CHAPTER 3

Creation

For Socrates, in the Symposium, eros is a type of desire, and desire is a type of need. For Levinas, in Totality and Infinity, desire is contrasted with need. Are their views of desire, then, completely different? No, I will argue in this chapter, they are not as different as they seem since Socrates invokes need for the same reason Levinas rejects it: in order to highlight human vulnerability to the other—for Socrates, to reject a decayed masculine ideal of self-sufficiency, for Levinas, to eliminate the return to the self predominant in Western philosophy. How, then, do their views of desire differ? After all, as Levinas rightly points out, Socrates rejects Aristophanes’s view that love reunites a split being, a view Levinas appropriately takes to imply that love is a return to the self (TI 254/232). Why, then, does Levinas nonetheless charge Socrates with an egoist understanding of love (TI 63/35)? One answer, I will argue, is found in the centrality, for Levinas, of a concept of creation (TI 63/35, 104/78, 292–94/268–70), a concept that, as Levinas claims, is lacking in Plato who, in the Timaeus, substitutes instead the demiurgic informing of matter (TI 63/35). Love and desire, for Levinas, are accomplished in fecund production, for example, the fecund production of a child who, though the father’s issue, is nonetheless absolutely other than the father—a creation ex nihilo, a true other (TI 63/35). The created other is, according to Levinas, absolute upsurge (TI 89/62) where the absoluteness of the upsurge indicates that the other’s coming to be is not the informing of matter or the development of potential, but the coming to be of something entirely new. Love, Levinas says, aims at the other, the stranger and not, as Socrates would have it, immortality (TI 63/35).

Levinas is not consistent, however, in contrasting his view of desire with Socrates’s. For though Levinas contrasts his creation ex nihilo or absolute upsurge with the informing of matter in the Timaeus, he also associates desire both with his absolute other and with Socrates’s good beyond being (TI 292/268; Rep. 6.509b6–10). For Socrates, the beautiful is a closely related transcategorial to the good beyond being, and the beautiful and the good
are the ultimate objects of love. If Socratic transcategorials are the same as Levinas’s good beyond being, then the Socratic and Levinasian views of desire do not really differ and Levinas’s critique of Socrates on love and desire collapses. If instead Levinas and Socrates have different ways of thinking of the good beyond being, as I will maintain, desire is different for them as well: for Socrates, desire is responsiveness to the forms of persons or things while for Levinas instead desire is an open responsiveness, a responsiveness to the singular beyond or before form. On my interpretation, then, though each philosopher highlights fundamental human vulnerability and responsiveness to the other, creation ex nihilo—absolute upsurge—distinguishes their views of love and desire.

In this chapter, I will show that Socrates invokes the concept of need for the same reason Levinas rejects it, namely, to highlight human vulnerability to the other (section 1); that their concepts of desire are, nonetheless, different owing to the presence or absence of a concept of creation ex nihilo (section 2); and that Levinas’s good beyond being is not the same as Socrates’s so that the outlined difference in their concepts of desire due to creation remains and points to two fundamental types of human vulnerability to the other (section 3).

1.

References to human vulnerability are legion in the Symposium, beginning with the dramatic date of the drinking party itself: 416 B.C.E., the year that Agathon put on his first tragedy. The dramatic background, as a result, is the Peloponnesian War during which a self-confident Athens overextended itself and fell. Even more, Socrates claims for himself a teacher who is a woman, Diotima, and, as a woman, hardly a symbol of heroic self-sufficiency, not to mention the fact that she identifies eros with pregnancy, a paradigm of being taken over by another. Diotima is from Mantinea, too, where in 418 B.C.E. the Athenians overestimated themselves and were defeated by the Spartans. And she teaches Socrates that love is not all-good or all-beautiful but in between, a peculiar combination of ability and vulnerability, power and need, poros and penia—a lot like Socrates himself, a powerful, magnetic figure sought out by the young for his wisdom though the only wisdom he claims is awareness of ignorance, and a lot like philosophy, too, which is not wisdom, according to Socrates, but the loving pursuit of it based on awareness of its lack. According to Diotima, “love is a philosopher” (204b4).

The critique of the male model of heroic self-sufficiency begins earlier in the dialogue in the frame dialogue between Apollodorus and his compan-
ion. The companion wonders about Apollodorus’s nickname, *the soft*, given how savage Apollodorus is in his attacks on those who spend their time in pursuits other than philosophy (*Sym. 173c2–d3*). Apollodorus is a comic image of Socrates, comic because he goes too far both in his savagery and, as his nickname suggests, his softness. The dramatic foreshadowing continues when Aristodemus and Socrates, in the next frame dialogue, are on their way to the party according to Socrates “to corrupt the proverb ‘to a good man’s feast the good go uninvited’” (*174b3–c4*). The superficial corruption is the pun on Agathon’s name, which means *good*—as if the proverb were to say “to Goodman’s feast the good go uninvited”—while the deeper corruption is a disagreement with the claim that the good go to the good, the beautiful to the beautiful. Instead, the soft or vulnerable, such as Menelaus, *the soft warrior*, go to the good, such as Agamemnon (*174c5–d1*). Clearly, the heroic model is under attack in this dialogue.

Soon, too, those present in the central dialogue, the dialogue that takes place at the symposium itself, are divided into those who are capable and those who are incapable—again foreshadowing the ability/vulnerability theme of the dialogue, though in this case, ability and vulnerability regarding drink, with Aristophanes, Pausanias, and Agathon on the side of those who are capable; Eryximachus, Aristodemus, and Phaedrus on the side of those who are incapable; and Socrates, not surprisingly, in the middle since he can go either way. The capacity to drink large quantities of wine is associated with madness and incapacity with soberness, leaving Socrates in the middle associated with what we might call sober madness. Socrates can drink or not. He is able and vulnerable, sober and mad, in his mind and out of it. It sounds like the son of Poros and Penia is Socrates and not, as Diotima claims later in the dialogue, Eros. That’s not surprising, though, since not only does Diotima describe eros as a philosopher, but Socrates identifies himself with eros when he says that the only subject he knows is “*ta érōtika,*” love matters or erotic things (*177d6–e3*). The *Symposium* is another dialogue in which Socrates is identified with a more than human figure—with Achilles in the *Apology*, for example, with Heracles in the *Republic*, and here in the *Symposium* with Eros.

Before considering the central dialogue’s series of speeches about love, what in general were the issues about the love in classical Athens? Homosexuality was not the issue, nor was the age of those involved in homosexual love (since youths had relationships with men at about the same age that girls were married). Instead, what was at issue was aggression (*hybris*) and insatiability. That Plato was concerned about the former is clear from the dramatic framing of the *Phaedrus*’s discussions of love in the context of the mythical rape of Oreithyia by Boreas (*Phdr. 229b4–5*). Insatiability comes up in the
Gorgias when Socrates caricatures Callicles’s view of the hedonistic good life as being like the life of the charadrios, a mythical bird that constantly eats and immediately excretes (Grg. 494b6–7). In the background of the Symposium, then, as in the background of the Phaedrus, is the Greek male concern with the idea of control—represented in Greek iconography by the heroic small penis. It is a concern with not overstepping the boundaries of others, as in rape, and with not allowing others—other things, such as food, drink, or sex, or other people—to overstep one’s own. Here again Socrates is a peculiar, and striking, middle figure. Aware of the problem of aggression, he nonetheless is comfortable with the idea that, in love, we’re out of our minds. In fact, according to Socrates, the greatest good things come to human beings by way of madness if that madness is divine (Phdr. 244a6–8). So there is divine and human, all-too-human, madness and moderation, the divine represented by love, philosophy, or Socrates and the human, all-too-human, by the comic figure of Apollodorus as well as various less savory figures such as Callicles, who pictures the good life as constant infl ow, or Lysias, who, in the Phaedrus, would seduce Phaedrus for sex through a lie about love, namely, that he is not in love with Phaedrus and that nonlove is better anyway since it is moderate, not mad.

At the drinking party, Phaedrus, a sober speaker, makes love, a great god, something useful. Great benefits would be derived from having a city or army composed of lovers and their youths since before their boyfriends lovers would be inspired toward virtue by shame and love of honor and would even die for their boyfriends’ sake. There is nothing better for a youth, Phaedrus maintains, than a “good lover” (Sym. 178c3–5). But Phaedrus’s language is the language of heroism, all about avoiding shame and being motivated by love of honor to do great deeds. He neglects love as vulnerability or a source of incompetence. In quoting Hesiod’s description of Eros, Phaedrus leaves out the description of Eros as the limb-loosener who weakens the mind in the breasts of human beings and gods (178b5–7). For Phaedrus, love is all about seriousness, virtue, and boldness and not at all about being soft or vulnerable. His example of vulnerability is Orpheus who, soft and lacking the boldness to die for the woman he loves, dies at the hands of women (179d2–e1).

Pausanias, a mad speaker and Agathon’s lover, is less sanguine about love. He does not think all of it is good and describes better and worse types, Uranian (heavenly) and Pandemian (popular). Uranian lovers are manly. They love only youths—stronger youths who have mind—and love them only after their mind has begun to form. Pandemian lovers, to the contrary, love both women and mindless youths. They care only about the sex act itself and, unlike Uranian lovers, leave the youths they have sex with rather than loving for
life (180c3–182a6). There is a queasiness in Pausanias’s feelings about love that is evident even when he argues for what he takes to be the better type of it. In attending to their youths, Pausanias maintains, lovers “are willing to perform slavish acts not even a slave would perform”—acts that would be seen as flattery and unfree if done to attain wealth, office, or power—and beloveds, too, are voluntarily slavish when they have sex with their lovers, though they are justified in engaging in those slavish acts if the acts are for the sake of virtue (183a2–c2). Pausanias’s association of love with slavery echoes tyrannical Meno’s refusal, in the *Meno*, to be governed even by the forms of things when he is thinking, as discussed in chapter 2. In the *Phaedrus*, Pausanian willing slavery foreshadows Socratic eros later in the dialogue as ability and vulnerability, power and need, *poros* and *penia* but differs since Pausanian love has an extrinsic aim—sex for the lover and virtue for the beloved. For Socrates instead, love’s vulnerability is for its own sake since it is vulnerability to the good or the beautiful itself—the good or beautiful the youth instantiates. For Socrates, service is not something shameful endured because it is for the sake of something else that is good. Instead, the service itself is something good.

Eryximachus, one of the sober speakers, is a doctor. An orderly technician, he’s puzzled by Heraclitus’s view that opposites are unified. If they are unified, they cannot be opposites. If things differ, they cannot agree. That, he says, would be “quite absurd” (*pollē alogia*) (187a6–8). But is he right? Love relationships suggest the opposite since often it is because two people differ that they are agreeable to one another. It seems it is the very tension—their very vulnerability to the other—that they crave. In addition, separation often brings us together. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder,” as we proverbially say. Perhaps then Heraclitus is right to say, presumably about all of reality, that “being brought apart (differing), it is brought together with itself (agrees); there is a back-stretched connection, as in the bow and lyre.”

Perhaps, as Heraclitus suggests, unity, at least for human beings, requires a certain tension and vulnerability, requires something brought apart that is brought together, as the unity of a bow results from the fact that, at one and the same time, the string pulls in and the bow pulls out.

Not so for sober Eryximachus whose idea of eros is of a great and wonderful god, found not just in love relationships but in all things, an all-powerful source of happiness. For Eryximachus—*Phaedrus’s* lover—all sciences are erotic sciences, and the better eros is an orderly eros that makes hostile elements come to love one another (186b2–188d3). Love, in other words, is harmony of elements that previously differed not of elements that currently do (187a8–c2). It is unity with no difference, tension, or vulnerability, whether in relationships or in medicine, music, astronomy, or other areas (186b2–188d3).
The drama of the dialogue suggests a different view of love. Eryximachus’s speech is preceded by Aristophanes’s hiccups (185c4–e5). Their rhythmical quality mimics the sex act and reminds us that human beings willingly engender its tension. Eryximachus’s suggestion that, to cure the hiccups, Aristophanes should tickle his nose and induce sneezing mimics the sex act, too, as well as all activities in which we induce tension in order to resolve it. Love, the dialogue suggests at this point, is not an orderly unity without tension and difference. Instead, in love we intentionally make ourselves vulnerable and tense in order to enjoy the tension’s resolution.

For Aristophanes, whose well-known speech follows, human beings are, to the contrary, a paradigm of vulnerability to the other. Previously, we were circle people, terrible in our strength and power, who thought great thoughts and tested the gods (190b5–6). We had two heads and necks, four arms, four legs, two sets of genitals, and we moved by rolling around with great force. Now, we are sick and need healing because the gods, frightened of our power and *hybris*, sliced us in half (190d6–7). Love draws our archaic nature back together and tries to make us one out of two. What lovers desire is to be fused together into one. Love, then, is the desire and pursuit of wholeness (192d2–193a1). For Aristophanes, eros is not a sign that human beings are manly, powerful, and invulnerable, as the first three speakers suggest, but a sign that human beings are wounded and need healing. His comic speech critiques the heroic ideal, which stresses human ability and downplays human need. It makes fun of manly pretensions and points to what we lack. Eros is a sign that we are missing part of ourselves, part of what it is to be complete, to be fulfilled, to be whole.

The fact that there are more speeches about love at this climactic point suggests some aspect of the critique of the heroic ideal of self-sufficiency may remain to be discussed. Agathon, the tragic playwright, provides the need for continuing the critique when, in his speech, he praises eros as most beautiful and best—beautiful because young, tender, and graceful; best because possessed of all the virtues. Eros is just, not violent, since people willingly serve it; moderate because stronger than all other desires and pleasures; courageous because Aphrodite defeated Ares; wise because eros makes every person a poet, creates all living beings, and brings renown to the varied craftsmen it teaches (195a5–197b9). Eros, Agathon says, is of beauty. There’s nothing ugly about it. And eros is the cause of peace, intimacy, goodwill, and more. Eros, in other words, is all-good.

Agathon’s vacuous tragic speech gets the most applause presumably because it is a tour de force, beautiful in poetic form. In content, it is similar to
the part of Phaedrus’s speech that makes eros fundamentally good. Socrates refutes Agathon in short order using wisdom he received from his female teacher, Diotima. Love, Socrates argues, is a species of desire, and desire a species of lack or need. If love is of what is beautiful, then love lacks what is beautiful and is not itself beautiful. Since beautiful things are good and love lacks beautiful things, love lacks what is good as well (200a2–e6). Socrates has learned well his lesson from Diotima—whom, presumably, he made up—that love involves vulnerability, lack, or need. As a young man, he, like Agathon, thought love was beautiful and good. Instead, love is not a god but a daimon, the son of Poros (resource) and Penia (need) (203c5–6). Human beings are not utter vulnerability, as Aristophanic comedy suggests, nor are they complete ability, as Agathon’s tragic poetry maintains. Instead, Socratic philosophy teaches, human beings are in between—as is awareness of ignorance. Ignorance makes us needy; awareness is the resource for overcoming our need. In Socratic eros, awareness of need becomes the resource to overcome it. In addition, eros is not a desire for wholeness. It is not a desire for one’s lost other half but for what is good. Socrates agrees with Aristophanes that eros is a sign of need or lack. But he disagrees that what is needed or lacking is a part of oneself. For Socrates, eros does not return to the self.

It does not return to the self even though, as Socrates learned from Diotima, eros is desire for immortality (207a3–4). For immortality according to her is found most of all in form as she suggests in remarking on the fact that a body remains even though all its material parts—hair, flesh, bones, and blood—pass away (207d4–e1). Similarly, the pregnant lover reproduces eternal form, for example, in a child who reproduces human form or, for another, in speeches about what makes a man good, speeches he shares with a youth he educates that are reflective of the beautiful itself—the form of the beautiful, which is eternal (208e1–209c7). Love begins as a desire to have what is good forever (206a11–12). Since that is not literally possible, love becomes the desire to generate and reproduce in someone beautiful (206e5). As such, it is a desire for immortality (207a3–4). Love is not, then, a desire for one’s missing half but is a vulnerability or need that results in generation and reproduction, realization and sharing, of eternal form. We begin by loving beautiful bodies, then beautiful souls, then beautiful practices, laws, and knowledge, and then beauty itself, the form of the beautiful—beauty in all its universality and of every type—and, as a result of our love, we generate and reproduce it. Socrates introduces need, then, to highlight human vulnerability and critique the heroic ideal of masculine self-sufficiency dominant in his time. In fact, the Symposium’s carefully crafted critique of self-sufficiency
culminates with Socrates’s speech, a speech portrayed as superior to Aristophanes’s in its turn away from the self to the beautiful and good, which are eternal.

Unlike Socrates, Levinas, in Totality and Infinity, argues that desire is not a type of need. In striking contrast, though, he does so to underline, not deny, fundamental human vulnerability to the other. As a result, the two philosophers’ views of desire are not as different as they seem since they share a common aim. Socrates underlines human vulnerability by rejecting heroic male self-sufficiency. Levinas, in a similar vein, does so by rejecting the return to the self that, according to him, dominates Western philosophy. Western philosophy, Levinas says, most often is ontology, “a reduction of the other to the same” (TI 43/13). Like Aristophanes and Socrates, Levinas rejects the idea of human invulnerability. Like Socrates and unlike Aristophanes, however, Levinas rejects the idea that love aims at fusion. “Man’s relationship with the other,” Levinas says, “is better as difference than as unity: sociality is better than fusion. The very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself, of coinciding into sameness. From an ethical perspective two have a better time than one [on s’amuse mieux à deux]!” (EI 188). Aristophanes’s mistake, he says, is thinking that love “can be reduced to . . . fundamental immanence, be divested of all transcendence, seek but a connatural being, a sister soul, present itself as incest. The myth Aristophanes tells in Plato’s Symposium, in which love reunites the two halves of one sole being, interprets the adventure as a return to self” (TI 254/232). Desire, for Levinas, is about the other, not about the self. The objective of desire’s movement is “the other, the Stranger.” Desire “is absolutely non-egoist” (TI 63/35).

For Levinas, desire is metaphysical and need ontological where ontology is comprehension of beings and metaphysics is respect for exteriority, that is, respect for the other as other (TI 42–43/13). Desire is not a species of need, he says, though it is customarily interpreted that way, interpreted to “be at the basis of desire” such that desire is thought to “characterize a being indigent and incomplete or fallen from its past grandeur” and to “coincide with the consciousness of what has been lost.” When understood as a type of need, desire is “essentially a nostalgia, a longing for return” (TI 33/3).

For Levinas, however, desire is not a longing for return and “does not rest on any prior kinship” (TI 33–34/3). It is not about the self—not about returning to it, nourishing it, or completing it: “The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it” (TI 34/4). The other deepens desire, or even hollows it out (le creuse). The other does not feed me: “The other metaphysically desired is not ‘other’ like the bread I
eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate” (TI 33/3). Ontology, for Levinas, promotes freedom, specifically “the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other” (TI 42/13). But I am not essentially defined by freedom. In metaphysics, the other critiques my freedom: metaphysics “discovers the dogmatism and naïve arbitrariness of its spontaneity, and calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology.” It “calls into question the exercise of the same” (TI 43/13).

In metaphysical desire, then, I am confronted by my vulnerability. The other, who cannot be integrated, who cannot be consumed by me or reduced to me, disrupts me, disrupts my sense of my self as all there is, a sense I achieve at the very same time that I achieve a self—an I, an egoism, a psychism—namely, in the atheist stage, as Levinas calls it, the stage in which I resist the totality of what is to form a self. Atheism, for Levinas, is separation. Resistance takes place through a process of taking in and feeding on what is outside myself while at the same time remaining distinct from that on which I feed (TI 112/84, 122/94). Atheism is accomplished, concretely, in a home, since a home, with its doors and windows, enables me to connect to what is outside while retreating to recollect and retain myself (TI 154/127, 156/129). In the atheist stage, I move from enjoyment, and sensibility broadly speaking, to perception to consciousness, that is, comprehension, representation, intentionality, or knowledge. In comprehension and representation, I dominate the other by capturing him or her in a concept, a concept that reduces the other and prevents me from seeing that other as other (TI 163–68/137–49).

But the other, like myself, resists the totality and cannot be fully integrated or reduced. The other contests me (TI 171/145), opposes me (TI 197/171), masters me (TI 176/146). The other breaks the ceiling of the totality, breaks totality’s closed circle (TI 171/146). For Levinas, as for Socrates and Aristophanes, desire is not a sign of heroic mastery but an indication of fundamental human vulnerability. And, as with Socrates, the vulnerability is not harmful since, to use Levinas’s term, the other as such is a marvel (TI 292/269). The other who disrupts me opens a new dimension (TI 171/146). The opposition is pacific (TI 197/171), the resistance nonviolent (TI 197/171), the opposition nonhostile (TI 171/146). The other is a master who does not conquer but teaches (TI 171/146). What the other teaches is his or her very otherness, sometimes referred to by Levinas as height (TI 171/146), sometimes as surplus (TI 97/70). The teaching of the critique of heroic or Western self-sufficiency is that there is a type of vulnerability, a type of openness, that does not leave me vulnerable to harm, but instead is positive—positive, though, in different ways for Socrates and for Levinas as we have seen in chapter 1 and will see again in this chapter though delineated in a different way (section 2).
Desire, according to Levinas, is accomplished in the face to face relation with the other and in fecundity. The face to face relation, the relation in which I relate to the other as other and the other relates to me as other, takes place in language—not in the content of language but in language’s function of direct address, not in the speaking about but in the speaking to, not in the said but in the saying, as Levinas says in *Otherwise Than Being*. Language, Levinas says, is “contact across a distance” (*TI* 172/147), where *distance* is metaphorical and suggests that I can never know or represent the other in his or her otherness, that the other’s otherness can never be a given for me. The personal other for Levinas is infinite where *infinite* means indefinite but in such a way as to be contrasted with the way in which the elemental world is indefinite and which Levinas designates with a Greek term for indefinite, *apeiron*. What is *apeiron*, such as a forest of which I only see a part or a sea all of whose elements I cannot perceive from my current position, can be disclosed. What is infinite, the other, cannot (*TI* 158–59/132, 192–93/166–67). The infinite can only be revealed, where revelation for Levinas is distinct from disclosure. The one who speaks is not disclosed. He or she is not placed in the light of another but, in articulating the world, is announced across what he or she presents (*TI* 65–66/37).

Fecundity, the second accomplishment of metaphysical desire, is a type of relation with the future that is “irreducible to the power over possibles” (*TI* 267/245). The biological sense of fecundity is the father’s production of the child but fecundity is broader than that (*TI* 247/225). Fecundity in general is found in relations between one person and another and between the I and itself (*TI* 306/283). In fecundity, we surmount the passivity to which our will is exposed. Our will is free—the possibility of its freedom is produced when, in the atheist stage, we resist the totality to form an egoism—but the will is immediately exposed and vulnerable. The work of the will can be taken or sold (*TI* 227/202–3). The will itself, because of its necessarily material manifestation, is subject to violence, and we are subject to death (*TI* 229/205, 224/199). This suffering and death are surmounted in fecundity (*TI* 236–40/213–17). Human existence, for Levinas, is not, as Heidegger avers, being toward death but is the *not yet* or a way of being against death (*TI* 224/199). We surmount our passivity and death in fecundity, in the production of inexhaustible youths. “Fecundity,” Levinas says, “continues history without producing old age.” In fecundity, he goes on, the I “meets with no trammels to the renewal of its substance” (*TI* 268/246). In this way, the I exists infinitely, since fecund desire produces another who desires: “Here the desire which in the first pages of this work we contrasted with need, the desire that is not a lack, the desire that is the independence of the separated being and its transcendence, is ac-
complished—not in being satisfied and in thus acknowledging that it was a need, but in transcending itself, in engendering desire” (*TI* 269/247)

2.

How, then, are Socrates’s and Levinas’s views of love and desire different? Each, as we have seen, rejects the idea that love is a return to the self: for Socrates, love is, first of all, a desire to have the good for oneself forever—but then it is the desire to generate and reproduce and, by doing so, to produce immortality; similarly, for Levinas, love in one respect is need—but in another is fecund desire and exists infinitely, beyond death (*TI* 254–55/232–33). Each sees love as a sign of human vulnerability, an example of the central other-directedness of human beings and of human subjectivity or soul. Each, then, in his understanding of love, is a philosopher of the other.

The difference is in what the generativity or fecundity is like. Here is a real difference between the two philosophers, not that one is a proponent of self-sufficiency or autonomy and the other of vulnerability or heteronomy, but that one sees immortality in the persistence of form while the other sees it in a series of creations ex nihilo. One draws a relation between immortality and the eternal while the other connects what is beyond death to the upsurge of something new. Levinas is wrong when he states that the way in which he differs with Socrates on love is that Socrates thinks immortality is the object of love while he, Levinas, thinks love’s aim is the other, the stranger: “love as analyzed by Plato does not coincide with what we have called Desire. Immortality is not the objective of the first movement of Desire, but the other, the Stranger” (*TI* 63/35). Instead, both philosophers believe love defeats death and, as we have seen, both believe love is, fundamentally, a directedness to something outside oneself. The difference in their views is, instead, the difference between the eternal and the new.

Levinas says “desire in its positivity” is “affirmed across the idea of creation *ex nihilo*” (*TI* 04/77–78; see also 63/35). By associating love and desire with creation ex nihilo, Levinas does not mean to refer to the creation of the universe and its contents in six days. Instead, he wants a “rigorous concept of creation” (*TI* 292/268–69) by which he means a philosophic idea that carries its own weight and is not grounded in appeal to religious text. The other in his or her singularity is a creation ex nihilo for Levinas because singularity is lack of determination (since determination implies generality) and production out of anything determinate (that is, out of anything whatsoever) would be production of something determinate. Creation ex nihilo is not the development of potential, not the realization of projected possibility: “This future is neither
the Aristotelian germ . . . nor the Heideggerian possibility” (TI 267/245). Instead, it is the production of something that is its own beginning.

How can that be? Creation ex nihilo is found, in the most concrete case, in the production by the father—or, dare we say, by the father and mother—of a child who in some way, nonetheless, is his or her own beginning: “the separated and created being is thereby not simply issued forth from the father, but is absolutely other than him” (TI 63/35); in fecundity, being is “produced not as the definitiveness of a totality but as an incessant recommencement” (TI 270/248). Every human being begins as a child who is immersed in the totality of what is and not clearly distinct from it due to an original inability to distinguish subject from object. Each one produces his or her self, ego, psyche, or singularity by resisting the totality: “The psychism constitutes an event in being” and “is already a way of being, resistance to the totality” (TI 154/24). The resisting is a resistance to all concept, all determination. In that respect, the self is not composed of or produced out of anything, but is instead a resistance to everything determinate. The resistance continues throughout life since the self, though essentially its contents, always remains distinct from them (TI 112/84, 122/94). This is Levinas's core metaphysical idea, of a self that constantly emerges in or offers a variety of forms while, at the same time, resisting the forms in which it emerges or which it offers, a self that is essentially in relation while, at the same time, absolving itself from the relations (TI 110/82).

Both in its biological meaning and in its extension to the relation of one person to another and of the I to itself, fecundity denotes a relation to another's future that is not a power: “The relation with such a future, irreducible to the power over possibles, we shall call fecundity” (TI 267/245). Fecundity, the very accomplishment of desire, is not heroic. Like Socrates, Levinas is a critic of the heroic masculine ideal, in his case perhaps best represented by aspects of Heidegger's philosophy, for example, resolute and authentic being toward death. The erotic relation involves “a characteristic reversal of the subjectivity issued from position, a reversion of the virile and heroic I” (TI 270/248). The erotic subject is initiation not initiative (TI 270/248).

Similarly, for Socrates, love is not heroic. In the Phaedrus, as we saw in chapter 1, the helmsman or governor of the soul, who is identified with reason (specifically with nous), falls on his back at the sight of the beloved and as a result loves him and serves him. The helmsman is knocked out by the sight of the youth and no longer in the things of himself (Phdr. 250a6–7). He even serves like a slave to his beloved (Phdr. 252a1–b1). The lover's nonheroic service to his beloved, though, is differently characterized than the relation to another that is not a power described by Levinas. The lover, according to
Socrates, at the sight of the beloved ascends to the place beyond the heavens up to the very forms themselves, a process Socrates calls recollection of those eternal forms, and then descends and, in the best cases, joins together with the beloved in philosophy, that is, in a sharing of the very eternal forms the sight of the beloved has spurred him to recollect. The lover and his beloved youth come together over an eternal third that they share in common (Phdr. 248d2–4, 252e11–253b1). Similarly in the Symposium, as we have seen, immortality is illustrated by Diotima’s example of matter that changes while form persists and is exemplified by the production of a child who shares human form and by the educative function of sharing with a youth speeches about what is good in the hopes that the youth will be affected by such conversations to become beautiful and good, that is, to share in those forms (Sym. 206c1–212a7).

For Levinas, to the contrary, the effect of fecundity is not to reproduce eternal form. Instead, fecundity involves relating to an other in such a way as to facilitate the arising of something that has not in any sense been before. The ability to relate in this way to the future is fecundity, and the way of relating is contraction—“contraction that leaves a place for the separated being” (TI 104/77). For Levinas, the fundamentally ethical way of relating is a contraction that enables the wholly other and his or her projects to be. Fecundity plays this role not just in erotic relations narrowly speaking but in all desire, since fecundity is the accomplishment of desire, and in our face to face relations to others and our relation to our self, since fecundity extends from the biological to both of these. Antiheroic reversion, initiation, and contraction play a role in all desire for Levinas, then, since all desire is a type of contraction in relation to an other that allows the other and his or her future projects—in their newness—to be. For Levinas, love and desire are generative vulnerability to what is fundamentally other or new.

3.

But Levinas is not consistent in contrasting his view of love and desire with Socrates’s. Though he contrasts his creation ex nihilo or absolute upsurge with the informing of matter in the Timaeus, he nonetheless identifies Socrates’s good beyond being in the Republic with his own metaphysical separation. If they were the same—that is, if Socrates’s good beyond being were the same as Levinas’s—the distinction between Socratic and Levinasian love and desire would collapse. If they were the same, Socratic eros would have to be for the new not for the eternal since the object of Socratic eros is the good (or the beautiful, a closely related transcategorial). But it is not for the new, as
Diotima’s example of the matter that changes while the form persists indicates. Socrates must mean something else, then, when he says that the good is beyond being.

There is more reason to think that Socratic transcategorials are different than Levinas’s good beyond being than just this textual argument. For one thing, if the object of desire for Socrates were the good beyond being in Levinas’s sense—that is, radical singularity—then we would expect Socratic virtues to be different than they are. We would expect Socrates to discuss virtues of the same general type as kindness, compassion, and faithfulness—virtues that go past knowledge of an individual’s characteristics and are directed instead to the singular individual him- or herself. Virtues of this type do not in fact play a central role in the Platonic corpus. Instead, the whole point of Socratic virtue seems to be to critique the heroic male ideal of power or force and replace it with knowledge—not with what is beyond or before knowledge, but with knowledge. A central argument for Socrates regarding virtue is that we all desire good and so virtue is not desire but knowledge or wisdom: we all desire what is good, Socrates argues, so if we do not pursue it, it must be that we do not know what it is (Meno 77b2–e2). Of course, Socrates’s goal is to replace the ideal of virile force with knowledge understood as wisdom, not merely with being intelligent or smart (as the suggested rejection, at Meno 88a6–b6, of the equation of virtue with eumathia demonstrates) so that someone could object that the idea that virtue is not simply knowledge but wisdom could be translated into the claim that virtue is the encounter with the other as singular. Justice, they might say in support of their objection, could be equated with wisdom in this sense. What, though, I want to reply, about moderation and courage? These seem to have nothing to do with singularity and more to do with awareness of what is appropriate or best. We perhaps are asking too much of Socrates if we ask both that he endeavor to eradicate an old ideal of virtue as power and replace it with virtue as knowledge or wisdom and, at the same time, that he introduce the ideal of response to human singularity. Moreover, if he had introduced that ideal, wouldn’t it be likely that Aristotle, his follower and great critic, would respond to such a crucial conceptual innovation? He does not respond to any such idea but instead responds to what he thinks is an overly intellectualist idea of virtue in Plato that he moderates by stressing the importance of emotional development. Virtue, for Aristotle, is not simply knowledge, as it is for Plato, but also requires suitable emotional development.

What, then, is the good beyond being according to Socrates? It comes up during a discussion in the Republic of the mathematical and eidetic or formal aspects of beings, aspects that are known, respectively, by discursive
creation

rationality (dianoia) and by rational intuition (nous) (511d2–5). As a result of this location in the dialogue, the strong suggestion is that the good beyond being is not a nonbeing but a hyperbeing or second-order being—beyond (epokeina), hyper, or second order because it is beyond the mathematical and the eidetic aspects of beings (as I have argued elsewhere), that is, beyond both what we might call the this and the what. Beings, in the Republic, are called originals to distinguish them from images. In images, such as the image of a tree on water, the mathematical and formal or eidetic aspects are very separate. In originals, such as a tree, they are more together. The good is responsible for their being together. The good is the togetherness of the this and the what, the mathematical and the eidetic, and, as such, we may call the good the fitting meaning the fit between a thing and its qualities or the conformity of a thing to its type.

That Socrates identifies the good with the fitting, or with related terms such as sufficient, proper, complete, or perfect, is indicated by numerous passages: in book 1 of the Republic, Socrates suggests that only if owed means fitting (prosekōn) is justice giving the owed to each (332c2); in book 4, that justice is doing one’s thing or doing the proper (to ta hautou prattein, oikeiotragia) (433b4, 434c8); in book 8, that the best for each is also what is most proper to it (oikeiotaton) (586e2); in the Gorgias, that moderation is doing the fitting (ta prosēkonta) concerning gods and people, that justice is doing the fitting concerning people, and piety doing the fitting concerning gods (507a7–b3); in the Philebus, that two signs of the good are the complete or perfect (teleon) and the sufficient (hikanon) (20d1–6). All these terms have to do with the fit of this to what, mathematical to eidetic, with complete and perfect indicating that something entirely fits while sufficient or proper are deficient cases of the complete or perfect: the sufficient just meets the mark, we could say, while the perfect meets it entirely.

The beautiful, for Socrates, would be another such second-order being or transcategorial (to use a somewhat Aristotelian term) but one that emphasizes another aspect of mathematico-eidetic beings than togetherness. Instead, the beautiful points not to the togetherness but to the separation of the mathematical and the eidetic, to the transcendence by a this of its what. In the case of a painting of a tree, the painting in one sense simply is shapes and colors on a surface, but those shapes and colors point beyond themselves. The beauty of something is beyond that something’s qualities, as the use of the term surpassing (294b2) in the Hippias Major, the dialogue on the beautiful, indicates. Since the Hippias Major has not been commented on as extensively as other Platonic dialogues such as the Republic, I will now give a detailed interpretation of it. The interpretation will show that the beautiful, for Plato, is
a transcategorical. In addition, I will return to discussion of the *Hippias Major* in chapter 7, where I will show how it contributes to a discussion of Plato’s views on human vulnerability.\(^{16}\)

In that dialogue, Hippias’s first definitions of the beautiful fail because they reduce beauty to a beautiful being (maiden) or to a beautiful quality (gold) rather than seeing that beauty is in and through the qualities of a being but beyond them (*Hipp. Maj.* 287e4, 289e3). So also in the case of every being—every original, to use the term from the *Republic*—form not only is together with thing but transcends it, as the generality or universality of form indicates. The beautiful for Socrates, then, indicates an aspect of the puzzling phenomenon of the relationship between *this* and *what*, between the mathematical and the eidetic, in all beings, with the good, as I have argued elsewhere, indicating their togetherness and the beautiful indicating their separation.

Consider the *Hippias Major* as a whole. The dialogue is full of *twos*. Socrates doubles himself. He talks to himself. The first Socrates, the one who talks the most to Hippias, seems to need the second Socrates, who is not fine or beautiful at all but trashy: “not refined (*kompas*) but trashy (*surphetos*), giving thought to nothing other than the truth” (288d4–5). At the end of the dialogue, Socrates indicates that he needed Hippias, as well, for what he learned in the discussion (304e6–7). What he learned is not on the surface clear, of course, since the dialogue is aporetic. It ends without an obvious answer to the question, what is the beautiful. Socrates does say, though, that he seems to himself to know, as a result of his conversation with Hippias, what the proverb means that says that fine or beautiful things are difficult: “For I seem to myself to know (*eidenai*) what the proverb means that says, ‘the beautiful things are difficult’” (304e7–9). Not surprisingly, the ending suggests that Socrates has gained some knowledge (he seems to himself to *know*) of ignorance (that beauty is difficult). So there is something difficult—dare we say permanently difficult?—about beauty, but there appears to be some knowledge, too. What exactly is the difficulty? What is the knowledge? And what is their connection to the twos that are found in the dialogue?

One way to approach the question is to ask what is the dialogue’s answer to the question, what is the beautiful. Despite the fact that the dialogue is aporetic, some answers are suggested. The dialogue, read in a zealous way, does provide some knowledge. As is often true in a Platonic aporetic dialogue, the mistakes in or halting parts of the argument suggest directions Socrates might have wanted to take, or directions of argument Plato is leaving for us to take. For example, one definition in the dialogue remains unrefuted, as commentators have pointed out.\(^{17}\) It is the definition of the beautiful as the
fitting (to prepon) (293e2–4). Gold is only beautiful when it is fitting, they conclude in the refutation of gold as the beautiful. So perhaps the beautiful is the fitting. The proposed definition runs aground, though, when Socrates asks Hippias whether the fitting is what makes something be or seem beautiful (293e11–294a2). Hippias’s answer is that it makes something seem beautiful. Hippias tends to focus on seeming, but if we follow his lead completely, the definition does not work. Whatever the beautiful may be, it must make that which it qualifies be beautiful not merely seem beautiful.

Hippias gives his answer, that the fitting is what makes something seem beautiful, because he is thinking of an external beauty that attaches to something and hides that something’s own lack of beauty. It is superficial beauty that hides something, not a beauty that qualifies something that still shows forth in and through the beauty. Still, there is something important about the discussion of this definition even though Socrates and Hippias leave it behind. Socrates—and the reader—learn something from it. It is important to note that the term I have translated here as fitting is not the term translated as fitting in the Republic, to prosēkon, but instead is to prepon, which can also mean the seemly. If we translate that way, then Hippias’s reluctance to go Socrates’s way is not surprising since the seemly can be something you attach to something else to hide what is not attractive or not appropriately exposed. A good suit on a homely man, for example, is seemly, as is a towel that hides one’s intimate parts (or, even, the phrase “intimate parts” itself).

We know early in the dialogue that Hippias is not averse to hiding things, that he is not an entirely honest, or at least frank, person. For example, he thinks he has surpassed his contemporaries and the ancients in power and wisdom (281d1), but confesses that he does not usually say so because he pays heed to the envy of the living and fears the wrath of the dead (282d6–8). For another example, early in the dialogue, we learn that though Hippias claims to teach virtue, when Spartans will not allow him to do that, he is satisfied instead to teach them what pleases them most, namely, stories about ancient things such as heroes and human beings who founded cities (285d3–5). The first of these two examples shows his deceptiveness; the second both his deceptiveness and, as Socrates implies, his lawlessness since to be lawful is not simply to do what is allowed but to do what is good (284e5–7). It is not surprising, then, that beauty for Hippias has to do with how things appear and is deceptive.

But Socrates in the end takes up Hippias’s idea that beauty has something to do with appearance. Is this what he needed Hippias for—to learn that beauty has something to do with appearance? We know that in the Phaedrus, Socrates refers to the beautiful as that which most appears, which shines
forth most or which most comes to light—\textit{ekphane\-n}estaton \textit{(Phdr. 250d7)}. What Socrates means there is that the beautiful is the one form that appears to everyone. Not everyone will see prudence or the good. But everyone sees the beauty of a beautiful youth or child or beloved. Maybe what Socrates needed from Hippias was a spur to think more about appearing and not as much about being. Can we square that idea with the rest of the dialogue?

We can if we consider the idea that the seemly is what makes things not just seem but be beautiful. Then beauty might in fact be appearance itself—or, to be more complete, the appearance of form. How would that work? At one point in the dialogue, Socrates apparently identifies the beautiful with the surpassing \textit{(tōi hyperechonti, 294b2)}. It is just an example, but as is not unusual in Plato, the example is more of a paradigm or parallel. Things are great by the surpassing, Socrates says, in giving a paradigm or parallel of how to answer regarding the beautiful. Just as the good is beyond being, so the beautiful is the surpassing. Just as the good is in the brightest or shiniest part of being \textit{(to phanotaton, Rep. 7.518c9)} so the beautiful is that which shines \textit{forth} most \textit{(ekphane\-n}estaton, \textit{Phdr. 250d7)}. Just as the good is the fitting \textit{(to prosē\-kon)}, so the beautiful is the seemly \textit{(to prepon)} (that is, the kind of fitting that specifically has to do with appearance). What is the difference? In the case of the good, Socrates is talking about what we might call \textit{realization}, an ontological change into form or whatness, whereas in the case of the beautiful he is talking not about realization but about shining forth or appearing to us, which is an epistemological change, or at least a change for a knower.

Both of these have to do with a two. In one case, one thing realizes another. In the other case, one thing discloses another or brings it to light. Hence it is not surprising, in retrospect anyway, that Socrates goes on to talk about the general idea that sometimes when there are two things, both together are something different than each is separately. In the ontological realm, when the head of the hammer is with the hammer’s handle, then the head can be a head rather than simply an interestingly shaped piece of metal. In the realm of beauty, when a patch of the color red is together with the more predominant grays, greens, and browns of the painting—Georgia O’Keefe’s \textit{Lake George Barns}, for example—the grays and greens are more vivid. They were there all along, but they show up more or stand out more. Without the red patch, the other colors do not stand out \textit{for us}. So as Socrates in the \textit{Theaetetus} and Aristotle in the \textit{Metaphysics} suggest regarding ontology that the whole is something different than a heap of parts \textit{(Tht. 201d8–206b12; Met. 1041b11–33)}, Socrates here suggests regarding appearance that when two are together, something else arises \textit{for us}. 
Once again, though, the example is left hanging. With the example of the surpassing, Socrates appears to push Hippias toward, or at least set things up to allow for, the idea that in beauty, both together are different than each is separately (300b6–8). If that is true of beauty, and I am arguing that Socrates thinks it is, Socrates likely was waiting to see if Hippias would agree. But Hippias is so far from agreeing that he does not even move in the general direction Socrates leaves open to him, namely, the direction of thinking that beauty has something to do with twos, that is, with something new that results when both of two things are together.

This, perhaps, though, is part of the point of the dialogue. The dialogue is frustrating because Hippias does not seem to get it—to get much of anything Socrates is saying. The dialogue, in other words, is not just aporetic, but frustratingly aporetic. Does Hippias resist? Or does he just not get it? We can compare Hippias to other interlocutors, such as Theaetetus or Meno. Theaetetus is refuted again and again, but keeps coming back with suggested alternative answers. Meno, to the contrary, resists many (though not all) of the refutations Socrates makes. His resistance appears in the form of an attack on Socrates (as like an ugly stingray that immobilizes what it contacts) or, in some cases, his willfully changing the subject, bossing Socrates around by pushing him to consider something other than Meno's answer. Give me another answer about color, he orders when Socrates has defined shape. Can you teach me that learning is recollection? he asks, when Socrates has just argued that there is no teaching but only recollecting.

Hippias is not like either of them. Unlike zealous Theaetetus, he does not really push to find another answer that responds to Socrates's criticisms. He gives definitions, but they do not really respond to Socrates's objections. What is important, though, is how his definitions fall short. When Socrates's coarse double asks Hippias the first time to define the beautiful and makes it clear that he does not want the answer to the question what is beautiful but what is beautiful, Hippias responds in such a way as indicates that he is ignoring the distinction on which Socrates has clearly insisted and answers that a beautiful maiden is beautiful (not the beautiful, but beautiful). Socrates indicates that he thinks Hippias cares more about giving answers that seem or look good rather than ones that are adequate when he replies, “You answer beautifully at least, by the dog, and reputably [eudoxōs]” (287e5–6). Mere beauty, then, is delineated by Socrates as being a positive seeming (eu + doxōs) that goes no further. Hippias goes on to say that the answer cannot be refuted because it seems so (dokei) to everyone (288a4). Anyone, he continues, who asserted that “what you say” is not beautiful would be ridiculous (288b1–3). The point is to say something that is beautiful and will seem beautiful to
everyone. This becomes clear when Socrates proceeds next to list examples. Hippias is fine with the idea that a beautiful mare praised by the gods is beautiful, and with the idea that a beautiful lyre is beautiful but not with the third example, a beautiful pot. His response is that the answer is a base answer about a dignified topic (Socrates “dares to name base—phaula—names regarding a dignified—semmôi—matter”) (288d1–3). In reply, Socrates in the guise of the double says that he is not refined but trashy, caring for nothing other than the truth (288d4–5). Hippias and Socrates’s double make quite a fine pair—or, should I say less ironically, a comical or ridiculous pair—with Hippias caring only that his answer seem so to others and Socrates’s double caring only that the answer be true. The difficulty here is not, as some commentators say, that Hippias thinks beauty cannot be defined but can only be understood through examples. Instead, the difficulty is that he cannot allow an answer that indicates that beauty is besmirched by any touch of the ugly or the plain. It must be dignified. As a result, he does not understand the very power of the beautiful, namely, to raise the ugly or plain to a higher level, specifically, to a level on which it is beautiful or to a level on which the beautiful is beautiful in and through what is by itself ugly or plain. It is this combination of what is beautiful with what is ugly that characterizes Socratic wisdom or, more generally, Socrates himself as the representative of specifically human wisdom and of all that is in between: knowledge of ignorance, resource and poverty, beauty and ugliness, and, more generally, ability and vulnerability. Even this discussion of beauty in the Hippias Major is a critique of the heroic ideal, since the discussion critiques the ideal of self-sufficiency that would not be touched by anything low or plain, just as Achilles would not reenter the battle because he had been disrespected or a soldier was not to return without his beautiful shield even if, despite losing it, he had won the battle. In comparison with the gods, Socrates says, a beautiful maiden is ugly, so that the example of beauty that Hippias started out with was no more beautiful than ugly. Things, Socrates indicates in the Republic, tumble about between being and not being—in this case, between being and not being beautiful (Rep. 5.478e1–479d6). Or, as Heraclitus says, and as Socrates quotes him here, “the wisest human being, in comparison with a god, will appear an ape both in wisdom and in beauty and in all other things” (289b3–5).

Given that his first answer was refuted on the grounds that things are a mixture of beauty and what is not beautiful, and given that Socrates is looking for the form due to whose presence things are adorned and appear beautiful, Hippias’s next answer is gold. Gold is not a thing. When it is present, things are adorned and appear beautiful. The problem with Hippias’s answer is not simply that it is an example rather than a definition. Even
more, it is problematic because once again it is an answer that would not allow for the combination of beautiful and the ugly or plain that is found in things. Gold covers over what is ugly or plain. It is as if Hippias were to say, “You want beauty? Add some gold.” The word translated here as “adorned,” kosmeitai, has two different meanings. One is related to kosmos as beautiful order. One is related to beautification in cosmetics. An order or arrangement of things that by themselves are not beautiful allows those things both to show themselves as what they are and to be beautiful. Cosmetics, instead, covers things that are not beautiful and, by doing so, makes them beautiful.\(^{22}\) Once again, Hippias does not understand the power of beauty, which is to be beautiful in and through what is by itself ugly or plain. Socrates’s double responds with the example of the eyes of Pheidias’s statue of Athena, which were not made of gold but of ivory, as were the face, feet, and hands, and the middle of the statue’s eyes, which were not made even of ivory but of stone (290a8–d4). Even stone is beautiful, Hippias agrees, when it is fitting (prepōn) (290c7).

The fitting (to prepon) is what strikes the senses in such a way as to be conspicuous or clearly seen. The fitting, thus, has to do with appearance, and can denote either the shining forth that makes something susceptible to being clearly seen, or the being seen itself, that is, either the appearance or the perception. The conspicuous is not just what is seen, but what is clearly seen. The conspicuous stands out for us, is obvious or striking. Another meaning of to prepon is the fitting or seemly. What is fitting is appropriate or suitable to something else. What is seemly is what is of good or pleasant appearance, or what conforms to propriety. What is true of beauty as to prepon, then, is that it involves something that can be seen standing out so that it can be seen clearly; it involves my perception of that which stands out; and it involves the fit of one thing to another such that something stands out. Socrates utilizes the third sense of to prepon and goads Hippias by suggesting then that when we fill the pot he mentioned previously with beautiful soup, a ladle of fig wood would be more beautiful in the pot than one of gold. The homely answer irritates Hippias, but he is forced to agree with it.

Frustrated, Hippias attempts one more definition. You might think his definition would reflect what was learned in the discussion of the last example. If it did, it could include the simple idea of seeming or appearance, the idea of something that appears standing out even more, or the idea of the fitting or suitable. All of that could be encompassed by the idea of to prepon perhaps best translated as the seemly, should we strain the resources of the English language to put all this in one word in this context. For Hippias, it would be easier, as he could simply say to prepon.
Instead, ignoring what could be learned from their discussion so far, Hippias reverts to another example of beauty as a cover-up of what is not beautiful at all. If you are wealthy, healthy, and honored, it is beautiful to give your parents a beautiful funeral and for you to be beautifully and magnificently buried by your children. What a grim answer! Death is not so beautiful for a Greek, given what existence is like in Hades or the familial tomb. The funeral covers over an eternal discomfort that awaits both parents and children. To what end are wealth, health, and honor if we are all simply to end up as in-substantial, flitting shades. The greatest human beings would not be covered by this definition, as Socrates points out in a question using the example of Achilles, son of the immortal goddess Thetis (292e8). Clearly, he would not bury her. In response to the refutation, Plato makes sure we will think about the inescapable bleakness of death, when he euphemistically tells Socrates to go to Hades. “Go to blessedness!” Hippias says. “The human being’s questions are not even respectful (ευθήμα)" (293a2–3). Not only is Hippias’s third definition too narrow—it does not cover stone, wood, human being, god, activity, learning—but once again it is beauty as something that hides something else rather than fitting it or bringing it out or making it conspicuous. Hippias cannot even speak of our eventual residence in the bleak after-life without using a euphemism (“blessedness”).

Hippias, then, is not like Theaetetus who pushes past every objection to try to find an answer. Hippias’s whole approach is euphemism. Nor, though, does Hippias attack Socrates or simply push him around like beautiful, bossy, lazy Meno. Instead, Hippias just gives some pretty answer. The beautiful for him could be characterized as the pretty, where the pretty is what is on the surface and is appealing because it hides something. The beautiful is not for him something that enables what it qualifies to shine forth, to be manifest or conspicuous, and at once to change or attain a different level. Similarly, Hippias’s answers hide something about himself. They hide the fact that he does not know, that he is ignorant. They hide it, and they prevent him from changing as a result. They prevent him from looking for the answer. Hippias does not admit to his vulnerability—in this case, his ignorance—and so he is not as a result of admitted vulnerability or ignorance plunged into the search for an answer. Hippias repeatedly says he has the answer or could get it if he were just alone to come up with it. Hippias, then, does not see the importance of the two—that is, of Socrates and him together, forming a pair that could change Hippias and bring something, in this case the beautiful, to light. He does not see the importance of publicly admitting his own vulnerability. Instead, he hides it by saying something pretty, something seemly in the lower sense of that term.
Hippias, then, since for him beauty is only a surface covering, is not comfortable with anyone noticing his vulnerability or ignorance. Instead, he is all about power. He makes more money than the renowned intellects of the ancient world, he says early in the dialogue, because he has wisdom and power. When Socrates, in his second definition, suggests beauty is power, Hippias not surprisingly goes along emphatically with the idea (Sphodra, he says—295e10). Socrates, having found a point of agreement with Hippias, then goes on to make one of his usual points about power. The beautiful, he says, cannot simply be power, but must be power for something good, since power for something that is not good is not beautiful but ugly. Power for something good, he says, is the beneficial (to ὀφέλιμον, 296e5). Then he makes an unexpected point, that the beautiful as the beneficial is the cause of the good. The reader wonders about the sudden turn in the dialogue. Why is the beautiful the cause of the good? The reader of the Republic might think instead that for Socrates the good is the cause of the beautiful since the good is the cause of truth. One imagines, or hopes, that Hippias, too, is surprised at the claim.

Moreover, we know from other dialogues, such as the Meno and the Republic, that Socrates thinks that the greatest human power is knowledge or wisdom. He says that as well in this dialogue. The powerful is most beautiful, Socrates says, and so wisdom is the most beautiful of all (295e). Wisdom is knowledge of the good, as we can conclude from, for example, the development in the Republic of the knowledge that is needed for virtue that takes us all the way up the divided line to the idea of the good. Hence, Socrates’s claim that the beautiful is the cause of the good implies that wisdom is the cause of the good. Once again, this seems to contradict the Republic where Socrates argues that the good is the cause of truth and knowledge. Socrates, then, must mean something different here, namely, that when we are wise, we become good, as indicated in the Republic as well as the Phaedrus. As noted in chapter 1, we learn from the Phaedrus that when we are wise by recollecting the form of the beautiful, we become good to our beloved. As noted in chapter 2, from the Republic we learn that when we are wise by having knowledge of all time and all being all the way up the divided line to being and ideas, to all time and all being, and to the brightest of being, the form of the good in the Republic, we acquire virtue and will serve the city.

Infuriatingly, Hippias does not take Socrates’s bait. When Socrates says that the beautiful is the cause of the good, we can assume that he wants Hippias to ask about the claim. Socrates’s counterintuitive claim shifts the subject from ontology to human beings. But Hippias will not show vulnerability by asking Socrates what in the world he means. Surely Hippias knows that beauty can cause evil, as any Athenian would know by thinking about
treacherous Alcibiades or Meno. Socrates goes off as a result instead into what appears to be a bad argument that since the beautiful is the cause of the good, the beautiful is not good. We want Hippias to ask or say, Socrates, don’t you see you have only shown that the beautiful is not the good, so that the beautiful could still be good? But Hippias, true to form, does not.

Hippias is not wise, then, because forms do not show up for him. The opening of the dialogue is heavily ironic, we can conclude, when Socrates starts off by addressing his interlocutor as “Hippias, the beautiful and wise” (281a1). Hippias’s beauty is a beautiful covering that does not allow for vulnerability, that is, for awareness of one thing’s need of being accompanied by another that can make what is present in the first shine forth, a shining forth that the first could not accomplish by itself. Hippias needs Socrates but does not know it, and covers his need with an anxious, but showy, prettiness. Socrates, on the other hand, needs a blunt Socrates who can keep him thinking about the good and the useful, which are crude, and a beauty-conscious Hippias who can get him to realize how important seeming is for beauty.

Socrates’s last significant attempt to make progress is his definition of beauty as the pleasure that accompanies sight and hearing (298a6–7). With it, he pushes toward the view that beauty has something to do with form, for he rejects the possibility that what is crucial to the definition of beauty is what is crucial in each part of the definition—pleasure that accompanies sight, pleasure that accompanies hearing. Instead, what is crucial for the definition of the beautiful is something else common (koinon) to the two parts and something that is missing from, for example, pleasure from sex (300a10). Socrates mentions form (298b4), but Hippias as usual does not take him up on the hint.

The hint is that the answer might be form itself (or might centrally involve it). Specifically, Socrates brings in two examples of beautiful things from which we would not ordinarily say we derive pleasure through sight or hearing—namely, beautiful practices and laws—and asks whether they are beautiful through some other form than pleasure through sight and hearing. Hippias concurs, twice, presumably because the beauty of human beings; decorations, paintings, and sculpture; voices and music; and speeches and stories is different than the beauty of practices and laws. In fact, the last two examples on the list itself are different from the others. The beauty of speeches and stories, like the beauty of practices and laws, is different from the beauty of human beings; decorations, paintings, and sculpture; voices and music. Socrates is pushing for the idea that the beauty of material things is not something material. He pushes for that idea by gradually bringing in examples of beauty that are not material: the beauty of speeches, stories, prac-
tices, and laws. The movement of the argument is reminiscent of Socrates’s claim in the *Philebus* that there is no such thing as bodily pleasure. The point there is that what we call bodily pleasure is pleasure experienced by the soul. The point here seems to be that the beauty even of material things is not material.

Hippias agrees with Socrates’s claim that the beauty of practices and laws is different than the other examples. We should not be surprised, since we know that it was the example of beautiful practices that led Socrates to ask Hippias what is the beautiful in the first place. Hippias in that early part of the dialogue swears by Zeus and declares that he has achieved a great reputation regarding beautiful practices, specifically by describing in detail what a youth ought to pursue, pursuits that are both beautiful and lawful (286a3–b7). At this point, having gotten Hippias where he wants him, Socrates indicates that what he is looking for is the perception that comes through hearing and sight (298d1–3). So it is not only that Socrates is looking for one form that covers (or is common to) all cases, but that the form he is looking for is form itself. He starts this movement of the argument by distinguishing the pleasures of food, drink, and sex, which have more to do with being filled and emptied, from the pleasure that accompanies sight and hearing, which have to do with discernment or perception of form.

Another hinted point that Hippias misses is that, in beauty, both together have something that each separately does not. Hippias ought to pick up on this point given the earlier discussion of the fitting (*to prepon*) where they agreed that gold, stone, or ivory are or are not beautiful depending on what they are with. Socrates’s point, of course, is not that the pleasure from hearing and the pleasure from sight have something in common that each does not but that two things can have something in common, beauty, that each does not have (303a2–3). Hippias also misses another suggested point in the same passage, namely, that it would be very irrational (*pollē gar alogia*, 303c3–6) if in the case of beauty, both together are something that each separately is not. Much like the *Meno*, the quest for an answer stalls here not because the interlocutor does not have the resources for an answer. Instead, it stalls because Hippias does not draw on the resource that they have, namely, the recollection from their previous discussion that two things together can have a beauty that each separately does not. Hippias has a good memory and is smart, but he does not seem very philosophic in the Socratic/Platonic sense. He does not seem to be able to draw an argument out of the discussion of an example. In other words, he has a good memory but does not excel at Socratic recollection. Like Meno, he has a good memory but cannot philosophize. The reason for it is different, though. Meno has a decidedly tyrannical personality,
perhaps due to his beauty and the power it gives him. He will not inquire, but demands that pleasing answers be given him. Hippias, on the other hand, has an impulse to cover over anything plain, ugly, or threatening. He cannot philosophize because he cannot linger over what is ordinary or ugly until the beauty within it becomes conspicuous.

The dialogue comes near to its end when Hippias expresses frustration with Socrates for engaging in unseemly arguments by making fine distinctions or by chopping up “great and continuous bodies of being” into pieces. Interestingly, though, it is Hippias, not Socrates, who at least in argument is unable to comprehend wholes, for it is Hippias who adamantly denies that there are cases in which both together are different than each separately. If he were right about that, there would be no wholes, only heaps, since in a whole, a material quality becomes a part, rather than a mere quantity of matter, when it is together with other parts. There is in the case of wholes a kind of increase or, to use Socrates’s term, a whole that surpasses its parts.

What Socrates knows, then, when he says he seems to himself to know what the proverb means that says “the beautiful things are difficult” is that there is such a thing as the visibly surpassing or transcendent. He knows that in the realm of appearance both together are something other than each separately. Though this is, in one sense, irrational, he sees and knows that it is true. When both are together, there is something other than just both together. When both are together, something else arises, called beauty. It is irrational because indeterminate, not easily countable. Is beauty some third thing separate from the original two? No. It is in and through them. Is beauty nothing but each of the two? No. For separately, the two are not beautiful. Both together should be two. Instead, they seem to be three. Following Socrates, we could call beauty, since it is something other that arises, the surpassing or transcendent. In the case of the beautiful, that something other that arises is form. Beauty is form that arises or comes to light for us when two things are together. Beauty, in other words, is the appearance or perception of form. Socrates, then, has knowledge and a difficulty since what he knows is itself difficult, namely, that in some cases, both together are different than each is on its own.

For Socrates in the *Hippias Major*, then, the beautiful has to do with the fundamental ambiguity of being. Being is double, for it consists of formed beings. The good, as I have argued elsewhere, is the presence of form in beings. Hence, the good is, as Socrates says in the *Republic*, the cause of truth and knowledge—where truth is *aletheia* or the unhiddenness, showing through, or disclosure of form. Only if form is in a thing can there be truth since truth is the unhiddenness or disclosure of that form. The beautiful, too, is about
twos. Beauty results when one thing causes the form of another to appear. Beauty is close to truth where truth refers more to the process by which form becomes unhiden and beauty more to the result of that process, namely, the appearance of form or the surpassing. When two things are put together in a certain way, a form that was already present and realized in the first changes its manifest state: it shines forth and is seen. The good and the beautiful, then, are not outside of being for Plato. Instead, they are hyperbeings or second-order beings—or, to use a different language, transcategorials.

The beyond being in Plato, then, is not the same as the beyond being in Levinas. For the beyond being in Plato, whether it is the beyond being of the good or the surpassing of the beautiful, has to do with form—with form, the immanence of form, and the shining forth or transcendence of form. The beyond being in Plato is in the realm of the light, form, and generality not, as it is in Levinas, in the realm of what is before or beyond the light because it has to do with the singular. This type of interpretation of Socrates’s beyond being fits more the overall Platonic problematic than Levinas’s interpretation does and, in addition, makes it possible to preserve the difference between Socrates’s and Levinas’s views of love and desire that section 2 of this chapter delineates.

We are left once again, then, with two types of vulnerability to the other, one a Levinasian open vulnerability, a vulnerability not to the form but to the singularity of the other, and the other a Socratic-Platonic vulnerability to the other’s form that involves responding to what things or persons are and relating to them based on what fits them as a result of what they are. Each type of vulnerability is important, I assert, because each is necessary both for our good dealing with ourselves and with other people. It is necessary and good both to respond to people based on what fits them and thus to play a role in enabling them to be what they are and, as well, to respond to them beyond or without reference to what they are at any particular time and by so doing to participate in enabling them to be or do something that is utterly new. Leaving this gesture toward an argument for a more comprehensive notion of relationships to the other aside, this chapter’s consideration of desire and need has shown us that both Plato and Levinas, in discussing desire, delineate an essential human vulnerability to the other while the chapter’s attention to the concept of creation and to the distinction between the eternal and the new indicates that the essential vulnerabilities on which their concepts of desire rest are significantly different in kind.