Aestheticizing Epistemology*

Errol Lord
University of Pennsylvania

> It's hard to make a habit of pure
> happiness, when there's so much
> to know
>
> Elisa Gonzalez, 'Epistemology of the Shower'

> yet the soul—how does it ever get peace in its mouth, close its mouth on peace while alive. To be alive is just this pouring in and out. Find, lose, demand, obsess, move head slightly closer.
>
> Anne Carson, '1=1'

> Now this takes me to the whole point of my discussion of the fourth kind of madness—that which someone shows when he sees the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty; then he takes wing and flutters in his eagerness to rise up, but is unable to do so; and he gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below—and that is what brings on him the charge that he has gone mad. This is the best and noblest of all the forms that possession by god can take... and when someone who loves [beauty] is touched by this madness he is called a lover.
>
> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249d

Aesthetic value is central to epistemic normativity. That is a startling sentence to the vanishingly small number of people who can fully understand it. The recent history of epistemology has focused on a narrow set of questions about belief, justification, and knowledge. Much of this work makes epistemology out as solely concerned with what amounts to a proper connection to the truth at a given time.

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Epistemology should be concerned with such questions; I have tried to answer some of them myself.[1] But consider this: The activities that constitutively involve the attitudes studied by epistemology are not isolated from the rest of life. What we believe, know, have confidence in, and—most importantly here—understand forms a core part of who we are. Indeed, plausibly what sets us apart ethically from the sticks and the stones is that we come to have a perspective on the world. Our cognitive capacities are absolutely central to this perspective. We should expect the study of such capacities to be deeply intertwined with what is most important in human life.

Further, we should expect it to be important that we exercise these capacities over time, and that the activities we engage in while exercising them both cost us something and reward us with something. This will strike many epistemologists as stinking of impurity; an unholy mix of epistemology's proper orientation with something practical—a stinging epithet in certain quarters. I suspect many of these readers are impossible to persuade. My goal is to show that there is a perfectly respectable package of views—a package that does not go far beyond humdrum ideas—that expands epistemology in this way.

My expansion will eventually make beauty central. How it will do this can be stated succinctly. Epistemic deliberation can end in *suspension of judgment*. Suspension of judgment comes in a variety of forms. One of them is connected to inquiry. To suspend in this way is to be in an inquiring state of mind. Following Plato, I will argue that a certain sort of passionate love—eros—is this sort of inquiring state of mind.[2] Beauty is the proper object of eros; thus, beauty is central to the epistemology of suspension of judgment.

Crucially, eros does not aim at belief or knowledge-that. Rather, eros strives for *understanding*. Further, the activity that eros pushes us towards is central to the formation of our selves. Indeed, beauty is *self-perpetuating* in the sense that it calls on us to make ourselves beautiful by developing beautiful conceptions of our beloveds. When all goes well, eros both connects us to the value of the world and pushes us to be the sorts of things that have that value. As we'll see, eros is full of dangers and risks. Its promise is great but its path is often murky. Ill-placed pursuit of its objects can have devastating consequences. An epistemology of suspension of judgment must reckon with this fact. This is why the study of eros is important to the study of a well lived human life. Since the study of eros is part of epistemology, this is why epistemology is important to the study of a well lived human life.

My focus on policing the boundaries of epistemology will now be dropped for the bulk of the essay. I will proceed by developing my views about the role of eros in our intellectual lives and how we should manage it. This discussion has merit no matter where the borders are drawn. At the end I will return to the drawing of the philosophical map.

[1] Immodestly: Lord (2014, 2018a,b, 2021, FC,F).

[2] Or at least, to use Nehamas (2007b)'s term, a 'purified philosophic' kind of eros. Other forms of eros will be less centrally concerned with understanding. Cf. n 9.

1 Epistemology's Competition: Part I

One of the consequences of the epistemic being a proper *domain* of normativity is that it has jurisdiction over several *rational competitions*.[3] The first competition is between what I'll call *doxastic competitors*.

There are at least two standards relevant to the adjudication of this competition. One of them is objective in the sense that it is insensitive to the position of the agent. Different theories differ about what sets this standard, but the most popular standard is truth. According to the alethic view, truth is the objective standard for the doxastic competition.

The second standard is subjective in the sense that it is sensitive to the position of the agent. There are also many different theories about what sets this standard. I will take the view that *epistemic reasons* set this standard.[4] According to this view, possessing sufficient reasons is the subjective standard for the epistemic competition, which is to say that in order for a competitor to win the subjective competition, it must be supported by sufficient epistemic reasons.[5]

What are the competitors in the doxastic competition? Belief and disbelief are two competitors. When one is deliberating about whether p, either belief or disbelief can in principle win. According to the alethic view of the objective competition, belief will win only when p is true and disbelief will win only when $\neg p$ is true. According to the reasons view of the subjective competition, belief will win when there are sufficient reasons to believe p and disbelief will win when there are sufficient reasons to disbelieve p.

Belief and disbelief are not the only competitors. A third (type of) competitor is *suspension of judgment*. Sometimes when we deliberate about whether p, neither belief nor disbelief wins the competition. In such cases, suspension of judgment is the winner of the competition.

This is most obvious when it comes to the subjective competition. There are many cases where the possessed reasons to believe or disbelieve are insufficient. If I am presented with a pot of 100 colored balls, told that there are 50 red and 50 black, and then asked whether the next ball drawn will be red, I will have to decline to answer. This is because I do not possess sufficient reason to believe or disbelieve that the next ball will be red. I should suspend judgment about whether the next ball will be red.

While the need for suspension is most obvious when it comes to the subjective competition, the objective competition plausibly calls for suspension about some propositions. Perhaps the most obvious examples are provided by truth-value gaps.[6] Suspension wins the ob-

[3] I will focus on two of these but I will not focus on the competition between *fine-grained* degrees of confidence. See Lord (FCa) for discussion of the relationship between the fine-grained and coarse-grained competitions.

[4] See Lord (2018b); Schroeder (2021).

[5] As Schroeder (2015, 2021) shows, you can think of the objective standard in terms of reasons. Schroeder maintains that the objective standard for belief is met with respect to some proposition p only when the total set of reasons to believe p outweighs the total sets of reasons for the alternative competitors—in short, only when the reasons to believe p are *objectively sufficient*. Objective sufficiency entails that p is true.

[6] Obviously enough, these examples are held hostage to the existence of such gaps; even if you think there

jective competition when it comes to the proposition <The present King of France is bald>. Similarly, imagine that Nick is a man in his late 30s with a family history of male-pattern baldness. It has recently become clear that he will carry on the family tradition, but he still has a reasonable amount of hair. The truth-value of the proposition <Nick is bald> is indeterminate. Suspension thus wins the objective competition.

As Kurt Sylvan and I have argued in a series of papers, there are two basic types of suspensive states (Lord & Sylvan (2021, FC, 2022); cf. Lord (2020)). The first kind of state is *inquisitive*. Inquisitive suspensive states are so-called because part of their function is to prime you to answer the question that is their object. Nick, whether he likes it or not, will likely be very interested in whether he is bald. Given this, it is rational for him to inquisitively suspend about whether he is bald; the suspensive state he enters will dispose him to settle the question. This disposition will involve a variety of more specific dispositions related to information relevant to the question. As Jane Friedman puts it, the question will be on Nick's *agenda*.

The other type of suspensive state is non-inquisitive. This type can aptly be called agnostic. Two varieties are worth separating. The first—weak agnosticism—is a state that merely records that the reasons to form a belief are insufficient. If the ball draw is thrust upon me by a probability-loving philosopher, weak agnosticism is likely the way in which I should suspend about whether the next ball drawn will be red. The other variety—strong agnosticism—is not only non-inquisitive, it is *anti*-inquisitive. Part of its function is to prime me to *ignore* the question that is its object. Given the facts about the French monarchy, this is likely the form of suspension I should take about whether the current King of France is bald; that is a bad question worthy of being ignored.

A helpful way of thinking about this competition is by thinking about the functions of various competing states. The function of belief is to settle some proposition as true in our perspective. This function goes a long way towards explaining why both the objective and subjective standards are constitutively tied to the truth. Sometimes, though, there are propositions that oughtn't be settled as true in our perspective, even though we should have some response. There are different states that are neutral about the truth. One state is neutral and inquisitive, one state is merely neutral, and a third is neutral and anti-inquisitive. These three suspensive states clearly compete with each other, and also compete with the belief states insofar as they are neutral whereas the belief states are settled. Which suspensive state it makes sense to be in, when belief is forbidden, is a matter of which function it makes most sense for our perspective to be primed to carry out.

To get a further feel for our competition, consider how it plays out through Nick's life.

> **Young Nick:** Nick just finished college and is off to a PhD program. His hair is thick and lustrous. He has decisive reason to disbelieve he is bald and happily so disbelieves.

are no such gaps, I think that there will be considerable pressure to think that suspension is objectively called for when it comes to epistemicist 'indeterminacy'. This might force a reconsideration of what the objective standard is.

Tenure-Track: Nick is midway through his tenure-track. His hairline has taken a bit of a beating and it is now indeterminate whether he's bald. He starts to notice, but his mind is extremely occupied by his quest for tenure; so, while he recognizes the recent indeterminate status of his baldness, he merely does this. He becomes weakly agnostic about whether he is bald.

Mid-Life Crisis: With tenure secured, Nick starts to notice the ways various aspects of his life have started to decay. His hairline becomes a focal point of this attention. He becomes deeply interested in whether he is bald. It is still manifestly indeterminate whether he is, but his recognition of this fact becomes very inquisitive. He finds himself investigating the question on a daily basis. He goes from being weakly agnostic to suspending in an inquisitive way.

Therapeutic Ignoring: Nick's focus on decay becomes pathological and he seeks professional help. His therapist helps him work on curbing his obsessive inquiry into his hairline. His bald-status remains indeterminate, but with the help of various methods of cognitive behavioral therapy, he is able to become strongly agnostic about whether he is bald. He isolates his attention from the question.

Old Nick: His hairline's prolonged state of indeterminacy comes to an end. To use Larry David's expression, he has become a bald. This becomes manifest to him and his doxastic state changes once again. He comes to believe that he is bald.

2 Eros and Epistemic Competition: Part I

It is no secret that Plato thought that a flourishing life was to be found through philosophy; it is even more widely known that the philosopher is a *lover* of wisdom. It is less common to query, especially around here, around now, what it takes to be such a lover. This lack of curiosity is not due to Plato failing to discuss this question; two dialogues—the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*—discuss the question at length.

Central to these discussions is a type of passionate love called eros. In the *Symposium*, Socrates recalls a discussion he had with Diotima about the nature of eros and its connection to philosophy. She tells the origin story of the god Eros, whose parents were Penia—poverty—and Poros—resource. This combination led Eros to be both always in need but also a passionate schemer after the beautiful.[7]

> he is tough and shriveled and shoeless and homeless, always lying on the dirt without a bed, sleeping at people's doorsteps and in roadsides under the sky...always

[7] The myth is rather thin about his connection to beauty; '[Eros] was born to follow Aphrodite and serve her... because he was conceived on the day of her birth. And that's why he is also by nature a lover of beauty, because Aphrodite herself is especially beautiful' (203b).

> living with Need. But...he is a schemer after the beautiful and the good; he is brave, impetuous, and intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life (203d).[8]

Eros, then, is always in a sort of in-between state; constantly in need but resourceful about how to be sated. But this never lasts: 'anything he finds his way to always slips away, and for this reason Eros is never completely without resources, nor is he ever rich' (ibid).

Diotima elaborates further that this in-between state is essential to being a lover of wisdom—'[Eros] is in between wisdom and ignorance as well.' Those that are wise, she says, do not love wisdom since they already have it; those who are completely ignorant do not love wisdom because they are ignorant of the value of wisdom. In order to be a lover of wisdom, you need to have some wisdom but also some ignorance. Eros is like this 'because he is in love with what is beautiful, and wisdom is extremely beautiful. It follows that Eros *must* be a lover of wisdom' (204b).

The lover, then, always lacks something and seeks to get it. What do they lack and how do they get it? What they lack is 'possession' of that which they love. This possession is (at least partly) epistemic; what they lack is an *understanding* of that which they love.[9] How do they get it? By 'giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul.' Every part of this is puzzling.

To start, everyone is in some way pregnant, and birthing is a 'godly affair' that is 'what mortals have in place of immortality' (206c, 207a). Some are pregnant in body and participate in the godly affair by birthing human children; others are pregnant in soul and participate by birthing ideas (and, *we* can add, art). By the end of the dialogue we learn, in the famous 'ascent' speech, that the 'offspring' of the lover of wisdom are themselves beautiful. So, to come to possess the beloved, one produces beauty by producing beautiful ideas. Beauty is thus self-perpetuating when properly engaged with.

He also maintains that in order to give birth, we need to be with beauty—'giv[e] birth *within* beauty.' The conditions under which we most freely birth beauty is with other beauties. This is a key plank in Plato's defense of the sociality of philosophy. The beginning of the ascent is 'lov[ing] beautiful bodies and beget[ting] beautiful ideas there' (210a). (It is also a key plank of his skepticism about *writing*, developed in the *Phaedrus* (see the later stages Carson (1986) for an eccentric but fascinating discussion of this skepticism).)

The *Phaedrus* provides a complementary vision. The speech most important here is given in response to the claim that it is better to be friends with 'non-lovers' than 'lovers' because lovers are in the grips of a possessive madness. Socrates calls the speech Phaedrus recites in defense of this view 'foolish...close to being impious' (242d). According to Socrates, some forms of madness are 'given to us by the gods to ensure our greatest good fortune' (244b).

[8] The version of the dialogues I consult and quote is Plato (1997).

[9] This is at least true of what Nehamas (2007b) calls the 'philosophic' lover. As we saw, Eros himself is guaranteed to be this kind of lover. It seems to follow from the argument above that anyone who loves beauty as such is guaranteed to be a philosopher, and thus guaranteed to want to understand the beloved.

To argue for this, Plato draws on the tripartite psychology developed in the *Republic*. Most important is the idea that all souls that take human form have some acquaintance with ultimate reality, with some having more than others. All humans, then, have the capacity to grow wings that will lift them up to ultimate reality.

The philosophic lover is gripped by a kind of madness, a madness induced by 'see[ing] the beauty we have down here and [being] reminded of true beauty' (249d). This glimpse causes him to 'take wing and flutter in his eagerness to rise up;' this causes him to 'pay no attention to what is down below' (ibid.). This madness is special because it enables us to take the path towards understanding reality: 'This is the best and noblest of all the forms that possession by god [i.e., divine madness] for anyone who has it...and when someone who loves [the] beautiful is touched by this madness he is called a lover (erastēs)' (249e).

This picture of eros does not sit well with textbook accounts of Plato. Those accounts portray the lover of wisdom as a cool conduit of reason, isolated from the passions and from the body. In these two dialogues, we get a more complicated picture. A passionate desire for understanding becomes central to the practice of philosophy. This passion is a sort of madness. It is a response to beauty, and it pushes one to create more beauty by giving 'accounts' of the beloved. For Plato, if all goes well, the philosopher is led towards a comprehensive understanding of all of reality, which necessarily involves virtue. Eros, then, is the driving force behind philosophy and the development of virtue.

Eros is an inquisitive attitude. It drives investigation into the nature of the beauty of the beloved. Its aim is epistemic; its aim is understanding. In the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, it is the central inquisitive state for the lover of wisdom, and thus the central inquisitive state for those who seek virtue.

Can it be the sort of inquisitive state that constitutes suspension of judgment?[10] There are several different kinds of inquisitive states, from wonder to curiosity. They all bear some relation to figuring out the answer to the question they take as their content.

Evidence that eros is a way of suspending comes from the wild. There's no better place to start than one of the great philosophers of both beauty and eros, Marcel Proust. There are many, many passages dedicated to both throughout *In Search of Lost Time*. One of the most compelling comes early on. First we get a description of the bewilderment of eros:

> suddenly a roof, a glimmer of sun on a stone, the smell of the road would stop me because of a particular pleasure they gave me, and also because they seemed to

[10] This is to talk about the relationship between inquisitive attitudes and suspension of judgment in a way different than Jane Friedman. According to Friedman, suspension of judgment is itself a distinct inquisitive state, and it is not constituted by other inquisitive states. I don't quite grasp why she does this, especially because it makes it considerably more difficult to understand exactly what suspension is like, on her view. Further, I think it is a mistake to think, for reasons you can glean from the overview of my views about suspension above, that suspension is necessarily an inquisitive state. For an argument for this, see Lord & Sylvan (FC).

> be concealing, beyond what I could see, something which they were inviting me to come take and which despite my efforts I could not manage to discover. Since I felt that it could be found within them, I would stay there, motionless, looking, breathing, trying to go with my thoughts beyond the image or the smell (184).[11]

Marcel—the narrator—is often awash with eros, but to this point is constantly frustrated by his inability to discover what the roofs or stones were concealing. This changes on a banal carriage ride. First comes the now familiar eros.

> At the bend of a road I suddenly experienced that special pleasure which was unlike any other, when I saw the two steeples of Martinville, shining in the setting sun and appearing to change position with the motion of our carriage and the windings of the road, and then the steeple of Vieuxvicq, which, though separated from them by a hill and a valley and situated on a higher plateau in the distance, seemed to be right next to them.
>
> As I observed, as I noted the shape of their spires, the shifting of their lines, the sunlight on their surfaces, I felt that I was not reaching the full depth of my impression, that something was behind that motion, that brightness, something which they seemed at once to contain and conceal (ibid.)

Marcel sees the beauty of the steeples of two churches and how they are juxtaposed from his perspective.[12] He learns plenty about the scene just from looking, presumably including the fact that the relation between the steeples from his perspective is beautiful. But he doesn't learn all there is to learn; indeed, his experience itself impinges upon him a sense that the scene 'contain[s] and conceal[s]' something more. Proust is direct that this sense drives inquiry. It drives observation, looking, and thinking.[13]

Unlike his previous experiences of eros, though, this time Marcel discovers a method for sating his curiosity. This happens accidentally. As the carriage moves on towards Marcel's destination, he tries and fails to engage the driver in conversation, which means he 'was obliged, for lack of other company, to fall back on my own and try to recall my steeples.' What follows is a revelation.

> Soon their lines and their sunlit surfaces split apart, as if they were a sort of bark, a little of what was hidden from me inside them appeared to me, I had a thought which had not existed a moment before, which took shape in words in my head,

[11] From the Lydia Davis translation of *Swann's Way*, which I will use throughout (Proust (2002)).

[12] One complication of this example is that Marcel is not really focusing on the beauty of the churches *per se*. Rather, he is focusing on the beauty of the *scene*, which essentially involves the perspective from which he is viewing the churches. Further, since he is in motion, the geometrical perspective keeps changing. This doesn't spoil the example since, plausibly, there is something he is perceiving and analyzing that is beautiful, even if it is relational in this way.

[13] Cf. Schellekens (2022)'s discussion of how aesthetic experience is 'epistemically motivating.'

> and the pleasure I had just recently experienced at the sight of them was so increased by this that, seized by a sort of drunkenness, I could no longer think of anything else...
>
> Without saying to myself that what was hidden behind the steeples of Martinville had to be something analogous to a pretty sentence, since it had appeared to me in the form of words that gave me pleasure, I asked [my companion] for a pencil and some paper and I composed...[14]

Marcel's inquiry into the steeples, unlike his previous inquiries into beauty, leads to resolution. Reflecting Plato, this resolution is an account of what Marcel saw. What Marcel does to express his love is develop, to use Bengson (2015)'s term, *a conception* of the scene. Conceptions are the objects of understanding; they are constellations of claims that collectively make up an account of something. Marcel's revelation was that what was concealed in the steeples was 'something analogous to a pretty sentence.' This is a beautiful conception, and it is what the beauty of the scene calls out for. (More about this aspect below.)

The most important thing about this example is just how epistemic Proust's descriptions are of his experience of eros. His initial perceptual experiences suggest to him that there is something more to what he is perceiving. Eros primes him to figure out what that is. What he is primed to do is *inquire*. And eros primes him to do this as a constitutive matter; it is not an aspect of eros that can be eliminated, nor is it an accidental necessary feature of eros. Eros is essentially inquisitive in this way.

Genre demands a more precise explanation of how this example manifests the first epistemic competition. The first competition, the doxastic competition, is a competition involving belief, disbelief, and the various varieties of suspension of judgment. Crucially, the first competition is centered around the truth of a particular proposition; it is centered around the question <whether *p*?>, and its options are all orientations towards that question.

As I'll explain more fully in a moment, Marcel's situation is not fully captured by this first competition. But there's no doubt that the first competition is highly relevant. There are many propositions the truth of which become salient to Marcel. Here are three important questions, just by way of example: Is the spatial relation between the three steeples from Marcel's perspective harmonious?; Does the temporary disappearance of the Vieuxvicq steeple make the beauty of the Martinville steeples more salient?; What other beauties are metaphorically salient?[15]

[14] Marcel includes the paragraph of criticism that he 'has since found again.' I won't include it for reasons of space.

[15] This question might strike one as strange without more context. It is a common thought that critical inquiry—inquiry into the aesthetic nature of things—essentially, or at least importantly, involves the use of

Marcel deliberates about each of these questions in response to his experience of the scene. Their answers are part of what is concealed. At first he lacks good evidence about their answers. Suspension is the only permitted reaction. He suspends in an inquisitive way. His eros itself constitutes this inquisitive state, among other things. Before this instance of eros, young Marcel didn't know how to reveal what was concealed, didn't know what *methods* to use in his inquiry. The accidental revelation of this experience was about the methods to use in critical inquiry. He comes to answer these questions—carries out the inquisitive function of eros—by developing an account of the beauty of the scene.

3 Epistemology's Competition: Part II

Marcel's eros is sparked by concealment. All inquiry is sparked by concealment. Inquisitive attitudes aim to reveal. As we just saw, eros can participate in the first epistemic competition by making us inquisitive about the truth of a wide array of particular propositions. Eros often aims at revealing certain truths.

But a complete picture—of Marcel in particular and eros' epistemic role in general—cannot be completed without considering a second epistemic competition.[16] Whereas the first competition focuses on particular propositions, the second competition focuses on *objects* and understanding them by accepting *conceptions*. Conceptions, as I said above, are (usually) complex constellations of claims that provide an account of something. They are the objects of understanding. When one understands some object O, one has a correct conception of O. While our first competition revolves around different reactions about the question <whether p?>, the second competition revolves around different reactions to the question <why O?>.

Given this, it is unsurprising that explanations are central to conceptions.[17] To have a con-

metaphor. See Cohen (2009) and especially Grant (2013).

As a matter of fact, the critical paragraph Marcel writes about the steeples (somewhat awkwardly) ends with a metaphor: 'They reminded me, too, of the three young girls in a legend, abandoned in a solitary place where darkness was already falling; and while we moved of at a gallop, I saw them timidly seek their way and, after some awkward stumbling of their noble silhouettes, press against one another, slip behind one another, now forming, against the still pink sky, no more than a single black shape, charming and resigned, and fade away into the night" (186).

[16] Cf. Dover (2023, 2024). Dover argues that traditional accounts of curiosity are incomplete because they focus on the first competition (to use my framing). She argues for a second sort of curiosity that is focused on objects and is open-ended. This curiosity drives more particular inquiries. She uses Plato's discussion of eros as a model for her second type of curiosity—hence she names it 'erotic curiosity'. Eros, on my view, is not quite like her erotic curiosity. Dover does not appeal to Plato's ideas about the epistemic aim of eros—understanding—which makes it easier to maintain that erotic curiosity is open-ended in the way she claims. I don't want to deny that there is erotic curiosity; indeed, perhaps it is involved in eros. But I do claim that eros has more structure than Dover's erotic curiosity. This added structure is epistemically important. Further, as we'll see, it is needed to make sense of the nature of its proper object; viz., beauty.

[17] It is controversial whether accepting explanations explicitly is strictly speaking necessary for understanding (see Bengson (2015); Kelp (2015, 2021)). I will simplify by focusing on cases where we do explicitly accept explanations.

ception of O is to accept some explanation of O.[18] To understand O one must accept a correct explanation of O. Of course, most things can be correctly explained in many different ways. O might be casually, socially, economically, physically, mathematically, metaphysically, ethically, or aesthetically explained. A complete conception of O includes an explanation along all dimensions in which it can be explained.

This second competition is more open-ended than the first. Doxastic deliberation focuses on single propositions and their truth. Noetic deliberation—the type of deliberation governed by the standards of the second competition—focuses on the object itself.

Noetic deliberation can terminate when one accepts a conception of O. When noetic deliberation focuses on candidate conceptions, it can reduce, at least temporarily, to doxastic deliberation that focuses on the truth of a particular explanation. When this happens, noetic deliberation focuses on the question <whether O because ϕ?>. The doxastic competitors become the options for noetic deliberation. Sometimes both forms of deliberation will terminate because one comes to believe that O because ϕ.

While it's possible for noetic deliberation to reduce to doxastic deliberation, often this does not happen. Marcel engages in noetic deliberation when he is struck by a roof or the smell of the road. As he puts it, when eros snuck up he 'would stay there, motionless, looking, breathing, trying to go with my thoughts beyond the image or the smell.' Given his lack of critical skills, he plausibly would not be considering particular explanations during this deliberation. Although he was inquisitive about why some object gave rise to this distinctive pleasure, he was not equipped with the tools to develop the relevant conception. Yet he was noetically deliberating.

Further, accepting some conception of O is clearly not sufficient for the termination of noetic deliberation. This is both because (mostly) everything admits of multiple correct explanations and because, even within one domain, there are often many layers of explanation. One can accept a perfectly good causal conception of O without terminating noetic deliberation about O; after all, O might be ethically, metaphysically, or aesthetically interesting. Similarly, one might accept a mid-level explanation of O of a particular kind—aesthetic, causal etc.—without terminating noetic deliberation; after all, there is more to understand, even within that domain.

In short, noetic deliberation is more dynamic because the objects of understanding are more dynamic. Complete and correct understanding requires accepting a huge constellation of claims and grasping the connections between them. For most things, it takes a lot of time, attention, and thinking in order to get even close to a complete, correct conception. We come to this—or to approximate it—in a piecemeal way.

Since we rarely have the deliberative option of accepting a conception whole hog, inquisitive attitudes are especially important to noetic deliberation. Inquisitive attitudes are necessary to sustain the sort of cognitive work that is needed in order to come to understand

[18] I will use 'acceptance' as a sort of dummy word; this is to avoid controversies about the nature of understanding.

something. Unlike in the first competition, noetic inquisitive attitudes have the targets of understanding as their objects; I am curious about beauty, baseball, epistemology, suspension of judgment, soccer tactics etc, not just curious about the truth of various propositions about those topics.

The two sorts of deliberation obviously interact. Results of mere doxastic deliberation can impact noetic deliberations. I might accidentally learn something that upsets one of my noetic commitments; I might, for example, accidentally learn something about cricket that impacts my more systematic views about baseball. Accidentally learning something about cricket might even dissolve my noetic interest in baseball.

More relevant here is that adopting an inquisitive attitude via noetic deliberation will usually guide many of my doxastic deliberations. My curiosity about baseball will lead me to consider many specific questions about baseball; for many of these questions, I will lack sufficient evidence to form a belief and will come to have inquisitive attitudes about those specific questions. Those doxastic inquisitive attitudes will be rationally related to my noetic inquisitive attitudes. Sometimes, the doxastic inquisitive attitude will only be rational because I am noetically inquisitive. Noetic inquisitiveness, given its broader remit, thus acts as a sort of regulator of at least some of my doxastic deliberation.

To be clear, there is still a noetic rational competition. There are multiple options in rational competition when <why O?> becomes deliberatively salient. It is often the case that when a noetic question becomes salient, there are salient (partial) conceptions of O—just think of the ordinary epistemic environment in a philosophy seminar. Reasons to accept the various conceptions will be provided by evidence. Sometimes the evidence will be sufficiently strong in favor of some conception. One might accept the conception on the basis of that evidence and move on, ending that bit of noetic deliberation.

Other times the evidence will not be sufficiently strong to accept a conception, in which case suspension is called for. As is clear at this point, inquisitive suspension is especially important to noetic deliberation, but I think that the other two types of suspension are available, as well. One can be weakly agnostic about O, registering the fact that the evidence is insufficient to support any particular conception. One can also be strongly agnostic about O, which disposes one to ignore information relevant to an account of O.

4 Eros and Epistemic Competition: Part II

While eros plays a role in the first competition, its primary role is in the second. Its canonical content are objects themselves, not single propositions. And its constitutive aim is understanding, not true belief (or knowledge). Just how different this makes it from doxastic inquisitive states depends on how different understanding is from knowledge. Everyone should agree, though, that knowledge is connected to understanding, and that the pursuit of understanding involves the pursuit of knowledge.

Eros can be a doxastic inquisitive state, but this is usually when one loves some object and

one's love regulates doxastic deliberation. Eros qua noetic inquisitive state primes one not to settle some particular truth, but to develop a conception of the beauty of the object. This disposes one to be attentive to information, questions, perspectives etc about the object and its beauty. If all goes well, one becomes like Diotima's Eros: 'a schemer after the beautiful and the good... brave, impetuous, and intense, an awesome hunter, always weaving snares, resourceful in his pursuit of intelligence, a lover of wisdom through all his life.'

Things don't go well for young Marcel. He is bitten by eros towards the sun on the roof, the smell of the road (etc.). He experiences them in a way that makes their beauty manifest, but these experiences do not reveal the full account of their beauty. His experiences lead to noetic deliberation but no conception is rational so suspension is all that is left. The appeal of the beauty makes him inquisitive; in fact, the pull of beauty is powerful and often violent, making him painfully inquisitive—the bite of eros indeed.

What he begins to learn when he sees the churches is how to be 'resourceful in the pursuit of intelligence.' He learns that 'what was hidden behind the steeples of Martinville had to be something analogous to a pretty sentence.' This something was a conception of their beauty, and the way Marcel goes about developing such a conception is through writing. His eros towards that particular scene is relatively short-lived, but the lesson he learns that day is central to his future life, which is a life filled with eros and the inquiries it produces.

5 What Does Beauty Have to Do With It, Really?

Given the difficulties of gaining understanding, I reckon most will agree with me that noetic deliberation needs inquisitive options. We need a mental state that will regulate complex investigations over time that aims at understanding. This is not to mention the fact that we obviously become highly inquisitive about particular objects without necessarily being inquisitive about the truth of any particular propositions.

But my initial claim was that beauty is central to epistemology. One could agree with the basic picture of epistemology's two competitions without agreeing with this. Further, the last 100+ years have seen even the aestheticians and philosophers of art turn away from beauty. The main project of the 20th century's most influential (analytic) philosopher of art—Arthur Danto—was to divorce beauty from the core of art.[19] He was taking his lead from modernist artists, who, to quote Barnett Newman, were lead by a 'desire to destroy beauty.'[20] (The poet Arthur Rimbauld wrote that, after finding beauty bitter, he reviled her (Rimbaud (1966); Danto finds inspiration from Rimbaud in titling Danto (2003) since he 'loosely' translates what he says as desiring to injure beauty).)

Even aestheticians, whose entire field of inquiry is historically centered on beauty, have mostly accepted views about its nature that, at least unintentionally, make it difficult to see as central. The most prominent of these views is hedonist, maintaining that beauty is just what

[19] See, e.g., Danto (1964, 1981, 2003).
[20] Newman (1992).

produces (or perhaps merits) a particular sort of pleasure. Some in this tradition recognize that this conception of beauty drains it of some of its historical mystique. Levinson (2012), for example, acknowledges that beauty historically has been a 'richer affair' than the hedonist makes out, but opts for the modernity's more 'earthbound' notion. With friends like these...

So what's *beauty* got to do with it?

A big question that I will answer without a full argument (although some details will be filled in in the last two sections). The short answer is that beauty is central to epistemic deliberation—doxastic and especially noetic—because beauty is a noetic value. It is a noetic value because it essentially has a complex structure ripe for understanding. To use Proust's phrase, beauty is essentially a feature of 'ordered complexity.'[21] Beauty always involves *structure*.

The structure of beauty helps to explain why *interpretation* is essential to full aesthetic engagement. Interpretation just is the development of an aesthetic conception of the object. Interpretation of beauty is always apt, and all aesthetic engagement involves interpretation.[22] This is what Marcel discovers in the carriage.

Its noetic nature explains why it is especially apt for understanding. But many things have structure that aren't worth coming to understand and thus not central to epistemic normativity. So being noetic doesn't fully secure my main claim. Think of it this way: I claim that beauty is so special that we have an attitude whose function is to inquisitively respond to beauty; what's more, this attitude is passionate and can be all consuming. It can make us like Eros—'impetuous and intense.' It can lead to a type of madness. An explanation is needed of why beauty and eros should play this role. Beauty is noetic, but why is it a noetic *value* worthy of this reaction?

My view is that beauty is a final value, and thus one cannot explain what is good about it by appealing to other values. I can give an explanation, though, of why it is a final value, on my view. Take the beauty of people first. The most important type of beauty in people is a feature of their *perspective*.[23] Their perspective is made up of their conception (in the sense above) of the world. Having the capacity for developing a perspective is plausibly the most ethically important aspect of being the type of agent that we are; it is what separates us from the inanimate world.[24] The perspectives of other people can be good in various ways. Being beautiful is one of those ways. Given the importance of having a perspective to being the ethically significant creatures that we are, it is no wonder that we take a keen interest in the

[21] This is many hundreds of pages after his encounter with the churches, in the third volume ((Proust, 1993, pg. 59)).

[22] This is, ironically, a central tenet of Danto's view about the nature of art (see, amongst many other places, Danto (1986)). Costello (2024) makes much hay of this fact in a (righteous) attempt to show that aesthetic value is central to the art that Danto so admired.

[23] This is not to deny that they can be merely physically beautiful, although I think that even physical beauty is usually not merely physical beauty, but is rather an expression of their perspective. See Nehamas (2007a) for relevant discussion.

[24] I take this to be a Kantian explanation of our ethical significance, even if Kant himself focuses mostly on one sub-capacity—viz., our autonomy. See Velleman (1999); Lord (FCb) for relevant discussion.

various ways perspectives can be good.

We can also indirectly explain the final value of the beauty of artifacts by appealing to perspectives. Artifacts are *products* of perspectives, and they often *present* perspectives (although the perspective they present is often not the same perspective that produces them).[25] An interest in the beauty of artifacts is an interest in a good had by a perspective. Very often, especially with art, exploring the beauty of an artifact is a way of exploring the good of another person.[26]

Beauty is one good among many that perspectives and their products can have. It is plausibly distinguished even amongst those goods. For one, it does have a constitutive connection to pleasure. While it does not derive its value from the value of pleasure, it still is always fitting to be pleased by beauty.[27] Second, it also has a constitutive connection to acquaintance, in its many forms. It is something you can see, hear, intellectually apprehend.

These two features are central to Plato's explanation of its importance. Beauty is a core part of the path to virtue precisely because it is both magnetic and the object of acquaintance. To use Murdoch (2013)'s Platonic paraphrases:

> Beauty is the only spiritual thing we love by instinct (83)...
>
> Beauty [is]...to use Plato's image, the text written in large letters. The concept Good itself is the much harder to discern but essentially similar text written in small letters (86).

Even if one doubts Plato's optimism about the connection between beauty and virtue—and I will in the final section—it is plausible that it has these two features, unlike many goods.

Marcel once again exemplifies these points. He becomes acquainted with the churches' beauty through perception. This is pleasant—indeed, it is a 'special pleasure which was unlike any other.' But given its noetic structure, there is something more to be won from their beauty than what he gets from mere perception—'I felt that I was not reaching the full depth of my impression, that something was behind that motion, that brightness, something which they seemed at once to contain and conceal.' This makes him long to reveal the full depth of their beauty. He comes to discover that to do this is to develop an interpretation, to produce 'something analogous to a pretty sentence.'[28]

[25] While the goodness of the beauty of artifacts is final—something to be valued for its own sake—it is also extrinsic. It is extrinsic because in order for the artifact to have the beauty it does, it needs to stand in certain relations to an agent's perspective.

[26] For more on the ethics of engagement with beauty, see Lord (MS).

[27] See Lord (2024) for discussion.

[28] To be clear, I am not claiming that beauty is constitutively tied to perspectives; some beauties are. These include two sites of beauty that we tend to be particularly interested in—people and art. But things can have the zenith value of ordered complexity without being related to perspectives in this way.

6 Ok. What Does Beauty Have to Do with the World, Then?

My main example so far—Marcel—is an aesthete who is, in the example, moved by the beauty of something especially arcane. It's not even the *steeples themselves* he is moved by. Rather, it is the *scene* presented to him as he moves across the plain. We can grant that the scene is beautiful and worth understanding. But how does this transform epistemology? Perhaps you agree that I've shown that the epistemology *of beauty* needs eros. Why does that show that eros is central to epistemology more generally?

It's worth splitting the challenge in two. The first part is about philosophical psychology. It's about which suspensive states play a role in inquiry. Why think that eros is central to noetic inquiry? To be clear, this is not to challenge one of my core claims, which is that eros is a suspensive state that plays an important structural role in (some) inquiry, especially (some) noetic inquiry. Establishing that eros plays this role in inquiry about the traditional sites of beauty is enough to establish this claim. The challenge is about whether eros plays a role in inquiry more broadly. This is not to say that eros plays a role into things other than beauty. My view is that beauty is the proper object of eros; whenever you have fitting eros, you have beauty. So the issue isn't whether we have (fitting) eros with no beauty. The issue is whether eros and thus beauty plays a role in inquiries that are not about traditional sites of beauty—art, the appearance of nature, people etc. As I'll put it, it's about whether eros plays a role in noetic inquiry tout court. I'll call the claim that eros does play this role the Motivation Claim.

The second part of the challenge isn't about philosophical psychology, but epistemology. If the Motivation Claim is true, then noetic inquiry about all sorts of things is driven by a state that aims at understanding the beauty of its objects. But, obviously enough, very often inquiries are not driven to merely by the aim of understanding the *beauty* of the object. I don't want to merely understand the beauty of physics, I want to understand *physics* itself. In order for eros to be a good guide to this, it seems like there must be a connection between the beauty of physics and physics itself.[29] (This is true for the traditional sites of beauty, too. I don't just want to understand the beauty of the painting (or person!); I want to understand the painting itself.) Let's call this the Beauty Claim. The Motivation Claim could be true but the Beauty Claim false (and vice versa). In that case, our noetic inquiries into the nature of the objects themselves would be guided by a drive to understand their beauty without a epistemically kosher relation between the two.

To begin, remember that Plato endorses both the Motivation Claim and the Beauty Claim. He does think that beauty plays an important role in noetic inquiry tout court. In fact, he thinks that answering the call of beauty is essential to the path of the philosopher, essential to understanding the world. He plausibly holds this view because he (i) maintains that the world itself is, as a matter of essence, good, (ii) that this goodness in some sense *grounds* reality, and (iii) that beauty is the good made manifest.[30] Since the world is, as a matter of essence, good,

[29] Note that this just says there needs to be *a* connection. The Beauty Claim on its own doesn't say the connection needs to be metaphysical. We'll see why this is important in a moment.

[30] See especially *Republic*, Book VI, especially 508-509.

and this goodness grounds reality, one can understand the world only by understanding the good. But the good is invisible in a particular way. To repeat Murdoch's metaphor, goodness is written in small, perhaps invisible, letters. Beauty, on the other hand, is the good made manifest; it's the good in all caps. It thus provides a guide to understanding the goodness of the world, which one must do in order to understand the world (and to develop virtue).

This view is surely to seem quite metaphysically extravagant to many readers of this essay. It certainly seems like it conflicts with modern(ist) sensibilities. It is worth remembering, however, that Plato has a noetic conception of beauty and goodness. Beauty and goodness are essentially tied to *intelligibility*. The world's goodness consists in its intelligibility; it is grounded in the good because the good makes it intelligible. Beauty makes this intelligibility at least partially manifest. Eros is a passionate reaction to a glimpse of this intelligibility, and its aim is to understand it. This makes it clear why Plato thinks eros is central to noetic inquiry tout court. It also makes clear how Platonic Keats famous lines are.[31]

> Beauty is truth,
> truth beauty—that is all
> Ye know on earth,
> and all ye need to know.

As it happens, the history of science and its philosophy is replete with allegiances to at least fragments of this Platonic view. While the Good is usually left out, the idea that the world's beauty is tied to its intelligibility is a common view throughout the history of science, as is the view that science itself is motivated by the drive to understand this beauty. Most of Chandrasekhar (1987) is designed to support his declaration that 'in the arts as in the sciences, the quest is after the same elusive quality: beauty' (52).

Before moving onto the most sustained discussion of this by an eminent scientist, here are a smattering of endorsements of the Beauty Claim or the Motivation Claim (all from Chandrasekhar (1987) except for the Alexander von Humboldt, which is quoted and discussed in Löwenberg et al. (1873)).[32]

> **Humboldt:** With the simplest statements of scientific facts there must ever mingle a certain eloquence. Nature herself is sublimely eloquent. The stars as they sparkle in the firmament fill us with delight and ecstasy, and yet they all move in orbits marked out with mathematical precision.

> **Kepler (at least according to Heisenberg and Pauli):** Mathematics is the archetype of the beautiful.

[31] At the end of "Ode on a Grecian Urn". See, for example, Keats (2008).

[32] In the next section we will encounter some other eminent scientists who also endorse these claims.

> **David Hilbert discussing Minkowski:** Our Science, which we loved above everything, had brought us together. It appeared to us as a flowering garden... we... liked to seek out hidden trails and discovered many an unexpected view which was pleasing to our eyes; and when the one pointed it out to the other, and we admired it together, our joy was complete.

> **Hermann Weyl, quoted by Freeman Dyson:** My work always tried to unite the true with the beautiful; but when I had to choose one or the other, I usually chose the beautiful.[33]

> **Heisenberg to Einstein:** If nature leads us to mathematical forms of great simplicity and beauty—by forms I am referring to coherent systems of hypothesis, axioms, etc.—to forms that no one has previously encountered, we cannot help thinking that they are true, that they reveal a genuine feature of nature...You must have felt this too: the almost frightening simplicity and wholeness of the relationships which nature suddenly spreads out before us and for which none of us was in the least prepared.

Worthy of singling out is Henri Poincaré, who eloquently endorsed both ideas in Poincaré (1914). First, on the question of motivation.

> The Scientist does not study nature because it is useful to do so. He studies it because he takes pleasure in it; and he takes pleasure in it because it is beautiful. If nature were not beautiful, it would not be worth knowing and life would not be worth living.

And then on the question of the relationship between beauty and the world.

> I mean the intimate beauty which comes from the harmonious order of its parts and which a pure intelligence can grasp.

These sentiments are expanded upon very explicitly in Werner Heisenberg's "The Meaning of Beauty in Exact Natural Science" (in Heisenberg (1974)). Here Heisenberg credits Plato (and Plotinus) for picking up on the essence of modern science by positing a connection between an ideal mathematical reality and the objects of ordinary experience.[34] Heisenberg follows Plato in thinking that that this ideal reality is essentially beautiful, and that this beauty is a guide to understanding. He concludes the essay by endorsing the Beauty Claim.

[33] Indeed, as Chandrasekhar points out, in two famous instances Weyl stuck with a beautiful theory that seemed to be empirically refuted that turned out to be true. See (Chandrasekhar, 1987, pgs. 65-6).

[34] Cf. Burnyeat (2000)

> And let us realize that beauty is—in exact natural science just as in the arts—the most important source of illumination and clarity.

He also explicitly follows Plato on the role of eros, although he does not use the word. After detailing examples of beauty playing a role the science of Kepler, Pauli, and airplane engineering, he asks 'What shines up in such structures so that the great interconnection can be known, even before it is rationally understood in detail?' The answer, of course, is beauty, and the reaction we have to it that allows us to understand, is eros. He goes so far as paraphrasing the *Phaedrus*.[35] Here is what Plato says at 251a, speaking of the reaction of 'a recent initiate' to beauty.

> when he sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him...then he gazes at him with the reverence due a god, and if he weren't afraid people would think him completely mad.

This is the beginning of the growth of the lover's wings that will take them to reality—i.e., to understanding. This process is marked by feelings of pain and pleasure. Plato puts it this way

> From the outlandish mix of these two feelings—pain and joy—comes anguish and helpless raving: in its madness the lover's soul cannot sleep at night or stay put by day; it rushes, yearning, wherever it expects to see the person who has that beauty.

This is the madness (at least this madness in its purified philosophic version) discussed above, the one given by the gods so that philosophy be possible. Plato sums up the long description by saying 'this is the experience we humans call love.'

Heisenberg himself describes an experience similar to Plato's recent initiate when discussing one of his major breakthroughs in quantum theory (in (Heisenberg, 1971, pg 61); I've bolded the key sentences).

> Within a few days more, it had become clear to me what precisely had to take the place of the Bohr-Sommerfeld quantum conditions in an atomic physics working with none but observable magnitudes. It also became obvious that with this additional assumption, I had introduced a crucial restriction into the theory. Then I noticed that there was no guarantee that...the principle of the conservation of energy would apply...Hence I concentrated on demonstrating that the conservation law held; and one evening I reached the point where I was ready to determine the individual terms in the energy table [Energy Matrix] ... **When the first terms seemed to accord with the energy principle, I became rather excited, and I began to make countless arithmetical errors.**

[35] He claims to quote the *Phaedrus*, but the passage given isn't exactly found in the text.

> As a result, it was almost three o'clock in the morning before the final result of my computations lay before me. The energy principle had held for all the terms, and I could no longer doubt the mathematical consistency and coherence of the kind of quantum mechanics to which my calculations pointed. **At first, I was deeply alarmed. I had the feeling that, through the surface of atomic phenomena, I was looking at a strangely beautiful interior, and felt almost giddy at the thought that I now had to probe this wealth of mathematical structure nature had so generously spread out before me.**

While this is accurately pitched as a description of a breakthrough, it is only a partial breakthrough. It is the sort of breakthrough that fuels eros. It gives him a glimpse of a 'strangely beautiful interior.' At this glimpse, he becomes giddy because it showed him the way towards 'prob[ing] this wealth of mathematical structure nature had so generously spread out' before him.

The foregoing gives us good evidence that many eminent scientists, over the course of many hundreds of years, have accepted at least part of Plato's views. This includes what I dubbed the Beauty Claim above, the claim that the beauty of the world is connected to its intelligibility; it also includes what I called the Motivation Claim, which is the claim that noetic inquiry into the nature of the world is motivated by an interest—an erotic interest!—in the world's beauty. This latter claim is crucial to answering the first part of the challenge. I think that it is clear from the history of science that eros is a core part of scientific noetic inquiry.

But the second part of the challenge remains. While many scientists have accepted the Beauty Claim, this is no guarantee of its truth. And, indeed, I suspect many philosophers will be dubious, perhaps even explaining away its acceptance amongst scientists and earlier philosophers as the product of a misplaced mysticism.

While I cannot hope to fully establish the Beauty Claim, I can chart some of the ways in which it might be true. Simply seeing this should make us more confident that a drive to understand something by understanding its beauty is not a fool's errand.

Start again with Plato's endorsement of what I'll call Platonic Optimism:

> **Platonic Optimism:** Beauty is constitutively connected to the intelligibility of all that is real.

This is what immediately makes eros (correctly) central to any sort of noetic engagement. Of course, it is an extremely bold claim that I cannot hope to defend here. But weaker forms are available and intuitively plausible. For example, Platonic Optimism–Some seems very plausible:

> **Some Platonic Optimism:** Beauty is constitutively connected to the intelligibility of some things.

This claim is, I think, very hard to deny because the nature of many artifacts is constitutively tied to their aesthetic features. Works of art are the most obvious artifacts that are like this, but I think there are others as well. This vindicates Some Platonic Optimism, but not in the most interesting way possible for our purposes. Still, other domains seem plausibly like this, with mathematics being a forerunner. It is hard to deny that mathematics contains a tremendous amount of beauty. The beauty of particular parts of mathematics does not seem to be a contingent aspect of their natures. Nor does it seem unconnected to its intelligibility. This is why so many eminent mathematicians seemingly endorse at least Some Platonic Optimism.

These Platonic claims are claims about the metaphysics of the intelligible. The Beauty Claim could be vindicated by purely epistemic claims. Consider Beauty as Guide:

> **Beauty as Guide:** Understanding the beauty of x is a reliable guide to understanding x.

Again, Beauty as Guide is very plausible when it comes to many artifacts. Further, I take the actual practices of many working scientists to be excellent evidence that it is true about at least some scientific subjects. It is very clear not only that many scientists are driven by eros, but that this *works*. They genuinely do gain understanding about mathematics, physics, chemistry etc through their pursuit of the beauty of those things. To doubt this claim is to be skeptical about their own understanding of what they are up to. Perhaps this skepticism is warranted, but the burden is on the skeptic to debunk the own self-understanding of scientists about their own practice.

A noetic conception of beauty helps explain why Beauty as Guide is plausible for many things, especially once you add that aesthetic properties are always grounded in non-aesthetic properties.[36] On a noetic conception of beauty, beauty is a property of a complex structure. It is a property instantiated only when the parts of something stand in certain relations with each other (if you want to make this more concrete, you can experiment with the old-fashioned view that the relation is harmony). If you think that beauty is always grounded in the non-aesthetic features of the beautiful object, then you get the result that at least some of the features that stand in the relevant relation are non-aesthetic features.

You can vindicate Beauty as Guide as long as you think that those non-aesthetic features are important parts of the intelligibility of the object. This is because, in order to understand the object's beauty, you'll need to explore these non-aesthetic features; in many cases, you'll need to develop (at least some) understanding of them. If you think that these features are important aspects of the intelligibility of the object, then an attempt to understand the beauty of the object brings along understanding of the object itself.[37]

It's important to pre-emptively address two possible confusions. The first is that I am making no claims about the epistemic ramifications of a *theory* being beautiful. There is a healthy

[36] This is a nearly universally held view about the metaphysics of aesthetic properties. See Sibley (1965) for a *locus classicus*.

[37] I think most good art criticism exemplifies these thoughts. For philosophical work that includes such criticism, see Nehamas (2007a)'s discussion of Manet's *Olympia* (cf. Lord (2025)'s discussion of Caravaggio).

debate about whether the beauty of a theory is evidence of its truth.[38] None of the claims discussed in this subsection have a direct bearing on this question. The claims in this section are all about the connection between the beauty of something and its intelligibility. If they are true—especially the Platonic claims—then you might expect the beauty of a theory being evidence of its truth. But I don't think even this much is true, as long as you think there are many different beautiful theories that can make some sense of the things they are theories about. In any case, the question of the evidential value of the beauty of a theory are orthogonal to the claims most important here.

The second possible confusion is more important. I am *not* claiming that inquiry shaped by eros must always *focus* on beauty. When Heisenberg made the breakthroughs described above, he wasn't always focused on the beauty of the quantum world. Most of the time, I presume, he was focused on the mathematics. This does not mean he wasn't driven by eros. He glimpsed the beauty of the quantum world, which led to his passion to understand—led to eros. His eros structured and sustained his inquiry, but this inquiry often focused on the mathematical and physical aspects of the quantum world. The breakthrough he described perhaps sated some of his eros, but also sparked a new love for 'wealth of mathematical structure nature had so generously spread out before [him].'

There is reason for optimism that the two challenges discussed in this section can be met. When it comes to the first, the testimony of many, many researchers suggest that eros does play an important psychological role in many different types of noetic inquiry. Whether they are right to focus on beauty or not, it seems clear that the quest for understanding beauty has played a crucial role in the doxastic lives of many eminent scientists.

The second challenge doubts whether they're right. These doubts are very natural when we focus on the strongest versions of Platonism. Platonic Optimism is a very grand claim. While I hope it is true, I'm not sure how to demonstrate it. Fortunately, though, the second challenge can be weathered with much weaker claims. Even if some intelligibility fails to be constitutively linked to beauty, some very plausibly is. Better still, as long as beauty is noetic, we have good reason to think that exploring the beauty of something is a good way of trying to understand it. Following the path of eros might lead to madness, but such madness can bear noetic fruit.

7 Epistemology and the Rest of Life

Let's return to the philosophical boundary lines. That which lies in epistemology's jurisdiction are the reactions that compete in its rational competitions. Inquisitive states are competitors—they compete with belief in the first competition and the adoption of conceptions in the sec-

[38] See Hossenfelder (2018) for a popular presentation of skepticism in the case of fundamental physics.

ond. Epistemic rationality can require one to be inquisitive rather than believe or adopt a conception.

One upshot of this is that the reasons to be inquisitive are therefore epistemic reasons; they are the reasons that defeat the reasons for belief/adoption when being inquisitive is the only permitted option. These reasons are paradigmatically provided by the fact that something is beautiful, although they can also be provided by mere indicators of beauty. Marcel's eros is rational because he becomes acquainted with the beauty of the scene. The reason to be inquisitive in this way competes against the reasons for the other doxastic and noetic options. In some situations of roughly this type, eros will not be rational. It might no longer be rational for Marcel to love the scene once he formulates his conception of their beauty; this is certainly how he reacts. After reproducing his conception, he says 'I never thought of this page again.'

Those who think that epistemology's jurisdiction is narrowly confined to purely alethic considerations will no doubt balk. There are many places along the route where they can exit. Perhaps the most obvious is my account of the range of suspensive states within the competitions. It is crucial to my argument that there are both inquisitive and agnostic forms of suspension in the competition. Once you allow for this, then it is a short step to non-alethic reasons. Whether to be inquisitive or agnostic is mostly a matter of how *interesting* the question or object is. The beautiful is essentially interesting for reasons laid out above, justifying its very own inquisitive state.

As an epistemologist, I care about the boundary lines, and think the boundaries outstrip the merely alethic. But, to paraphrase Hume, I am first a person amidst my epistemology. The borders are less important than the overall significance of this region of the map to the rest of life.

As we saw above, Plato suggests both that eros is *the* love of the lover of wisdom and that the proper path of eros is the path to virtue. This region is of utmost importance to the Platonic vision. As we saw, key to his thinking about eros' connection to virtue was his view about the beauty of the world itself. A love of beauty leads to virtue through philosophy because philosophy step-wise reveals the beauty of the world, culminating in understanding the good—i.e., virtue.

This metaphysical hopefulness is perhaps hard to sustain these days. The 20th century was a deluge against the idea that the world itself is beautiful. Discoveries in physics arguably upended the idea that the world is ordered in the way needed for its physics to be thoroughly beautiful. After all, some fundamental facts of reality are random; the order in their complexity vanished.[39]

(Of course, a great irony is introduced to the story, given that Heisenberg's project—a project he thought was successful—was precisely to understand this quantum world. He clearly thought that it was no threat to the beauty of the world!)

[39] For a relevant dramatization of this, see Labatut (2021).

Worse still is the breakdown in the order of ethical complexity, with evil as the culmination. The 21st century didn't have a monopoly on evil but did a lot to distill its senselessness. The presence of evil threatens the beauty of the world because it cannot be accounted for in the right way; it is plausibly impossible to understand. It creates a hole in the intelligibility of the world.

This dims the light of Plato's hopeful vision. But it is not to deny that there is plenty of beauty to go around, nor does it deny its potential for positive transformation. Instead of following Plato, we can follow Socrates' gleeful enemy and Plato's reluctant ally, Nietzsche.

> *One thing is needful.*— To "give style" to one's character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye...Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime...In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small ((Nietzsche, 1974, §290)).

Nietzsche's exultation is to make one's life beautiful. Properly engaging with beauty is a way of doing this, as, recall, beauty is self-perpetuating. Eros' aim is not just understanding, but beauty. We give birth to beautiful ideas 'within beauty'. To use Marcel's conclusion one last time: What is hidden, what eros is driven to find, is 'something analogous to a pretty sentence.'[40]

The potential for greatness is there and makes it no wonder that beauty is magnetic. But its pull can lead to dark places. The madness described in the *Phaedrus* is, according to the story, sent from the gods to guarantee that it leads to virtue. But no gods are there to play this role.[41] So the madness of eros can and often does push us to bad places.

A catalog of eros' dangers: The first and most obvious is that the object of one's love might not actually be beautiful. It might fall apart under critical scrutiny, draining it of its mystique. Marcel himself is led down many blind alleys by eros. This is the overarching theme when it comes to his relationships with women. He is bitten by eros towards women over and over, often after only seeing them from afar. This leads to extreme machinations of his imagination, purportedly in the service of developing a conception. These outputs of imagination often come into crashing conflict with reality, leading to disillusionment and unhappiness.[42]

[40] For more on how this can give one's life a certain sort of meaning, and make one, as Diotima claims, immortal, see Lord (2024).

[41] Charity suggests we should see the gods as a metaphor for the beauty of the world. But, as I just suggested, that is also not there to secure the path.

[42] This is not just his experience with women, but also art. Early in the novel, he becomes obsessed with the stage actress 'la Berma.' His imagination carries him too far once again and he is greatly disappointment by a performance. This leads him to begin to think that stage acting is a 'poor and pitiable thing' and that only 'certain tapestries, certain modern paintings' have a 'deep-rooted soul' ((Proust, 1993, pg 39). He comes, though, to revise this view upon seeing Berma again several years later.

A second threat comes from eros' potential to overwhelm us with its passion. Its madness can take over our lives. Again, Marcel's love of various women provides ample examples (not that anyone needs them). But such madness can be directed at less sexual subjects. Einstein and Gödel famously travelled this path together at the end of their lives. Einstein spent decades chasing a unified field theory. This pursuit eroded the quality of his life. This happened as Gödel, by his side, succumbed to a similar madness, eventually starving himself to death. Gödel was a Platonist through and through, buoyed by a faith in the beauty of the world as described by mathematics. Were the world not beautiful, concluded Gödel, 'mathematics would be just an ornament and the real world would be like an ugly body in beautiful clothing.'[43]

By far the most discussed threat of eros is the impossibility of its full success. The great poet of eros, Sappho, described it as 'sweetbitter.'[44] This is because it drives us towards something we do not possess even though it cannot survive this possession. Marcel's way of putting it is that love 'is born, it lives, only for so long as there is something left to conquer. We love only that which we do not wholly possess' ((Proust, 1999, pg 590)). This is born out in our guiding example. As soon as Marcel gets his pretty sentences out, the scene loses its appeal. Once he thinks he has revealed what was concealed from him, his love evaporates.

Andre Weil—the mathematician brother of Simone—once wrote a letter to his sister from prison (where he was for refusing military service).[45] This letter was an attempt to explain to her what his work was about. It became a landmark statement of an incredible research program combining three seemingly distinct fields of mathematics. Andre was clearly driven by eros, by the mysteries concealed in his apprehension of logical space. He wrote that 'the pleasure comes from the illusion and the far from clear meaning.' The sweetness of this drove Weil to incredible heights, but success came with 'melancholy,' for 'once the illusion is dissipated, and knowledge obtained, one becomes indifferent at the same time.' Sweetbitter.

The greatest beauties resist this, by being constant sources of 'illusion and far from clear meaning.' This makes the great beauties constant sources of the distinctive pleasure of eros, but only by guaranteeing that eros will not succeed. The understanding it seeks will always be out of reach.

This means that a life of eros—the life of a lover, an erastēs—is full of Sappho's sweetbitter. It is difficult for the lover to find a certain sort of happiness, a certain sort of contentment. To paraphrase Anne Carson, to be alive in this way makes it difficult to find peace. To be an erastēs is to 'find, lose, demand, obsess, move head slightly closer' (Carson (2016)). Or, as Elisa Gonzalez (Gonzalez (2023)) puts it

> It's hard to make a habit of pure happiness, when there's so much to know.

[43] (Wang, 1997, 151).
[44] See, for example, Sappho (2002).
[45] Weil (2005).

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