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Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/0198237928.001.0001>

Published: 1998

Online ISBN: 9780191597800

Print ISBN: 9780198237921

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CHAPTER

3 The Fine and the Beautiful

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/0198237928.003.0004> Pages 58–79

Published: February 1998

Abstract

Considers the role Plato assigns to beauty, and whether for him beauty is connected with what we now call 'aesthetic pleasure'. The Greek *kalon*, often translated as 'beautiful', can also be rendered as 'fine', and applies to a kind of value that is not exclusively aesthetic. A discussion of the dialogue *Hippias Major* reveals many of the connotations of *kalon*. Also looks at Plato's most famous treatment of the topic in Socrates' speech in the *Symposium*. The high value Plato assigns to beauty should not be taken, however, to single out aesthetic value, nor should it be thought that he regards art as any specially privileged source of beauty.

Keywords: [aesthetic pleasure](#), [aesthetic value](#), [beauty](#), [Hippias Major](#), [kalon](#), [Plato](#), [Socrates](#), [Symposium](#)

Subject: [Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art](#), [Ancient Philosophy](#)

Collection: [Oxford Scholarship Online](#)

So far we have seen Plato interested in what the arts contribute to knowledge or goodness. The modern reader, however, will tend to think that a poem can be fine in another way, irrespective of its beneficial effect on someone or its imparting knowledge, and some would say that a kind of pleasure is an essential factor in this. Not all pleasures are intrinsically valuable—some are perhaps not valuable at all—but we may wonder whether Plato acknowledges 'aesthetic pleasure' as something of value which an *alogon pragma* such as poetry or music might afford. There are three questions of interpretation here: (1) Does Plato recognize (under whatever name) something that we would call aesthetic pleasure? (2) Is there room for him to think of it as something valuable? (3) Does he associate aesthetic pleasure or its equivalent particularly with the arts—as opposed to, say, the human body or the multifarious forms of nature?

I shall suggest a qualified affirmative answer to all three questions. But that will still leave philosophical work to do. Even if Plato recognizes the arts as principal providers of aesthetic pleasure, we do not know to what extent that will furnish any defence of them as valuable activities. If 'aesthetic pleasure' in the arts turns out to have a value of its own, it might nevertheless be like the pleasures of playing back-gammon or smelling roses. These, I assume, are valuable in themselves, but are not essential components of the best

kind of life for a human being. Indeed, a life largely organized around attaining these pleasures could seem perversely mis-directed. I shall argue that Plato recognizes the arts as providing aesthetic pleasure, but does not regard their doing so as giving them a prominent place in the best of human lives.

p. 59 'Plato wants to cut art off from beauty, because he regards beauty as too serious a matter to be commandeered by art. . . . Kant, on the other hand, wants to cut beauty off from morals. Kant restricts beauty for the same reason for which Plato restricts art, to get it cleanly out of the way of something more important.'¹ 'He [Plato] never denied the beauty of art. But he asserted that it was less than that of the phenomenal world, and far inferior to that of the world of the intellect.'² These statements reflect the truth that for Plato the arts at best occupy a low rung of something that is the ultimate object of human aspiration, what he calls *to kalon*, or *auto to kalon*, phrases traditionally rendered as 'the beautiful' or 'beauty', 'the beautiful itself' or 'beauty itself'. Many salient examples of things that are *kalos* are indeed beautiful things, and the word in ordinary Greek when applied to people and physical things has a central meaning to do with visual attractiveness.³ Nevertheless *kalos* is a term with a much wider use as well, and is more like 'noble', 'admirable', or 'fine'.⁴ It will pay to remember this, otherwise we run the risk of over-aestheticizing Plato. Inadvertency must not lead us to construe Plato's ultimate aspiration as purely aesthetic;⁵ the highest value is located for him in something more all-embracing, which for now we may call 'fineness itself'. The aesthetic quality which we call 'beauty' is one aspect of fineness, although it is not always separately noticed or valued.

p. 60 But before we ask whether Plato shares 'our' concept of beauty—what do we think beauty is? Collingwood is helpful again for his clarity. He suggests that phrases of the form 'a beautiful X' express 'an attitude of admiration for a thing well done, irrespective of whether that thing is an aesthetic activity, an intellectual activity, or a bodily activity'.⁶ If we adopt Collingwood's view, then *to kalon* is very like beauty, and it makes sense to maintain that 'Plato has a lot to say about beauty, in which he is only systematizing what we find implied in the ordinary Greek use of the word':

To call a thing beautiful in Greek . . . is simply to call it admirable or excellent or desirable. A poem or painting may certainly receive the epithet, but only by the same kind of right as a boot or any other simple artifact. The sandals of Hermes, for example, are regularly called beautiful by Homer, not because they are conceived as elegantly designed or decorated, but because they are conceived as jolly good sandals which enable him to fly as well as walk.⁷

This captures some of the truth about calling a thing *kalos*. But why follow Collingwood and say that the English 'beautiful' is substantially the same? We cannot just stipulate out of existence the understanding of 'beautiful' which gives it a peculiarly aesthetic significance.

It is Kant who has here provided the clearest paradigm for recent aesthetics. Kantian beauty (*das Schöne*) is something we may predicate of any kind of object (it is pointedly not restricted to the arts), but in doing so we always make an evaluation which is expressly neither moral nor utilitarian. The attribution of Kantian beauty depends on the occurrence of a distinct kind of pleasure, which for present purposes we may simply call 'aesthetic pleasure'. In her recent discussion of beauty, written within this Kantian tradition, Mary Mothersill⁸ has argued that the term 'beauty' picks out a concept of aesthetic value of the most general nature, which is a 'standing concept', or one which we could not do without. Beauty, according to her, is a kind of good, which may be found in objects of any sort, and 'is causally linked with pleasure and inspires love'.⁹ Plato pervades Mothersill's discussion, for she thinks that this standing concept of beauty is also his: 'if Plato characterizes as *kalos* such disparate items as youths and maidens, goddesses, horses, lyres, codes of law, this suggests that *kalos* is a good match for the English "beautiful" which has an analogously wide range.'¹⁰ This is not to agree with Collingwood, whose view is that 'beautiful' has this same wide range and does not pick out an aesthetic concept. Mothersill's view is that beauty is the aesthetic concept and has a range analogous to that of *kalos*.

p. 61 The view I develop will be at odds with both Collingwood and Mothersill. I do not accept the bald ruling that 'beautiful' has no aesthetic ↪ connotation, and will, for now, retain it as the term picking out a generic, standing concept of aesthetic value.¹¹ But if this is what our 'beautiful' means, I do not believe that Plato's *kalos* is its straight equivalent. *Kalos* is a much wider term. There are things which are *kalos* because they give aesthetic pleasure—but that is only one species of *kalos*. Mothersill says that poems and sculptures are 'cited as clear . . . instances of beauty' by Plato.¹² Yes, but poems and sculptures may only belong to the sub-species of what is *kalos*-by-giving-aesthetic-pleasure. *Kalos* as such cannot be equated with 'beautiful' in its aesthetic sense.¹³ When in the *Symposium* Plato talks of *to kalon* as the supreme object of love, to which we make a transition from first loving a particular human body that is *kalos*, it is then, I admit, hard to resist using the word 'beauty'. To say that we first love a particular person's physical fineness and ascend to loving fineness itself loses the resonance of Plato's language in that extraordinary passage, and also its sense for us. Yet this does not overturn the view that *kalos* in general is a much wider term than 'beautiful' when the latter is taken as the generic aesthetic predicate.

Returning briefly to the *Gorgias*, we find that Socrates addresses part of our first question—is there aesthetic fineness?—by offering the following account of what is fine:

All fine things, such as bodies, colours, shapes, sounds, practices—do you not call them each fine with reference to something? First of all, for instance, don't you say that fine bodies are fine either because of use, for whatever each of them is useful for, or because of some pleasure, if they give onlookers enjoyment when they look on? . . . And don't you call all the other things fine too in this way—shapes and colours—either because of some pleasure or because of some benefit or because of both? . . . And don't you call sounds and everything to do with music fine in the same way?
(474d3–e5.)

p. 62 There is a case for saying that Plato here acknowledges the existence of aesthetic pleasure in a limited way. The point may be elucidated thus. Colours, shapes, and sounds seem to have been selected as the simplest objects of straightforward sensation or perception, and Plato appears happy to say that there is pleasure in the mere seeing or hearing of them. He recognizes that fineness may be a matter of benefit, or a ↪ matter of both benefit and enjoyment. It may please us to see an object which also is of some use or benefit to us—a well-wrought urn could be fine because of its pleasing contour and also because we usefully store things in it; or (elaborating Plato's example) think of a man with a strong physique who is a fine man because he can help us in adversity, and fine because we enjoy seeing him when he is throwing the discus. (The linkage of 'bodies' with 'giving onlookers enjoyment' suggests an athletic context.) But there is also a pleasure in seeing or hearing things where we may discount benefit altogether. Such things have the kind of fineness which Aquinas (defining beauty) calls 'id cuius apprehensio ipsa placet' ('that of which the apprehension in itself pleases').¹⁴ Such things do not just please us when we apprehend them; rather it is the *very* apprehension of them which pleases. It is this pleasure in seeing or hearing that, in the most minimal sense, we could call an 'aesthetic' pleasure.

This brief passage arguably shows that Plato recognizes aesthetic pleasure in a limited but informative sense. It also suggests answers to the other questions we have raised. Firstly, some of the arts are included among the providers of this kind of pleasure—explicitly 'everything to do with music' (though note that music's fineness may also reside in its being beneficial or of use to us). Secondly, Plato is prepared to include things which give such pleasure among things that are fine. The two points combined allow us to construct the thought that artistic products which give aesthetic pleasure are a species of fine things. We have discovered that Plato comprehends the idea of a positive value in some pleasing works of art, independently of any further use or benefit they may have.

The dialogue of Plato's which takes the fine as its central topic is the *Hippias Major*.¹⁵ Socrates is here in conversation with the sophist Hippias of Elis, who is satirized as superficial, unthinking and self-satisfied.

p. 63 The description of his multi-talented achievements is peppered with ↪ references to his being ‘fine’, his doing things ‘finely’ (*kalōs*), and so on (‘You’re putting fine thoughts in fine words, Hippias’, says Socrates at 282b1). Thus his inability to say what fineness is seems all the more calamitous, though he shares with Ion (who also cuts a fine figure in public) an unawareness of the direction the Socratic manoeuvres are taking. Hippias and Ion each make a claim to ‘speak finely’ about a compendious list of subject-matters, and both claims are coupled with astounding ignorance. There is also an underlying continuity with Gorgias, who is mentioned in *Hippias Major* as ‘the well-known sophist’ (282b4–5), and seems to have provided Hippias with the model for his pompous rhetorical style.¹⁶ With Plato’s *Gorgias* in mind, we can see that Hippias’ early claim to ‘know most finely of men how to pass virtue [*aretē*] on to other people’ (284a2–3) is an obvious target for demolition.¹⁷

When aesthetic pleasure emerges at the end of the dialogue, it is only after many different angles on fineness have been tried. Socrates makes it crystal-clear to us (if not to Hippias) that he seeks an answer to the question ‘what the fine is itself’,¹⁸ and that this is to be distinguished from the question ‘What is a fine thing?’ What Socrates wants is that which *makes* all fine things fine, understood in a constitutive rather than a causal sense: What constitutes the fineness which all fine things have?¹⁹ The dialogue puts the same point by asking for ‘that because of which fine things are fine’ or ‘that by which fine things are fine’. The answers Hippias first gives confirm the range of the term *kalos*: ‘A fine girl is a fine thing’ (287e4); ‘the fine is just gold’ (289e3); and ‘it is always finest . . . to be rich, healthy, and honoured by the Greeks, to arrive at old age, to make a fine memorial to his parents when they die, and to have a fine, grand burial from his own children’ (291d9–e2). The last of these is clearly not an aesthetic fineness. The first is probably not, if ‘a fine girl’ is fine because she is desired (or is human beauty *always* aesthetic?). In the example of gold the claim that ‘wherever that is added, even if it was seen to be foul before, it will be seen to be fine when it has been adorned with gold’ (289e4–6) may more readily ↪ suggest that Hippias has an aesthetic value in mind—though even here nothing necessitates an exclusively aesthetic reading.

The example Socrates throws back at him is Pheidias’ monumental statue of Athena inside the Parthenon. If gold is truly that which, by being ‘added’, makes all fine things fine, the great Pheidias must have been ignorant of fineness, and hence a ‘bad craftsman [*dēmiourgos*]’. Why? ‘The point is . . . that Pheidias didn’t make Athena’s eyes out of gold, nor the rest of her face, nor her feet, nor her hands—as he would have done if gold would really have made them be seen to be finest—but he made them out of ivory’ (290b2–5). Hippias, unruffled, replies that ivory is fine too. But if it is gold *and* ivory that are fine and make things fine, why did the sculptor construct the middles of Athena’s eyes out of stone? The truth is that properties which make something fine can equally make something else foul. (The same properties could make something else simply lack fineness—a distinct way of failing. An Athena with golden eyes and ivory robes might have been an abomination, but it might simply have been a flop.) Any of the properties mentioned makes things fine, then, only when it is appropriate. Another example of the same kind is the stirring spoon for a bean soup: should it be made of gold or of figwood? If the figwood spoon is finer, then once again gold is not what makes all fine things fine. Hippias’ surprise at the demeaning turn the conversation suddenly takes here is a well-worked piece of comedy (290d7–e1). But the same transition may have its point for us too: splendid aesthetic fineness is not the exclusive topic of discussion. Fine pots and spoons are fine things, even though among fine things they are not especially fine, as Hippias recognizes in an earlier remark.²⁰

This discussion has come nowhere near defining *auto to kalon*. Hippias has merely given examples of things which are fine, and has chosen things each of which can in some way be seen to lack fineness: a fine girl is not fine in comparison with a goddess, not all applications of gold produce fine objects, and the supposedly fine life Hippias describes, including burying one’s parents, would not be fine for someone like Achilles whose father was immortal.²¹ We shall not discover what ↪ the fine itself is until we can locate something strictly or completely fine, something for which there is no comparison, use, instance—in short, no way at all—in which it can be seen *not* to be fine.²² In pursuit of this, Socrates and Hippias try out other evaluative

notions: the appropriate, the useful, and the beneficial—but each fails in turn to provide a definition of the fine itself, whereupon Socrates proclaims himself ‘stuck’, in a state of *aporia*.

It is now that aesthetic fineness seems to provide a way out: is the fine after all ‘what is pleasant through sight and hearing’?

If whatever makes us be glad, not with all the pleasures, but just those through hearing and sight—if we call *that* fine, how do you suppose we'd do in the contest?

Men [i.e. people: *anthrōpoi*] when they're fine anyway—and everything decorative, pictures and sculptures—these all delight us when we see them, if they're fine. Fine sounds and music altogether, and speeches and storytelling have the same effect. (297e5–298a5.)

p. 66 Obviously we are treading the same terrain as in *Gorgias* 474d, discussed above. But music is the only art mentioned by name in the *Gorgias* passage—now alongside music we find two species of visual art, and story-telling. This passage in *Hippias Major* is thus significant for uniting disparate arts under a single conception of fineness whose defining feature is pleasure through sight and hearing. Paintings, sculptures, speeches (if that is the correct translation of *logoi*²³), story-telling (*muthologiai*), and all of that general class of human artefacts which count as ‘decorations’²⁴ are put together with music as fine in the same way. We may note further that *mousikē*, translated above as ‘music’, often means just music, but in some contexts, such as the extended discussion of education in *Republic* Books 2 and 3, it is a seamless whole which includes music among a larger group of arts that have to do with sound, rhythm, song, and speech. The concatenation of ‘fine sounds and music altogether, and speeches and storytelling’ suggests this sense here. Some of the things listed are not art products (‘people’, recalling the ‘bodies’ in the *Gorgias*, and ‘sounds’, which perhaps embrace more than the artistic *mousikē*). Yet the passage shows that the products and practices of the arts are things Plato finds it natural to associate with aesthetic pleasure, and that for this purpose they form a cohesive group.

Placing the unified branch of ‘music altogether’ side by side with the other obvious grouping of all decoration, painting, and sculpture, we have arts pleasing to the sense of hearing, and arts pleasing through sight. But that these *two* groups of arts are expected to cohere stores up trouble, and allows the definition of the fine as ‘what is pleasant through hearing and sight’ to fail on a technicality. For what, according to this definition, is the *one* characteristic which all fine things share in, and which makes them fine? It is not the sheer characteristic of giving rise to pleasure, since there are pleasures which the definition excludes: ‘what is pleasant to the other senses . . . food and drink, what goes with making love, and all the rest of that sort of thing’ (298d8–e2). These are undeniably pleasant things, but

anyone in the world would laugh at us if we called it not *pleasant to eat* but *fine*, or if we called a pleasant smell not *pleasant* but *fine*. And as for making love [*ta peri ta aphrodisia*], everybody would fight us; they'd say it is most pleasant, but that one should do it, if he does it at all, where no one will see, because it is the foulest thing to be seen. (299a1–6.)

Eating and smelling involve lowly pleasures which are just not admirable or interesting enough to be judged ‘fine’. Things to do with *ta aphrodisia* are refused the title because they are foul to be seen, confirming again that a thing's having an admirable outward appearance will always be relevant to whether it is *kalos*.

Not everything pleasant is fine. So, if it is not being pleasant *per se* that provides the single definition of the fine, what is it? Here is the difficulty. What is it that is common between, say, a painting the seeing of which pleases us, and a melody the hearing of which pleases us? It is not that both please through sight, nor that both please through hearing (299e2–300a3). Nor is it true of each that it is pleasant through sight and hearing. Yet what is true of both of two things, Socrates insists, really must be true of each: if both the

p. 67 painting and the melody \hookrightarrow please by being *F*, then the painting is *F* and the melody is *F*. On these grounds the definition fails. Socrates seems to become more interested in a tortuous piece of logical theorizing than in pursuing fineness, even though something akin to Aquinas' definition beckons: the fine is what pleases in the very apprehension of it—with some suitable qualification on what counts as 'apprehension', if one can be found.

Stuck with 'pleasure through sight' and 'pleasure through hearing', Socrates at least asks whether there is any overarching common feature, and he answers that 'they are the most harmless pleasures and the best' (303e1–5). He then strangely interprets his own remark as saying that 'beneficial pleasure' is the fine (303e9). 'Beneficial pleasure' excludes (*contra Gorgias* 474d) both the merely pleasing and the merely useful, leaving only the category of things which are called fine because of pleasure and benefit. It would rule out the fineness of 'purely aesthetic pleasure'. However, this interesting final development is curtailed because of the problems encountered earlier over defining the fine in terms of the beneficial. The dialogue ends with Hippias re-asserting his Gorgianic claim that one should stick to 'presenting a speech well and finely, in court or council or any other authority' (304a7–b1) and walk off with the rewards. Socrates counters with the traditional Socratic worry, addressed first and foremost to himself: 'How will you know whose speech—or any other action—is finely presented or not, when you are ignorant of the fine? And when you're in a state like that, do you think it's any better for you to live than die?' (304d8–e3.)

Having acknowledged the existence of aesthetic pleasure, and having located it substantially within the group of activities which we call 'the arts', Socrates has at last confronted the question: What is it about just these pleasures that is peculiarly fine? It is disappointing that he rejects the only answer he thinks of—but his formulation of that answer itself is perplexing. For it would be stretching things to the point of incredulity if we were expected to equate 'most harmless' (or 'least harmful') with 'most beneficial'. My examples of smelling a rose or playing backgammon show this: they may well provide pleasures which are among the most harmless, but it is still an open question whether these pleasures are among the most beneficial, or are beneficial at all. In the *Gorgias* Plato presented the line that public performance of instrumental music, dithyrambs, and tragedy does the audience no good whatever, but *merely* serves to give them pleasure. Which is the more plausible defence against this line: that the pleasure provided by \hookrightarrow the arts is fine because it is harmless, or that it is fine because it is beneficial?²⁵

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We have so far met no evidence that Plato considers aesthetic pleasure—to the extent that he recognizes it—a harmful thing. Reflect, however, that a sweet-smelling plant can be poisonous. Its smell would not be a bad thing, but its being poisonous *and* sweet-smelling would make it all the more dangerous. This, I think, is how Plato comes to view some of the arts. Good poetry which pleases us when we hear it is *eo ipso* a fine thing—no need to deny that. But until we have asked how it stands with relation to knowledge, learning, and human excellence, we have not said anything particularly important. In the same vein, it is doubtful whether a friend of the arts would wish to take a stand on the 'pleasure through sight and hearing' which Plato acknowledges, for it is a pretty flimsy affair. Is the value of attending a recital of Homer or a Sophocles drama to be found in the pleasure of sight and hearing? It is still unclear what the question means, but what is good about these occasions—if anything is—cannot be just that they look and sound pleasant. How could we ignore the thoughts with which the poet engages our imaginations and our emotions, seeming to teach us something about life and about ourselves? These are surely where a friend of the arts would begin.²⁶ Thus it becomes plausible that the kind of 'aesthetic pleasure' Plato recognizes is indeed only a small portion of fineness, which in itself is insufficient to make the arts worthy of our highest aspirations.

In the much later dialogue *Philebus* Plato comes close to a positive notion of aesthetic pleasure, but very little that is 'artistic' appears to be covered by it. The great distinction which divides the pleasures here is that of the pure and the mixed. Mixed pleasures contain, or depend on, some form of pain or distress, while pure pleasures do not. The pleasures to be taken in some kinds of beauty are 'quite unlike those of

p. 69 scratching', for instance (*Phil.* 51d1). Pleasure in scratching depends ↪ on the distress of the itch that is relieved. But some pleasures in colour, shape, and sound are not at all of this nature:

By 'beauty of shape' I don't mean what most people would understand by it—I am not thinking of animals or certain pictures, but, so the thesis goes, a straight line or a circle and resultant planes and solids produced on a lathe or with ruler and square. . . . On my view these things are not, as other things are, beautiful (*kala*) in a relative way, but are always beautiful in themselves, and yield their own special pleasures quite unlike those of scratching. I include colours, too, that have the same characteristic. . . . With sounds, it is the smooth clear ones I am thinking of, ones that produce a single pure tune (*melos*), and are beautiful not just in a certain context but in themselves—these and their attendant pleasures. (51c1–d9.)

As elsewhere, a particular kind of fineness is to be equated with what gives pleasure to sight and hearing.²⁷ But Plato takes a step nearer to a modern notion of 'aesthetic' pleasure when he rules out any admixture of distress. For this, by implication, rules out any admixture of desire. A sound might give pleasure if it was the voice of one's beloved that one had longed to hear, or the bell ringing at the end of a tedious school day—but such pleasures in sounds are conditional on a prior lack. If the perception of a sound or shape satisfies a particular desire, and is pleasurable because of its so doing, Plato will count the pleasure not as 'pure', but as the replenishment of a prior deprivation. This is, I think, the best interpretation of what Plato intends by saying that shapes and sounds are 'beautiful not in a relative way', 'not just in a certain context but in themselves', and that they 'yield their own special pleasures'.²⁸

p. 70 Plato also rules out of consideration 'what most people would understand' by beauty of shape, namely animals (living things, humans included, presumably), and pictures. Why is this? A painting which depicts something is liable to give pleasure—so why not a 'pure' pleasure? Schopenhauer complains of over-naturalistic nudes and paintings of oysters and herrings which engage the appetites, saying that when this happens 'purely aesthetic contemplation is at once abolished'.²⁹ Can Plato be thinking that all depiction engages desires or emotions concerning the depicted object? The pleasure in the picture would then not be a pleasure 'all of its own', and the picture would be a fine one only relative to our attitudes towards things of the kind depicted. The reference to the beauty of living things may also trade on the same idea: living things are like pictures in that they excite desires and emotions, so that we cannot appreciate their beauty 'pure', as we can that of a geometrical construction.³⁰

It is hard to know where Plato thinks of his examples of 'pure' pleasure in the beautiful occurring. They seem to apply to human ventures that are artistic in the broad sense: his geometrical figures, for example, are 'produced' (though in fact, as far as the argument goes, they might just as well be discovered in nature). But a vast volume of artistic productions will be excluded from this category. No representation will give 'pure' pleasure. Nor, we assume, will 'expressive' modes, rhythms, and texts, which will be beautiful because of the emotional character which they 'imitate' and which they are liable eventually to set up in the listener.³¹ Plato is seeking visible and audible forms which are objects of pleasure not because they are parts of an artistic structure, but because of what they are, regardless of context. Very little of what is fine in the arts, in his understanding or in ours, will therefore be included under the heading of pure pleasure.

Plato has already claimed earlier in the *Philebus* that the pleasure we take in tragedy and comedy is 'mixed'. It does not, however, have exactly the same analysis as the pleasure in scratching. There, a state was pleasurable only because it brought the cessation of a prior distressing state. In watching a tragedy, it is rather that *at the same time* ↪ we feel distress and pleasure. 'The audience at a tragedy actually enjoy their tears' (48a5–6). Plato continues to assume that distress in the audience is genuine. Given that premiss, no one would enjoy tragedy in the same way if the events were depicted so as to *avoid* distress! The whole point of a tragedy—and of why we enjoy it—would be lost. Our liking for portrayals of the painful is puzzling.³² Plato offers a hint of a general explanation when he says that many emotions which are forms of distress—

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anger, fear, yearning, sorrow, love, envy, malice—turn out to be ‘imbued with an unexpected degree of enjoyment’ (47e5). If sorrow and fear in real life can be tinged with pleasure, perhaps pleasure in a depiction of the fearful and sorrowful is only what psychology would predict, after all. But there is clearly no likelihood of tragedy's proving an object of ‘pure’ pleasure in the sense which Plato goes on to delineate. Pleasure in comedy, too, depends on our having certain emotions. Plato argues that we must feel malice towards a character whom we laugh at as an object of ridicule, and (less convincingly) that malice is in itself a distressing emotion. Therefore, our pleasure in laughing at a comedy is also mixed with distress (48a8–50a9). Indeed, wherever emotions are involved, pure pleasure is not to be found. ‘In dirges, tragedies, and comedies, not only on the stage, but in the whole tragi-comedy of life, distress and pleasure are blended with each another’ (50b1–4). We might observe that this idea of a ‘pure’ pleasure embodies something of a flight from life itself.

Well, as Socrates might say, all that is fine . . . but aren't we forgetting something else that someone once said about *to kalon*? At the climax of his literary masterpiece, the *Symposium*, Plato has Socrates relate the wise words which Diotima, a woman of Mantinea, supposedly addressed to him, revealing an absolute beauty as the supreme object of love. The whole dialogue is devoted to love, evoking and portraying it as well as attempting to define it. What is loved is what is *kalos*, and in this context, as I have conceded, we can scarcely help thinking of beauty. Because love is the topic, we meet no soup-ladles, pots, or sandals, however fine. Perhaps more surprising is that in Diotima's account of the lover's ascent to beauty itself, the fine objects of love encountered on the way include no paintings, sculptures, music, story-telling—nothing artistic. Despite Plato's poetic writing in this work, and the inclusion in the cast-list of a comic and a tragic poet—Aristophanes and Agathon, each of whom speaks with eloquence—we learn little concerning the arts from the explicit content of the *Symposium*. Rhetoric is given full rein but then put in its place: when Socrates is called upon to take his turn at speaking about love, he first subjects the previous speaker, Agathon, to a cross-examination. It is agreed that Agathon spoke finely, in a spectacular rhetorical style which reminded Socrates of Gorgias.³³ But Socrates draws a sharp contrast between two activities, namely speaking finely (*kalōs*) and speaking the truth (the former possible on Gorgias' theory, the latter not). He purportedly refutes one of Agathon's statements—so what Agathon said was not the truth, and he did not know what he was talking about—‘still, you did speak finely, Agathon’ (201c1). Fineness masks falsity: rhetoric is, once again, a mere image in words.

Once launched into his retelling of Diotima's teachings, Socrates brings forward the new definition of love as ‘desire for the perpetual possession of the good’ (206a11–12). The argument requires the replacement of ‘beautiful’ by ‘good’, which is simply achieved by Diotima's saying we may ‘change terms and substitute *agathos* for *kalos*’ (204e1–3). This makes the class of things that are *agathos* and the class of things that are *kalos* coincident, the terms being ‘interchangeable . . . but not synonymous’.³⁴ Being fine is one thing, being good another, but still all and only good things are fine things. So if a poem or a painting is fine (perhaps by being pleasing to see or hear), then it cannot help being in the class of good things. But we should not assume that this settles very much about the value of the arts. Agathon's speech was fine. It was beautiful. But for whom and in what way would Plato regard it as good? It appealed to (persuaded? deceived?) the gathering, but was based on a falsehood. Agathon's or anyone's tragedies, similarly, according to the *Gorgias*, may be as fine as they like, but in fact benefit no one in the respects that matter to Plato. Both before and after³⁵ the *Symposium* Plato thinks that what presents itself appealingly may fail to be good in important ways and may even be harmful to those whom it charms.

Have we in Diotima's speech at last struck an account which will place artistic products firmly among the good things towards which human beings should aspire? Diotima assigns a role to poets and poetry when she talks of the offspring of the soul rather than the body. The motivation of all *erōs* is procreative, it desires to generate something new. This is woven in with the notion that all humans desire immortality, and the original strand which says that love is love of the beautiful. (‘From fairest creatures we desire increase,|

That thereby beauty's Rose might never die.') The aim of love is 'to procreate and bring forth in beauty'. Thus the happiness we seek in possessing beauty is the kind of immortality we think may be provided by producing offspring—'the nearest thing to perpetuity and immortality that a mortal being can attain'. It is only 'in' beauty that we wish to procreate.³⁶ While physical intercourse and procreation provide the context for the ordinary understanding of *erōs*, Diotima's account uses the physical as a metaphor for something more general. The same impulse to generate can show itself in spiritual form, and is in Plato's eyes clearly superior when it does so. Without having to have 'recourse to women' one can seek out a beautiful companion with a beautiful soul and with him generate 'children of the soul' which really can last forever. What is the offspring of the soul?

It is wisdom and virtue [*aretē*] in general; of this poets and such craftsmen [*dēmiourgoi*] as have found out some new thing may be said to be begetters; but far the greatest and fairest branch of wisdom is that which is concerned with the due ordering of states and families, whose name is moderation and justice. (209a3–8.)

p. 74 Poets rank only with inventive producers in general, and can claim to do nothing so fine as lawgivers—that said, Diotima is prepared to give ↪ poets credit as begetters of wisdom and virtue (or excellence). Homer and Hesiod feature prominently, alongside the lawgivers of Sparta and Athens, Lycurgus and Solon, in a resounding defence of the superiority of non-physical generation, whose children

surpass human children by being immortal as well as more beautiful. Everyone would prefer children such as these to children after the flesh. Take Homer, for example, and Hesiod, and the other good poets; who would not envy them the children that they left behind them, children whose qualities have won immortal fame and glory for their parents? . . . and so it is in many other places with other men . . . who by their many fine actions have brought forth good fruit of all kinds; not a few of them have even won men's worship on account of their spiritual children, a thing which has never yet happened to anyone by reason of his human progeny. (209c6–e4.)

Something is seriously awry here. The depreciation of children as merely 'human' is startling. The pretension to know that the *Iliad* and *Works and Days* are finer than any human child is unexplained. If fathers are not worshipped for producing their offspring, the reason is surely not that the product is generally shoddy and liable to die. A further problem is this: How do the poets fit into the rest of Diotima's picture? 'In' what beauty did Homer generate his long-lived children?³⁷ Even if the aim of his making poetry was to seek a kind of immortality, what was the beautiful object he loved and from which he desired increase? We are given no clue to this. The speech concurs with the standard admiration of good poets for their production of works which are fine and can endure far longer than a human life. ('So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, | So long lives this . . .'.) Being a poet ranks higher than having children. But Diotima's positive role for poetry does not attach to it on account of 'aesthetic pleasure'. Poetry is fine here because it gives rise to wisdom and excellence—a highly conventional thought which has been challenged by the Socrates of earlier dialogues, and which the Socrates of the *Republic* will deny outright. The thought is not explained or developed further in the *Symposium*.

p. 75 Later there is another slight hint of a new view about poetry, but arguably it turns out to be spurious. After Socrates' speech, and after the speech of his lover, Alcibiades, comes a brief evocative picture of the dying hours of the all-night party, with Socrates still trying to ↪ persuade his poetic co-symposiasts of some point about tragedy, comedy, and *technē*. ('They were giving way to his arguments, which they didn't follow very well, and nodding. Aristophanes fell asleep first, and when it was fully light Agathon followed him' (223d6–8).) Here is what was going on in the small hours:

The main point was that Socrates was compelling them to admit that the man who knew how to write a comedy could also write a tragedy, and that someone who by *technē* was a tragic writer was

capable of being also a comic writer. (223d2–6.)

Now if there were after all a genuine all-embracing poetic *technē*, we could begin to imagine how poetry might be what Diotima said, something genuinely productive of excellence and wisdom, something more like medicine or lawgiving. Dover remarks: ‘the argument, strikingly unlike what is said by Socrates in *Ion* 531e–534e, is not developed elsewhere in Plato, and reconstruction of the form it might take is a useful exercise for students of ancient philosophy.’³⁸ Well, first we must think how Socrates would compel someone to admit that a tragedian must also be able to be a comedian. Surely only by some assumption about the nature of things done ‘by *technē*’, such as the assumption that a *technē* must succeed by reliable, generalizable principles. Assuming that there were a poetic or dramatic *technē* which enabled both Aristophanes and Agathon to do well, we must conclude that each could master both genres. But it is easiest to imagine Socrates arguing *against* the assumption of a poetic *technē*, precisely as a way of accounting for their lack of generality as poets—just the same argument, in fact, which accounted for *Ion*'s exclusive leaning towards Homeric poetry.³⁹

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In the famous culmination of Socrates' Diotima-speech, the account of the upward progress of the initiate of love, there is no explicit reference to poetry or any of the arts. Choosing the path on which the generation of children is not even possible as an incidental distraction, the ideal lover must start by loving one boy's body for its beauty, then generalize this love to all beautiful bodies, ascend to love of a single ♫ soul, then generalize to a love of what is common to all souls. From then on, in company with a beloved, he should move on to love practices, laws, and sciences (*epistēmai*: branches of knowledge), opening up a ‘vast ocean of beauty’ which will make it seem narrow-minded simply to love one person or object. At all stages he will generate fine discourse, brought to birth by union with beauty. Some of this discourse, in the early stages, may be poetry, though Plato does not say so. But, apart from that, the arts do not figure here—why not? Decoration and music are not mentioned, says Dodds, ‘since they are not objects of *erōs*’.⁴⁰ In the restricted sense of *erōs*, of course, they are not. But Plato is labouring mightily to replace that sense with another. If something called *erōs* is transferable from human love-objects to branches of knowledge and the Spartan constitution, why not to music and the visual arts? And why does the ideal lover not produce such arts in response to the higher objects of *erōs*? Is Plato studiously silent about the arts here, or just silent because it does not occur to him that they should play a role? There is another view: ‘Strangely enough, Diotima and Socrates do not assign a role to the arts in this process of reawakening to Beauty, though it takes but a short step to do so, and this stopping on the verge has not prevented the *Symposium* from luring numerous readers . . . to press on.’⁴¹ But the lure is to be resisted. We have no right to assume that Plato has waiting before him a smooth train of thought leading to a positive, quasi-modern account of the arts. (Besides, he was ‘on the verge’ of writing the *Republic*.)

Diotima's ascent continues, and so it is that

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The man who has been guided thus far in the mysteries of love, and who has directed his thoughts towards examples of beauty in due and orderly succession, will suddenly have revealed to him as he approaches the end of his initiation a beauty whose nature is marvellous indeed, the final goal, Socrates, of all his previous efforts. This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders; nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a face or hands or anything else corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or a science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatever; he ♫ will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things as partaking of it, yet in such a manner

that, while they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change. (210e2–211b5.)

The lover attains to the Form, *auto to kalon*: the beautiful, or the fine, *itself*, which is set in contrast with the multiplicity of mere beautiful things. They participate in it, and, as we learn elsewhere, it is this relation of participation in the Form of the beautiful that makes anything beautiful.⁴² Socrates tried to cajole Hippias into seeking that one single characteristic, the presence of which constituted something's being *kalos*. Plato now tells us how fineness itself must be conceived. It is single, eternal and unchanging, dependent on nothing for its existence, and distinct from any particular thing (or class of things) that is *kalos*. This passage has commonly been read as saying that the beautiful itself simply and strictly *is* beautiful, in the sense that it itself is a beautiful thing.⁴³ Plato lists many ways in which an ordinary beautiful thing could also be the opposite of beautiful, in order to show that, in contrast, the beautiful itself suffers none of these admixtures of the ugly or the foul; this invites the interpretation that the Form itself is *kalos*. Furthermore, unless the Form is itself beautiful or fine, Plato's extravagant claims for its effect on the lover's life make no sense. The Form, once known, must strike the human mind in such an overwhelming way that it diminishes all other objects of love. It must *be* completely and overwhelmingly beautiful. Then we can explain why Plato can speak with such moment of 'the region where, if anywhere . . . a human life is liveable, contemplating absolute beauty'.⁴⁴ To fulfil this exalted role, the beautiful itself (arguably) has to be measured on the same scale as familiar beautiful things, and be superior to them in value on that scale.

p. 78 The beauty of former treasures such as boys, clothing, and gold becomes, from this vantage point, something to disdain. It is 'beauty tainted by human flesh and colour and a mass of perishable [mortal] rubbish' — while the eternal, untainted fineness itself is 'divine', and the lover who has intercourse with it will be the most nearly immortal of humans (211e2–212a7). Plato has not given up his sexual imagery, and he does not forget to mention the offspring generated by the lover who lays hold of the Form: 'he will beget not images of excellence [*eidōla aretēs*] in that he will not grasp an image, but true excellence, in that he grasps the truth' (212a3–5). To be capable of bringing genuine excellence into the world is to know and love the eternal, divine, logical cause of things' being fine, and nothing short of that. Could the supreme lover of *auto to kalon* be a poet? Poets were earlier said to be among the 'begetters of wisdom and excellence'. But a Homer, in order to have engendered true excellence, must have grasped the eternal Form of the beautiful, not a mere image of it. Could a Homer do that? Perhaps Diotima's teachings are mysteries too mysterious to contain a definite answer. On the other hand, in a more sober passage in the *Republic* Plato chooses the same words to give a resounding No: all poets, starting with Homer, make only images of excellence; they never rise to, or know, the real thing, they never grasp the truth.⁴⁵

It is only when the lover is at the earliest level of loving the beauty of bodies that poetry is seriously in consideration. The 'beautiful discourse' generated at this early stage possibly includes poetry,⁴⁶ though Plato does not say so explicitly. Perhaps it would have been misleading to say so. Since tragedy, comedy, and epic are not likely to spring from such a context, the poetry engendered by the love of a beautiful body is hardly representative of what Plato usually discusses under that heading. More importantly, such discourse is only a beginning. At higher levels non-poetic discourse takes over: a moral discourse 'that improves the youths', and then 'much fine and noble discourse and thoughts contained in abundant philosophy'. In Diotima's final vision poets quietly slip out of view. Beautiful poems last a long time, but could never be an exchange for beauty itself.

p. 79 Surely, however, the aesthetic is lauded as a self-standing value in this whole passage? And, since the aesthetic will have something to do with the arts, surely Plato cannot be seen as excluding them from the highest human life? Care is required. It is unclear how much of Diotima's teachings are really concerned with an aesthetic fineness, or even an aesthetic beauty. At the first stage, again, where the lover loves the beauty of bodies, Plato talks of *to ep' eidei kalon*, the fine in appearance or outward form. Do we then have, as

has been suggested, ‘love of bodies for the sake of bodily beauty that can be abstracted and contemplated on a general level’, followed by a ‘move from mere sexual interest to some sort of aspiration, presumably aesthetic’?⁴⁷ A sharp distinction cannot always be made between ‘erotic’ and ‘aesthetic’ contemplation of human beauty, and it would be wrong to try to force such a distinction upon Diotima. However, it is fairly clear that for her the contemplation of human bodies is never purely aesthetic. The lover is not one to whom pleasure occurs merely in the looking (unlike the ‘onlookers’ of *Gorg.* 474d8–9), and his aspiration, whatever it ends up generating, is always erotic. And is there a move in the direction of the aesthetic? Higher up the ladder towards the ideal we find the contemplation of laws, sciences, and excellences, and it is not clear that we should describe these as the objects of an aesthetic aspiration.

Although Plato is talking about value, about fineness, and about beauty, there is little indication that artistic practices or an exclusively aesthetic form of value have any special place in the *Symposium*'s vision of the best of lives. And yet one reason remains why it is strange to say this. For *Symposium* 210a–212a is among the most elevated and beautiful stretches of writing ever composed. To be moved by it to any degree is to allow ourselves the thought of a standpoint from which the fair products of the arts count for little and the complexion of all human institutions is dimmed by contrast with the Forms. But what has been capable of making the aspiration to this ‘higher’ region live in our minds is the offspring of Plato the literary artist, who has brought us to this point scarcely by argument—rather by extended, subtly modulated rhetoric, layers of fictional narrators, and beguiling persuasion.⁴⁸ I have argued so far that Plato is not blind to the beauty which poetry has to offer, but that he does not place any very great value upon it. His own poetic achievements, I shall eventually suggest, do not conflict with his opposition to the poetry which he actively rejects. But it is to the *Republic* that we must first turn, to see what the reasons for that rejection are.

Notes

- 1 Murdoch, 17–18.
- 2 Grube (1927), 287.
- 3 See the survey of uses by Dover (1974), 69–73. Whether a thing has or lacks fine *appearance* is commonly a central question in whether it is *kalos*. Sexual intercourse and superficial personal appearance provide different examples in the *Hippias Major*: the one of something that cannot be fine because it is not fine *to see*, the other of something which possibly is fine just because it *looks* fine (*HiMa.* 299a3–b1 and 293e7 ff.). Mothersill (263) is perceptive about a puzzle the second passage raises: in effect, What is the difference between being beautiful and looking beautiful? The ridiculous man may look beautiful in sufficient garb, though he is not beautiful. Alcibiades is beautiful—but what is that? He too is beautiful in that he looks, appears, is seen to be beautiful. All beauty depends on appearance. (‘True beauty is what matters, but the appearance of beauty is not flatly a fraud.’)
- 4 Paul Woodruff writes: ‘Like beauty, *to kalon* is something splendid and exciting; and in women or boys it is the loveliness that excites carnal desire. But the use of *kalos* for that quality is embraced by its use as a quite general term of commendation in Greek. “Noble,” “admirable,” and “fine” are better translations, and of these “fine” is best of all in virtue of its great range’ (1982a, 110). See also Moravcsik (1982), 30–2 and 43, for a helpful discussion of the fine and its relation to beauty.
- 5 Cf. Irwin (1979), 154: ‘There is no reason to believe that the use of “*kalon*” for what we call moral properties indicates that the Greeks have a particularly “aesthetic” attitude to morality, as the translation “beautiful” might suggest.’
- 6 Collingwood (1938), 39.
- 7 Collingwood (1938), 38.
- 8 Mothersill, 247 ff.
- 9 *Ibid.* 271.
- 10 *Ibid.* 251.
- 11 I argue elsewhere that Mothersill's account of beauty will not stretch to cover natural and artistic beauty univocally (see Janaway (1993)).
- 12 Mothersill, 251.
- 13 Here I follow Moravcsik (1982), 31: ‘what we call beautiful is for the Greeks “fine in appearance”’, a species of what is fine.

- 14 *Summa Theologiae* 1a. 2ae. 27, 1 (76–7). The definition is of the beautiful (*pulchrum*). Mothersill (323 ff.) argues that Aquinas' formulation encapsulates a truth which stands up to philosophical scrutiny.
- 15 If it is by Plato: the dialogue's authenticity, though broadly accepted, remains a subject for argument. See Waterfield's discussion in Saunders (ed.), 217–28, for a start on the debate. Woodruff (1982a) provides an extensive case for authenticity; Kahn a forthright argument against, but note his comment (269) that 'no serious philosophical harm will be done to scholars and students who take the work for Platonic, so cleverly has the author done his job'. I treat the *Hippias Major* as a work by Plato, written before the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, making no other assumptions.
- 16 See Woodruff (1982a), 116–17, 123–35.
- 17 I make no assumptions about the chronological ordering of *Gorg.* and *HiMa*. Woodruff regards the issue as 'too close to call' (1982a, 102). Dodds argues that *Gorg.* 474d–475a is probably later than the parallel passage *HiMa*. 298a–b (1959, 250). *auto to kalon hoti esti, HiMa*. 286d8–e1.
- 18 Woodruff refers to the fine as the 'logical cause' of fineness in things (see 1982a, 151 ff.), borrowing the term from Vlastos (1969), 91 ff. The fine is referred to as 'what makes things fine' at 290d2, 294a1, 294d6–7, 300a9–10, 302d1–2.
- 19 288e6–9. A girl and a horse are finer than a fine pot. The only other fine thing in the immediate context is a lyre. None of these need be taken as exhibiting a particularly 'aesthetic' fineness.
- 20 'The first fails because it is not fine in every comparison; the second because it is not fine in every use, and the third because it is not fine in every instance' (Woodruff (1982a), 48).
- 21 See *ibid.* 153–5 on the conception of what is *strictly* fine. *Symp.* 211a (discussed below) elaborates on this conception.
- 22 Dodds (1959, 250) places *logoi* parallel with the *Gorgias*' 'branches of learning' (*mathēmata*). But do the latter please 'by sight and hearing'? There is surely little to suggest that for Plato the pleasures of listening to the spoken word are the same as the pleasures of learning. It is rhetoric and tragedy that aim at pleasure in the medium of *logoi*, and it would be odd for Plato to call these 'branches of learning'.
- 23 *Poikilmata*. Dodds (loc. cit.) treats *poikilmata* as simply 'patterns', no different in principle from the colours and shapes of the *Gorgias* passage. But the word connotes embroidery or ornamentation resulting from human agency, and its association in the text with painting and sculpting suggests that the patterns are those of artefacts. (When Plato elsewhere (*Rep.* 529c7–8) uses the same word to describe the heavenly bodies as 'ornaments which brighten the sky . . . embroidered in the visible world', it is a metaphor.)
- 24 The claim in *Rep.* 10 (595b5–6) that mimetic poetry is ruinous to the intellect could be countered by according it the fineness of harmless pleasure. But this would be playing into Plato's hands, for by the end of *Rep.* 10 (607d8–9), he demands a defence of poetry 'as not only pleasant [*hēdeia*], but also beneficial [*ōphelimē*] to cities and to human life' (my translation).
- 25 'The traditional defence of poetry has been founded on the consideration that the finest works of poetry can help us to better our lives. They provide us with a particularly important means of enriching our awareness of human experience, and they enable us to give to our feelings greater precision, purity, strength and depth. Poetry is a means of increasing our intelligence and strengthening our moral temper' (Budd (1983), 155).
- 26 Pleasures of smell also tend to be 'pure' in that they require no admixture of distress. But they are 'less divine' (51e1) than those of shape, colour, and sound—presumably because delight in the latter is 'the beginning of delight in numbers, whereas smells lead nowhere' (Gosling (1975), 122).
- 27 Cf. Gosling (1975), 122. I am aware of two other views: Hackforth (1958), 98–9: 'their beauty does not depend on contrast with something less beautiful, or positively ugly', as opposed to things that are 'relatively beautiful in the sense that they come at some point on a scale of greater and less aesthetic satisfaction'. Hackforth also sees an affinity here with the way in which the Form *auto to kalon* is absolutely, and not relatively, *kalon*. But I agree with Gosling (1975), 121, and Murphy, 244, in finding these views not clearly supported by the text. Murphy's view is that what is being ruled out is something beautiful only in relation to something else (against a background, for example), and not in itself—the most natural reading of *ouk einai pros ti kala . . . all' aei kala kath' hauta* (51c6–7)—but he faces the problem that this does not explain either the examples excluded or those included. However, Murphy's reference (245) to a pleasure in 'beauty alone without any adventitious appeal to other human interests' seems right.
- 28 Schopenhauer, i. 208.
- 29 The alternative explanation is that Plato is criticizing *mimēsis* as an 'inferior reduplication' of 'commonplace reality' (Hackforth (1958), 99). But that gives no clue as to why the non-representational, non-artistic beauty of living things should also be excluded from the 'pure' category.
- 30 Cf. the explanation by Gosling (1975), 122.
- 31 The discussion of this familiar point by Schier (1989) is stimulating.
- 32 *Symp.* 198c1–5. Dover (1980, 123–4) explains some features of Plato's extended parody of Gorgias, and shows by metrical analysis how 'Plato has taken considerable trouble to give Agathon's peroration [197d1–e5] a poetic character in addition to caricaturing its "Gorgianic" structure'.

- 34 Price, 16, following Dover (1980), 136: ‘Anything which is *kalon*, i.e. which looks or sounds good (or is good to contemplate), is also *agathon*, i.e. it serves a desirable purpose or performs a desirable function, and vice versa.’ ‘Contemplation’ has to be taken pretty widely to make this explanation stick, and we also have to be careful about desirable functions and purposes. Someone’s life could be fine and good without *looking* particularly interesting, and without subserving any function or purpose *outside itself*. Price’s more cautious gloss brings out both points: ‘The *kalon* is what presents itself appealingly (though not only to the senses); the *agathon* is good for someone in some way (though not only instrumentally).’
- 35 Tragic poetry is again called *kalos* but harmful overall in *Rep.* 10 (595b3–c2, where the context—conceding admiration to Homer—makes *kalos* (c1) unlikely to be merely ironic).
- 36 206e5–8. The imagery is thoroughly sexual, based on a particular assumption about why males desire sexual intercourse with beautiful females, and also on the common ancient assumption that it is the male who ‘generates’, with the female serving as the place or receptacle where generation occurs. Plato also offers no argument for the ideas that heterosexual intercourse is essentially motivated by reproductive ends, or that reproduction manifests the desire for immortality.
- 37 Dover (1980, 151–2) speculates that ‘it can only be the virtuous character of the [society] for which Homer sang’, which seems somewhat lame. Plato’s text gives no hint of an answer. Price (27) brings out the unsatisfactory nature of this passage.
- 38 Dover (1980), 177.
- 39 This is the beautifully simple reading offered by Grube (1935), 184 n. 1, and by Taylor, 234. See also Flashar, 44; Woodruff (1982b), 149 n. 11. For a different view of the passage, linking it to a unity between tragic and comic views of *erōs* presented in the dialogue, see Nussbaum (1986), 194, and 469 n. 55; a similar suggestion is made by Else (1986), 11–12. Clay argues for a connection with the figure of Socrates himself, seen as a fusion of the tragic and the comic.
- 40 Dodds (1959), 250.
- 41 Beardsley, 41. Lucas (260) also sees Plato taking ‘a step along the path’ to exaltation of the artist.
- 42 *Phdo.* 100b3–e3.
- 43 The classic statement of this interpretation is in Vlastos (1965). In a recent challenge to it, Penner has argued that ‘the aim in the upward path is *not* to ascend from less fully beautiful to most fully beautiful objects. Rather it’s to ascend from inferior (nominalist) candidates for being *what beauty is* to the best of all candidates’ (1987, 139). Penner argues (see 127 ff.) (i) that Plato is not committed to the claim that the Form is itself a beautiful thing by his talk of ‘the beautiful itself’, (ii) that he is not so committed by the contrasts between the Form and other things which are and are not beautiful, (iii) that he is not so committed by the talk of the beautiful itself as a supreme object of *erōs*. One might agree with (i) and (ii) while finding (iii) unconvincing. Price (43 n. 49) writes: ‘if [Beauty itself] is to gratify the lover in a manner analogous to beautiful sights . . . it must itself, supremely, be beautiful to contemplate. Nowhere else does “self-predication” (or better, self-participation) have such clear point.’
- 44 *Symp.* 211d1–3: my translation, influenced partly by Nussbaum (1986), 467 n. 34.
- 45 *Rep.* 600e4–6. The same phrase, *eidōla aretēs*—‘images of excellence’—is used here and at *Symp.* 212a4. *Tou alēthous ephaptomenōi* at 212a5 is also echoed by *tēs de alētheias ouch haptesthai* in the *Rep.* passage.
- 46 For this view of 210a7–8, see Moravcsik (1971), 292–3, and Price, 41, 47.
- 47 Moravcsik (1971), 291. For criticism, see Price, 37–8.
- 48 Socrates tries to *persuade* others of what Diotima said to him, having been *persuaded* himself (212b1–3). At one point she convinces him ‘like a perfect sophist’ (208b7–c1). See Nussbaum (1986), 176–7.