

Plato on Eros and Dance

The Symposium

Transl. Benjamin Jowett (1911)

Text 1: On the Nature of Eros (205a–e):

[Diotima to Socrates:] "There is poetry, which, as you know, is complex and manifold. All creation or passage of non-being into being is poetry or making, and the processes of all art are creative; and the masters of arts are all poets or makers. . . . Still," she said, "you know that they are not called poets, but have other names; only that portion of the art which is separated off from the rest, and is concerned with music and metre, is termed poetry, and they who possess poetry in this sense of the word are called poets. . . . And the same holds of love [*eros*]. For you may say generally that all desire of good and happiness is only the great and subtle power of love; but they who are drawn towards him [i.e., love] by any other path, whether the path of money-making or gymnastics or philosophy, are not called lovers—the name of the whole is appropriated to those whose affection takes one form only—they alone are said to love, or to be lovers. . . . [A]nd you hear people say that lovers are seeking for their other half; but I say that they are seeking neither for the half of themselves, nor for the whole, unless the half or the whole be also a good. . . . To which must be added that they love the possession of the good. And not only the possession, but the everlasting possession of the good."

Text 2: Purpose of Eros (206b–211d):

"Then if this be the nature of love, can you tell me further," she said, "what is the manner of the pursuit? what are they doing who show all this eagerness and heat which is called love? and what is the object which they have in view? . . . I will teach you: The object which they have in view is birth in beauty, whether of body or, soul. . . . I mean to say, that all men are bringing to the birth in their bodies and in their souls. There is a certain age at which human nature is desirous of procreation—procreation which must be in beauty and not in deformity. . . . For love, Socrates, is not, as you imagine, the love of the beautiful only [but the] love of generation and of birth in beauty." . . . [Socrates:] "But why of generation?" "Because to the mortal creature, generation is a sort

of eternity and immortality," she replied; "and if, as has been already admitted, love is of the everlasting possession of the good, all men will necessarily desire immortality together with good: Wherefore love is of immortality." . . .

"Marvel not," she said, "if you believe that love is of the immortal, as we have several times acknowledged; for here again, and on the same principle too, the mortal nature is seeking as far as is possible to be everlasting and immortal: and this is only to be attained by generation, because generation always leaves behind a new existence in the place of the old. Nay even in the life, of the same individual there is succession and not absolute unity: a man is called the same, and yet in the short interval which elapses between youth and age, and in which every animal is said to have life and identity, he is undergoing a perpetual process of loss and reparation—hair, flesh, bones, blood, and the whole body are always changing. Which is true not only of the body, but also of the soul, whose habits, tempers, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, never remain the same in any one of us, but are always coming and going; and equally true of knowledge, and what is still more surprising to us mortals, not only do the sciences in general spring up and decay, so that in respect of them we are never the same; but each of them individually experiences a like change. For what is implied in the word 'recollection,' but the departure of knowledge, which is ever being forgotten, and is renewed and preserved by recollection, and appears to be the same although in reality new, according to that law of succession by which all mortal things are preserved, not absolutely the same, but by substitution, the old worn-out mortality leaving another new and similar existence behind unlike the divine, which is always the same and not another? And in this way, Socrates, the mortal body, or mortal anything, partakes of immortality; but the immortal in another way. Marvel not then at the love which all men have of their offspring; for that universal love and interest is for the sake of immortality. . . .

"Those who are pregnant in the body only, betake themselves to women and beget children—this is the character of their love; their offspring, as they hope, will preserve their memory and giving them the blessedness and immortality which they desire in the future. But souls which are pregnant—for there certainly are men who are more creative in their souls

than in their bodies conceive that which is proper for the soul to conceive or contain. And what are these conceptions?—wisdom and virtue in general. And such creators are poets and all artists who are deserving of the name creator. . . .

"He who from these ascending under the influence of true love, begins to perceive that beauty, is not far from the end. And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is. This, my dear Socrates," said the stranger of Mantinea [i.e., Diotima], "is that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute; a beauty which if you once beheld, you would see not to be after the measure of gold, and garments, and fair boys and youths, whose presence now entrances you; and you and many a one would be content to live seeing them only and conversing with them without meat or drink, if that were possible—you only want to look at them and to be with them."

The Republic

Transl. Tom Griffith (2000)

Text 3 (Book III, 401b-403c):

[Socrates:] 'Is it only the poets we have to keep an eye on, then, compelling them to put the likeness of the good nature into their poems, or else go and write poems somewhere else? Don't we have to keep an eye on the other craftsmen as well, and stop them putting what has the wrong nature, what is undisciplined, slavish or wanting in grace, into their representations of living things, or into buildings, or into any manufactured object? Anyone who finds this impossible is not to be allowed to be a craftsman in our city. That way our guardians will not be brought up among images of what is bad, like animals put out to graze on bad pasture. We don't want them browsing and feeding each day—taking in a little here and a little there—and without realizing it accumulating a single large evil in their souls. No, we must seek out the craftsmen with a gift for tracking down the nature of what is fine, what has grace, so that our young can

live in a healthy environment, drawing improvement from every side, whenever things which are beautifully fashioned expose their eyes or ears to some wholesome breeze from healthy regions and lead them imperceptibly, from earliest childhood, into affinity, friendship and harmony with beauty of speech and thought.'

'Yes, that would be by far the best way for them to be brought up,' [Glaucón] said.

'Aren't there two reasons, Glaucón, why musical and poetic education [*mousikē*] is so important? Firstly because rhythm and harmonic mode [*harmonia*] penetrate more deeply into the inner soul than anything else does; they have the most powerful effect on it, since they bring gracefulness with them. They make a person graceful, if he is rightly brought up, and the opposite, if he is not. And secondly, because anyone with the right kind of education in this area will have the clearest perception of things which are unsatisfactory—things which are badly made or naturally defective. Being quite rightly disgusted by them, he will praise what is beautiful and fine. Delighting in it, and receiving it into his soul, he will feed on it and so become noble and good. What is ugly he will rightly condemn and hate, even before he is old enough for rational thought. And when rationality does make its appearance, won't the person who has been brought up in this way recognize it because of its familiarity, and be particularly delighted with it?'

'Yes,' he said. 'If you ask me, that certainly is the point of a musical and poetic education [*mousikē*].'

'It's just like learning to read,' I [i.e., Socrates] said. 'We could do it as soon as we realized that there are only a few letters, and that they keep recurring in all the words which contain them. We never dismissed them as unworthy of our attention, either in short words or in long, but were keen to recognize them everywhere, in the belief that we would not be able to read until we could do this.'

'True.'

'Well, then. We shan't recognize copies of the letters—supposing reflections of them were to appear in water, or in a mirror—until we can recognize the letters themselves. Don't both involve the same skill and expertise?'

'Of course they do.'

'And isn't it, as I say, exactly the same with musical and poetic education? There's not the remotest chance of becoming properly educated—either for ourselves or for the people we say we must educate to be a guardian—until we recognize the sort of thing

self-discipline is. Likewise courage, liberality and generosity of spirit, which keep recurring all over the place, plus all the qualities which are closely related to them, and their opposites. We must see the presence both of them and of their likenesses in all the things they are present in, and we must learn never to dismiss them, be the context trivial or important, but to regard them as part of the same skill and expertise.'

'Yes,' he said, 'it is absolutely essential that we learn this.'

'So if someone is lucky enough to possess a soul containing a good character, and a physical form which matches and harmonizes with that character, which is modeled on the same pattern, wouldn't that be the fairest of sights for anyone with eyes to see it?'

'Very much so.'

'But what is fairest is most desirable.'

'Naturally.'

'So the well-educated man will fall in love with people as much like this as possible. But he will not fall in love with someone whose soul and body are out of tune.'

'Not if the defect is in the soul,' he said. 'If it is in the body, he might put up with it, and be prepared to love him.'

'Ah, yes, of course,' I said. 'Am I right in thinking you are—or were—the lover of a boy like this? Anyway, be that as it may, I think you're right. Now, the next question. Does too much pleasure have anything to do with self-discipline?'

'How could it? Too much pleasure makes you as irrational as pain does.'

'Does it have anything to do with any other good quality?'

'No.'

'How about arrogance and indiscipline? Does it have anything to do with those?'

'Yes, everything.'

'Can you think of any pleasure greater or keener than sexual pleasure?'

'No,' he said. 'Nor a more insane pleasure, either.'

'Whereas the right sort of love is by its nature the self-controlled and harmonious love of what is self-disciplined and beautiful?'

'Precisely,' he said.

'So we must not offer the right sort of lover what is insane, or what is related to lack of discipline?'

'No, we mustn't.'

'In which case we mustn't offer him sexual pleasure, must we? Neither lover nor boy must have anything to do with it, if they are loving and being loved in the right way.'

'Good heavens, no, Socrates. We certainly mustn't offer them that.'

'You will pass a law to that effect, presumably, in the city you are founding. A lover can kiss his boy friend, spend time with him and touch him, as he would a son—for beauty's sake, and if the boy says "yes." Apart from that, his relationship with the boy he is interested in should never allow anyone to imagine he has gone any further than that. Otherwise he will be condemned as uneducated, and blind to beauty.'

'Yes, I shall pass a law to that effect,' he said.

'Well, then, do you think our discussion of musical and poetic education has come to an end?' I asked. 'It has certainly ended where it *ought* to end. Music and poetry ought, I take it, to end in love of beauty.'

'I agree,' he said.

Text 4 (Book III, 410e-412a):

[Socrates:] 'The soul of someone who is harmonized in this way is self-disciplined and brave, isn't it?'

[Glaucou:] 'Exactly.'

'So if you give music [*mousikē*] the chance to play upon your soul, and pour into the funnel of your ears the sweet, soft, lamenting modes we were talking about a little while ago, if you spend your whole life humming them, bewitched by song, then the first effect on a nature with any spirit in it is to soften it, like heating iron, making it malleable instead of brittle and unworkable. But if you press on regardless, and are seduced by it, the next stage is melting and turning to liquid—the complete dissolution of the spirit. It cuts sinews out of your soul, and turns it into a feeble warrior.'

'Yes,' he said.

'If you start with a soul which is not very spirited by nature,' I said, 'this happens quite quickly. If you do have a spirited soul, you weaken the spirit and make it unstable—easily roused by trivial things, and as easily extinguished. People like this become hot-tempered and quick to anger rather than spirited; they're full of discontent.'

'They certainly do.'

'What about the person who puts a lot of effort into his physical training, and eats like a horse, but has nothing to do with music [*mousikē*] or philosophy? At

first, because his body is in good shape, isn't he full of decision and spirit? Doesn't he become braver than he was before?'

'Much braver.'

'But suppose that [i.e., working out] is all he does. Suppose he has no contact with the Muse. Even if he did have some love of learning in his soul, it gets no taste of learning or enquiry, and has no experience of rational argument [*logoi*] or any artistic pursuits [*mousiké*]. As a result, since it never wakes up and has nothing to feed on, and since there is nothing to purify [*diakathairomenon*; cf. *katharsis*] its senses, it becomes weak, and deaf, and blind, doesn't it?'

'Yes, it does,' he said.

'Someone like this becomes an enemy of rational argument, I suspect, and an enemy of music and literature. He abandons any attempt at persuasion using rational argument, and does everything with savage violence, and like a wild animal. He lives his life in ignorance and stupidity, without grace or rhythm.'

'Yes,' he said, 'that's exactly what he is like.'

'If you want my opinion, then, the two elements for which some god has given mankind to arts—one musical and poetic, the other physical—seem to be not the mind and the body, or only incidentally, but the spirited part of their nature and the philosophical part, so that these can be brought in harmony with one another through the appropriate tension and relaxation.'

Text 5 (Book IV, 424b-425a):

'To put it briefly, then, the overseers of our city must keep a firm grip on our system of education, protecting it above all else, and not allowing it to be destroyed accidentally. They must reject any radical innovation in physical or musical education, preserving them as far as they can unchanged. They should regard with apprehension anyone who tells them that

The latest song, fresh from the singer's lips,
Has most appeal to men. [Homer, *Odyssey* 1.351]

People who approve of this might easily think the poet meant a new style of song, rather than just new songs. But that is not the sort of thing they should approve of, and they should not think that was what the poet meant. They should beware of new forms of music [*mousikē*], which are likely to affect the whole system of education. Changes in styles of music are

always politically revolutionary. That's what Damon¹ says, and I believe him.'

'In which case, you can count me among the believers as well,' said Adeimantus.

'Presumably this is where we think the guardians should build their watchtower. In music.'

'It's certainly a place where breaking rules can easily become a habit without anyone realizing,' he said.

'Yes, people don't see how breaking rules in the realm of entertainment can do any harm.'

'It can't,' he said, 'except that once the idea of breaking rules has gradually established itself, it seeps imperceptibly into people's characters and habits. From there it brims over, increasing as it goes, into their contracts with one another. And from contracts, Socrates, it extends its course of wanton disruption to laws and political institutions, until it finally destroys everything in private and public life.'

'I see. So that's how it is, isn't it?'

'I think so,' he said.

'In that case, as we were saying at the beginning, our children must have entertainment of a more disciplined kind. When entertainment is undisciplined—and children likewise—it's impossible for the children to grow up into disciplined and responsible men.'

'Of course.'

'If they start off as children with the right sort of entertainments, they will acquire discipline through their musical education. This discipline has the opposite effect on them to the effect you were describing just now. It accompanies them in all their actions, and helps them grow, correcting any part of the city which may earlier have gone wrong.'

Text 6 (Book III, 395b; 399a-c):

[Socrates:] 'So if we stick to our original plan, which was that our guardians should be released from all other occupations, and be the true architects of freedom for our city, and that everything they do must contribute to this end, it is essential that they do not do or imitate [*mimeisthai*] anything else. If they do imitate anything, then from their earliest childhood

¹ Damon, an expert in musicology, was a teacher and advisor of Pericles, one of the most influential Greek politicians who initiated the building project on the Acropolis, including the Parthenon. Socrates' words can also be translated as follows: "change in music presents a global threat. Nowhere do you get perturbations in styles of music without perturbation in the most important social and political *no-moi* [laws]: as Damon says, and I believe him."

they should choose appropriate models to imitate—people who are brave, self-disciplined [*sōphrōn*], god-fearing, free, that sort of thing. . . .¹

[Socrates:] 'I don't know about modes²,' I said. 'Leave me the mode which can most fittingly imitate the voice and accents of a brave man in time of war, or in any externally imposed crisis. When things go wrong, and he faces death and wounds, or encounters some other danger, in all these situations he holds out to the end in a disciplined and steadfast manner. Plus another mode for someone engaged in some peaceful, voluntary, freely chosen activity. He might be trying to persuade someone of something, making some request—praying to a god, or giving instructions or advice to a man. Or just the opposite. He might be listening patiently to someone else making a request, or explaining something to him, or trying to get him to change his mind, and on that basis acting as he thinks best—without arrogance, acting prudently [*sōphrōn*] and calmly in all these situations, and being content with the outcome. These two modes, then. One for adversity and one for freely chosen activity, the modes which will best imitate the voices of the prudent [*sōphrōn*] and of the brave in failure and success. Leave me those.'

Text 7 (Book X, 604b–607a):

[Socrates:] 'Custom says, presumably, that in misfortune the best thing is not to be upset, but to be as calm as possible—for a number of reasons. In the first place, it is not clear how much is good and how much bad in situations of this sort. Second, if we look to the future, it does no good to take things hard. Third, nothing in human affairs is worth taking that seriously. And fourth, grieving gets in the way of the thing which ought, in the situations, to come to our assistance as swiftly as possible.'

'What thing do you mean?' [Glaucón] asked.

'Reflection on what has happened,' I replied. 'People should accept the way things have fallen out the way they accept the fall of the dice, and then make their plans in the way reason prescribes as best for them. They shouldn't spend their time howling, clutching hold of the part which is hurt, like children

² Greek music, similar to architecture, distinguished several harmonic modes [*harmoniai*], which consisted of fixed series of tonal intervals, e.g. the Dorian, Lydian, Phrygian, etc. Different modes went with different poetic genres, occasions, and moods—comparable to our major and minor modes.

who have fallen over. They should always accustom their souls to concentrate straight away on curing and repairing the damaged and injured part. They should use healing to do away with lamentation.'

'Yes,' he said, 'that would certainly be the right attitude to take towards misfortune.'

'So it's the best element, we say, which is prepared to use this kind of rational calculation as a guide.'

'Clearly.'

'Whereas the element which draws us towards mourning and the recollection of our sufferings, which can never get its fill of these things—won't we describe this as irrational, lazy and a friend to cowardice?'

'Yes, we will.'

'This element, the fretful element, is highly susceptible to all sorts of varied imitation [*mimesis*]. The calm, thoughtful character, on the other hand, unchanging and true to itself, is hard to imitate, and not a simple matter to understand if it is imitated—particularly in public, when you get a diverse collection of people in the theater. What is being imitated is quite unfamiliar to them.'

'Absolutely.'

'The imitative poet's nature is obviously not adapted to this element in the soul, nor is his wisdom framed to appeal to it. Not if he's going to be popular with the general public. His concern is with the fretful, variegated character, because that is the one which is easy to imitate.'

'Obviously.'

'So we'd be justified now in taking him and putting him on a par with the painter. His products, like the painter's, are inferior by comparison with the truth, and he resembles him also in associating with an inferior part of the soul, not with the best part. By rights, therefore, we ought not to admit him into a city which is going to be well governed, since it is an inferior part of the soul that he arouses and feeds, and by making this strong destroys the rational part. It's the same with a city. If you give power to those who are bad, and hand the city over to them, you destroy those who are better. In exactly the same way, we shall say, the imitative poet sets up a bad regime in the soul of each individual, gratifying the senseless part of it, the part which cannot distinguish larger from smaller, and which regards the same things at one time as large and at another time as small. He is nothing but an image-maker, and he stands far removed from the truth.'

'He does indeed.'

'However, we haven't yet brought our most serious accusation against imitative poetry. Its ability to corrupt even good people—with a very few exceptions—is surely a disgrace.

'Of course it is, if that really is what it does.'

'Listen, and see what you think. The best of us, I imagine, when we hear Homer or one of the tragic poets imitating some hero in the state of grief, as he drags out a long speech of lamentation, or even breaks into song, or starts beating his breast . . . well, you know how it is. We enjoy it, and surrender ourselves to it. We follow and share the hero's sufferings, treat them as real, and praise as an excellent poet the person who most affects us in this way.'

'Yes, I know how it is. How could I fail to?'

'And yet when some misfortune affects one of us personally, you're aware how we pride ourselves on doing the exact opposite—if we can have the strength to remain silent, and endure. We seem to regard this as men's behavior, and what we praised in the poetic context as women's behavior.'

'Yes, I'm aware of that,' he said.

'Is praise of that sort justified, then—if you see a man behaving in a way you wouldn't dream of behaving yourself, a way you'd be ashamed to behave, and are not repelled by it, but take pleasure in it and praise it?'

'Heavens, no,' he said. 'That kind of praise sounds quite unreasonable.'

'Yes, it does,' I said. 'At least, it does if you look at it like this.'

'Like what?'

'Think about it. Here we have this element which in one situation—in our private misfortunes—is forcibly held in check, though it has this hunger which can only be satisfied by weeping and wholesale lamentation, since these are the satisfactions this kind of thing by its nature desires. Then in another situation the same part is fulfilled and gratified by the poets, and what is by nature the best part of us, inadequately educated by reason or habit, abandons its watch over grieving of that kind. It says the sorrows it is watching are another's, and if someone else, who claims to be a good man, is grieving inappropriately, there is nothing for us to be ashamed of in applauding him and pitying him. We believe there is a positive benefit, which is pleasure, and would not be prepared to lose that by rejecting the whole poem. It is given to few people, I suspect, to work out that the pleasure they take in what happens to others necessarily carries over into what happens to them. If they

allow the faculty of pity to grow strong, but feeding it on the sorrows of others, it is hard to restrain it when it comes to their own sorrows.'

'Very true,' he said.

'The same argument applies to laughter, doesn't it? If there are jokes you wouldn't dream of making yourself, but which you very much enjoy when you hear them in the comic theater, or even in private company—if you don't regard them as the wrong sort of jokes, or hate them, isn't what you are doing the same as with the things you pity? That element in yourself which wanted to make jokes, but which you kept in check by means of reason because you were frightened of being thought a buffoon, you now release. You don't realize that giving it its head in this way results in your playing the comedian, over and over again, in your own life.'

'Exactly.'

'Doesn't it also apply to sex, anger, and all the desires, pains and pleasures in the soul which we say accompany any of our actions? Isn't the effect of poetic imitation on us the same? It feeds and waters these things, when they ought by rights to wither away. And it makes them our rulers, though if we want to be better and happier rather than worse and more wretched, they ought to be ruled by us.'

'I have to agree with you,' he said.

'In that case, Glaucon, when you come across Homer's admirers saying that this is the poet who has educated Greece, that he is worth studying both for our general education and for the management of human affairs, that we should learn from him and follow this poet in the arrangement and conduct of the whole of our own lives, then by all means show them the warmth of friendship and affection. They are, after all, excellent people within their limitations. By all means agree that Homer is highly poetic, and first among tragic writers, but be aware that the only poetry we can accept into our city are hymns to the gods and verses in praise of good man. If you accept the honeyed Muse, in song or poetry, pleasure and pain will be twin kings in your city in place of established custom and the thing which has always been generally accepted as best—reason.'