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PLATO JOURNAL

Société Platonicienne
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Imprensa da
Universidade
de Coimbra

Coimbra
University
Press

Scaling the Ladder. Why the Final Step of the Lover's Ascent is a Generalizing Step

Anthony Hooper

The University of Sydney

anthony.hooper@sydney.edu.au

ABSTRACT

The 'Scala Amoris' (210a-212b), or 'Ladder of Love', constitutes the philosophical and aesthetic centrepiece of Socrates' *encomium* of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*. Here Diotima describes how a lover ascending up the Ladder directs his erotic attention to a number of difference kinds of beautiful objects, first bodies, then souls, just institutions and knowledge, until he catches a glimpse of Beauty itself. In this paper I advance an 'inclusive' reading of the lover's ascent – to use Price's 1991 terminology – with a particular emphasis on justifying such a reading concerning the final step.

Keywords : Plato, *Symposium*, *Scala Amoris*, Beauty.

http://dx.doi.org/10.14195/2183-4105_15_6

I

The ‘*Scala Amoris*’ (210a-212b), or ‘Ladder of Love’, is the concluding image of Socrates’ *encomium* of Eros in the *Symposium*.¹ Here Diotima describes how a lover ascending up the Ladder directs his erotic attention to a number of different kinds of beautiful objects: first bodies, then souls, just institutions, and knowledge, until finally, after looking on ‘a sea of beauty’, he catches a glimpse of Beauty itself.² This passage constitutes the philosophical and aesthetic centrepiece of Socrates’ speech, and has been the subject of no small amount of analysis, particularly since the turn of the century. One of the perennial points of interest for scholars concerns whether the lover’s ascent of the Ladder should be read ‘inclusively’ or ‘exclusively’ — to use the language coined by Moravcsik 1972. According to the inclusive reading, the lover, in his ascent, incorporates an increasing number of kinds of beautiful objects into his sphere of erotic concern, while on an exclusive reading the lover is understood as turning away from the previous objects of his erotic attention, as he identifies ever more valuable beautiful objects as he climbs the Ladder.

Following the prevalence of exclusive readings in the last quarter of the twentieth century,³ more recent scholarship has settled on the position that the lover’s ascent ought to be read inclusively.⁴ However, most scholars have simply posited an inclusive reading without providing an adequate justification for their view. In this paper I give a theoretical grounding for an inclusive reading of the *Scala Amoris* passage.

My analysis falls into two parts. First, I consider the lover’s ascent from the first step, in which he loves only a single beautiful body, through to the penultimate step of the ascent, in which he looks upon a ‘sea of beautiful objects’.

Here I offer a firm foundation for an inclusive reading of these steps through examination of the key terms, ‘καταφρονήσαντα’ (210b5-6) and ‘σμικρόν’ (210b6, c5). With this conclusion in mind, I then focus particularly on the final step of the ascent, in which the lover catches a glimpse of Beauty itself — the step that will be of primary concern in this paper. For the examination of this step I draw on a distinction between ‘transcategorical steps’ and ‘generalizing steps’, and justify an inclusive reading of the final step of the ascent by arguing, against the general consensus in the literature, that the final step is a generalizing step.

II

In order to justify an inclusive reading of the *Scala Amoris* passage as a whole it is first necessary to demonstrate the inclusivity of the lover’s erotic attention in the initial stages of the lover’s ascent, in those steps that precede the lover catching a glimpse of Beauty itself. This will in turn provide important support for an inclusive reading of the last step, in which the lover catches a glimpse of Beauty itself.

Given the divide in the literature between inclusive and exclusive readings of these stages of the lover’s ascent, it is not surprising that there are various elements of the passage that, *prima facie*, support both readings. On the one hand, indicative of an inclusive reading is Diotima’s claim that, having proceeded through a love of first bodies, then souls, just institutions, and knowledge, the lover is described as gazing at ‘a sea of beauty’ [πελαγός ... τοῦ καλοῦ] (210d4). This description seems to suggest that the lover has not at this stage turned away from all kinds of beautiful objects besides knowledge, but rather that all together are objects of his shared erotic attention. On the other

hand, support for an exclusive reading is often located in Diotima's description of two earlier stages in the lover's ascent. The first concerns the lover's reaction to his pursuit of a single beautiful body after he has come to recognise that this kind of beauty is shared by all bodies (210b4-6), and the second concerns the lover's assessment of the value of beautiful bodies after he has become a lover of souls (210c3-6). Moravcsik 1972, 288-89 describes these two steps as 'disdaining steps', because they appear to involve the lover spurning the previous objects of his erotic concern once a new kind of beauty has caught his attention.

Such is the dilemma upon a *prima facie* reading of the dialogue. However, I argue that the passages cited in support of an exclusive reading, upon close examination, give us no reason to attribute an exclusive interpretation of this passage. Let us consider the two texts now:

210b4-6: τοῦτο δ' ἐννοήσαντα καταστήναι πάντων τῶν καλῶν σωμάτων ἐραστήν, ἐνὸς δὲ τὸ σφόδρα τοῦτο χαλάσαι καταφρονήσαντα καὶ μικρὸν ἡγησάμενον·

210c3-6: ἵνα ἀναγκασθῆ αὐτὸν θεάσασθαι τὸ ἐν τοῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασι καὶ τοῖς νόμοις καλὸν καὶ τοῦτ' ἰδεῖν ὅτι πᾶν αὐτὸ αὐτῷ συγγενές ἐστιν, ἵνα τὸ περὶ τὸ σῶμα καλὸν μικρὸν τι ἡγήσῃται εἶναι·

Usually these texts are translated in a way that favours an exclusive reading. For example, in the Cooper edition, Woodruff and Nehamas have:

210b4-6: When he grasps this, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and he must think that this wild gaping after just one body is a small thing and *despise it*.

210c3-6: The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all of this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the beauty of bodies is *a thing of no importance*.

This translation presents an exclusive reading of the lover's ascent. In the translation of the first text the lover is said to 'despise' the previous objects of his erotic attention, suggesting that the lover comes to despise all of the previous objects of his erotic attention once he has ascended to a higher point on the Ladder. So also the lover of souls will despise his previous pursuit of bodies, and the lover of laws will despise the pursuit of souls, etc. The translation of the second text seems to give us some indication of why the lover's reactions are so strong. Once the lover has seen the value of beautiful laws, he comes to recognise the beauty of bodies to be a thing of 'no importance'. Again, this suggests that the lover has similar reactions to the previous objects of his erotic concern as he moves up the Ladder.

Examination of the Greek, however, casts doubt over this interpretation. In the first text, in which the lover is said to believe (ἡγησάμενον) that the lover of a single beautiful body is μικρὸν, the term that has been translated as 'a small thing'. In the second text, however, where Diotima states that the lover is said to believe (ἡγήσῃται) the beauty of bodies is μικρὸν, it has been translated as 'a thing of no importance'. In this instance Nehamas and Woodruff's translation is too strong for the term. Given the similarity of language in the two texts the only accurate translation of μικρὸν in the second text would be 'a small thing'.

Nehamas and Woodruff's translation of the participle 'καταφρονήσαντα' is also problematic. The term here has been translated as

'despise', and although this is an accepted sense of this term, it also has the weaker sense of 'think slightly of'. In order to determine which translation is the most suitable, it will be necessary to consider the strong (s) and weak (w) versions and see which is more coherent:

210b_s: he must think this wild gaping after just one body a small thing [σ μικρόν] and *despise it*.

201b_w: he must think this wild gaping after just one body a small thing [σ μικρόν] and *think slightly of it*.

Two issues are relevant here. First, the fact that Diotima uses the term 'σ μικρόν' rather than 'φάυλον' or 'ἀχρείον', or a phrase like 'οὐδέν εἶναι' gives us some insight here. In 210b_w the adjective 'σ μικρόν' and the participle reinforce each other's meaning in the sentence, as here the lover 'thinks slightly of' the love of that which has only 'slight' value. In 210b_s, by contrast, the meaning of the participle seems to conflict with 'σ μικρόν', as it would be odd to go so far as to *despise* the love of something that has some value, even though it is only slight. Second, the weaker translation is consistent with the only other evidence of significance concerning the question of the inclusivity of this passage, the claim that the lover, at the penultimate step in his ascent, gazes upon a 'great sea of beauty'. Given these two points, I believe that the weaker sense of 'καταφρονήσαντα' is more appropriate here.⁵

Taking these points into consideration we can now revise the translations as follows:

210b4-6: When he grasps this, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and he must think that this wild gaping after just one body is a small thing and *think slightly of it*.

210c3-6: The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all of this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the beauty of bodies is a *small thing*.

With these amendments the interpretation of the passage has changed. In the first text the lover does not despise his previous love of one beautiful body, as if he were wholly misguided in his erotic attachment to this object, although he does think slightly of lavishing so much attention on a single body now that he has come to appreciate that the beauty of all bodies is akin. And in the second text the lover of laws does still recognise some amount of value in the beauty of bodies, although he clearly now believes physical beauty to be slight in comparison with the beauty of objects such as laws and, presumably, souls.

A conservative approach to these texts, then, points to an inclusive reading, in which the lover continually incorporates new objects into his sphere of concern. As the lover moves up the Ladder, he does not go from being a lover of bodies to a lover exclusively of souls, and so on, shunning those objects he once valued so highly. Instead, the lover's ascent is one in which the lover recognises the beauty of an ever-increasing number of beautiful objects.

There is, however, an important caveat here. As he ascends the value that the lover attributes to a certain object does not remain constant, but changes as he moves from one rung to the next. At 210b4-6 we see that the object that once exhausted the lover's understanding of what is beautiful now shares a place with many other beautiful bodies, and at 210c3-6 we learn that, by the time the lover has recognised the beauty of laws, beautiful bodies have been relegated to a more peripheral place in his sphere of erotic

concern. That the lover values the beauty of laws over that of bodies is undoubtable, but that this does not preclude the lover from valuing both simultaneously should be appreciated.

The lover's ascent up the Ladder through these steps is one in which his understanding of what is beautiful continually grows, until he appreciates the beauty of a variety of different kinds of objects. This is the strongest reading that provides a consistent account of the relevant claims in the passage. It accounts both for Diotima's description of the early stages of the lover's ascent, and his claim that the lover, at the penultimate step of the Ladder, gazes on a 'sea of beauty'. In order to understand this image fully it will be necessary to consider the last step of the ascent, in which the lover comes to glimpse Beauty itself.

III

At the end of the previous section we left the lover near the top of the Ladder, gazing at a whole sea of beautiful objects. But there is still one last step the lover must take before he reaches the highest rung of the Ladder of Love: he must catch a glimpse of Beauty itself. Although Diotima spends more time detailing the lover's vision and activities at this stage in his ascent than all other stages put together (210e3-210a10), his description here is in many ways more obscure than at any other point in the *Scala Amoris* passage. This obscurity poses certain difficulties for justifying an inclusive reading of this final vision. At no point does Diotima explicitly describe the nature of the lover's interest (if any) in the previous objects of his erotic concern once he is in the presence of Beauty itself, and certain assertions he makes, *prima facie*, seem to recommend an exclusive reading of this step. First, the only mention that

Diotima makes of the previous objects of the lover's erotic interest is by way of contrasting their nature to that of Beauty itself (211a6-8). Second, Diotima suggests that here the lover is engaged in a very different epistemological activity than at previous stages in his ascent. Where the lover engages with objects on lower rungs of the Ladder through the senses, Diotima states that one grasps Beauty by a very different means, by which he appears to mean the mind (211a3-5). Third, Diotima describes Beauty as the '*telos*' of the lover's ascent (211b9), and suggests that the lover's progress in previous stages of the Ladder has all been 'for the sake of Beauty' (ἐνεκα τοῦ καλοῦ, 211c2). And finally, she tells us that it is best to live in the presence of Beauty, as only here can we produce true virtue, rather than the mere images of virtue produced at previous rungs of the Ladder (212a3-10). Together, these assertions seem to suggest that, at the top of the Ladder, the lover has turned away from the sensory objects that once held his erotic attention in order to embrace an existence of mental contemplation of Beauty itself. From these descriptions, Beauty seems to loom like a monolith, unchanging and eternal, above the turbulent and undulating sea of beautiful objects below.

Given these issues many scholars who are proponents of an inclusive reading of all previous stages of the lover's ascent argue that this last step must be understood as exclusive.⁶ But given the conclusion of the last section we have reason to doubt this position. As on the lower rungs of the Ladder, Diotima's description of Beauty itself does not necessarily exclude a continued appreciation of the many beautiful things. A number of contemporary scholars take this view, however more often than not they simply assert this view, rather than offer a systematic justification.⁷ In what follows I will offer a firmer grounding for an inclusive read-

ing. In order to do this I wish to focus on an underlying assumption of exclusive readings, that being that this last step should be understood as a 'transcategorical step'. By contrast, I offer the view that this last step should be understood as a 'generalising step', and this distinction will be the present subject of analysis.

Moravcsik 1972 was the first scholar to suggest that the lover's ascent is composed of a number of qualitatively different kinds of steps — a position which has been the subject of some subtle adaptation, but which has been broadly accepted in the literature.⁸ The two categories of steps that will be most relevant for our discussion are 'transcategorical steps' and 'generalising steps'. A transcategorical step is one in which the lover identifies a new category of beautiful objects in his ascent. For Moravcsik, Diotima employs a number of such steps in the lover's ascent, including when he turns from bodies to souls, from souls to laws and activities, and from laws and activities to knowledge. A generalising step, by contrast, is one in which the lover, rather than recognising a new kind of beautiful object, learns something new about those objects already within his sphere of erotic concern. Generalising steps are explicitly described at two points in the passage:

210a8-b1: then he should realise that the beauty of any one body is brother [ἀδελφόν] to that of any other.

210c3-5: The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and see that all this is akin [συγγενές] to itself.

As the key terms here indicate, central to both of these steps is the recognition of family resemblances between objects within certain classes of beauty. In the first quote the lover

learns that the beauty of one body is akin to that of any other body; and the same is true in the second quote for beautiful laws. What appears to be going on here is that, at each of these points, the lover learns that the reason why one object within each of these classes is beautiful is the same as why any object within that class is beautiful. To clarify this idea let us take the example of beautiful bodies. In a generalising step the lover comes to appreciate that there are not several different, unrelated sources of physical beauty, as there might be if there were many different archetypes of physical attractiveness — for example, a principle which captures the beauty of lithe bodies as opposed to another discrete principle which captures muscular bodies. Instead, what he learns is that all physical beauty originates from its relationship to a single principle. To recognise that all beautiful bodies are akin, then, is to understand that all physical beauty is accounted for by reference to a single *logos*. Given the repetition of this description, it is reasonable to assume that a similar recognition occurs within every kind of beautiful object that the lover encounters before he comes to gaze on a whole sea of beauty. As he ascends the lover recognises that the beauty of all bodies, the beauty of all souls, and so on, is unified, and that the objects that manifest each kind of beauty are related through reference each to their own single principle.

Three points should be noted here. First, these quotes indicate that, by the time that the lover gazes on a sea of beauty, he is able to recognise the unity of beauty *within* particular categories of objects, but nothing is said about the lover's ability to recognise positive — as opposed to comparative — relationships *between* categories of objects. So although at this point the lover is able to recognise that all beautiful bodies are akin, and that all beautiful souls are

akin, we are given no indication that he thinks at this point, for example, that the beauty of all bodies is akin to that of souls. Second, from these excerpts it is clear that Diotima suggests that, in recognising that the beauty of bodies, or the beauty of knowledge, is unified, the lover is making important, positive developments in his ascent. And third, even though the beauty of all objects of a particular category is akin, this does not mean that all beautiful objects within this category are equally beautiful. For example, Alicia's body may be more beautiful than Alan's as, despite the fact that the beauty they manifest is akin, Alicia manifests this beauty more completely than Alan.

We can now return to the issue of how to understand the last step up the Ladder. In the literature, it is nearly universally accepted — or at least assumed — that the last step is a transcategorical step. On this view, the last step up the Ladder is one in which the lover comes to appreciate the beauty of one final, ontologically distinct object. *Prima facie* this is a natural reading of this last step, as in Diotima's description of the lover's final vision he seem to present Beauty itself as a new object, and, moreover, one entirely distinct from all other beautiful objects. Diotima describes it as supremely beautiful in all respects at all times, and in the familiar Platonic description of the Forms as 'itself by itself' (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτό, 211b1-2).

If the last step up the Ladder is a transcategorical step, the attempt to show that it is also inclusive becomes highly problematic. If Beauty is another objects, and it alone is necessary and sufficient for producing virtue, it is difficult to see why the lover would concern himself with the previous objects of his erotic attention, even if we admit that the do possess some slight value in relation to Beauty itself. If, however, the last step is not a transcategorical one, but a

generalizing step, such difficulties are obviated, as Beauty itself would be understood as nothing more than the beauty that is manifest in all of the beautiful objects the lover has previously encountered. In order to advance such a reading I first detail the nature of the lover's final step as understood as a generalizing one, detail more fully which this justifies an inclusive reading of this passage, and finally provide a justification for this position.

As outlined above, generalizing steps are common in the lover's ascent, as for every category of object that the lover draws into his sphere of concern, he comes to appreciate the unity of beauty within that category. To catch a glimpse of Beauty itself is a generalizing step of a special sort, I suggest, because it involves the recognition of the unity of beauty between those various categories of beautiful objects. To clarify, in this last step the lover gives up on the idea that all various kinds of beautiful objects that he has encountered in his ascent — bodies, souls, laws, and knowledge — derive their beauty from different sources, as if one thing makes bodies beautiful, and another things makes souls beautiful (and so on). What he realizes in this final moment is that the beauty that each of these objects share is one and the same thing. In the last step up the Ladder, then, the lover does not come to recognize a new kind of objects. Instead, he comes to comprehend a hitherto unacknowledged relationship between all of the various beautiful objects that he has already encountered in his ascent. He appreciates that all these instances of beauty can be accounted for by a single *logos*, and so he recognizes how each object possesses beauty, and so the full extent of their relationship to each other. At the top of the Ladder the lover possesses an account of beauty that leaves out no instance of beauty, and includes nothing that is not beautiful.

An important implication of this reading concerns what Moravcsik has identified as transcategorical steps in the *Scala Amoris* passage, such as when the lover moves from loving beautiful bodies to beautiful souls, or beautiful souls to beautiful laws, etc. Initially, the lover will recognize these as transcategorical steps, as in the lower stages of his ascent he identifies each kind of beauty as wholly different in kind. However, in interpreting the final step up the Ladder as a generalizing step, it follows that in recognizing Beauty the lover has come to appreciate that this divided categorization of beautiful objects was mistaken. That is, the lover appreciates that he has not recognized a number of different kinds of beauty, but rather a variety of objects each of which possess the same attribute: Beauty. So although these movements may be transcategorical for other purposes of comparison — such as between sensible and super-sensible objects, in the case of bodies and souls respectively — in regards to their beauty, the lover comes to recognize that they are all to be grouped within the same category of Beauty.

Interpreting the last step up the Ladder as a generalising step constitutes a significant departure from the accepted view in the literature. However, I believe that there is evidence in the passage to support this interpretation. The most important evidence concerns the lover's activity on the penultimate rung of the Ladder. In analysing this step it is immediately striking that the lover does not move directly from being a lover of knowledge to a lover of Beauty, but that, between these stages, there is a step in which the lover gazes on a whole sea of beautiful objects. According to Diotima, the lover's primary activity at this stage is the generation of "many gloriously beautiful ideas [καλὸς λόγους] and theories [διανοήματα], in unstinting love of wisdom" (210d5-6).

The generation of *logoi* is an important feature of the *Scala Amoris* passage, and the significance of these speeches and accounts in the lover's ascent has been increasingly recognised in the literature.⁹ In addition to the excerpt quoted above, the generation of *logoi* is also mentioned at two other places in the passage:

210a6-b2: First, if the leader leads aright, he should love one body and beget beautiful ideas [λόγους καλοὺς] there; then he should realise that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other and that if he is to pursue beauty of form he'd be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same.

210b6-c5: After this he must think that the beauty of people's souls is more valuable than the beauty of their bodies, so that if someone is descent in the soul, even though he is scarcely blooming in his body, our lover must be content to love and care for him and seek to give birth to such ideas [λόγους τοιοῦτους] as will make the young man better. The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all this is akin to itself.

Although the generation of *logoi* is only described explicitly at these three points, the repetition of language again leads one to believe that the lover produces these speeches throughout his ascent, as does the assertion Diotima makes in the discussion immediately preceding the *Scala Amoris* passage, in which he declares that the best lovers will 'teem with ideas' [εὐπορεῖ λόγων] in the presence of young men (209b8).

It is initially difficult to discern the content of these *logoi*. From the excerpts quoted above we at least know that they are i) beautiful and ii) that they make young men better. Looking slightly further afield in the *Symposium* helps us refine our understanding slightly. Given Socrates' reaction to Agathon's speech, which he criticizes as being pleasantly adorned but entirely empty in content (198b1-199b5), the *logoi* the lover generates in his ascent cannot be merely pretty pieces of oratory, beautiful in form alone; instead, they must be beautiful in content. But here still we are not much wiser. Perhaps the greatest insight we gain into the content of these *logoi* is found in the passage that immediately proceeds the *Scala Amoris* passage, where Diotima states that a true lover, in the presence of beauty, will 'teem with ideas concerning virtue' (εὐπορεῖ λόγων περὶ ἀρετῆς, 209b10).

Given this, we can conclude that at every rung of the Ladder the lover gives accounts and speeches to justify his attraction to those beautiful objects that he includes in his sphere of erotic concern. Because the lover of the *Scala Amoris* passage is not a lover of merely any variety, but one who loves 'correctly' (ὀρθῶς, 210a2), and in a manner in which Diotima doubts even a young Socrates could follow (210a1-4), we can assume that he is of a particularly systematic philosophical temperament. As such, it is doubtful that these speeches are merely trivial or flowery love songs; instead, it is much more likely that they are intelligently constructed accounts of what the lover understands as beautiful – although some beauty of form need not be absent from these. Taking the example of the lover of souls at 210b6-c5 quoted above, such a lover produces *logoi* in which he extols the supreme worth of the beauty of souls, while making some reference perhaps to

the comparatively slight beauty of bodies, of which he is still a lover.

The purpose of these *logoi* is more easily discerned, as in 210a6-b2 and 210b6-c5 the result is that the lover advances to a higher point on the Ladder. In the first instance the generation of *logoi* for one beautiful body leads the lover to appreciate that the beauty of all bodies is akin – a generalising step – and in the second the production of *logoi* concerning beautiful souls necessitates that the lover recognises the beauty of laws and activities – what are initially recognised as transcategorical steps – and thence that the beauty of these new objects is akin to each other – another generalising step. Given that the result of the giving of these *logoi* is the development of understanding, we can suppose with some confidence the following state of affairs: By putting forward arguments or by saying good and upright things according to his understanding of the beautiful the lover comes to recognise either: i) in the case of the apparent transcategorical steps, that his account of what is beautiful is not exhaustive of all instances of beauty, and so helping him to appreciate the beauty of new kinds of objects; or ii) in the case of generalising steps, the essential relationship in the beauty of objects that one already recognises as beautiful, and specifically that their beauty can be accounted for by appeal to a single principle.

Returning to the issue of the penultimate step of the lover's ascent, it is important to note that the lover's production of *logoi* is similarly efficacious. As a result of generating *logoi* at this step he catches a glimpse of Beauty itself (210e2-211b5). But still pressing is whether the production of these *logoi* results in a transcategorical step or a generalising step. The evidence in this passage indicates the latter. At this rung of the Ladder Diotima's description of the lover 'gazing upon' a 'sea of beauty' indicates that

he is looking back on the myriad of beautiful objects that he has already encountered through his ascent, grouping them together into a continuum — albeit a rather formless one at this stage. This suggests that the lover is reflecting on the relationship between these various kinds of beautiful objects, and that in these *logoi* the lover attempts to account for how they all relate to one another — activities that, as we have seen, are central to generalising steps. The result is that the lover glimpses Beauty itself; that is, he comes to recognise that the beauty that is present in all objects is one and the same, regardless of what kind they are. In doing so the lover comes to understand this sea of beautiful objects, not as a series of discrete waves, each representing a different beautiful object or kind of beauty, but as part of a unified mass of beauty, that is shaped in accordance with Beauty itself.

In understanding the last step up the Ladder in this way, we now have a firm theoretical basis for advancing an inclusive reading of this last step. In order to demonstrate why this is the case it is first necessary to note the difference between the 'object' and the 'ground' of a desire. The object of a desire is the particular entity towards which the desire is intentionally directed, and the ground of a desire concerns the reason why the object is desired. Taking the lover's desire at the first rung of the Ladder as an example, the object of the lover's eros is a single body, while the ground of his eros is the beauty of this body. That is, the lover is erotically attracted to this body on account of its beauty. As he ascends the lover incorporates an increasing variety of objects into his sphere of concern, but for all of these objects the ground of his eros remains the same: he loves them all because they are beautiful. But in the initial stages of his ascent the ground of his eros does not appear to him to be single but manifold.

Upon making an apparent transcategorical step the lover posits a different principle of beauty for each object in this category — so one for this body and another for that body, and so on. And even after generalising steps on the lower rungs he posits a discrete ground for his desire for each category of objects — one for bodies, another for souls, etc. His final revelation, however, is the recognition that the ground for his eros has always been the same, because all beautiful objects are beautiful because they each possess the attribute of Beauty.

In positing an exclusive reading of this last step commentators have confused the role of Beauty itself in the lover's eros. Beauty is not a new object of erotic desire; instead, it is the ground of the desire. In some ways this entails a genuine categorical shift in the lover's last step up the Ladder from recognition of the object of eros to the ground of eros. In this final step the real ground of the lover's erotic desire finally becomes the intentional objects of his understanding of his desire. From then on, the all beautiful objects pursued by the lover are pursued because the lover has his eros set on this ground. Far from turning away from the previous objects of his erotic concern upon catching a glimpse of Beauty, then, in this final step the lover recognizes that Beauty has been the ground of his erotic concern from the very beginning of his ascent. It is for this reason that Diotima offers the following description of Beauty itself:

one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end

at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful (211b7-d1).

At the end of his ascent the lover does not turn away from the beautiful objects that held his attention at lower rungs. Instead, it is more accurate to say that the lover attends to Beauty itself and the objects that share Beauty as a feature together, through different faculties. The lover recognizes Beauty in the myriad of beautiful objects that he has encountered, and he experiences Beauty through these objects. The objects themselves are captured through the senses, but the lover's understanding of the Beauty they all share — that on account of which they are beautiful — is grasped by the mind.

But given this reading how do we account for those parts of Diotima's description of the last step of the Ladder that seem to imply a transcategorical reading? This confusion derives from the fact that the distinction between transcategorical and generalizing steps cuts across two domains. The first is the ontological, and here it should be noted that Beauty itself is not in a distinct ontological category from the objects on the lower rungs of the Ladder because Beauty itself is not a distinct object, but rather a feature all these various beautiful objects share. Conceptually, however, there is a sense in which the last step is transcategorical. It is on this conceptual level that Diotima describes Beauty itself as αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτό. Because Beauty is the ground of the lover's eros, Beauty is conceived in an entirely different way to the objects of the lover's erotic attention. It alone is an object of the mind, by contrast to the various objects that have Beauty as a feature, which are objects of the senses. In the last step up the Ladder the lover sees the ground of his

desire as representing his intentional object. But even though Beauty isn't an 'object' in any normal sense, Diotima has depicted it in an object-like way.

There are two likely motivations for this move. First, the abstract theoretical discussion that would have been necessary to outline this procedure would have grated with the poetical tenor of his speech, and would have been inappropriate in the light-hearted context of Agathon's symposium. And second, it is probable that, even if Socrates offered such a theoretical discussion, his audience would not have been able to comprehend it. At the beginning of the passage Diotima suggests that a proper understanding of this revelation is beyond a young Socrates; a figure who is still far more philosophical in his persuasion than any of the guests at Agathon's celebration. Given this, it is understandable that Diotima does not fully differentiate the ontological and conceptual ambiguity of his description. However, with evidence concerning the production of *logoi* at the previous rung of the Ladder, however, and the addition of phrases like 'what it is to be beautiful', an attentive audience has sufficient evidence to determine the true nature of this last step.

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NOTES

1 All quotes from Plato's dialogues in this paper are from their respective translations in Cooper's *Plato: Complete Works* 1997 unless otherwise noted.

2 Although it does not have a substantial impact on the line of argument in this article, I will note that I reject the idea that Socrates serves as a 'mouthpiece' for Plato, or Diotima for Socrates, in the sense that the former of either pair represent the philosophical positions and methods of the latter. As a result, I refer to Plato only in reference to those matters that concern the construction of the dialogue. The various claims of Socrates and Diotima will be attributed to these figures in turn.

3 See particularly Cornford 1972, Moravcsik 1972, Nussbaum 1994, and Bloom 2001. Note that in a later publication, *Plato and Platonism* 2000, 112, Moravcsik revises his view and advances an inclusive reading of the lover's ascent. Note also that there were some prominent proponents of an inclusive reading in this period, including Kahn 1987, Nye 1990, and Allen 1991.

4 See particularly Corrigan & Glazon-Corrigan 2004, Sheffield 2006, Kraut 2008, and Reeve 2009.

5 In this conclusion I am in the minority, as the majority of translators use the stronger sense of 'καταφρονήσαντα' – see especially Benardete & Bloom 2001, 'in contempt', Howatson & Sheffield 2008, 'despising', Jowett 2001, 'despise', and Lamb 1925, 'contemning'; however, Allen 1991 and Price 1991, 44 do opt for a weaker sense of the participle, and translate it as 'looking down'.

6 See particularly Santas 1988, Nussbaum 2001, and Ferrari 2008.

7 See particularly Kahn 1987, Nye 1990, Allen 1991, Rowe 1998, Kraut 2008, and Reeve 2009.

8 In addition to the two categories of steps discussed here, Moravcsik also breaks down the lover's ascent into what he calls Emotive steps, Creative steps, and Reason steps. A similar project of breaking down the lover's ascent into a variety of steps is also undertaken by Price 1991, who adapts Moravcsik's schema in a number of ways.

9 See especially Kahn 1999, 270, Hunter 2004, 93, Sheffield 2006, 125, and Reeve 2009, 302.