

# Plato's Two Horses

From *Phædrus* 253d-254b, tr. Taylor

But one of the horses, we said, was good, and the other not. But we have not yet declared what the virtue is of the good horse, or the vice of the bad one; it is therefore proper that we should now declare it. The good horse, therefore, subsists in a more beautiful condition, is erect, well-articulated, has its neck lofty, its nose somewhat aquiline, its colour white, and its eyes black. It is likewise a lover of honour, together with temperance and modesty; is the companion of true opinion, is not whipped, and is only to be governed by exhortation and reason. But the bad one is crooked, various, rash in its motions, stiff and short-necked, flat-nosed, of a black colour, having its eyes grey, and being full of blood; is the companion of injury and arrogance, has its ears hairy and deaf, and is scarcely obedient to the whip and the spur. When, therefore, the charioteer beholds the amatory eye inflaming all the soul, through sensible perception, and filling it with the incentives of titillation and desire, then, as always, the horse which is obedient to the charioteer, violently checking its motions, through shame restrains itself from leaping on the beloved object. But the other cannot be held back, either by the spur or whip of the charioteer; but hurries along violently, leaping and exulting, and, fully employing the charioteer and its associate, compels both of them to rush along with it to venereal delight. Both these, however, resist its violence from the beginning, and indignantly endure to be thus compelled to such dire and lawless conduct.

## Commentary by Thomas Taylor

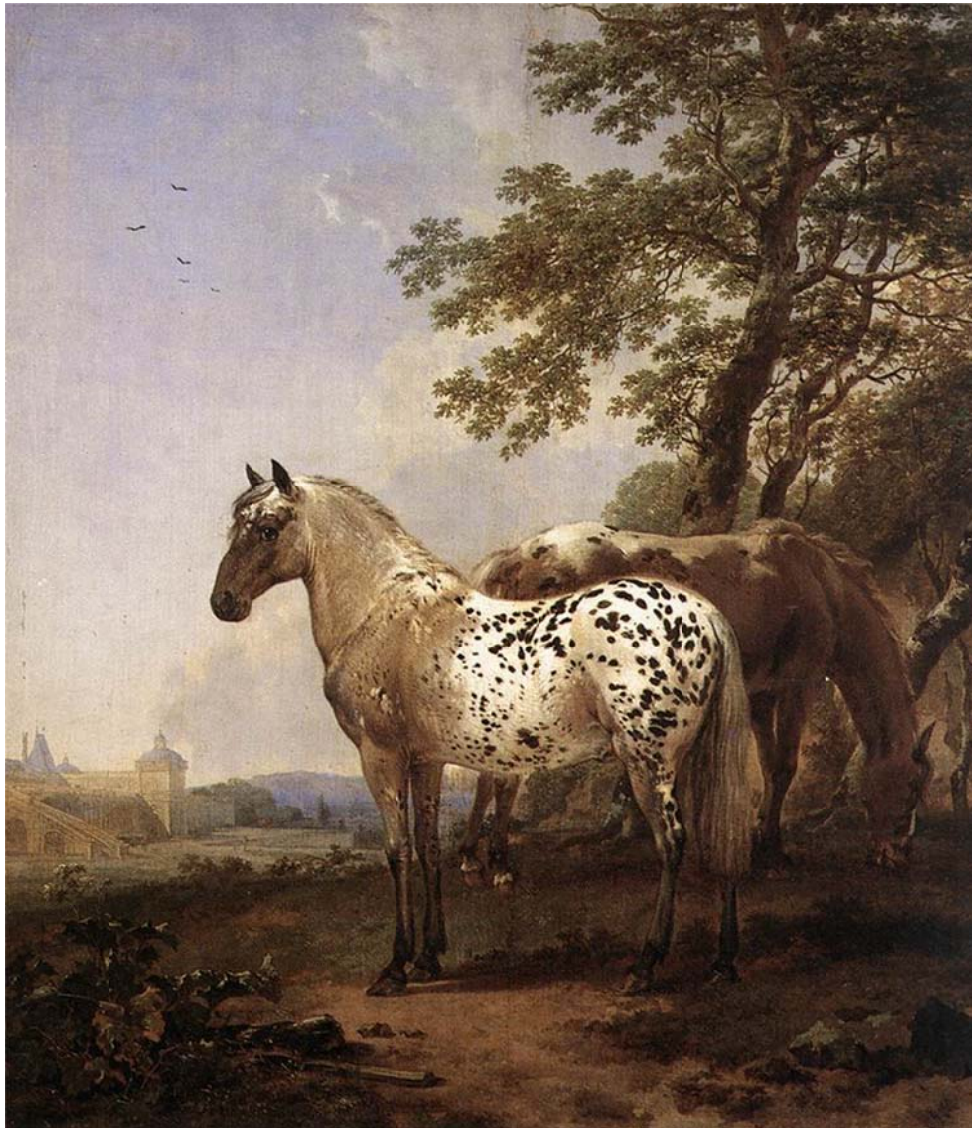
Plato having related the prerogatives which the better of the two horses possesses from the body, now enumerates those which it possesses from the soul. Honour, then, is the greatest of goods, as he says, in the *Laws*; <sup>[727a]</sup> but nothing evil is honourable. On which account also we honour Divinity. The good horse, therefore, is a lover of honour; that is, it aspires after form and the good. But it also loves honour in conjunction with temperance, *i.e.*, it possesses these prerogatives of the soul, performs things pertaining to itself, and is not willing to be filled with the contrary. It is likewise only to be governed by reason and exhortation, as being near to reason, and directing by its measures all the measures of its own life.

Plato here speaks concerning the worse of the two horses, and imitates its mingled nature. For he no longer speaks first concerning the prerogatives of the body, and afterwards concerning those of the soul, but he confuses the order. In opposition, therefore, to what he had asserted of the more noble horse, he says of this, that it is *crooked*, as being characteristic of desire; for desire is similar to a wild beast: *various*,



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for this epithet also is accommodated to desire, which is multiform, and the friend of multitude; and *rash in its motions*, as being hurried along by casual impulse. He also adds, that it is *stiff*; indicating by this its *resisting* nature: that it is *short-necked*, as being abject, living according to desire, and not aspiring after honour: *flat-nosed*, as being vile, grovelling, and not royal: *of a black colour*, as being dark, and not clear and shining like the other: *having its eyes grey*, as being only superficially splendid, and possessing intellections only as far as to the phantasy: *being full of blood*, i.e. being most allied to generation: *the companion of injury and arrogance*, as possessing properties directly contrary to the other horse; for that was the associate of temperance and modesty: *has its ears hairy and deaf*, as being unobedient, and often hearing a thing without attending to it: and, lastly, *is scarcely obedient to the whip and the spur*, as not capable of being benefited by exhortation.<sup>1</sup>



Landscape with two horses by Nicolaes Berchem, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor T. (Tr. & Annot.). *The Works of Plato*. (Vol. III of a set of five volumes & Vol. XI of “The Thomas Taylor Series”) From: The Prometheus Trust, 1996. Endnotes 24-25, p. 418, being Taylor’s Additional Notes on Plato’s *Phædrus*. [Westerink lines 253d-e, p. 367.]

