pleasurable, but Beethoven’s Ninth is a beneficial pleasure. I can easily discern that the former statement is true, but it requires more knowledge—about goodness—to discern why the latter is the case.

With the completion of this erotic shift, the recapitulation is also complete. The dialogue has taken us from Hippias’s boasts about his money and influence, to his first definition of the beautiful (a beautiful maiden) which evokes *epithumia* and an attachment to bodies. Eventually, through many dialectical twists and turns, Socrates shepherds the discussion to the noetic revelation that the beautiful is good. The definition of the beautiful as pleasure also evokes *epithumia*, and in fact Socrates uses the word, in a rather odd context, during the beginning of the recapitulation. But like the previous part of the dialogue, this part too reveals that the beautiful must be associated with the good in some way, if we are to get anywhere near defining its *eidos*. Both the main part of the dialogue and the recapitulation end in the same way: in both the goodness of the beautiful is affirmed, but in neither is the *eidos* of the beautiful identified as being goodness. In other words, the beautiful is good, but the two are distinct things. Yet by
leading two dialectical trains down to the same station, Plato suggests that the goodness of the beautiful is truth which philosophy can uncover, and can do so in various ways. The beautiful always leads us to the good, and it even leads dialectic itself toward it. We can say now that the dialogue begins with the noetic insight that the beautiful itself is something, and that dialectic refines this insight (through the crafting and revising and rejection of various definitions of the beautiful), so that eventually we are lead to a new insight, one which holds up through two separate sequences of dialectical questionings: beautiful things are good, and the beautiful itself is good.

The dialogue does not conclude here, however. It concludes with Socrates and Hippias making their final statements of allegiance. Hippias will go first, reiterating his previous criticism of Socrates by claiming that Socrates’s talk is “flakings and clippings of speeches … divided up small” (304a). Socrates, it is implied, engages in “small talking” (σμικρόλογίας, 304a) and “nonsense” (ἀνόητος, 304b). Socrates’s philosophical inquiries are pointless. More than that, they are useless. Hippias implicitly returns to utility as a standard by which to judge the beautiful: “But here’s what is beautiful and worth a lot: to be able to present a speech well and beautifully, in court or council or any other authority to whom you give the speech, to convince them and go home carrying not the smallest but the greatest of prizes, the successful defense of yourself, your property, and friends. One should stick to that” (304a-b). Hippias’s statement signals a departure from the attempt to even play along with Socrates. He defines the beautiful by its usefulness, even using the word beautiful in his ersatz “definition” (something that he did before, in his first and third definitions). Moreover, the type of usefulness that Hippias refers to is related to political power. Now, the pretense is gone. If you are smart, Socrates, you will stick to what is good for you, and leave aside this chasing after things that do
not exist. Hippias has made his decision: against philosophical *eros*, and against the pursuit of the *eidos* of the beautiful.

On his part, Socrates reaffirms the search for the *eidos* of the beautiful, as well as philosophical *eros*. He coyly tells Hippias “you know which activities a man should practice, and you’ve practiced them too” (304b), admits that “I wander around and I’m always getting stuck” (304c). Socrates considers it may be the case that “I am spending my time on things that are silly and small and worthless.” Yet when he comes close to agreeing with Hippias on this point, that man—the imaginary friend, the son of Sophroniscus—begins to insult him once again. He asks Socrates “How dare I [Socrates] discuss beautiful activities when I’ve been so plainly routed about the beautiful, and it’s clear I don’t even know at all what that is itself” (304d). The son of Sophroniscus compels Socrates to stick with philosophy. In other words, Socrates cannot disobey his own desire to ask the question about the beautiful. He remains true to his philosophical *eros*. In this case, it is not the daimon of the *Apology*, but a version of Socrates himself, “the son of Sophroniscus,” who reminds Socrates that philosophy is the way of life he should lead. This “idealized” or “imaginary” Socrates is merely Socrates in a more confident mode. Socrates believes it is necessary to bear the pain of the blows and insults which “the Son of Sophroniscus” threatens him with. These blows are likely the suffering that is involved in any philosophical endeavor, the effort required to discover any truth. About this suffering, Socrates says, “It wouldn’t be strange if it were good for me. I actually think, Hippias, that associating with both of you has done me good.” Philosophy, however painful, has been a path to goodness. “What’s beautiful is hard,” is the final thing that Socrates affirms. With these words, Socrates reaffirms his philosophical *eros*. He does not say that it is a useful art, or that it will allow him to win a court case. Nor does he argue that it will make him rich or honored, as sophistry has done for
Hippias. He merely says that it will do him good. Moreover, the search has left him with the knowledge that beautiful things are “difficult,” along with all the other affirmations that he makes at earlier junctures in the dialogue: among them, that the beautiful itself is something, that it appears radiantly to the erotic seeker, and that it is good.

Both Hippias and Socrates have now completed their respective dramatic arcs, have made final gestures of allegiance; in Aristotelian terms, their “action” has been completed. Now, therefore, we can examine the comic and tragic dimensions of their action.

Comedy in the *Hippias Major*

Before we analyze the contrast between the comic elements of the dialogue, and the dialogue’s philosophical meaning, I should clarify what I mean by “comedy” as a genre. Strictly speaking, the comedy of the fourth and fifth centuries was a staged affair, with three to four actors wearing masks and costumes. While some have argued that it is possible for Plato’s dialogues to have been staged, my argument here is not contingent upon such a possibility. Instead of being a comic play, the fact is that the *Hippias Major* has comic elements, ones which a Greek audience would recognize. It is important to outline and interpret these comic elements because they form a part of the whole of the dialogue, and their presence must be considered in any interpretation of the dialogue that aims to disclose the role that *eros* plays within it. In fact, the erotic dimension is part of what makes this dialogue funny.

---

226 “In the fifth century, spectators would expect to see a play with three speaking actors (or possibly four) and a chorus, all or almost all dressed in outlandish, padded costumes, and many bearing large leather phalluses; some of them, especially in the chorus, might even be dressed as animals or other strange entities, such as clouds.” Konstan, “Defining the genre,” 33.

227 On the possibility of Plato’s dialogues having been performed in a very limited sense, see Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22-25. Blondell argues that because silent and solitary reading were the exception, rather than the rule, in Plato’s time, “just about all ancient Greek texts were in some sense performed. At a minimum, this means that they were spoken aloud, for the benefit or entertainment of some kind of audience (23).” Nevertheless, complex, reported dialogues such as the *Symposium*, would not likely have been performed by more than one actor (24).
The comedy in the *Hippias Major* manifests itself primarily in three comic tropes: Hippias is made to seem foolish and his claims to nobility are found questionable in light of the events of the story; both Socrates and Hippias find themselves in a laughable situation; the register employed by both characters has a wide range, befitting the comic genre. These comic elements are present in the dialogue and a Greek reader would recognize them as such. The overall philosophical significance of the comedy in the dialogue lies in the self-knowledge that both Socrates and Hippias acquire, when they both admit, in different ways, to having failed to define the beautiful itself in a definitive, discursive way. This self-knowledge also extends to reader of the dialogue, who is able to see in the contrasting ways that Hippias and Socrates deal with their admitted failure a choice between sophistry and philosophy. Once their ignorance is revealed, Hippias and Socrates deal with their failure to answer the question of the beautiful in different ways. Socrates is a person who admits to not knowing what the definition of the beautiful itself is, but who must relentlessly pursue the question. Hippias is revealed to be someone who claims to know what the beautiful itself is (287b), but who does not care or find it

---

228 David Konstan writes: “… an Athenian audience, whether in the fifth century or the fourth and later, would have had no difficulty in knowing whether the performance they were watching was a kômôidia.” See David Konstan, “Defining the genre,” in The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy, Martin Revermann, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 32. It follows that an Athenian reader would be able to recognize comic tropes when they make their appearance in a Platonic dialogue.

229 Here I concur with Franco V. Trivigno’s thesis that the comic element of Platonic dialogues is best understood as a device to inspire self-knowledge *in the reader*. “Since self-ignorance is universally agreed to be a vice, by exposing the self-ignorant, he makes them more virtuous. Indeed, insofar as this person aims at the good even of his enemies, this person seems not really to have enemies at all. He recognizes and acknowledges a shared humanity: both he and the self-ignorant are ignorant with respect to wisdom and share the tendency to self-ignorance. This person perceives the bad, self-ignorant condition of others also as a real possibility for himself, which he attempts to stave off through constant examination. His examination of others is thus at the same time an opportunity for self-scrutiny. The pleasurable feeling generated by the revelation of self-ignorance is not one of mocking self-satisfaction. Rather, it is the pure pleasure of learning (52a). The person living the higher way of life, then, through his exposure of the ridiculousness of self-ignorance, attempts to occasion self-knowledge in all he meets.” Franco V. Trivigno, “The Philosophical Muse: On Comedy in the Platonic Dialogues” (PhD Diss., Boston University, 2008), 242. I would quibble with Trivigno’s thesis only in adding that the Socrates of the *Hippias Major* does not necessarily prove that Hippias’s ignorance of the philosophical answer to the question of the beautiful (as opposed to the rhetorical or sophistical answer which he gives us [304a-b]) is morally blameworthy. In other words, Socrates demonstrates Hippias’s philosophical ignorance, but he leaves the reader with the option to question whether the philosophical path truly is preferable. This will become clearer in the third section of this chapter.
useful to pursue the question—and someone whose ignorance has been exposed by none other than the self-aware ignorant and ugly man, Socrates. Thus we have a comic situation where the ignorance of both characters is revealed, but the pride of only one of the two is hurt. But Hippias’s pride is only hurt because he claimed to know something he did not know. If he were a philosopher, his pride would not have been hurt. Proceeding, I will first elaborate upon the three comic tropes found in the *Hippias Major*. Then I will articulate the philosophical significance of the comic element.

The first comic element lies in Hippias’s failure and inability to satisfactorily answer the question of the beautiful, and the irony that comes with this failure and inability, given the claims that Hippias makes for himself. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that comedy concerns blundering or laughable protagonists (μίμησις φαυλοτέρων) who make some sort of mistake (ἀμάρτημα) which is laughable (γελοῖον), but which does not cause pain and disaster (ἀνώδυνον καὶ οὐ φθαρτικόν). This dynamic is found in the *Hippias Major*. Hippias’s mistake is his inability and failure to meet the standard of wisdom he has claimed of himself. As such, he cuts a common Platonic figure. From the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates indulges Hippias’s ego, by affirming his noble claims. Hippias is “beautiful and wise,” and he excels in both public and private affairs. Many cities—with the significant exception of Sparta—pay him to teach. Yet once Socrates sets for him the task of defining one of the terms—τὸ καλόν—which Hippias uses to describe the value of his work as a Sophist, Hippias is found to be powerless to do so. The failure of all three of his attempts to define the beautiful, and his loss of patience with Socrates, both point to a comic haplessness on the part of the man who claims to be able to teach the elite youth of many Greek cities. A similar charge cannot be made of Socrates. He too cannot

---

230 *Poetics* 1449a.
discover the *eidos* of the beautiful. But the fact that he does not claim to know the beautiful, and that he confesses his ignorance (286c), keeps him from becoming a ridiculous figure. Moreover, all of the vituperation that Socrates takes at the hands of his unnamed friend, precisely for being unable to answer the question, is actually transferable to Hippias himself. Once the unnamed friend is unmasked, and seen to be Socrates himself, more comedy ensues. The unnamed friend has been, all along (though perhaps not *exclusively*), a comic device, which Socrates uses to mock and ridicule Hippias, indirectly, from the very beginning of their dialogue. Hippias would know the identity of “Sophroniscus’s son,” and the more strident tone that Hippias adopts against Socrates in the final passages of the dialogue is due to the fact that Socrates has disclosed his own opinion of Hippias’s by disclosing the true identity of his unnamed friend.\(^{231}\)

An important part of Hippias’s failure is that he does not learn from it—that is, he gains no self-knowledge from it. Even if Hippias’s inability to answer the question becomes readily apparent to him by the end of the dialogue (and is laughable, when one recalls, for example, his initial confidence and boastfulness about the question not being “large,” 287b), it does not become apparent at all that his ignorance constitutes a flaw, or something negative, in itself. Instead, from his point of view, Hippias fails not at obtaining knowledge, but at playing Socrates’s game. Once he drops Socrates’s questioning, and makes a gesture in support of speechmaking (“But here’s what is beautiful and worth a lot: to be able to present a speech well and beautifully…”, 304a-b), he no longer looks like a fool. He is only a comical figure when he attempts to do something he cannot do: define the beautiful under the strict standards set forth by

---

\(^{231}\) Less plausible is that Hippias does not know who “Sophroniscus’s son” really is. In that case, Socrates’s line, that “He happens to be a close relative of mine, and he lives in the same house” (304d), which he utters near the end of the dialogue, is comic because Socrates is teasing Hippias about the true identity of the unnamed friend. It would be an instance of dramatic irony: the reader knows who Sophroniscus’s son is, but not Hippias. I find this interpretation less plausible than the one I advance above, for the reason that Socrates was a well-known figure, historically speaking, to the Sophists with whom he dialogued.
Socrates’s dialectical questioning. But once he wholly rejects Socrates’s method, he is no longer an object of ridicule. Hippias learns that he cannot claim philosophical wisdom, but having learned this, he chooses to definitely break with the life of philosophical *eros*. He rejects Socrates’s philosophical *eros* in order to stop looking ridiculous, in order to end the frustrating conversation that Socrates has roped him into having. Yet the reader also learns something about Hippias: that his initial boastfulness was misguided and wrong, and that philosophy is more difficult—and perhaps more worthy of pursuing—than Hippias believes it to be.

The second comic element of the *Hippias Major* has to do with the general situation in which the protagonists find themselves. Even if Socrates is saved from looking foolish—because he, unlike Hippias, does not claim to be wise—nevertheless both Socrates and Hippias share in looking ridiculous once they have undertaken the task of discovering the *eidos* of the beautiful. The fact that neither of them can discover the *eidos* puts them both in a laughable situation. For all of their talk about maidens and spoons, power and pleasure, neither Socrates nor Hippias can formulate a satisfying answer to their own question. Socrates himself understands the humorous side to this. He tells Hippias that the unnamed third friend would “certainly laugh [καταγελάσεται] at us harder than ever” (291e) for still not being able to answer the question, already back when the two discuss Hippias’s third definition. Later on, after the collapse of his own definition of the beautiful as “the beneficial,” Socrates will confess that the collapse of this definition is “more laughable [γελοιότερος] than the first accounts, when we thought the girl, or each one of those things mentioned earlier, was the beautiful” (297d). Hippias and Socrates have each failed, and Socrates finds both of their failures to be comical. However, Socrates reserves the more pejorative word, καταγελάω, for Hippias’s failure—a word that is closer to “jeer”—

232 As Hyland notes, “those dialogues in which a number of definitions are proposed but all are refuted, thus ending in *aporia*, can be understood as comedies of errors.” See Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence*, 133.
while applying the lighter γέλοιος ("ridiculous", "mirth-provoking") to his own. This suggests that Socrates does not see the two “failures” in the same light: Socrates is making a genuine philosophical search, his eros oriented toward the good. Hippias, on the other hand, vacillates between genuinely supporting Socrates’s philosophical inquiry, and buffing up his own claims to knowledge. The end result, as we have seen, is that Hippias ultimately rejects philosophy, and Socrates’s questioning.

The difference between laughing and jeering can be recast in terms of self-knowledge. Socrates knows that he does not know something worth knowing; Hippias knows that he does not know, but he does not think this ignorance is significant. In other words, Socrates recognizes the limits of his knowledge, but he maintains the interrogative stance, characteristic of philosophical eros, with respect to the eidos of the beautiful. At the end of the dialogue, he affirms that the investigation into the beautiful has been worthwhile. His situation is comic, viewed from a certain angle. But it is not something before which one should jeer. Socrates recognizes his limited capacity to pursue a worthwhile goal of knowledge. In contrast, Hippias sees this same limitation in himself, but does not believe that this limitation signals something significant about his condition as a human being. He prefers to ignore it and move on to other things, like the pursuit of power through sophistry. Socrates and Hippias both obtain self-knowledge about the limits of their capacity of knowledge, but only Socrates refuses to see this bit of self-knowledge as a sign that he should quit philosophizing. He affirms philosophy in spite of it, recognizing that philosophy is still something good.

---

233 In his survey of Platonic uses of laughter, G.J. De Vries underscores the difference between καταγέλαστος, the adjectival form of καταγελάω, and γελοῖος (or γέλοιος): “As to the terms used, no uncertainty can exist. Plato makes Aristophanes mark the difference between καταγέλαστος which is always unfavourable and γελοῖος which often means ‘funny,’ ‘amusing’ (Συ. 189 b, cp. 215 a).” De Vries’s preferred rendering of γελοῖος is “funny,” a translation that we adopt in this chapter: “In his translation of Republic Shorey consistently uses ‘ludicrous’ for γελοῖος. I am not sure that the English word can be used as synonymous with ‘funny.’” See G.J. De Vries, “Laughter in Plato’s Writings,” Mnemosyne 38 (1985): 381.
The third comic element in the *Hippias Major* lies in its register, or the range of linguistic variety employed by the work’s protagonists.\(^{234}\) Greek comedy of Plato’s time employs colloquial and less formal registers,\(^{235}\) sometimes contrasting this “vulgar” diction with the lofty language of the higher classes.\(^{236}\) We see a similar wide-ranging register in the *Hippias Major*. Hippias speaks in a lofty style, while Socrates’s imaginary friend speaks in a more vulgar fashion; Hippias attacks him precisely for this reason: “Who is the man, Socrates? What a boor he is to dare in an august proceeding to speak such vulgar speech [φαῦλα] that way!” (288d). Socrates says that his friend is “not refined. He’s garbage” (οὐ κομψὸς ἀλλὰ σωρφετός, 288d). Yet this unrefined man cares for nothing but the truth (οὐδὲν ἄλλο φροντίζων ἢ τὸ ἀληθές, 288d). By the end of the dialogue, we learn that Socrates is in fact referring to himself in these passages. Thus the philosophical search for truth is deemed to be a wholly separate enterprise from the mellifluous speechmaking that Hippias practices and prefers. Socrates, unrefined and desirous of discovering the truth, prefers to use as wide a range of diction as possible. He will speak of spoons and mares, but also of the *eidos* and the beneficial. But he defends the use of lowly diction against Hippias’s condemnations of the same. The dialogue contains many “low” moments and vulgar diction.

Socrates’s defense of low diction presents a problem, similar to his lack of beautiful dress. Why is it that the man who does not know the beautiful itself—Hippias—is also the one

\(^{234}\) As part of his discussion about the *Hippias Major*’s authenticity, Woodruff highlights the comic register in the dialogue: “the *Hippias Major* uses poetic and bombastic language playfully in parody of Hippias, possibly by quoting comic authors of Plato’s period.” See Woodruff, *Hippias Major*, 99.

\(^{235}\) See Andreas Willi, “The Language(s) of Comedy,” in The Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy, Martin Revermann, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 168-185, especially these observations on the continuities of register in throughout the history of Greek comedies: “Considering the entire range of Greek literary genres, comedy – both Aristophanic and Menandrean—undoubtedly gravitates towards the colloquial end” (172).

\(^{236}\) Konstan argues that is was the case in the time of Old Comedy: “Beyond metre, the audience at a *kömōidia* in the time of Aristophanes would anticipate a linguistic register that was highly varied, including colloquialisms and vulgar language, extravagant multisyllabic coinages, occasional imitations of non-Attic dialects or ungrammatical and even nonsensical expressions on the part of barbarians (that is, non-Greeks), and ‘high-falutin’ phrases in the style of tragedy, especially useful for mocking the sister genre.” See Konstan, “Defining the genre,” 34.
who is beautifully clad and who speaks beautifully? And why is it that ugly Socrates, who earnestly desires to know the beautiful and may have learned at least something about it in the course of his dialogue with Hippias—why is he using vulgar words? A reason for these contrasts can be found in the erotic nature of Socrates’s search. Eros seeks what it lacks. The ugly Socrates seeks for beauty. Moreover, Socrates’s philosophical eros causes him to search for what is beautiful itself within appearances but somehow distinct from them (294a), and he is therefore against anything which would give an object the appearances of beauty without the eidos of beauty. The example he uses is precisely “clothes and shoes” that make someone who is in fact ridiculous (γελοῖος) look beautiful (294a). Finally, philosophical eros expresses itself in the performance of asking questions (as we argue in Chapter One). Hippias’s preference for lofty speech, and his disdain for the vulgar, closes him off to philosophical dialogue with Socrates’s unnamed friend: “I wouldn’t talk with a man who asked things like that” (291a). That man is, once again, Socrates himself.237

This identification of Socrates with the use of vulgar language suggests that we can understand the register of the dialogue also in terms of self-knowledge. Socrates refuses to claim a wisdom he does not have for himself. His language reflects his awareness of his lack of knowledge, and his refusal to make lofty claims for himself. But Socrates’s ability to nevertheless engage Hippias, who speaks beautiful, shows that Socrates does have the ability to pursue knowledge from within his stance of poverty, from within the interrogative stance. The

237 My interpretation of the linguistic register in the Hippias Major owes much to Nancy Worman’s illuminating discussion. Worman calls Socrates’s engagement with his imaginary friend and Hippias an “elaborate charade,” in which “Socrates’s imposture makes possible a lampoon not only of the boastful, word-proud sophist but also of the self-abuse that reiterates the insults of his opponents and underscores his lowbrow, small-talking ways” (204). See her full discussion of the Hippias Major in Nancy Worman, Abusive Mouths in Classical Athens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 201-204.
reader then is forced to consider whether Socrates’s vulgar speech is truly at odds with the pursuit of wisdom, or whether Hippias’s lofty speech is actually a mask for ignorance.

Having looked at the comic elements in the *Hippias Major*, we can now analyze their contrast with the philosophical significance of the dialogue’s theme (the beautiful) and the philosophical *eros* which animates the pursuit of this theme. The three comic elements in the *Hippias Major* which we have just described—the contrast between Hippias’s high claims about his own knowledge and his inability to answer the question of the beautiful, the laughable situation the characters find themselves in, and the range of linguistic variety found in the dialogue—can all be said to contribute to a general atmosphere of liveliness and fun in the dialogue. But this liveliness and fun is accompanied by a sense of limits: the comic elements disclose the inability and failure of both characters to define the beautiful. Precisely because Hippias and Socrates fail to answer the question, the dialogue is funny. The dialogue makes their task appear to be impossible, and for two men to spend a lot of time trying to accomplish an impossible task can be a comic situation. Yet the comic dimension also reveals a difference between the character’s respective ways of dealing with this limitation. Both acquire self-knowledge about their ability to define the beautiful, but Socrates does not see this limitation as an excuse to abandon philosophy, the way Hippias does. The reader is forced then to ask herself which of the two stances with respect to philosophy—Hippias’s or Socrates’s—is the most reasonable. In other words, what should *eros* do after it encounters beauty? Should it pursue one interrogate beauty, asking for its *eidos*? Should one merely use it? This question cannot be fully answered, however, without also taking into account the tragic elements of the dialogue.
Tragedy in the *Hippias Major*

Looking at the comic dimension of the dialogue brings to the fore Hippias’s and Socrates’s limitations with regard to their ability to define the beautiful itself. It also shows us how these characters gain self-knowledge about their limitation. But each character also responds to their failure to define the beautiful, and their self-awareness about this failure, in different ways, and the dialogue suggests that these responses produce tragic outcomes for both Hippias and Socrates. Nussbaum’s observation about the tragedy and comedy of *eros*, as depicted in the Aristophanic discourse in the *Symposium*, finds an echo here: “If it were told from the inside, it would, as we have said, be tragedy. The comedy comes in the sudden turning round of our heads and eyes to look at human genitals and faces, our unrounded, desiring, and vulnerable parts.” 238 From the “outside,” the *Hippias Major* looks like the story of two men, one rich and the other poor, one powerful and the other a pauper, one beautiful and the other ugly, both in search of something neither can obtain. Together, they come to an awareness of the limitations of their knowledge. From the inside, however—from the point of view of my personal erotic longing for the good, and from the point of view of the beautiful—the dialogue takes on a tragic tone. On the one hand, the dénouement of the dialogue suggests that Hippias is a tragic figure. That is, Hippias, as a result of his decision to reject philosophy, encounters suffering. On the other hand, the dénouement also hints a tragedy for Socrates. Socrates, as a result of his decision to embrace philosophy, will fail to do what Hippias calls “what is beautiful and worth a lot,” that is, “to be able to present a speech …. in court or council or any other authority to whom you give the speech, to convince them and go hone carrying not the smallest but the greatest of prizes, the successful defense of yourself, your property, and friends” (304a-

---

b). A close look at each of these tragic outcomes reveals a difference between them explicable in terms of *eros*, and hints a sort of “consolation” which attenuates, or perhaps makes worthwhile, Socrates’s tragic suffering.

*The Tragedy of Hippias*

The tragedy of Hippias results from his final decision to reject philosophy and return to his original position as a sophist (304a). He returns to viewing the beautiful as a powerful rhetorical tool, as something to be *used*, as opposed to something to be discovered for its own sake, something to be *known*. If we bring to bear a few of the conventions of Greek tragedy, we can see how the dialogue suggests that this decision of Hippias’s is a tragic one. My method here is *not* to make a general interpretation of Aristotelian tragedy in order to see whether and how Hippias and Socrates stand with relation to it. Rather, I want to demonstrate how certain aspects of tragedy, as identified by Aristotle, help us gain a deeper understanding of the twin fates of our interlocutors as they are described in the dénouement of the dialogue.

One of the essential elements of tragedy enumerated in the *Poetics* of Aristotle is the *stature* of the tragic hero. Only the fall of a person from a position of “great repute and good fortune” (μεγάλῃ δόξῃ ὄντων καὶ εὐτυχίᾳ, 1453a8) to a position of bad fortune can inspire tragic pity and fear in an audience. More to the point, the stature of the tragic figure is a product of other people’s estimation, and not necessarily a matter of fact. As Michael Davis puts it, “the subjects of tragedy are those who are thought to be great. Their repute (*doxa*) is a question of opinion (*doxa*)”239. The tragic hero’s subsequent fall forces reflection upon, and reevaluation of,

---

this opinion. This fall must be of a certain magnitude (μέγεθος ἐχούσης, 1449b24). Within Hippias’s story, we find all of these tragic elements: a certain stature furnished by public opinion; a missing-of-the-mark, attributable to both personal moral factors as well as political world beyond Hippias’s control; and tragic consequences—a fall—which come about as a consequence of this missing-of-the-mark, which are hinted at or implied in the dialogue.

Hippias’s stature is made clear from the very beginning of the dialogue. Stature need not mean moral rectitude, but merely a high status of power and honor in Greek society, that is, a position of prestige afforded by the doxa of others. Hippias is both a diplomat and a renowned sophist (281a-d). Moreover, a contemporary reader of the dialogue would perhaps know about the career of the real-life Hippias, which was full of prestige as well as notoriety. In any case, it was the career of a powerful man. But in a broader sense, his stature is also derived from the fact that he can experience beautiful beings, and has the ability—as a human being—to make a noetic insight into the beautiful itself. In other words, he is an erotic being, and he has the choice to direct his eros toward the good. He has the ability to follow Socrates. This gives him a certain nobility, at least in the Socratic sense of the word. The beautiful is also noble (καλόν is often rendered, “the noble”) and the ability to come to know the noble, an ability which Socrates believes human beings have (to an imperfect but real degree), gives a certain nobility to human beings.

Hippias’s hamartia, or missing-of-the-mark, is precisely his rejection of his ability to know the beautiful. It is his decision to abort the search, inaugurated by Socrates, for the eidos of the beautiful. The concept of hamartia, as it appears in Aristotle and as it manifests itself in

---

240 As Davis puts it, “The goal of tragedy is the stimulation of pity and fear because reflection is stimulated only by failure.” Davis, “Introduction,” xxv.
Greek tragedy, has been variously defined as meaning a “mistake of fact”\footnote{A thorough defense of \textit{hamartia} as referring exclusively to mistakes of fact is found in R. D. Dawe, “Some Reflections on \textit{Ate} and \textit{Hamartia},” \textit{Harvard Studies in Classical Philology} 72 (1968): 89-123. Dawe prefers the phrase, “error in judgment,” caused sometimes through divine action as \textit{ate}. As he puts it, “an error in judgment is something which can either be entirely the responsibility of the man who makes it, or can be something induced, normally by the gods putting in such a position that he has little choice but to make a decision that will later recoil on him with disastrous, and above all disproportionate, consequences” (94-95). Leon Golden disputes Dawe’s association of \textit{ate} and \textit{hamartia}, but defends the notion that \textit{hamartia} means “intellectual error of judgment, although it may at times include other nuances of meaning as well” (12). See Leon Golden, “\textit{Hamartia}, \textit{Ate}, and \textit{Oedipus},” \textit{The Classical World} 72 (1978): 3-12. A more recent expression of this view is found in Ho Kim, “Aristotle’s ‘\textit{Hamartia}’ Reconsidered,” \textit{Harvard Studies in Classical Philology}, 105 (2010): 33-52. Kim writes that \textit{hamartia} “can be interpreted to mean ignorance of the particulars of one’s action, especially including misidentification of close blood-relatives.” For a historical survey of how this passage in the \textit{Poetics} has been interpreted since the Middle Ages, see J. M. Bremer, \textit{Hamartia: Tragic Error in the \textit{Poetics} of Aristotle and in Greek Tragedy} (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1969).} or a “moral error,”\footnote{A compelling case for “moral error” as a type of \textit{hamartia} included in the \textit{Poetics} is made by T.C.W. Stinton, “\textit{Hamartia} in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy,” \textit{The Classical Quarterly} 25 (1975): 221-254. Michael Davis shares this view. See Davis, “Introduction,” xxv. A useful and brief explanation of Stinton’s views is found in J.L. Moles, “\textit{Aristotle and Dido’s ‘Hamartia,’}” \textit{Greece & Rome} 31 (1984): 48-54.} or as encompassing both.\footnote{There are also those who argue that \textit{hamartia} is not a central idea to Aristotle’s theory of tragedy nor to tragedy itself. See A. W. H. Adkins, “\textit{Aristotle and the Best Kind of Tragedy},” \textit{The Classical Quarterly} 16 (1966): 78-102. Adkins argues that \textit{hamartia} does not require special emphasis in Aristotle. Also Joe Sachs, who writes: “Tragedy is never about flaws, and it is only the silliest of mistranslations that puts that claim in Aristotle’s mouth. Tragedy is about central and indispensable human attributes, disclosed to us by the pity that draws us toward them and the fear that makes us recoil from what threatens them.” Joe Sachs, “Aristotle: \textit{Poetics},” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://www.iep.utm.edu/aris-poe/. While I find the concept to be useful for looking at the dénouement of the \textit{Hippias Major}, I would agree with Sachs that, read in light of the categories of tragic theater, the \textit{Hippias Major} shows us a few central human attributes with regard to \textit{eros}, \textit{noesis}, and the beautiful.} Moreover, the external factors and unchangeable facts of the situation and environment which surround the tragic hero (and which he cannot control) also have a place in any complete account of \textit{hamartia}.\footnote{In David Roochnik’s apt description, the hero’s fall is “as much a consequence of his necessary involvement in a world beyond his control as it is of his own action. It is precisely this duality … that characterizes tragic catastrophe.” Roochnik, \textit{The Tragedy of Logos}, 3.} In calling Hippias’s rejection of philosophy a \textit{hamartia}, I am arguing that Hippias’s refusal to direct his \textit{eros} toward the good and toward knowledge about beauty brings about negative consequences, which are caused both by the nature of his decision as well as by external factors. Hippias’s decision constitutes a moral error, but it is also one made within a particular political environment.

Hippias’s \textit{hamartia} must first be understood in terms of his attitude toward \textit{eros} and pleasure, and their respective relationship to the beautiful. We can gain a sharper view of his
attitude towards both if we compare it to that of two other Platonic characters, Alcibiades in the *Symposium* and Philebus in the dialogue of the same name. Both of these characters also chose to reject Socrates’s invitation to follow him in the path of philosophy, and they also both betrayed a weakness for the life of pleasure. Hippias stands in contrast to these two characters in a unique way. Unlike Philebus, he is open to following Socrates down the path of philosophy, at least for the length of one conversation. Unlike Alcibiades, his decision to reject Socrates is adamant, clear-cut, and not fraught with self-doubt or insecurity.

The contrast with Philebus is instructive because it shows the degree to which Hippias attempts to embrace philosophy. Philebus only speaks three times in the dialogue which bears his name (11c, 12a-c, 27e); the discussion about pleasure, and its relation to the good life, is conducted primarily between Socrates and Protarchus, Philebus’s companion. Socrates has set out to determine whether pleasure is the highest good for which one should live. If one chooses to engage in philosophical discussion about pleasure, one has already indicated, by actions if not argument, that there exists a good higher than pleasure. According to Gadamer, Philebus’s silence is philosophically meaningful: “Resistance to the demand that justification be given is part and parcel of the hedonist position. Philebus is consistent when he does not oppose this demand with a logical argument, but, instead, dogmatically insists on the unconditional priority of *hēdonē*.”

In other words, Philebus choses to be consistent with what he declares to be his deepest held belief: the life of pleasure is the best way of life. Had he chosen to engage Socrates in a defense of this belief, he would be affirming its contrary; he would be arguing that the life of philosophy is at least on par with the life of pleasure. But Philebus’s position can also be articulated in terms of *eros*. Philebus does not have the need to go beyond pleasure and to see the

---

good. Pleasure is self-referential; it is a type of appearance. Philebus does not have an *eros* for the truth beyond appearances. By refusing to play Socrates’s game, he remains consistent in his self-satisfaction. In contrast, Hippias *does* entertain Socrates’s invitation to philosophize, even if he does so without the best attitude (for example, he thinks that the discussion is too easy for him: “The question is not large” 287a). Nevertheless, he implicitly affirms that philosophizing with Socrates is good. He also *explicitly* agrees with Socrates that the beautiful is good (297c).

All of this, despite also showing a bias for defining the beautiful in self-referential ways: through the thrill of pleasure (his first definition, “a beautiful maiden”) or sensory perception (his second definition, “gold”). When Socrates proposes that the beautiful may be defined as “the pleasurable through hearing and sight,” Hippias entertains the idea, even to the point of concurring with Socrates that if the beautiful were to be associated with pleasure, then it would have to be a sort of beneficial pleasure (303e). What all of this indicates is that Hippias does not have a consistent point of view with regard to the goodness of philosophy, up until the moment that he decides to reject it. Before that, he is able to entertain the possibility that the definition of the beautiful itself ought to be sought after in dialectical argument, even though, were he to pursue this endeavor consistently, he would have to change his way of life.

From the Socratic point of view, Hippias’s ultimate rejection of philosophy (304a) is a mistake, which can also be articulated in terms of *eros*. Hippias ultimately does not want to direct his *eros* toward the good. To direct one’s *eros* toward the good means to refuse to be content with apparent goods, and to not cease exploring until one reaches an actual good. The pursuit of the *eidos* of the beautiful requires a similar disposition: we cannot be content merely to accept the apparent beauty of objects, but must move in a direction of trying to understand the *eidos* which is the source of their beautiful appearance. Whatever the psychological origins of his
refusal, Hippias’s refusal is decisive. It is also pleasant. By abandoning Socrates’s path, Hippias returns to his self-referential, self-interested position. He can enjoy his wealth, power, and pleasure, without the bothersome task of following the path of philosophy.

In this last respect, Hippias stands in sharp contrast with the Alcibiades of the Symposium. In that dialogue, Alcibiades depicts himself as being torn between his attraction to Socrates, on the one hand, and his attraction to the life that Socrates is inviting him to live, on the other. He is also, broadly speaking, torn between a life of honor and power, and the more demanding, self-sacrificing, ascetic life of philosophy.246 His flaw has to do with weakness: for pleasure and honor over self-sacrifice, and for the particular (Socrates) over the ideal (the Good). Alcibiades is attached to what is familiar to him, and what seems more pleasant. But he has seen enough of the life of philosophy to be tortured by his weakness, and to regret the fact that he cannot follow Socrates down the path of philosophy. Hippias, in contrast, feels no such regret. He knows, in the end, what is truly beautiful: “to be able to present a speech well and beautifully, in court or council or any other authority … to convince them and go home carrying not the smallest but the greatest of prizes, the successful defense of yourself, your property, and your friends. One should stick to that” (304a-b). In other words, what is beautiful is the ability to defend, protect, and increase one’s own interests, those things which are good “for me,” in a selfish sense. This is consistent with what we know about the historical Hippias: he was known to regard “money and glory as the constant values of human life.”247 We do not perceive in

---

246 I quibble here with Nussbaum’s following claim: “The philosopher asks to be taken to the agathon, the repeatable universal Good. Alcibiades asks to be taken to Agathon, a non-very-good particular boy.” Alcibiades’s is surely attracted by Agathon, but he is also in love with Socrates. It is the tension between his love of Socrates, and the fact that Socrates’s points beyond himself toward the good, that is the source of Alcibiades’s suffering. Alcibiades wants the good, but he cannot sacrifice his desire to possess Socrates. See Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness, 185.

247 S. Dušanić, “Hippias the Elean: The Revolutionary Activities and Political Attitudes of a Sophist,” Aevum 82 (2008): 46. Dušanić goes through most of the historical records we have of Hippias in an attempt to reconstruct his
Hippias the same turmoil that Alcibiades is all too willing to divulge to his friends in the Symposium. In fact, his decision is taken out of frustration with Socrates’s apparently aimless and fruitless questioning. Socrates only gives us “flakings and clippings of speeches” (κνήσματά τοί ἐστι καὶ περιτμήματα τῶν λόγων, 304a) and his theorizing does not allow him to see “naturally continuous bodies of being” (διανεκῆ σώματα τῆς οὐσίας πεφυκότα, 301a). In contrast to Alcibiades, Hippias shows himself to be more confident and decisive in rejecting philosophy and Socrates.

Alcibiades also proves to be a useful contrast when dealing with the matter of the “world” beyond Hippias’s control, that is, the situation within which Hippias makes his decision to reject philosophy. For this, we must go to the historical record. Hippias was “a prominent, but not sincere, diplomat.” He was remembered in the ancient world for being “autocratic and harsh,” known for revolutionary inclinations, and the conviction that “nature is to be preferred to law, and that it is nature which is the real source of human obligations.” This last philosophical conviction supplied the philosophical justification for arguing in favor of Pan-Hellenic unity. (This conviction also explains, perhaps, Hippias’s preference for “continuous bodies” over Socrates’s tedious questioning.) In other words, Hippias was enmeshed in a world quite similar to that of Alcibiades, who was also a political leader involved in revolutionary intrigue. Moreover, like Alcibiades, Hippias loved money and glory. Therefore his decision to reject the path beyond appearances that Socrates opens up is made within a context of wealth,
power, and violence. When Plato has Hippeia declare that the most beautiful thing is to be able to
defend one’s self, friends, and property before a council or court, he is probably alluding to the
historical Hippeia’s involvement with the politics of Elis. Moreover, he is possibly alluding to
the fact that Hippeia died as a direct consequence of his political activities. Hippeia was executed
for attempting to launch a coup in Elis “against the oppressive, radically oligarchical and pro-
Spartan regime created in Elis in 401-400 BC.”\footnote{252} To be sure, Hippeia is not “fated” to reject
philosophy for power in the same way Oedipus is fated by the gods to murder his father and
marry his mother, but the political environment does play a role analogous to that of the gods in
that it is a pressure upon Hippeia that he cannot control completely, and that \textit{could} determine his
fate.

As stated above, for Hippeia’s act of rejecting philosophy to be considered properly
tragic, it must be shown to be a fall from good fortune to bad fortune—that is, it must have
negative consequences. Hippeia makes his choice explicit (304a-b), and this choice reflects his
preference for the way of life that he has been leading to this moment: a life of wealth, glory, and
sophistry, but also the engaged political life of a diplomat. But it is precisely this world of glory
and power which will see his end. In becoming embroiled in revolutionary politics, Hippeia will
find his fate.

Another angle from which to consider whether Hippeia’s fate is to be called tragic is to
consider the \textit{content} of his politics. The historical Hippeia died as a consequence of his
opposition to a pro-Spartan regime. In the Hippeia Major, Sparta is depicted as being a city
which holds teachers to the standard of virtue and, as a consequence, does not allow Hippeia to
teach to its youth (284d-285c). Socrates in the Hippeia Major effectively aligns himself with the

\footnote{252} See Dušanić, “Hippeia the Elean,” 45.
Spartans, in the sense that he too opposes Hippias’s understanding of what education is, and unlike Hippias, believes that the search for the beautiful is good, and that the beautiful is good in itself. (To be sure, Socrates may have disagreed with the actual content of Spartan education—it is their intentions that he agrees with). Thus, Socrates implicitly agrees with the Spartan bias against foreign education and for the teaching of virtue, and Hippias ends his life in a fight against a pro-Spartan regime. Perhaps there is a link here between the discussion about Sparta in the dialogue, and Hippias’s actual end. Perhaps Plato is hinting at the political consequences of the rejection of philosophy.

Regardless of the accuracy of the foregoing historical speculation, however, on a philosophical plane, Hippias’s decision can be construed as tragic most certainly if we take Socrates’s point of view on the beautiful itself. If Socrates and Hippias have truly had a noetic flash, an insight that the beautiful itself is something, and something good, then Hippias’s rejection of the search for the beautiful itself is a rejection of this capacity (however limited) to make trustworthy insights into the beautiful itself. It is also a rejection of the capacity to know the good in one of its manifestations (i.e., as beauty). It is the tragic rejection of the discoveries made in the course of a philosophical dialogue. The search for the beautiful itself was born out of a debate between Hippias and Socrates concerning beautiful speeches, and their value for the citizens of a polis. As we have seen, the ensuing philosophical investigation into the beautiful revealed the beautiful to be “something” (287c-d), an eidos which causes beings to become beautiful (289d) and not merely appear to become beautiful (294a), and which has a beneficial power (296e-297a) and is also itself good (297c). Only the soul whose eros is focused in a philosophical direction toward the good, will be able to see the beautiful for what it is. Only the eros for the good forces one to go beyond epithumia, utilitarian interest, and appearances (an
apparent good is never satisfactory; one can only be content with an actual good). But now, Hippias has opted to forget all of this.

If we accept Socrates’s position, then Hippias’s life must be considered tragic. We do not see the “pity and fear” depicted in the dialogue, however. In this respect, his story is not tragic in a more conventional sense. What is ennobling is Socrates’s life, and the suffering that he undergoes in the pursuit of philosophy. The dialogue leaves us with a hint that Socrates’s life is preferable to Hippias’s, and also with Socrates’s explicit claim that his search for the eidos is “good for me.” Ultimately, however, this claim must be tested, that is, enacted, by the reader who wishes to attempt the philosophical life.

The Tragedy of Socrates

Socrates’s character also undergoes tragedy, but his hamartia is the opposite of Hippias’s: he chooses to continue philosophizing, and this is what will eventually lead him to suffering (which he acknowledges in his final speech, 304b-e) and catastrophe (though this catastrophe—Socrates’s execution—is known by the readers, though not depicted, but perhaps foreshadowed, in the text). This means that Socrates’s story is tragic only in the eyes of someone who values philosophy, who believes that eros should seek the good, and who believes that the beautiful itself is worth knowing. This is also because Socrates has the required tragic stature according to those who believe (doxa) that philosophy is a worthwhile endeavor. Thus

---

253 In his interpretation of the Laws, Richard Patterson writes the philosopher’s perception of what is tragic may differ from that of common opinion. See Richard Patterson, “The Platonic Art of Comedy and Tragedy,” Philosophy and Literature 6 (1982): 84.

254 Christopher Bruell suggests that Socrates’s death is foreshadowed by these lines in the Hippias Major. As far as I can tell, he is the only commentator who has made this insight. See the Christopher Bruell, On the Socratic Education, 91.
one’s perception of the tragic element in the *Hippias Major* is contingent, at least in part, on the value that one judges philosophy to have.

Beyond this, however, it is also the case that Socrates’s tragedy has an added dimension to it which Hippias’s lacks. This added dimension is a moment of partial transcendence, a partial fulfillment, which is proper to philosophical *eros*, and which makes the suffering and catastrophe worthwhile. This makes Socrates’s tragedy a tragedy of a special sort, a philosophical one. Or perhaps, even the word “tragedy” is inadequate here, because it emphasizes the negative aspect of Socrates’s philosophical enterprise: its incompleteness. Rather, Socrates, in making insights into the *eidos* of the beautiful, enjoys partial *success*. If tragedy reveals to a character (and to an audience) certain limitations about the human condition, then Socrates’s partial philosophical triumph, however incomplete and uncertain (in the Cartesian sense of clarity and distinctness), also shows a way in which finite human understanding can transcend its limitations. Here, I will explore both aspects of Socrates’s story.

The first step to understanding Socrates’s partial fulfillment is to note that *eros* is understood not only by what it lacks, but also by what it is able to attain. In the *Symposium*, Diotima defines it as the offspring of both Poverty and Plenty. In other words, *eros*, as it is experienced in human life, comes with moments of yearning, but also with moments of satisfaction, however partial and transitory those moments may be. *Eros* has a certain

---

255 Here I am following Hyland’s understanding of the “noble” nature of *eros*: “Human *eros* is not just a source of consolation for foolish humans; in its multiple manifestations, it is the source as well of the noblest of human aspirations. As I have already suggested, this makes the human situation not less but more fully tragic. Not only are humans fated to a condition of incompleteness that they will never fully overcome, not only are they therefore fated to aspire toward a goal to which they are doomed to fail, but this aspiration, notwithstanding its fated failure, nevertheless can, in the striving, ennoble human being. The portrayal of *eros* in the *Symposium* therefore sets out in full richness the potentially tragic character of the human situation.” This tragic nobility is characteristic, Hyland argues, of philosophy. See Hyland, *Finitude and Transcendence*, 122. My purpose here is to see how this tragic nobility manifests itself in the Socrates of the *Hippias Major*. 

227
“paternity,” a consoling positive element to it which makes the moments of yearning bearable. This dynamic between poverty and plenty, yearning and paternity, also holds with regard to philosophical eros as it manifests itself in Socrates in the Hippias Major. Despite the fact that neither Socrates nor Hippias is able to reach a conclusive definition of the beautiful itself, they nevertheless are able to make certain noetic insights about the beautiful itself. As stated above, those insights includes that the beautiful itself “is something,” something that causes particular beings to become beautiful (rather than appear to be so), and it is something beneficial and good. With these discoveries, Socrates suggests that philosophical eros experiences a partial degree of noetic fulfillment, however incomplete and tenuous that fulfillment might be. They are experiences in which Socrates looks at the beautiful as something outside of his own interests, outside of a network of possible uses, and outside of the interests of power. They are moments of contemplation of the beautiful itself. Having had these experiences, Socrates is able to consider all beautiful beings in a new light: he is able to see them not only as beautiful appearances but instances of the eidos of the beautiful beyond appearances. Socrates’s philosophical transcendence, however partial, has the potential to enrich all of his experiences of the beautiful. This is why Socrates is able to tell Hippias that the abuse he (Socrates) has taken at the hands of his imaginary friend is “good for me,” and that engaging with Hippias has “done me good” (304e). The philosophical pursuit of an answer to the question of the beautiful uncovers the goodness of the beautiful, but this discovery is not merely theoretical: Socrates believes that it enriches his life, and is worth the sacrifices which must be endured to learn. Evidently, Socrates

I borrow the term “paternity” from Hyland. He notes that the Aristophanic discourse in the Symposium never mentions to τὸ κάλλος, and is the only speech in that dialogue with this omission. Hyland offers that a point is being made with this omission: “What Aristophanes misses is eros’ paternity,” that is, the positive side of erotic desire, “Plenty” or “Resourcefulness.” “But one crucial feature is missing [in Aristophanes’s discourse], and that is the element of beauty, of nobility, that from time to time can characterize human erotic striving, even an erotic striving that is fated to fail.” See Hyland, “The Whole Comedy and Tragedy of Philosophy,” 17-18. I differ with Hyland only in qualifying his sense of the word “failure.” I think that even a limited moment of beauty counts as a kind of “success.”
feels like his time with Hippias has been well spent, and unlike Hippias, he will not reject philosophy in favor of speechmaking and politics.

It would serve us to press deeper on this point and ask just why Socrates believes that a philosophical investigation into the experience of the beautiful and the beautiful itself gives an added value to one’s experience of beauty. The key to understanding this “added value” lies in the fact that Socrates prizes the good above all things—in that his *eros* is directed toward the good. We have already seen Socrates argue in favor of virtue and goodness and against personal advantage and power in the opening sections of the dialogue (283e-284, see Chapter One). We have also seen him argue for the goodness of the beautiful (287c-d, see Chapter Four). It is clear that Socrates believes that the pursuit of the truth about the beautiful itself is good, and that the truth itself is good. To make a brief insight, however incomplete, into *eidos* of the beautiful itself is therefore a good thing for Socrates. It is the goal of his *eros*. Once again, the goodness of Socrates’s enterprise and of its noetic fruits can only be recognized by someone who also values philosophy, who chooses to follow Socrates, and whose *eros* desires goodness. Only a person who chooses to do so can fully verify that this “added value” really exists.

A sign of this added value—of the goodness and therefore worth of the philosophical path—is the fact that Socrates believes that his investigation into the *eidos* of the beautiful is so worthwhile and valuable, that he will continue it *even at the cost of his own life*. The dialogue appears to foreshadow Socrates’s future trial, which will culminate in his execution at the hands of the state: Hippias says that a beautiful speech is one which gives one the power “to be able to present a speech well and beautiful, in court or council…” (304a-b).257 Hippias tells Socrates that the philosophical way of speaking, “flakings and clippings of speeches,” does not yield any

---

practical benefit. Instead, Hippias prefers to speak beautifully, because such speech will protect
“yourself, your property, and friends” (304b) before a council or court of law. Recall that in the
Apology, Socrates tells the jurors that he will not speak in words spoken beautifully
(κεκαλλιεπημένους, 17b) or carefully arranged (κεκοσμημένους, 17c). In the Apology, Socrates
does not take Hippias’s advice. His suffering for the sake of philosophy is thus implicitly
ennobling, but also worthwhile for the fruits that it yields of its own accord: a life of goodness.258

The suffering and sacrifice involved in the pursuit of the beautiful itself is encapsulated in
the proverb with which Socrates concludes the dialogue: “Beautiful things are difficult” (χαλεπὰ
τὰ καλά, 304e). The levels of meaning in this proverb sum up many of the themes we have
explored in this dialogue. The proverb appears in three other places in the Platonic canon: twice
in the Republic, and once in the Cratylus. Within each context it takes on a different shade of
meaning.259 In the Hippias Major, the proverb serves as a sort of check on Hippias’s arrogance,
and reprimand against his initial bluster that that question of the beautiful would be easy to
answer.260 But the phrase can evoke more than just the emotions that are aroused by
admonishment. As I have stated above,261 the proverb underscores the “otherness” of the

---

258 McCoy’s comparison between Alcibiades’s and Socrates’s respective attitudes toward political pressure, also
applies, I would argue, to that of Hippias and Socrates here: “However, the Symposium suggests that there are
tremendous costs in too great a concern with political pressure. While Socrates’s death is the consequence of
choosing philosophy, a life of enquiry and of questioning of others, as his response, Alcibiades avoids his own
vulnerability with the resulting peril of losing a sense of his own virtue. If we contrast Socrates’s relative placidity
and acceptance of his own death in both the Phaedo and the Apology, to the inner turmoil and confusion that we see
in Alcibiades’ speech, as well as the outward tumult of his political actions, Socrates’s response seems to result in
greater happiness.” We do not see inner turmoil in Hippias, but we the historical record does give evidence of
questionable or in any case violent political action. See McCoy, Wounded Heroes, 137.
259 For a thorough interpretation of each use in the Platonic canon, see See A.I. Mintz, “‘Chalepa Ta Kala,’ ‘Fine
Things are Difficult’: Socrates’s Insights into the Psychology of Teaching and Learning,” Studies in Philosophy and
260 This point is made by Mintz: “The proverb can be read as Socrates’s rebuke of Hippias’s general intellectual and
moral conceit, which is perhaps also intended to remind the reader of the lengthy introduction to the dialogue.” The
phrase has two meanings, it “describes the general type of effort or struggle necessary for learning and moral
development,” and it “serves to chastise those who have avoided the necessary effort of struggle.” See Mintz,
“Chalepa Ta Kala,” 292.
261 See Chapter Three.
beautiful, the fact that a beautiful object is beautiful in itself, and not because of an emotion or valorizing projection on the part of the observer. Recognizing this “otherness” is of vital importance, because it is requirement for understanding: the beautiful is not merely something which appears before me and is appealing or useful, but something in and of itself, and I must stretch out of my own perspective in order to understand it. The phrase can also be read in a pedagogical vein, as a sort of encouragement to the reader who wishes to pursue philosophy. As it appears in the opening lines of the *Cratylus*, the proverb suggests a sort of encouragement to pursue a question in philosophy, however difficult it may prove to be.\(^{262}\) A reader mindful of the overarching pedagogical purpose of Plato’s dialogues may find an echo of this same encouragement in Socrates’s use of the proverb in the *Hippias Major*. This gesture of encouragement would be directed less at Hippias (who has given up on philosophy at this point) but to the reader of the dialogue (at least, a reader who is still interested in philosophy after concluding her reading of it).\(^{263}\) Moreover, beyond reprimand, “otherness,” or encouragement, the phrase signals that the desire for beautiful beings and the pursuit of knowledge about the beautiful itself, both entail suffering. But this last shade of meaning comes with an important implicit claim, that this suffering is somehow worthwhile, because beauty is worth pursuing. The suffering involved in the pursuit of beauty and knowledge about beauty is a suffering that is *ennobling*. It is a suffering that Socrates undertook, even unto death. This last implication leads us to one more nuance of meaning in the proverb: “Beautiful things are difficult” is a phrase that

\(^{262}\) As Mintz puts it, in the *Cratylus* the proverb is used “to express support and encouragement in the face of a difficult task.” See Mintz, “*Chalepa Ta Kala,*” 294.

\(^{263}\) Mintz also points out that one of the two uses of the phrase in the *Republic* (435c-d) is connected to Socrates’s statement that philosophy requires a “longer and fuller road.” In a sense, this meaning is present in the Hippias Major, as well. The longer and fuller road is the dialogue itself, which Hippias chooses to end, but which Socrates continues for the rest of his life. See Mintz, “*Chalepa Ta Kala,*” 294.
implies hope. If things are difficult, they are not impossible, or ἄπορος. To obtain beautiful beings, and knowledge about the beautiful itself, is not impossible.

This last point requires some unpacking. It is related to the point about Socrates’s partial fulfillment, or transcendence, the dialogue. The dialogue ends in an aporia with respect to the explicit goal that Socrates and Hippias set out to attain: a comprehensive definition of the beautiful itself, which would endow the knower with a sense of possession—that is, of possessing the essence of the beautiful itself in his or her own mind. The dialogue does not yield a “clear and distinct” idea of what the beautiful is, and therefore does not provide certain knowledge in this Cartesian sense of “certainty.” But the proverb, along with the other claims that Socrates has made about the beautiful—that it is something in itself, that it is good, that it causes a being to become, and not appear, to be beautiful, etc.—signals that, even though Socrates and Hippias have failed in their mission to articulate a definition of the beautiful itself using words, they have nevertheless discovered a few things about it. Their philosophical eros has borne some fruit. The proverb in essence tells us that beautiful things are difficult, but not impenetrable. It suggests a way through the aporia: it suggests that a modification of the standard of “definition” would in fact allow for some knowledge of the beautiful. If we give up the idea that the beautiful can be defined using words, and instead assume a posture of humility with regard toward the beautiful (it is “difficult”), then we may find ourselves to actually possess more knowledge about it than we realized. Beautiful things are “difficult,” meaning that they cannot be fully possessed, explained, or articulated: but certain aspects about them can be known by an erotic seeker who directs his eros toward the good, that is, who becomes a philosopher. By the end of the dialogue, Hippias no longer has the patience to endure the difficulty of beauty and he “will not suffer fools” who do. For him, beauty is either useful, or it is nothing. Beauty is
useful in speechmaking and politics: this is all Hippias has to say about the beautiful both in the beginning and end of the dialogue.

In contrast with Hippias’s return to the *status quo ante* at the end of the dialogue, Socrates embraces an ennobling suffering for the sake of philosophy and beauty at the end of the *Hippias Major*. This choice to embrace suffering, however tragic, has a positive, not negative, relationship to *eros*. Usually, in a tragedy, an event occurs that causes a human life or human project to become frustrated, terminated, or otherwise thwarted. Tragedy involves a limit to erotic fulfillment, whether *eros* for another, or *eros* for the good. A tragic hero (as well as his audience) becomes aware of a certain limit to human capacities through his failure to achieve something, or to prevent something evil from befalling him. A tragic hero’s manner of facing tragedy, of accepting and suffering through it, is supposed to be commendable, or at least instructive for an audience to witness. But what occurs at the end of the *Hippias Major* is altogether different. Socrates accepts suffering as part and parcel of his fulfillment, of the fulfillment, that is, of philosophical *eros*. This is not a tragedy in the conventional sense, because his *eros* is not thwarted, but rather left incompletely fulfilled, but fulfilled enough to make the suffering worth it. Therefore the dialogue cannot be called a comedy in the conventional sense either, because the fulfillment that Socrates comes to enjoy is incomplete, and retains a certain sense of danger about it, since his death at the hands of the state is also part of his future.

Socrates is able, after all, to say a few things about the beautiful itself that he had not said before. These noetic insights are attempts to capture in words the elusive experience of something that stands apart from one’s self, always enriching one’s self in the experience of encounter: beautiful beings, shining forth in their beauty, particulars of the beautiful itself. Socrates does not see the
beautiful itself, but he says a few things about it, all of which are borne out of experience, and become trustworthy after a process of dialectical examination.

Exploring the tragic dimension of Socrates’s story in the *Hippias Major* brings us to the point where we can draw up a most fruitful comparison with Diotima’s ascent. The penultimate rung on Diotima’s ascent is philosophy (φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ 210d). The culmination and fulfillment of eros must go through a phrase in which the erotic seeker becomes a philosopher. This is a necessary condition for the fulfillment of *eros* and the insight into the beautiful “itself by itself with itself” (ἀλλ’ αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ μεθ’ αὐτοῦ μονοειδὲς, 211b). Similarly, the *Hippias Major*, by showing us that it is Socrates, and not Hippias—that is, the philosopher who loves the good above all things, rather than the sophist, who prefers power and utility—that has the required character and disposition to make a noetic insight into the beautiful itself. But the big difference between the two dialogues lies in the tragic aspect, the limitation, and the incompleteness of Socrates’s search for the beautiful itself which characterizes the latter dialogue. Both dialogues suggest that the beautiful itself is a mysterious essence, distinct from its instantiations in the world. Both depict the different ways *eros* is drawn to beauty. Both suggest that the philosopher, because his desire for the good expands his horizons to the widest breadth possible, is uniquely suited for the goal of making a noetic insight into the beautiful itself. Both suggest that the beautiful is good, and the good beautiful. But while Diotima’s story appears to end in a triumph, in the *Hippias Major*, Socrates ends in a special sort of tragedy. Diotima’s story ends with the “sudden” (ἐξαίφνης, 210d) encounter with the beautiful itself, while Socrates’s story in the *Hippias Major* ends in *aporia* and suffering, albeit with enough of a consolation—enough of a noetic “flash”—to make the suffering worthwhile. Thus, the *Hippias Major* gives us a view of an ascent toward the form of beauty similar to Diotima’s, but one
which begins and ends within the sub-ouranian realm, within the world of appearances. It is, in a sense, a more “realistic” or “naturalistic” depiction of what happens when *eros* becomes philosophical *eros* and, inspired by beauty, makes an ascent.

This special nature of Socrates’s story in the *Hippias Major*—its not-quite-tragic conclusion for Socrates—helps us to make a contribution to the ongoing discussion over the relationship between Plato’s dialogues and the Greek tradition of tragedy. This debate also helps us to what exactly Socrates gains at the end of the dialogue with regard to the beautiful, that which makes his suffering “good for me.” It also helps us to see more clearly how arbitrary and, in a sense, violent is Hippias’s rejection of philosophy at the end of the dialogue.

On one side of this debate is Martha Nussbaum, with her contention that the Platonic dialogues present us with an “anti-tragic theater,” a type of theater “purged and purified of theater’s characteristic appeal to powerful emotion, a pure crystalline theater of the intellect.” Plato’s dialogues aim to draw the soul away from its attention to particulars, and towards “general accounts,” and ultimately to pure intellectual knowledge. For Plato, “only certain elements are appropriate” to the search for truth: the noetic capacity, but not the passions. While tragedy is open to the “complexity and indeterminacy of the lived practical situation,” Platonic dialogues aim to overcome these in favor of noetic insight.\(^{264}\) Prominent (but by no means alone) on the other side of the debate is David Roochnik, who contends that Plato *does* present us with a tragedy, the tragedy of *logos* itself: “Logos has limits that it cannot surpass, and against which it must collide,” and this limit is self-justification.\(^{265}\) *Logos* explains reality, but it cannot explain why it should be the only method with which to explain reality. For this reason, Socrates most of

\(^{264}\) All quotations from Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 133-134.
the time fails to convince his interlocutors to change their lives in favor of philosophy. A good example of this failure is found in the *Hippias Major*.  

For the anti-tragic side, the *Hippias Major* does, at first blush, appear to follow the description that Nussbaum gives of a Platonic dialogue. Socrates does steer the discussion away from Hippias’s definitions, which center upon concrete realities or physical attributes (maidens, the color gold, etc.), and toward definitions of the beautiful that appeal to ideas (utility, goodness, etc.). But the dialogue does not associate philosophical discussion and noetic insight with salvation from, or abandonment of, the “lived practical situation” which Nussbaum says traditional tragedy deals with. On the contrary, by hinting at a connection between Hippias’s rejection of philosophy and the rest of his life as he lived it, Plato suggests a link between the pursuit of philosophy and the goodness of one’s life. Moreover, Socrates, whose end is superficially similar to Hippias’s (they were both executed by their fellow citizens), is able to bear and find goodness in his own life, precisely because he pursues the beautiful as an *eidos*, and does not consider it to be a mere tool (as Hippias ultimately does). In the *Hippias Major*, Plato is aware of the tragic dimension of life, but associates this dimension with a rejection of the good. This is not to say that a person who aims for the good is protected from tragedy. Socrates himself was not. But Plato does suggest that the rejection of philosophy and of the erotic longing for the good which is philosophical *eros*, is itself tragic. This rejection has consequences in a person’s “lived practical situation,” because by rejecting philosophical *eros*, one is neglecting to direct one’s *eros* toward the good. On the other hand, but directing one’s *eros* toward the good,

266 Drew Hyland has also contributed to this debate in *Finitude and Transcendence*, 111-137, arguing that a proper understanding of the tragic dimension in Platonic dialogues involves framing the Socratic quest for definitions in terms of *eros*. In *Wounded Heroes*, Marina McCoy has articulated the role that the passions play in various Platonic dialogues. See also Franco V. Trivigno, “Is Good Tragedy Possible? The Argument of *Gorgias* 502b-503b,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 41 (2011): 115-38; also Patterson, “The Platonic Art of Comedy and Tragedy,” 84.
one is allowing for the possibility that tragedy does not have the last word in life, but a consolation in the form of noetic insight, the “paternal” aspect of *eros*.

To Roochnik’s argument, the *Hippias Major* offers a way beyond the tragic impasse which he articulates. While it is true that Socrates fails to convince—and convert—Hippias to the life of philosophy, it is not the case that Socrates does not attempt to justify the philosophical way up against Hippias’s sophistry. Socrates does justify his own path, the path of philosophy. He does so by arguing for its goodness: “It wouldn’t be strange if it were good for me” (304e) he says, referring to the discussion that has just taken place.267 This justification is not made with apodictic certainty. Nevertheless, it is a claim upon which Socrates is willing to stake his life. This justification also works for continuing the philosophical discussion after the action of the dialogue has drawn to a close. Philosophical discussion is good, and good for me. I can verify the goodness of philosophy, and thus justify it for myself, by living philosophically and seeing that it is, indeed, good for me. The key here is that “good for me” can only be determined by a willingness on Socrates’s part to accept that his knowledge of the beautiful and the good is uncertain, but that the way toward truth consists in continuing the philosophical path. As I have argued,268 human beings who direct their *eros* toward the good are never content with apparent goods, but only actual ones. In order for me to verify whether philosophical inquiry is good for me, I must direct my *eros* toward the good, and must continue until I get to an experience of authentic goodness. Hippias cannot be convinced by an argument, but he can be given a method

---

267 Here I am following Schindler, who argues that one cannot take for granted that (for Socrates), “reason’s primary aim is to persuade, to such an extent that, if it fails to achieve this aim, its own integrity becomes suspect.” Rather, reason’s aim is “simply the good.” See Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason*, 272-273. Schindler develops his own brand of the anti-tragic view (partially using Roochnik as a foil), which nevertheless appears to be different from Nussbaum’s in that Schindler attempts to defend Plato against the charge of “otherworldliness.” See especially pages 240-282, which include a critique of the “tragic” view, and the final chapter of that book, which includes an engagement with Nussbaum’s work.

268 Following C.D.C. Reeve, in Chapter Three.
through which to verify the philosophical path: test it, and see whether it is good. This testing, of course, requires a modification of one’s eros: it has to become directed toward being, beyond appearances, toward the truth beyond my immediate self-interest. It demands, in other words, a switch from the life of a political sophist to that of an “ugly” philosopher.

This test or work of verification has already been modeled, and to a degree, accomplished in the dialogue itself. By agreeing with Socrates that the beautiful itself “is something,” and that this something is the object of a dialectical inquiry, Hippias implicitly agrees that true opinion is distinct from false opinion. He also agrees that any definition of the beautiful itself is trustworthy only to the extent to which it does describes the beautiful itself as it is in itself, not as it is in appearance. The problem lies, of course, in discerning the eidos within appearances. But the key point is that, in Protagorean terms, Hippias accepts that the beautiful itself, and not “man”, is the “measure” of what makes an object be beautiful. Now, Hippias is compelled to accept this because to deny that the beautiful itself is something would be to deny the practical knowledge that Hippias himself claims to have about the beautiful (i.e., the knowledge that he claims to have with regard to beautiful speech, and implicitly claims to have with regard to beautiful dress). Such knowledge requires the prior recognition that the beautiful is something to be known (for example, I have to know about meter, rhyme, assonance, etc., in order to speak well). Hippias’s knowledge is a techne, and the existence of a techne implies the corresponding existence of a part of reality which is to be manipulated (that it is something). To the degree that Hippias actually does know something about arranging things beautifully, he can also trust the claim that the beautiful itself is something, because he can distinguish between an object with beauty and one without beauty. Once Hippias recognizes that the beautiful itself is something, he accepts the whole erotic, other-oriented structure of Socratic philosophical inquiry, and the
development of the dialogue goes, perforce, in a Socratic direction, and toward an eventual recognition of beauty’s goodness. The trustworthiness of Socrates’s subsequent claims about the beautiful itself have their foundation in the original noetic insight that the beautiful itself is something distinct from beautiful objects. Once Hippias finds himself in the increasingly frustrating philosophical path (frustrating because it puts into question Hippias’s claims to knowledge), Hippias finds that the only way to end it is to break with it violently, to declare himself to be against philosophy and in favor of rhetoric, once again. Thus it is not really philosophy that needs justification in the *Hippias Major*, but rather what needs justification is Hippias’s decision to ignore the truth he has already recognized: that the beautiful itself is *something*, something to be *known*, something not defined by me.

---

269 One may speculate that this account, from Simon Leys, is perhaps descriptive of what Hippias chooses to do at the end of the *Hippias Major*: “Once—many years ago—a miniscule incident afforded me a deeply upsetting revelation. I was writing in a café; I had been sitting there for a couple of hours already, comfortably settled at a table with my books and papers. Like many lazy people, I enjoy a measure of hustle and bustle around me while I am supposed to work—it gives me an illusion of activity—and thus the surrounding din of conversations and calls did not disturb me in the least. The radio that had been blaring in a corner all morning could not bother me either: pop songs, stock market figures, muzak, horseracing reports, more pop songs, a lecture on foot-and-mouth disease in cows—whatever: this audio-pap kept dripping like lukewarm water from a leaky faucet and nobody was listening anyway.

Suddenly a miracle occurred. For a reason that will forever remain mysterious, this vulgar broadcasting routine gave way without transition (or, if there had been one, it escaped my attention) to the most sublime music: the first bars of Mozart’s clarinet quintet began to flow and with serene authority filled the entire space fo the café, turning it at once into an antechamber of Paradise. But the other patrons who had been chatting, drinking, playing cards or reading newspapers were not deaf after all: this magical irruption of a voice from heaven provoked a general state among them—all faces turned round, frowning with puzzled concern. Yet, in a matter of seconds, to the huge relief of all, one customer resolutely stood up, walked straight to the radio, turned the tuning knob and cut off this disquieting *intermède*, switched to another state and restored at once the more congenial noises, which everyone could again comfortably ignore.

At that moment the realization hit me—and has never left me since: true Philistines are not people who are incapable of recognizing beauty; they recognize it all too well; they detect its presence anywhere, immediately, and with a flair as infallible as that of the most sensitive aesthete—but for them, it is in order to be able better to pounce upon it at once and destroy it before it can gain a foothold in their universal empire of ugliness. Ignorance is not simply absence of knowledge, obscurantism does not result from a dearth of light, bad taste is not merely a lack of good taste, stupidity is not a simple want of intelligence: all these are fiercely active forces, that angrily assert themselves on every occasion; they tolerate no challenge to their omnipresent rule. …More than artistic beauty, moral beauty seems to exasperate our sorry species. They need to bring down to our own wretched level, to deflate, to deride and debunk any splendor that is towering above us, is probably the saddest urge of human nature.” Simon Leys, *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (New York: *New York Review of Books* Classics, 2013), 40-41.

270 Schindler argues that the association between money and sophistry is founded on the latter’s preference for appearance over reality, and of practical wisdom over theoretical wisdom: “It is precisely because this [the *ti esti*
Conclusion

The *Hippias Major* ends with a recapitulation of the essential thrust of the journey that Hippias and Socrates have taken together, a journey that begins with a colloquial and unexamined use of *kallos* and *to kalon*, shifts to a concerted philosophical effort to understand the content of the word, and culminates with Socrates announcing that the beautiful is good. This announcement forces the discussion to turn, and threatens Hippias’s position as a sophist: to accept the goodness of the beautiful requires the acceptance of a standard of goodness outside of one’s own definition of goodness, and perhaps also against the immediate political interests that one may have. Perhaps in order to avoid ending the discussion already at the conclusion of the discussion of the beautiful as “father of the good,” Socrates begins a recapitulation: perhaps the beautiful is a sort of pleasure. Yet the discussion ends up in the same place: in a protreptic injunction. The beautiful, if it is pleasure, must be a beneficial pleasure. Hippias cannot abide by this conclusion; he rejects it in favor of the art of speaking beautifully, an art with more practical advantages. More importantly, the noetic insights into the beautiful that are gained by Socrates and Hippias’s dialogue—that the beautiful is something in itself, that knowing it requires a move beyond appearances, and that it is good—cannot be accepted by Hippias without Hippias also abandoning the life of sophistry.

The decision to philosophize about the beautiful unites a distinction between the practical and the theoretical, as the entirety of our soul—*eros* and *nous*—must be directed toward the good question that Socrates poses] is a theoretical, rather than practical, question that it always arrives as a troublesome interruption of one’s projects. If one is going to pay [a sophist] … one would most immediately rather pay for the removal of this nuisance, which is another way of saying for the ‘power’ to be free from the claims that reality makes on us: the sophist, Gorgias, in Plato’s dialogue of the same name, points to just this sort of freedom as the aim of sophistry. Education, as a claim on one’s being, costs too much, as it were. You cannot buy an education; but you can buy the appearance of an education.” See D. C. Schindler, “Why Socrates Didn’t Charge: Plato and the Metaphysics of Money,” *Communio* 36 (2009): 394-426. Hippias appears to share this sentiment when he rejects philosophy.
in order to discover the beautiful. This unique state of soul rises in high relief at the end of the
dialogue, in the figure of Socrates. By transcending both the comic and (to a limited degree) the
tragic, Socrates comes to light as a uniquely philosophical hero: one who knows the good, at
least in part, and is able to stake his entire life on it, even unto death. This stands in sharp
contrast to the sublime heights that Diotima’s rhetoric reaches in the Symposium, as well as
Socrates’s speech in the Phaedrus. The Hippias Major stands with those dialogues in presenting
an understanding of the beautiful that responds to erotic desire and leads guides it toward the
good; but it differs from those dialogues in presenting a much earthier, realistic version of the
same story. In all three dialogues, it necessary for eros to become philosophical in order for it to
make an insight into the beautiful itself. But in the Hippias Major, this insight is partial, and
takes place within finite human existence, and is accompanied by tragic suffering. In comparison
to the tragedies and comedies of Plato’s time, it also stands apart. The dialogue’s conclusion is
neither comic nor tragic in the conventional sense, but philosophical. The dialogue discloses that
the proper way of understanding the beautiful—the attitude through which one can come to
understand the beautiful in its intelligible nature—is philosophical. But the dialogue also shows
us that there are consequences to taking this stance—tragic consequences. Philosophy changes
one’s life in very clear ways. The Hippias Major here suggests that beautiful beings inspire a
philosophical question, but that this question is tied to suffering, and cannot be answered—even
if only partially—without sacrifice. The difference between the triumphal climax of Diotima’s
ladder, and the quiet tragic foreboding of the Hippias Major, could not be starker.

* * *

So far in this dissertation, I have primarily worked on the task of describing the ways in
which eros, and philosophical eros in particular, manifest themselves in the Hippias Major, and
are thus indispensable concepts for understanding it. But all the while, I have also been
describing the philosophical claims which make up the relationship between beauty and love of
the good, claims which the dialogue makes manifest to the careful reader. In the next chapter, I
will attempt to bring these claims into conversation with a more general set of questions in the
philosophy of aesthetics. In doing so, I will make another, more concise statement of what I take
these claims to be.
Chapter Six

Beauty, “Liking Devoid of Interest,” and Eros

My main philosophical claim about the *Hippias Major* can be summed up as follows: *The possibility of making a noetic insight into the eidos of the beautiful is contingent upon the attitude that one takes toward the good.* In the dialogue, this attitude proper to the eidos of beauty is modeled by Socrates: philosophical eros, that is, the desire for the good above all other things, a desire which motivates the philosophical quest to understand the essence of beings. In this chapter, I would like to go deeper into the significance that this claim about the *Hippias Major* has for the philosophy of beauty in general. More specifically, I would like to show how my interpretation of the *Hippias Major* offers a model for understanding aesthetic judgment and aesthetic contemplation which is an alternative to the Kantian notion of “liking … devoid of interest.”

As I state in the Introduction above, my claim in this dissertation is not only that eros is a key interpretive key to the *Hippias Major*, but also that this relationship between eros and beauty modelled in the *Hippias Major* tells us something essential about what the way human beings experience and judge beauty in the world. It is this essential finding which I wish to bring into a conversation with the Kantian view.

“Disinterestedness,” “disinterested pleasure,” or “disinterested liking,” are three different ways to denote one of the foundational claims of Kant’s aesthetics, namely that “The Liking That Determines Judgment of Taste Is Devoid of All Interest (Interesse).” Kant’s claim is that the proper understanding of both beauty and aesthetic judgment includes the idea that the observer

---

271 This phrase appears in the second section of Division I of the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 45. See Also the discussion of interest in the Introduction: Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, lix-lx.

272 This is the title of the second section of Division I of the *Critique of Judgment*. See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 45.
and judger of beautiful objects is “disinterested” in the beautiful object’s existence, and means
therefore that this observer and judger does not wish to possess it in any way. In contrast, in the
_Hippias Major_ we are given, in the figure of Socrates, someone who is both _interested_ in
observing and enjoying and possessing beautiful objects, while at the same time also _interested_
in gaining a proper understanding of the essence of the beautiful itself, and thereby gaining the
requisite knowledge for making proper judgments over whether objects are beautiful. This very
knowledge—the knowledge about the _eidos_ of beauty, which is also the knowledge required to
make a proper judgment about the beauty of an object—is sought and contemplated within a
context of “interest” in beautiful beings. Thus, for the Socrates of the _Hippias Major_, a proper
understanding of the beautiful itself does not preclude the desire to possess, and take interest in
the existence of, beautiful objects. Beauty inspires _eros_, and _eros_ is attracted to and aims to
possess beautiful objects. When it becomes philosophical, _eros_ inspires the desire to understand
how these beautiful beings are able to be beautiful. Thus the desire to understand that which
makes things be beautiful—their _eidos_—occurs within a context of interest and desire.

Therefore, with regard to the question of the appropriate human attitude required to contemplate,
and make an insight into the nature of, the beautiful, the Kantian view and the view depicted in
the _Hippias Major_ stand at loggerheads. In this chapter, I would like to further articulate the
difference between these two views, and explain why I believe that the Socratic view is, in one
respect, superior. I contend that the Socratic view found in the _Hippias Major_ makes a more
adequate description of the phenomenon of aesthetic enjoyment and its relation to aesthetic
judgment, than does Kant’s theory. This chapter has two parts. First, I will sketch out the
essential components of the Kantian view. Second, I will make a contrast between the Kantian
view and the Socratic position that I believe is modelled in the *Hippias Major*. In the Conclusion, I will argue for the superiority of the account of beauty and desire in the *Hippias Major*.

**“Liking Devoid of Interest”**

In order to set up the contrast with the depiction of the relationship between beauty and *eros* found in the *Hippias Major*, we must first outline the main facets of Kant’s notion of “liking devoid of interest,” as they are found in his *Critique of Judgment*. Kant’s position is famously complex, but briefly put it can be said to have the effect of sundering any link between desire (e.g., for possession of the beautiful object, including sexual desire, or any other type of involvement) and aesthetic judgment. In §2 of the *Critique*, Kant writes that “in order for me to say that an object is beautiful, and to prove that I have taste, what matters is what I do with this presentation within myself, and not the [respect] in which I depend on the object’s existence.” In §5, he writes: “A judgment of taste…is merely contemplative, i.e., it is a judgment that is indifferent to the existence of the object.”

Any judgment that includes interest of any sort cannot be deemed a “pure” judgment of taste. Kant’s position does not necessarily exclude any sort of relationship between pleasure and moral interest from aesthetic contemplation. The aesthetic carries with it its own brand of pleasure, and aesthetic experience (of natural beauty,

---

273 Both passages are found in Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 45-53. Many commentators have sought to clarify the meaning of “disinterestedness” in Kant. I have found the following to be useful. First, Gadamer: “‘Naturally, ‘disinterested delight’ means that we are not interested in what appears or in what is ‘represented’ from a practical point of view. Disinterestedness simply signifies that characteristic feature of aesthetic behavior that forbids us to inquire after the purpose served by art. We cannot ask, ‘What purpose is served by enjoyment?’” See Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 19. The Kant scholar Roger Scruton also is a valuable resource. As Scruton sees it, disinterest in an object’s existence means that my “desires, aims, and ambitions are held in abeyance in the act of contemplation” of the beautiful. See Roger Scruton, *Kant: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 104. Instead, Scruton writes elsewhere, in a position of disinterestedness we are “entirely devoted to the object” as a beautiful form. See Roger Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27. Finally, Martin Seel, who writes that disinterested judgment allows for a “free beholding” of the beautiful object. See Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 139.

274 As Salim Kemal puts it, for Kant, aesthetic contemplation carries with it its own unique brand of pleasure: “By contrast, Kant wants to maintain, aesthetic responses are pleasurable without interest. Pleasure is only that which is the experience of beauty. Our liking depends only on the presentation of an object.” See Salim Kemal, *Kant’s*
in particular) can be “preparatory” to moral concern. What Kant does claim is that for a
judgment to be purely aesthetic (and therefore to be possible at all, strictly speaking), “must not have an interest as its determinating basis.” Moreover, the beautiful object itself must not give a
rise to interest, be it in pleasure or of another sort. The upshot of Kant’s view is that it
preserves a unique status for aesthetic contemplation, a status that cannot be reduced to any other
type of experience—be it moral, pleasurable, or otherwise. Heidegger perhaps captures this point
most clearly when he writes that, by claiming that beauty requires a disinterested stance, Kant
“asks by what means our behavior, in the situation where we find something we encounter to be

Aesthetic Theory (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 35-36. Malcolm Budd makes the necessary distinctions here: “What he means by this is that an interested pleasure in an object is pleasure that such and such is the case with respect to the object: it is pleasure that the world is a certain way, pleasure that something is true of this particular object, pleasure in a fact (or apparent fact) about the object; in particular, pleasure that a certain kind of thing, which the given object exemplifies, exists. Pleasure at the existence of O is pleasure that such-and-such is (positively) the case with respect to O, which is pleasure at a fact (or apparent fact) about O. Kant passes freely between the conception of an interest as a propositional pleasure and the conception of an interest as a desire or concern that something should be the case, a desire determined by a concept (e.g. CJ § 4, 209, § 10, 220). This move is easy to understand, for if you are pleased that p you want it to be the case that p, and if you want it to be the case that p and you believe that p then you are pleased that p. His claim about a pure judgement of taste is therefore that the pleasure it expresses is not pleasure that the represented object exists, or that it is of a certain kind or possesses certain properties, which implies that the pleasure is not the satisfaction of one of the subject's desires. Given Kant's understanding of a pure judgement of taste as a judgement about an item's form based on the pleasure experienced in the contemplation of that form, this is clearly correct: pleasure in the perception of an object's structure is not the same as pleasure that the elements of the object are structured as they are.” See Malcolm Budd, The Aesthetic Apperception of Nature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46.

See §42 in Kant, Critique of Judgment, 167. For an account of how Kant’s argument works, see Rodolphe Gasché, The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 161. Kant claims that the judgment of beauty in nature may be “preparatory” for moral feeling by allowing us to witness a disinterested love of a prime object of sensible interest (nature), which is analogous to the love of a moral will disinterested in private gain or pleasure, but rather in acting according to the categorical imperative. But the beautiful is preparatory for the moral in this way only because, and only insofar as, it is disinterested. It is the prior interest in the moral good which compels one to look into the disinterested contemplation of the beauty in nature for a “trace” of “lawful harmony” between one’s cognitive faculties and nature: “… whoever takes such an interest in the beautiful in nature can do so only to the extent that he has beforehand already solidly established an interest in the morally good” (emphasis mine). Another attempt to articulate the link between the contemplation of natural beauty and moral interest is found in Anne Margaret Baxley, “The Practical Significance of Taste in Kant’s Critique of Judgment: Love of Natural Beauty as a Mark of Moral Character,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 63 (2005): 33-45.

From §5 in Kant, Critique of Judgment, 163. See also the commentary by Gasché, who cites this same passage from Kant: “A pure judgment of taste comes into being only when all such concern with the existence of the object is excluded, and when that which is judged beautiful (rather than pleasant or good) pleases independently of ‘whether anything depends or can depend on the existence of this thing, either for myself or for anyone else’ (38).” Gasché, The Idea of Form, 155.

Both of these senses of “disinterest”—first, no interest can serve as the determining ground for a judgment, and second, the object itself must not inspire an interest—are identified by Baxley, “The Practical Significance of Taste in Kant’s Critique of Judgment,” 33.
beautiful, must let itself be determined in such a way that we encounter the beautiful as beautiful.”  

This “behavior” which allows the beautiful to be encountered as beautiful is marked by detachment from practical concerns and desire for possession of the beautiful object.

We can deepen our grasp of what disinterestedness is by contrasting aesthetic judgment, or a judgment of taste, with the interest that we take in sensuous pleasure and morality. Sensuous pleasure is like aesthetic judgment in that it makes a subjective judgment about an object: “This is pleasant” always means: “This is pleasant for me.” It differs from aesthetic judgment, however, precisely on the point of disinterestedness. Sensuous pleasure very much takes an interest in the existence of the object that produces pleasure. It is a judgment about a particular experience, and not about the form of the object itself. It therefore cannot claim universality grounded in disinterest. Likewise, a moral judgment is a judgment in which the will takes an interest, not in an object, but in reason. A moral judgment is purposive, it takes interest in practical reason, while aesthetic judgment is unconcerned with the purpose or use of a beautiful object.

The point should be emphasized, however, that despite the difference between sensuous pleasure and the judgment of beauty, a difference based specifically on this stance of disinterestedness which the latter takes as a condition for judgment, Kant does argue that the beautiful gives us a unique type of pleasure. Even within our disinterested stance, we feel that

---


279 “A pure judgment of taste must be free of partiality toward the existence of objects that cause the respective pleasures of the sensibly pleasant and the morally good, a partiality that is characteristic of the senses and the will.” Seel, Aesthetics of Appearing, 27.

280 “Naturally, ‘disinterested delight’ means that we are not interested in what appears or in what is ‘represented’ from a practical point of view. Disinterestedness simply signifies that characteristic feature of aesthetic behavior that forbids us to inquire after the purpose served by art. We cannot ask, ‘What purpose is served by enjoyment?’” See Gadamer, The Relevance of the Beautiful, 19.
beauty gives us pleasure, a pleasure without interest.\footnote{Kemal, \textit{Kant’s Aesthetic Theory}, 35-36.} This means that it is a pleasure simply in contemplating a beautiful form, full stop. It is not a pleasure derived from the fact that a certain object is beautiful (which implies an interest in the object’s existence), nor is it pleasure derived from possessing a beautiful object (which also clearly implies interest in existence). As Alexander Nehamas puts it, it is a pleasure “bereft of desire,” of beautiful objects “completely independent of their relations to the rest of the world.”\footnote{Nehamas, \textit{Only a Promise of Happiness}, 3. In a similar vein, Theodor Adorno writes, “For Kant, aesthetics becomes paradoxically a castrated hedonism, desire without desire.” See Theodor Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1997), 14. Scruton calls this unique pleasure a type of pleasure “in” something, or an “intentional” pleasure, where the key factor is that the mere contemplation of, say, athletic glory can give pleasure without reference to an actual athletic glory that is happening before me. Scruton, \textit{Beauty}, 28-31.}

Kant also argues that the disinterestedness involved in aesthetic judgment does not exclude the possibility of taking an interest in making aesthetic judgments. Kant writes about two types of such interest. First, one may take an empirical interest in the beautiful, which is primarily a social interest, an interest in sharing with others one’s judgment of beauty, and in experiencing beauty with others. “Only in society is the beautiful of empirical interest” (§41).\footnote{Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 163.} Or one may take an intellectual interest in the beautiful in nature: one may have an interest in the intellectual consideration of beautiful forms which one has already judged (“the mind cannot meditate about the beauty of nature without at the same time finding its interest aroused” §42).\footnote{Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 167. As Gasché puts it, “Disinterestedness on the level of the sense—a possibility realized solely in the case of entirely pure judgments of taste— is the provision under which alone a relation between the beautiful and ethics is conceivable.” Gasché, \textit{The Idea of Form}, 173.} But both of these types of interest arise after a disinterested judgment of beauty has already been made. They do not alter the fundamental structure of the human experience of beauty, which is marked by disinterested contemplation and judgment.\footnote{See Gasché, \textit{The Idea of Form}, 170-172.} As stated above, Kant also claims that the judgment of beauty in nature may be “preparatory” for moral feeling by allowing us to
witness a disinterested love of a prime object of sensible interest (nature), which is analogous to
the love of a moral will disinterested in private gain or pleasure, but rather in acting according to
the categorical imperative. But the beautiful is preparatory for the moral in this way only
because, and only insofar as, it is disinterested. It is the prior interest in the moral good which
compels one to look into the disinterested contemplation of the beauty in nature for a “trace” of
“lawful harmony” between one’s cognitive faculties and nature: “… whoever takes such an
interest in the beautiful in nature can do so only to the extent that he has beforehand already
solidly established an interest in the morally good” (emphasis mine).

Despite these nuanced relationships between pleasure, moral interest, and aesthetic
judgment, however, the consequence of Kant’s position on disinterestedness is that it does not
allow for any direct relationship between the experience of beauty and every other part of human
life. In Kant’s theory, the link between morality and beauty is extrinsic: it is only because the
disinterested stance, which one cultivates in contemplating the beautiful, is similar to the
disinterested stance which belongs to moral concern that one can speak of a link between beauty
and morality. Moreover, the pleasure that one takes in normal engagement with beautiful
beings—the warm glow of the sun, the smell of flowers, or sexual pleasures—have nothing to do
with the unique type of pleasure afforded by pure judgments of taste. For Kant, these realms are
all distinct and separate: There is the world of practical concern: of moral decisions and logistical
arrangements, the world of choices and tools. There is also the world of emotional affectivity
(e.g., for my friends) and sensuous pleasure (e.g., for chocolate). The contemplation of beauty is
wholly distinct from both, because it does not rely, but rather excludes, concern for, interest in,
or desire to possess the beautiful object.

---

287 This passage is found in §42. See Kant, Critique of Judgment, 167.
Contrast with Socrates

Having laid out the essential points of Kant’s notion of disinterestedness, we can proceed to contrast his view with what is present before us in the Hippias Major. There are precedents for this comparison. Many thinkers have argued that Kant’s position excludes aspects or dimensions of aesthetic experience which are constitutive of the human experience of beauty. Others point out that these are aspects or dimensions which the Greeks (and Plato in particular) did not exclude. Constraining myself here to what is found in the Hippias Major, I would like to make the case for three clear differences between the Kantian view, as outlined above, and the Socratic view found in this dialogue (drawing upon my preceding interpretation of it). The three differences are as follows: First, in the Hippias Major, beautiful beings always inspire “interest” of one sort or another. Second, for Socrates and Hippias, the ground of aesthetic judgment is always based on some interest. Third, the search for the eidos of the beautiful, which is also a search for the proper criterion of aesthetic judgment, is itself interested, and this interest is in part moral interest in the good.

First, that beautiful objects always inspire an interest of some sort can be seen by the fact that, whenever Hippias and Socrates speak about a beautiful object, they never attempt to isolate

---

288 A famous (though not necessarily rigorous) proponent of this criticism is Nietzsche. In a passage from The Twilight of the Idols, an earlier work, Nietzsche summons Plato (in a rare moment of approval) in order to defend the notion that interest, in particular, sexual interest, is an important element in the beautiful. Here he attacks Schopenhauer, who Nietzsche sees as Kant’s heir in matters of aesthetics, separating the “will” from the experience of beauty: “No lesser authority than the divine Plato (—as Schopenhauer himself calls him) maintains a different proposition: that all beauty stimulates procreation—that this is precisely the proprum of its effect, from the most sensual right up to the most spiritual …” See Nietzsche, The Twilight of the Idols or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer, Trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54. Elsewhere, Nietzsche attacks Kant’s notion of disinterestedness directly (but without reference to Plato). See Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic, Trans. Douglas Smith. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 83-84. Alexander Nehamas is a contemporary voice for this criticism. Identifying Kant’s view with the term “aesthetic,” he writes: “The aesthetic made it possible to isolate the beautiful from all the sensual, practical, and ethical issues that were the center of Plato’s concern … Kant disavowed the ancients.” See Nehamas, Only a Promise of Happiness, 3. A similar sentiment is expressed by Hyland, when he argues that Kant and his heirs begin their inquiry into “aesthetics” by looking at art, whereas “for the Greeks beauty begins, as it were, with the beauty of human bodies, and only from their radiates to art and elsewhere.” See Hyland, Plato and the Question of Beauty, 15.

250
(in thought) that object’s intelligible form, which would stand apart from the lived experience of beholding that object. For example, they never speak of the form of the spoon as being beautiful, but rather its active capacity to stir the soup as being what makes it beautiful. In other words, they never claim that the object of their contemplation is purely formal, and separated from the complex of interests within which these beautiful objects are discovered in the course of human life. The only time when Hippias and Socrates do distinguish form from particular object is when they pose the question of whether the beautiful itself is something (287c), which will later be restated as the question of what kind of form causes an object to become beautiful when added—the point in the dialogue in which the word, *eidos*, appears (289d). But the discovery that the beautiful itself is a form which stands apart from its instantiations in the world is achieved by first taking an inventory of objects whose beauty is grounded in a diverse array of interests—sexual (maidens), moral (noble lives), even utilitarian (a spoon, an Elean mare). It is in contemplating the beauty of these objects as they are experienced in the world that, later on, as a second step, the interlocutors are able to posit the existence of the *eidos*. The idea that an object can properly be called beautiful only when it is contemplated with disregard to its surrounding context of interests and concepts is an idea that is foreign to this dialogue.

Two examples suffice to establish that, for Socrates and Hippias aesthetic judgment is always grounded in an interest of some sort. In other words, aesthetic judgments made by both characters in the dialogue are grounded in some one or other aspect of the beautiful object, an aspect which is attractive and inspires a concrete interest in that object’s existence. First, Socrates and Hippias agree that a noble life (or rather, the noble life of a male Greek aristocrat) is beautiful (291d-e). Now, a noble life is beautiful precisely because it is noble, or moral, i.e., precisely because it is a life in which a person has fulfilled his duties. The determining ground
for the judgment, “A noble life is beautiful,” is a moral interest in nobility. It is this very nobility, this fulfillment of one’s duties, which is beautiful. Second, Socrates and Hippias both believe that a maiden is beautiful (287e). As we have seen in Chapter Two, the judgment that maidens are beautiful is not founded on a contemplation of the human body as an abstract form, but rather upon a host of sexual and cultural prejudices which the Greeks associated with young, unmarried women. The “determining ground” of Socrates’s and Hippias’s judgment is, then, both sexual interest and also the interests encapsulated in certain ideas that the Greeks held to be true about maidens. However, although the determining basis of their judgment are these sexual and cultural prejudices, this does not keep Socrates and Hippias from asserting that the determining ground of their judgment is not also the beautiful itself. Both the cultural and sexual prejudices or interests, and also the eidos of the beautiful, are the determining ground of their judgment. In other words, the eidos inheres in the object by virtue of these interests. The problem then lies in finding a definition of the eidos of the beautiful that is expansive enough to encompass sexuality, maidenhood, as well as all of the other attributes of beauty (e.g., utility, power, etc.) which the interlocutors go on to discover. The task is complicated because the beautiful is both something distinct from beautiful beings, but it also manifests itself in each of these beings in a different way.

Not only is the contemplation of beautiful beings always involved in the nexus of interests which inform common life, but the search for the eidos of the beautiful is itself “interested.” The philosophical endeavor which informs the dialogue is never sundered from those “interested” experiences of beautiful objects in real life which inspire the question about the beautiful in the first place. The drive behind the question, What is that, the beautiful? is asked within these experiences, and is itself motivated by the desire for the good which defines
philosophy. As I argue in Chapter Four, the relation between these experiences and the overarching drive to question is that of a mobile and motive. \[289\] “Motives are ideas that draw to action. Mobiles are forces or impulses that incline us to act.” \[290\] The *eros* for the good above all things is a motive, which fuels our desire to understand the essential nature (*eidos*) of those mobiles (beautiful beings), which attract our attention and desire. If we take into account the fact that proper aesthetic judgment is grounded in knowledge of the *eidos* of the beautiful (Socrates’s unnamed friend associates the practice of correct aesthetic judgment with knowledge of the *eidos*: “How do you know what sorts of things are beautiful and foul? Look, would you be able to say what the beautiful is?” 286d), then it follows that the desire to make correct judgments is also somehow associated with the desire to possess the good, or to be good, or to behave well and correctly. For Socrates, taste is tightly woven into the notion how a life should be lived well: the desire to possess the good, which is the desire proper to a philosopher, also includes the desire to make proper judgments about beauty, and the ability to make proper judgments about beauty is contingent on one’s love of the good.

This relationship between love of the good and knowledge about the beautiful, which manifests itself in the actions and words of the Socrates of the *Hippias Major*, is most clearly visible in the political dimension of the dialogue. \[291\] As seen above, the question about the beautiful is born within a political discussion between Hippias and Socrates, about the proper way to teach the youth of a *polis* (283d-286c). \[292\] Since Hippias makes claims about his ability to

---

\[289\] See Chapter Four for a discussion of these terms.
\[290\] Quoted from Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 610-611.
\[291\] It is interesting that Hannah Arendt found, in Kant’s aesthetic theory, the basis for a political philosophy. Unfortunately, neither Kant nor Arendt was able to develop such a theory extensively, though Arendt did leave us with the lecture notes which were to form the basis of a (never written) book on the subject. See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
\[292\] See Chapter One.
teach well, and since he uses the word *kallos* and *kalon* as markers of the value of his work, Socrates decides to test Hippias’s knowledge about these words. They are words of praise, words of evaluation, and thus Socrates would like to know whether Hippias has the adequate knowledge to bestow proper praise and to make a sound evaluation, in particular with respect to education and speechmaking. The key is that, in order to have such adequate knowledge, one must have an insight into the very nature of beauty itself—into the *eidos* of the beautiful: How do you know what sorts of things are beautiful and ugly? Look, would you be able to say what the beautiful is?” (286d). Thus knowledge for proper praise is said to require an insight into the essence of beauty. In order to be able to make such an insight, one must abandon the self-interested life of sophistry (as depicted by Hippias), which is primarily concerned with power, and become instead a lover of the good, a person who understands that the truth about being lies beyond appearances, and must be discovered, rather than defined by one’s self. That is, one must become a philosopher. Thus, when Socrates later alleges that the “most beautiful” thing is wisdom about politics (296a), he is saying this already within a context of believing that only philosophy will achieve for a person a modicum of this wisdom. The political dimension thus shows that the search for the *eidos* has practical consequences, and is directly related to the problem of the good life as it manifests itself politically. It is therefore founded on “interest” through and through. These practical consequences are also—as we have seen—tragic, for both Hippias and Socrates. Thus the proper attitude toward the beautiful is also one that bears certain existential risks, or perhaps demands certain sacrifices.

In these three ways, we can see that the picture of aesthetic contemplation found in the *Hippias Major* is thoroughly connected to desire and interest. The ground of judgment is always based on an attractive or admirable quality in an object. The contemplation of a beautiful object
is never disconnected from the desire inspired by its attractive or admirable qualities. And the desire to understand how and why these objects are beautiful, and what the beautiful itself consists of, is also connected to the overall interest in the good which is characteristic of philosophy. Compared to Kant’s theory, the *Hippias Major* gives us a view that beauty is born within, and always remains within, a web of interests and erotic desire.

But it should be made clear, however, that the point of comparison is between Kant’s view and that view modeled by *Socrates*, not Hippias. It is Socrates who is able to both appreciate the beautiful as it is in itself within the complex of interests—that is, of erotic longing—that constitutes the experience of beautiful beings in the world. Hippias, while feeling the same erotic attraction to beauty, ultimately rejects the philosophical attitude required to make an insight into the beautiful as it is in itself. This is why I make the argument\(^2\) that Hippias is more interested in the *charm* of beauty—in its uses and pleasures—than in the beautiful itself. For Kant, a judgment about a beautiful object’s charm (*Reiz*) is held to be distinct from a judgment about an object’s beauty. Charm is an object’s sensory or emotional appeal, and according to the Kantian understanding of the term, has nothing to do with beauty as such: “Any taste remains barbaric if its liking requires that charms and emotions be mingled in, let alone if it makes these the standard of its approval.”\(^3\) There is a sense in which the Socratic position in the *Hippias Major* could be said to echo Kant’s distinction here. Socrates is indeed “charmed” by beautiful beings, but his relationship to them is not ultimately defined by charm, but rather by the desire to make an insight into their intelligible nature. Thus, in contrast with Kant’s view, the beauty of objects may manifest itself through charm, and charm does not necessarily keep a

\(^2\) See Chapter Three.
\(^3\) The main discussion on charm is found in §13, “A Pure Judgment of Taste is Independent of Charm and Emotion.” See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 69.
person from contemplating a beautiful being’s intelligible nature as beautiful. However, a person may choose to simply stay at the level of charm and not come to a deeper understanding of what the beautiful itself is—this is Hippias’s position.

**Conclusion**

My argument in this chapter can be summarized as follows. The view of the beautiful which is presented and enacted by Socrates in the *Hippias Major* shows us that the desire for pleasure, utilitarian interest, and moral concern are all inextricable from the experience of beauty as it occurs in human beings.\(^{295}\) It also shows us that philosophical *eros* is required to see that what makes beautiful beings beautiful is the *eidos* of the beautiful, as opposed to their pleasantness, utility, or goodness. Philosophical *eros* means *eros* directed toward the good, and it is this direction toward the good that allows one to pose the question of the *eidos* of the beautiful and make a noetic insight into its nature. Thus we see that the *Hippias Major* gives us a view about the nature of human contemplation of the beautiful which does not exclude desires and interests from the experience of beauty (I may desire the object that I believe to be beautiful, in other words), but also preserves a unique status for the beautiful itself (if I pay attention to what makes a beautiful being beautiful, I will learn that it is beautiful by virtue of the *eidos* of the

---

\(^{295}\) The parallels to the *Symposium* are once again worth noting. As Andrew Payne writes of Diotima’s Ladder: “The lover’s actions in the ascent are all done for the sake of the vision of the form of beauty, a quite determinate end, but these actions do not betray adherence to any overarching model of practical rationality” (146). Practical rationality is a concern in the *Hippias Major*: Hippias’s definitions often evoke it (i.e., the spoon), and Socrates does not reject it as a constitutive part of the *eidos* of the beautiful. Ultimately, however, as in the Diotima’s Ladder, the end of Socrates’s quest in the *Hippias Major* cannot be characterized as a practical concern but as the desire to obtain noetic knowledge of the beautiful itself. See Andrew Payne, “The Teleology of Ascent in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Apeiron* 41 (2008): 123-146. In contrast, the dichotomy which Nussbaum finds in the *Symposium* between Socrates and Alcibiades’s respective perceptions of the beautiful is not found in the *Hippias Major*: “The faculty that apprehends the form is preeminently stable, unwavering, and in our power to exercise regardless of the world’s happenings. The faculties that see and hear and respond to Alcibiades will be the feelings and sense-perceptions of the body, both vulnerable and inconstant.” Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 184. The Socrates of the *Hippias Major* responds to feelings and sense perceptions and takes these as starting points in his question to discover eidetic knowledge of the beautiful itself.
beautiful, and not because of any other reason). To refer once again to Heidegger’s words cited above, what the *Hippias Major* shows us is that the proper “behavior” that a human being must adopt in order to allow the beautiful to manifest itself as beautiful is *philosophical* behavior. This philosophical behavior consists of an openness to allow beautiful being to be defined by the *eidos* of the beautiful, and not be defined by appearances, or utility, or by the pleasure it may induce. It is only by adopting a philosophical stance that I can approach the beautiful for what it really is. In adopting this stance, I too accept certain consequences—consequences which, for Socrates, include suffering, but suffering that he believes to be worthwhile.

Because it is able to account for a proper “behavior” before the beautiful, while at the same time encompassing those experiences of desire and interest which often arise when a human being encounters the beautiful, I believe that the Socratic view as presented in the *Hippias Major* is superior to the Kantian theory of disinterestedness. It is able to safeguard a unique conceptual space for beauty judgments while at the same time also allowing for the fact that beauty judgments are usually accompanied by desire to possess, enjoy, or somehow involve one’s self with that object which is being judged as beautiful. As such, the Socratic account gives a more accurate account of the way most human beings experience the beautiful.
Conclusion

The task which I set out to accomplish with this dissertation is to show that where beauty becomes an object of possible knowledge (*noesis*) in the *Hippias Major*, it does not cease to also be an object of love (*eros*), and in fact that the *eidos* of the beautiful itself can only be known by a soul who *eros* is directed toward the good, that is, by a philosopher. In other words, the *Hippias Major* presents us not only with an inquiry into the *eidos* of the beautiful, but it also gives us a dramatic presentation of the disposition that a soul must take in order to conduct such an inquiry successfully (in the limited, partial, Socratic sense that “success” means, in this context). If one does not direct one’s *eros* toward the good, one still perceives beautiful beings (they are an object of *eros*, after all), but one cannot know them except in terms of their appearance, that is, in terms of their relative significance for a human observer (e.g., as pleasant or useful). When *eros* is directed toward the good, it is tasked with going beyond appearances and toward being. Only with such a disposition can the beautiful beings be distinguished from the *eidos* which makes them be beautiful, and make a noetic insight into its nature. I have also tried to show that in describing the centrality of *eros* to the *Hippias Major*, I am not only making a statement about a more accurate way to read this dialogue, but I am also arguing that the dialogue itself says something essential about the relationship between *eros*, beauty, and philosophy, and it does so through its dramatic enactment of two ways of relating to the beautiful: Hippias’s way, and Socrates’s way, both of which end in distinct types of tragedy. In this conclusion, I would like to first, recap the noetic path that Socrates takes, in order to second, show how philosophical *eros* plays a role in it.

The *Hippias Major* speaks about beauty in two ways. First, it speaks of beautiful objects: maidens, spoons, noble lives, et al. Second is the *eidos* of the beautiful, which is also beautiful in
itself, and which causes objects to become beautiful. As the Symposium (along with the Charmides, as well as other dialogues) tells us, beautiful objects are the objects of love (eros). What the Hippias Major shows us is a case study in making beautiful objects the object of a noetic inquiry. Two things immediately occur when beautiful objects become the object of noetic inquiry. First, the objects become distinguished from the eidos of the beautiful, which is what gives them their beautiful nature. This eidos is “something.” The second thing that happens is that the investigation becomes focused on determining what this eidos consists of, what its attributes might be, and how (if possible) one could articulate its definition using words. What we are left with at the end of the dialogue is only a partial fulfilment of this task by Socrates. He is able to say a few things about the eidos of the beautiful but is not able to encompass the eidos in a definition. This is perhaps in itself another truth about the beautiful—that by its very nature it eludes a comprehensive discursive understanding—thus, the conclusion that “beautiful things are difficult.” But did all of this happen without eros playing a role? No—eros plays a major, principle, vital role in the noetic investigation.

The first way that eros plays a role is the way we have just mentioned: it is eros which notices beautiful beings. But beyond this commonplace observation, there are the ways in which philosophical eros guides the noetic investigation itself. As we saw in Chapter One, Socrates’s questioning, his interrogative stance, and his interest in the good, are all a function of philosophical eros. In Chapter Two, we saw how Socrates’s dialectical engagement with Hippias’s definitions of the beautiful produces a sort of “ascent” towards a view of the beautiful which includes different types of beings and which, to a certain degree, “scales” upward toward higher types of beauties, in a way reminiscent of Diotima’s latter. This “ascent” is also a product of philosophical eros. Socrates’s declaration that the eidos causes a being to be, and not appear to
be beautiful—and its attendant implication that noesis of the eidos amounts to an insight into the intelligible form beyond appearances—is an erotic declaration. It is erotic because the self-transcending impetus to move beyond appearances and toward intelligible reality is part of what constitutes eros. The movement from appearances to being which Socrates talks about, which is analogous to the movement from opinion to knowledge, is likewise a movement of self-transcendence toward an object.\textsuperscript{296} The Hippias Major also depicts the beautiful as bearing a “visible” intelligibility, that is, as being radiant in appearance before anyone who is seeking to understand it according to what it is in itself. As such, the beautiful in the Hippias Major is similar to the beautiful in the Phaedrus, where it is depicted as being a unique form because it makes the intelligible visible. In Chapter Four, we saw that the erotic movement of self-transcendence required to know the beautiful itself must become a movement toward the good—this is what produces the shift we see in the dialogue. This shift is important because it orders the direction of the discussion with Hippias definitively in the direction of knowing the beautiful as it is in itself, and not as it appears to me. The goodness of the beautiful grounds the distinction between, and the possibility of an erotic movement from appearances and toward being.

Goodness is a concept that admits of a relative and intrinsic dimension. It is both good for me (it appears good to me), and it is good in itself (it is intrinsically good). Anyone who truly loves the good (whose eros is directed toward the good), will want to go from the relative good, to the good in itself. Since beautiful beings, as beautiful, are also good, they also inspire and cooperate with this transit from appearances to being. Thus we see that the love of the good (eros for the good, philosophy) is a necessary condition for any noetic insight into the beautiful itself.

\textsuperscript{296} To further clarify this point, Schindler’s discussion of Platonic eros is instructive. “Love is self-transcending of its very nature, because it aims at what lies beyond mere relativity to self.” This transcending aspect of love mirrors the movement from opinion to knowledge because such a movement “involves a renunciation of the Protagorean measure, because it is a consent to be measured by what is other than the self. Knowledge means taking something, not merely as it is for me, but … as it is in itself.” Schindler, \textit{Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason}, 129-135.
The result of this noetic-erotic inquiry into the *eidos* of the beautiful can be gleaned in part by examining the dramatic conclusion of the dialogue according to the canons of comedy and tragedy. It is my contention that Socrates and Hippias both come to trustworthy noetic insights into the beautiful, derived from both their experience of beautiful beings (which they discuss throughout the dialogue) and dialectical inquiry into that experience (as when every definition is expanded and refined to include different nuances of meaning). But these insights are also incomplete. Moreover, Socrates and Hippias finish the dialogue agreeing on one thing: that a definition of the beautiful has *not* been reached. Socrates continues to quest for knowledge of the beautiful itself, but it is not clear—and I would argue, it is not the case—that his quest remains a quest for a comprehensive definition of the beautiful itself. Rather, he is seeking for a knowledge which will always remain incomplete. To use the terms adopted in Chapter Three, Socrates’s telic *noesis* is never an absolute *noesis*. This is also a sign of the erotic nature of the noetic inquiry of the beautiful: it is a venture which encompasses both poverty and plenty, partial knowledge and a mystery always beyond complete grasp. The tragic dénouement of the dialogue also suggests that, while the proper attitude required to make an insight into the beautiful itself is philosophy, or love of the good, it is not the case that this attitude yields the triumph of making it to the top of Diotima’s ladder, or of reaching the supernatural realm that Socrates speaks about in the *Phaedrus*. Rather, the philosophical ascent toward the beautiful itself, as it plays out in this world, actually requires sacrifice, suffering, and—Socrates perhaps suggests—may end in tragedy. Thus the notion that philosophical *eros* is required to know the *eidos* of the beautiful amounts to much more than the simple idea that an intelligible nature is something only a philosopher can see, because only a philosopher is interested in knowing it. Instead, the *Hippias Major* suggests that the attractiveness of beauty invites us to philosophize, and to make a
commitment to an ever-deeper insight into its intelligible nature, and that doing so risks suffering and maybe tragedy. Philosophy, for Socrates, involves intense and dangerous living.

This description of the cooperation between noesis and philosophical eros in the Hippias Major gives us a new approach to the more general question in philosophical aesthetics concerning the relationship between the contemplation of beauty, and the various desires and interests (in pleasure, usefulness, etc.) which comprise human experience. The view of the experience of beautiful beings, and of the search for the principle which makes beings beautiful, which is presented in the Hippias Major, shows us that the beautiful is part and parcel of the whole web of experiences and desires which constitute human life, and that it is not a unique mode of contemplation which isolates the self from human desire. In other words, I can call a being beautiful while at the same time be charmed by it or desire to possess it (for pleasure or utility). But the Hippias Major also shows us that noesis of the eidos of the beautiful requires a knowledge that transcends experience, that goes beyond appearances, and that is therefore a unique form of contemplation distinct from the desire for pleasure or interest in utility. It is, once again, the eros for the good—the necessary disposition for knowing the beautiful.

The interpretation of the Hippias Major advanced by this dissertation is that while the dialogue deals with the noesis of the beautiful itself, it also models the search for this noesis, and this model is philosophical eros. The Hippias Major is not, then, a dialogue which makes a theme of eros—as does the Symposium and to a certain extent, the Phaedrus. It is, instead, a dialogue which in presenting the philosophical search for the eidos in dramatic fashion allows us to see the erotic structure of that search, and also to see why the erotic structure is indispensable specifically for the search for the beautiful itself. In showing the intricate relationship between
noesis and eros, the *Hippias Major* can serve as a starting point for further reflection on the deep relationship between these two themes in other dialogues in the Platonic corpus.
Bibliography

Primary Text

Translations consulted


Secondary Texts


--------. *Poetics*. Translated by Seth Benardete and Michael Davis. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002.


--------. “‘Only in the Contemplation of Beauty is Life Worth Living’ Plato, *Symposium* 211d.”


http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/1992/03.05.11.html#NT1.


Thesleff, H. “The Date of the Pseudo-Platonic Hippias Major.” Arctos 10 (1976): 105-17.


