

ČLANCI / ARTICLES

Motions of sounds, bodies, and souls [Plato, *Laws* VII. 790e ff.]

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ABSTRACT: This article explores how Plato, in his “metaphysical” dialogues, sees the specific properties of motion (and especially of motion in music), which lend themselves to adaptation for the purposes of maintaining or restoring the health of the soul. Plato explores the property of regular or rhythmic motion in particular. The attention has been drawn to the analogy between the calming effect of music, at the human level, and the Demiurge’s achievement in willing the world into existence. The focus of the article lays on the *Laws*, in which the principle of musical motion plays a central role in resolution of the contradictions between material and spiritual, natural and physiological, medical and educative.

KEY WORDS: Plato, motion, music, dance, bodies, soul, *Timaeus*, *Laws*, *Philebus*.

If one wanted to see how the concept of motion fits into Plato’s philosophy in its final form, one could link them quite simply to the category of “mixture of opposites” that so preoccupied Plato in his “metaphysical” dialogues. The problem of opposition between what is and what is not, previously adumbrated in the *Theaetetus*, is resolved in the *Sophist* by recognizing a mode of being in what is not. The problem of opposition between what is infinite and what is finite is similarly resolved, for its part, in the *Philebus*, by introducing the concept of a harmonic measure. And the problem of opposition

between Selfhood and Otherness, raised in the *Timaeus*, is resolved in a more complete (though also more complex) manner, by double mixing of Selfhood and Otherness in their selfsame mixture, resulting in a profound alteration of the original nature of each. This final mixture corresponds to the essence of the World Soul. At a secondary stage its mass is broken up into mathematically calculated segments. These imply the existence of intervals, and between these intervals, a number of “means” – in other words, of supplementary new intermediate terms, – introduced by the Demiurge.¹ One is struck by the apparent analogy between these acts of creation and certain aspects of music. The similarity between the concept of harmony and that of the soul had already made its appearance in the *Republic*²: here it is restated at the cosmic level. Whereas the opposition between low and high pitch is resolved at the level of “shared pitch” (*homotonon*) in the *Philebus*³, in the *Timaeus* this very same opposition is resolved not by “mutual absorption” but by “simultaneous imposition”, or in other words by harmonic coexistence. Here we see the sounds in harmonic relation, issuing from a single sound source, reaching the ear at velocities corresponding to their pitches: the higher notes more quickly than the lower notes. They make their way through the brain, seat of reason, and the diaphragm, seat of passion, to the liver, seat of desire. Here they intermingle and fade away. This naturally implies the principle that moving sounds from outside are slowed down in their course through the body, in relation to their initial velocity⁴. The principle not only permits their initial harmonic relation to survive, but assures the finality of their existence⁵, that is, of their predetermined harmony. A superficial listener feels only gratification; but an intelligent listener – the *emphron*, or, to use the term of the *Theaetetus*⁶, the *kompsos* – reaps the reward, in one way or another, of one of the greatest of lessons. In similar fashion, the *Philebus* distinguishes between mixed and pure pleasure.⁷

This theory of motion of sound leaves one with the impression that any natural motion is played out in a biological, and ultimately in a psychological reaction, and that natural motion evokes an emotion. At a later date, Aristides Quintilianus puts the question as follows: “It is not to be wondered at that the soul, with its body kindred in nature to the strings of the lyre and the air-column that [sc. in wind instruments] the instruments set in motion, should be one with them in emotion and fellow-feeling... since it has the

¹ Cf. E. Moutsopoulos, *Masses and intervals in the cosmic space of Plato's Timaeus*, Athlon: *Festschrift for E. Moutsopoulos*, Athens, Athens University, 2001, pp. 145–149 (esp. p. 146).

² Plato, *Republic*, IV, 443d.

³ Plato, *Philebus*, 51c.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 80a–b.

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, VII, 530d; *Timaeus* 47c.

⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus*, 156a; 171d; *Philebus*, 53c; *Cratylus*, 405d. Cf. E. Moutsopoulos, *Epistemology and ontology in Plato's Theaetetus*, *Athena* 64, 1961, pp. 230–238.

⁷ Plato, *Philebus* 5d.

selfsame motion as theirs; or that when the struck string gives out a note..., the soul should echo it and be of corresponding pitch".⁸ In the *Timaeus*, Plato insists that there is an equilibrium between the parts of the body and the parts of the soul, and also an equilibrium between the parts of the soul themselves. His argument should remind us at once of the Hippocratic teaching⁹, with its special emphasis on the soul's pathology. Seen in this light, Plato's theory is further extended in the *Laws*, where musical motion is conceived of as a healing principle. In keeping with the Hippocratic medicine, Plato recognizes the importance of maintaining, and if necessary restoring, the equilibrium relations between the various parts of the human entity. Stress is now laid on the need for equilibrium between soul and body, so as to avoid potential one-sided overdevelopment due to various kinds of unevenness, the gravest of which is ignorance.¹⁰ The problem of their internal equilibrium is easily assignable to the equilibrium between their corresponding motions.

The specific properties of motion in music can be adapted to the purposes of maintaining, or restoring, the health of the soul.¹¹ Internal motions can, because of their regularity, be imposed on the deleterious motions of external origin. Conversely, soul and body can be immunized against these deleterious external motions by a method of education, consisting of an imposition of an orderly turbulence on the body such that it is never at rest.¹² This method of accustoming the body to rhythmic exercise requires firstly that the functions of the soul be in equilibrium, and secondly that there be an awareness that one's body is not in a good condition and that it needs to be gradually immunized. This in turn implies that children – who have as yet not reached the stage of self-awareness – and mentally deranged people – who have reached it but lost it again – cannot of themselves apply the method in question. A healthy soul is in a position to impose the performance of unwelcome, but salutary and therefore useful exercises on the body. Supposing that these conditions are not fulfilled, and that a sick soul is incapable of imposing the required motions on the body, it will be necessary to follow another method, of preventive immunization or of healing by catharsis, with recourse to external corrective motion.

The distinction between motions of internal and external origin is, intrinsically, an important one. For in both categories one motion is capable of imposing regularity or instability on the other. More particularly, motion in music is in opposition not to tranquillity, but merely to turbulence of movement that is present whenever harmony has not yet been imposed. This is

⁸ Aristides Quintilianus, *De Musica*, XVIII, p. 107 (Meibom).

⁹ Cf. also Plato, *Republic*, IV, 443d; *Phaedrus*, 248a.

¹⁰ Plato, *Timaeus* 87e–88b.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 88d

¹² Plato, *Laws*, VII, 790e.

the case even in the world of entities without soul, as is clear from the cosmogony of the *Timaeus*. Here the Demiurge remains transcendent in relation to matter. He intervenes only to impose order, like the Mind in Anaxagoras: “All this visible, restless mass, shifting about without measure or order, did he take in hand, adjudging that order is better than disorder.”¹³ From a state of becoming, matter modulates to a state of being, thanks to the harmony of musical motion, and thus forms the World Soul. We can see a comparable process in the case of entities with soul. Plato provides a proof in the *Laws*. In every case, he says, “young ones... are impotent to maintain tranquillity of body or voice, and continually seek to move about or cry out. Some of them jump about..., others utter noises and sounds of every kinds. But whereas other living beings lack a feeling for order and disorder in their motion, for rhythm and harmony, that is to say, we humans have been endowed by the gods with just this feeling, which is moreover linked to pleasure..., so that we embrace one another in song and dance”.¹⁴ There is an obvious kinship between this passage and the one quoted previously. Music, a gift from the gods, is an achievement analogous, at the human level, to the Demiurge’s achievement in willing the world into existence. These analogies have not met with the attention that they deserve from the scholars. Knowledge and creative imagination play their part in the creation of a Universe, the soul of which carries the entire fabric in seminal form. This World Soul is reflected in the human soul with its profound changes of nature. And in just the same way, the human soul reveals itself, to start off with, in disorderly motion extending over the bodily mechanism of the human being. In the sequel, there is a further modulation, no longer from becoming to being, but from unknowing to knowing and wisdom (or, at a slightly different level, from a state of sickness to a state of health). This involves a modulation from disequilibrium to equilibrium, and the reference to these two latter states should remind us of Empedocles:¹⁵ “It will not... be permitted for elements that are out of proportion to one another to be at odds with one another, or to make wars and illnesses in the body. They will balance out, so that there follows inner tranquillity [not, of course, lack of all motion!]; and thus the body will be given health.”¹⁶

At this point it will be useful, as a guideline, to make an obvious observation that, for Plato, the model of a regular motion is the rocking movement which a groundswell at sea imposes on the sea voyager.¹⁷ Very similar are

¹³ Plato, *Timaeus*, 30a; cf. J. B. Skemp, *The Theory of Motion in Plato’s Later Dialogues*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1942.

¹⁴ Plato, *Laws*, II, 653d–654a; cf. Schiller, *An die Freude and Beethoven, 9th Symphony, Mvt. 4*.

¹⁵ Cf. E. Moutsopoulos, *Le modèle empédocléen de pureté élémentaire et ses fonctions, La cultura filosofica della Magna Grecia*, Messina, G. B. M. Edizioni, 1989, pp. 119–126. Idem, *Kairos et alternance: d’Empédocle à Platon*, Philosophie de la culture grecque, Athènes, Acad. d’Athènes, pp. 49–56.

¹⁶ Plato, *Timaeus*, 88e.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89a.

the motions that he invokes for the transition from bodily therapy to the therapy of the soul. In the *Laws*, it is established that the sick soul experiences a sort of fear manifest in the heartbeat and in disorderly body movements.¹⁸ His obvious observation gives Plato a number of elementary components for his theory of the relationship between body and soul. These components are partly drawn from his views about newborn children. “Both the body and the soul of the newborn child also need to be carefully looked after, all round the clock, as regards feeding and motion, as if they had still not found their sea legs.”¹⁹ Here is further evidence of an astonishing similarity with the words of the *Timaeus*²⁰, where a mother wishing to lull her wakeful child to sleep is advised to do as mothers had done from time immemorial: if the child is restless and crying, she should give it not tranquillity, but a rhythmic rocking movement that will impose itself by its regularity.

There are evident similarities between this method as applied to children and as applied to the possessed. With regard to children, Plato’s view is that “whenever a motion is imposed on like states of the soul from without, this motion is stronger than internal motion resulting from fear or loss of control. And since it is stronger, it causes a mien of tranquillity, instead of the jerky, unwelcome motions of the heart, and sends the child to sleep.”²¹ A lullaby is normally accompanied by the motion of the mother’s arms. The sounds themselves exert a calming effect on the soul via the body. Externally caused motion of this sort results in a mien of contentment of the soul, in place of the previous manic tendency. This is how Plato accounts for the effect of singing and rhythm on the world of the soul. It also accounts for the requirement in the Platonic *Protagoras*, that “every human life is in need of good rhythm and good harmony.”²² Because of the movements for which they are the vehicle, music-making and dancing have an effect on children, and under certain circumstances on adults, that is like that of an incantation.²³ In the words of the Athenian Stranger in *Laws*, mothers sing incantations to their children in the same way as incantations are sung by women votaries of Dionysus in a state of bacchic frenzy.²⁴

If we turn to the procedures for curing corybantic states of mind, all these can be reduced to a more general healing method for eliminating fear. For, although differently caused, these states are comparable with the ones just mentioned. They too result from an unrhythm in the soul that is manifested

¹⁸ Plato, *Laws*, VII, 790c.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Timaeus*, 30a; and Note 14 above.

²¹ Plato, *Laws*, VII, 790c–791c.

²² Plato, *Protagoras*, 326b.

²³ I. e. a spell. Five times running, Plato insists that to chant a song is actually to make an enchantment. Cf. *Laws*, II, 659e ff.

²⁴ Ibid. Book VII, 790e.

in violent motions of the heart to start off with, then in violent body movements, and finally in a generalized frenzy. Plato lays particular stress on the idea that frenzy is a state of sickness. As is well known, there were women specialized in the healing of such states who would restore a disturbed state of the soul by recourse to incantations, where singing was combined with dancing.²⁵ Well known, too, is the Pythagorean emphasis on education through music – which was held to be beneficial for the soul no less than the body – and through “music therapy”. Last of all, there was the myth of Melampus, who calmed rampant insanity by overexciting the subject, by means of violent dancing, the better to impose sanity on it. Melampus’ method recalls, *mutatis mutandis*, certain techniques that are still in use today, for example in Africa. Their tendency is to replace a state of diffuse, clandestine possession²⁶ by one of overt, specific possession. There are already references to such techniques, which were characteristic of the corybantic ritual, in both the *Symposium*²⁷ and the *Crito*.²⁸ Aristotle’s procedure of catharsis obviously belongs to the same context of homoeopathic healing of both soul and body.²⁹ Plato, however, prefers the allopathic healing recommended (it would seem) by Damon, whose influence he himself acknowledges.

In Plato’s theory, music has a calming effect. The importance of the views presented in the foregoing pages for an understanding of Plato’s teaching (in *Laws*, Book II) about education through music and dance should not be underrated. Once cleansed by musical education, the soul then expresses itself in regular movement. It follows that one can define a whole series of reflex movements. The external space towards which the motions of the trained soul are directed, and which is symbolized by the body politic, is encouraged to continue its efforts to immunize the body and effect a catharsis of the soul. The aim is to create a cycle of regular musical movements showing the subordination of unrhythm to rhythm, rulebreaking to law, disorder to order, and deficiency and imperfection to equilibrium. The *Laws* – more than any other late Platonic dialogue – is the work in which, as Plato studies the world of the human soul (and as he had already written in the Book III of the *Republic*), the principle of musical motion, in all its various forms, occupies a key position, playing a central role in resolving the contradictions between material and spiritual, natural and physiological, medical and educative, individual and collective. Movement through music is polyvalent and it is a mean: it ensures that there is continuity between a human being’s essence and its main observable manifestations.

²⁵ Ibid., 791e.

²⁶ Cf. Plato, *Ion*, 536c; *Phaedrus*, 245a.

²⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 215c–e.

²⁸ Plato, *Crito*, 54d.

²⁹ Cf. E. Moutsopoulos, *Diotima*, 2, 1974, pp. 248–250.

Kretanje zvukova, tijela i duša [Platon, *Zakoni* VII. 790e i d.]

SAŽETAK: U članku se istražuje kako Platon u svojim “metafizičkim” dijalozima vidi specifična svojstva kretanja (posebno kretanja u glazbi) koja su prikladna za prilagodbu u svrhu očuvanja ili uspostavljanja zdravlja duše. Platon posebno istražuje svojstvo pravilnog ili ritmičkog kretanja. Naglašava se analogija između umirujućeg učinka glazbe, na ljudskoj razini, i Demiurgova stvaranja svijeta. U žarištu članka su *Zakoni* u kojima načelo glazbenog kretanja igra ključnu ulogu u rješavanju proturječnosti između materijalnog i duhovnog, prirodnog i psihološkog, medicinskog i obrazovnog.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: Platon, kretanje, glazba, ples, tijelo, duša, *Timej*, *Zakoni*, *Fileb*.