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Platonic Proportions: Beauty, Harmony and the Good Life

Angela Hobbs

Abstract: Despite the strict censorship of the arts advocated in the *Republic*, beauty is of central importance throughout Plato's works. This entry examines in particular the role of harmony in Plato and considers how, when internalized in the psyche, it equates to virtue, mental health and flourishing. What does Plato mean by *harmonia* and its cognates? How does he reach this notion of psychic harmony in theory, and how does he think it can be achieved in practice? What are the dangers inherent in his views on harmony and could there be any Platonic responses to them? I argue that Plato's thinking on proportion and harmony has its roots in the Pythagorean application of mathematics to musical theory and the cosmos as a whole. Plato develops their work and extends it to the human psyche and society, arguing that early aesthetic education – both formal and informal – is vital: the child must first be taught to appreciate 'true', objective outer beauty before reason can understand the mathematical underpinnings of both outer and inner harmonies. The influence of Plato's thinking about proportion and harmony on many traditions in western culture is briefly touched on, and challenges are raised. Do his theories open the door to psychiatric and political abuse? And if immersion in artistic beauty helps create inner harmony, how is it that some very wicked people have claimed to love the arts? I conclude by suggesting that Plato's tripartite psychology can address some, but not all, of these challenges.

Keywords: beauty, education, eudaimonia, flourishing, harmony, mathematics, mental health, music, Plato, proportion

Introduction: ~~A~~an Initial Puzzle

'We must look for artists and craftsmen capable of perceiving the real nature of what is beautiful (*kalon*), and then our young men living as it were in a healthy climate, will benefit

because all the works they see and hear influence them for good, like the healthy breezes from wholesome places ...' (Plato *Republic* 401c–d)¹

Many people who have not read Plato simply associate him with censorship of the arts, and it is perfectly true that in the ideally just state outlined by the character of Socrates in the *Republic* the arts are indeed to be heavily censored: in Book 10, for instance, the only poetry that is allowed is a grim-sounding diet of hymns to the gods and paeans to good men (607a). Given this, those who have not read Plato might then initially be surprised to read the above passage from Book 3 and learn of the absolutely central role that beauty and aesthetic experience play throughout his work. When considering this apparent tension, we need to start by considering three points. Firstly, the very call for artistic censorship in the ideally just state *itself* reveals how powerfully Plato thinks art affects our emotions and our moral and intellectual development. Secondly, his dialogues are themselves magnificent works of art: Plato is a great artist as well as a great philosopher. And thirdly, a key component of his artistry is the skilful deployment of irony, and there is no more salient example of this than the fact that the dialogue that has been known since Roman times as the *Republic*, or *Res Publica*, would be *banned* in the ideally just state that it purports to describe: it does not meet its own censorship criteria.² Plato cannot have been unaware of this supreme irony. We must beware of assuming that Plato the off-stage author simply agrees uncritically with all the views he puts into the mouth of the main interlocutor in each dialogue (usually Socrates).

So let us leave to one side any image we may have unjustly acquired of Plato the arid censor, and focus instead on Plato the lover of beauty and advocate of both actual and metaphorical harmony,³ and explore and examine their fundamental place in his account of individual and communal flourishing and a good life.

Psychic Harmony and a Flourishing Life

Let us start with one of the most important passages of the *Republic*, the account in Book IV of the truly just person. For such a person justice (*dikaiosunē*) is not simply a matter of

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¹ Unless otherwise stated, the translations of the *Republic* (*R.*) are adapted by me from Lee [2007/1987](#).

² Cicero appears to have been the first to give it the title of *Res Publica*; in Greek it was known as *Politeia*. One of the many ways in which the dialogue flouts the censorship rules it contains is in its inclusion of morally flawed characters, such as the sophist Thrasymachus in Book 1.

³ This key and complex term is to be discussed below.

external actions, but an internal harmony (*harmonia*) of the *psychē* or soul.⁴ This harmony arises when the three faculties that comprise the human *psyche* – reason, a spirited element (*to thumoeides*) and the appetites – are all performing their proper functions. It is the task of reason to seek and love truth and to rule for the good of the soul as a whole; the spirited element loves and seeks honour and success and its task is to carry out the orders of reason; the appetites desire physical satisfaction and the money that may be needed to acquire them, and their task is to obey. Psychic harmony, in other words, only occurs when all three elements agree that reason should rule. Such a man will not allow the three elements of his *psychē* to interfere with each other's functions, but

'By keeping all three in tune, like the notes on a scale (high, middle and low, and any others that may exist), he will truly set his house to rights, attain self-mastery and order and achieve good terms with himself. By binding all these elements together he will genuinely become one instead of many, self-controlled and harmonious (443d3-e2).'⁵

The notion of psychic harmony, and the grace and beauty of soul and life that flow from it, is utterly foundational to the moral and political programme of the entire dialogue. Self-control (*sōphrosunē*) is also defined at 430e3-4 as a 'kind of concord and harmony', while at 413e and 423e Socrates says that the aim of the primary education system is to produce men who are rhythmic, harmonious and measured.⁶ The consequences of such internal harmony are highlighted at 588a, where the just person is said to be greatly superior to the unjust person in terms of 'grace and beauty of life', while in 591d we are told that the just person attunes the harmony of their body to the harmony of their *psychē*, since they are the 'true *mousikos*', the person truly living in accord with the Muses.

We will be returning to these key passages later, but three seminal points need to be noted immediately. Firstly, the notion that psychic harmony and a harmonious life can be viewed as both aesthetically *and morally* beautiful: we will be examining shortly how this is a natural viewpoint in Greek thought when we discuss the full meaning of the *kalon*, the usual term for 'beautiful'. Secondly, this outer and, especially, inner beauty are also portrayed as *beneficial*

⁴ *Dikaiousunē* is broader in scope than 'justice', and can sometimes be closer to 'right conduct' in general. Note how in 444d below, Socrates concludes this discussion of *dikaiousunē* with a statement about *aretē*, 'excellence' or 'virtue' in general.

⁵ 'Harmonious' translates *hērmomenon*, literally: 'having been fitted harmoniously together'.

⁶ The term for 'measured', *metrioi*, can also mean proportionate. While Socrates talks of males in this passage, it is clear from later in the *Republic* (e.g. 454d-e; 540c) that selected girls from the two Guardian classes are also to receive the same training, and with the same aim.

to the agent: the beautiful psychic harmony that comprises justice also comprises the *flourishing*, or *eudaimonia*, of the agent. *Eudaimonia* is a more objective concept than subjective ‘happiness’, involving the actualisation of our various faculties – rational, imaginative, affective and physical (literally, it means living under the protection of a good *daimōn*, a good guardian spirit). Indeed, in 444d-e we find the first known reference in western thought to the concept of mental health:

‘It seems, then, that excellence (*aretē*) is a kind of mental health (*hygieia* ... *psychēs*) or beauty or fitness, and defect a kind of illness or deformity or weakness.’

Finally, as we saw in 443e, this mental health manifests itself in being ‘one instead of many’, a *whole* person, living a *whole* life, whereas mental illness and disorder involves a fracturing and fragmentation of the self. It also leads naturally to the view that a person and their life can be seen and assessed in terms of narrative shape, of life models and role models, which in turn deepen the very close links in Plato between ethics and aesthetics—links which lie at the very heart of his thought and which we shall be exploring further.

It is clear, therefore, that Plato’s treatment of harmony involves issues of the most profound importance to our individual and communal wellbeing. In what follows I want to address four fundamental questions:

- a) What exactly does Plato *mean* by ‘harmony’, *harmonia*, and its cognates?
- b) How does he reach this notion of psychic harmony *in theory*?
- c) How does he think individuals, and individual societies, can achieve it *in practice*?
- d) Is it *true* that Plato’s conception of psychic harmony would in fact lead to a good life? What are the dangers inherent in his conception and could there be a Platonic response to them?

The Concept of *Harmonia*

The original meaning of *harmonia* is a ‘joining’ or ‘fitting-together’, and its expert practitioners are carpenters. But it swiftly takes on two specific musical senses, and it is these senses which are very much to the fore in Plato. Before examining them, we need to clarify immediately that in ancient Greek musical theory *harmonia* does *not* mean what we mean by complex musical harmony. Its original musical sense refers to the building blocks of melody: a tuning or fitting-together of notes, a pattern of pitches and intervals—in other words, a

scale. As we will see, the Pythagoreans analysed the mathematical ratios of these patterns in ways which deeply influenced Plato.

This Pythagorean approach to *harmonia* is based on *quantitative* analysis. But there was also a *qualitative* approach pioneered by a mysterious fifth century BCE Athenian sophist called Damon, a friend and adviser to Pericles and a friend of Socrates, which takes us to the second of the two musical senses of *harmonia*. Damon argued that there were special types of scale—special patterns of tuning—which were associated with particular characteristics and emotional effects and named (probably by Damon himself) after particular ethnic groups, such as the Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian and Ionian. When used in this second sense, *harmoniai* are usually translated ‘modes’ and probably achieve their effects by also being associated with particular *rhythms* and melodies.⁷

Whichever of these two musical senses Plato has uppermost in mind in any particular passage, the same basic point holds: when he is talking of the human psyche being in a state of internal harmony he is talking about it being in tune—indeed, precisely as the phrase ‘like the notes on a scale’ in 443d above suggests. Later we will see how he extends the musical metaphor even beyond the psyche to the cosmos itself.

Aesthetic Beauty and Moral Nobility: Understanding the *Kalon*

What of our second question? What is the theoretical underpinning of Plato’s notion of psychic harmony in both quantitative and qualitative senses? To get a grasp of this, we first need to take note of the key Greek term *kalon*, which we met in the opening quote exhorting us to seek out artists and craftsmen who can appreciate its true nature. ‘*Kalon*’ embraces both outward aesthetic beauty and inner moral beauty, moral nobility: as *Republic* 402a makes clear, it exerts a strong power of attraction even before reason has fully developed, and it merits admiration and praise. As we shall see, it is what allows Plato to depict correct ethical choice as at least partly a matter of possessing good taste. The psychology that underlies this is something we shall be exploring in our discussion of the philosopher-artist; our immediate task is to understand what it is that fundamentally connects outer and inner beauty in Plato. The answer again lies in mathematics—the mathematical ratios and proportions that, for him, underpin musical and all other forms of harmony also connect the sensible and non-sensible

⁷ *Republic* 398d-399e (on which more below) discusses Damon and his work on the different modes and their effects: the Dorian mode, for example, both represents and fosters courage and self-control, while the Ionian represents and fosters voluptuousness and the Mixolydian and Extreme Lydian are associated with dirges and laments.

instances of the *kalon*. In addition, as we shall also explore in detail later, it is the notion of proportional balance that connects the *kalon* to the good and beneficial (the *agathon*), including in its manifestations of mental and physical health. This mathematical underpinning helps explain why what is truly *kalon* is always an *objective* matter for Plato: he acknowledges wide subjective differences of perception and opinion concerning what counts as beautiful but, for him, some of these subjective views are quite simply mistaken. Indeed, as we shall see, ultimately what is to count as an instantiation of true beauty will depend on the absolute Form of Beauty itself.

On Not Neglecting Geometry

Plato had long been fascinated by mathematics and in 387 BCE, after many years of travelling around the Mediterranean after his beloved friend and mentor Socrates had been put to death by the Athenian democracy in 399, he visited the Pythagorean communities in Magna Graecia in southern Italy in order to learn from their mathematical and astronomical studies. He seems to have been particularly intrigued by the Pythagorean findings that music could be mathematically notated in terms of the numerical ratios governing intervals in scales and melodies, such as the ratios between different lengths of string on the lyre. The lengths of two sections of a string giving notes an octave apart are in the ratio 2:1; 3:2 gives a fifth and 4:3 a fourth. Hippasus of Metapontum (c. 500-450 BCE) is thought to have discovered the relation between musical chords and whole number ratios,⁸ but it seems to have been Philolaus of Croton (c. 470-390 BCE) who did most to develop the study of musical theory. In his system there are three basic principles: the unlimited, limiters and their ‘fitting-together’, *harmonia*, which combines limiters and the unlimited in an attractive way according to number. The clearest example of this, he believes, is the musical scale: the unlimited continuum of sound is limited by a sequence of pitches to form a scale, and these pitches are established by mathematical ratios which produce *harmonia*. The science of harmonics takes account of the ratios of intervals in scalar systems corresponding to notes, as Plato makes clear at *Philebus* 17a–e, a passage which owes much to Pythagorean teaching in general and probably Philolaus in particular.⁹

Philolaus also seems to have thought that the cosmos as a whole was governed by these mathematical principles and ratios, and that in consequence the cosmos is a true *harmonia*

⁸ According to a scholium on Plato *Phaedo* 108d.

⁹ See (Barker 1989: 63 n.34) — (though also see Barker’s caveats n.41).

(and that that is why it is called a *kosmos*—the term suggesting beauty as well as order, as ‘cosmetic’ indicates). It may also have been Philolaus who first proposed the idea that the movement of each celestial body—sun, moon, planets—emitted a sound, and that the movements of the planets revolving around the earth produce a series of coherently related pitches, the proportional relations between them creating the exquisite ‘music of the spheres’.¹⁰

Philolaus had died three years before Plato’s arrival in 387, and the leading Pythagorean was now Archytas of Tarentum, a former pupil of Philolaus who became one of Plato’s close friends. Archytas also worked extensively on the mathematics that govern musical theory, and is the first person on record to talk of ‘geometrical proportion’ ([fragment. 2](#));¹¹ he may therefore have been influential in formulating the distinction between ‘geometrical equality’ and ‘arithmetical equality’ that we shall shortly find playing such a central role in Plato’s *Gorgias*. And as he was also a practising politician—he was elected the democratic leader of Tarentum seven years in succession—he may well have begun the application of harmonic theory to the social sphere that Plato develops in the *Gorgias*, *Republic* and elsewhere.

All these findings and speculations made a very deep impression on Plato. He probably wrote the *Gorgias* soon after his return to Athens in 387, and Pythagorean influences are markedly in evidence in its latter stages. In 503e-504a., Socrates says that if you look at the work of any artist or craftsman—whether painter, builder or shipwright—you will see how

‘each of them arranges everything according to a certain order, and makes one part to suit and fit (or ‘harmonise’ *harmottein*) with another, until he has combined the whole into a regular and ordered production.’

Nor does this simply apply to inanimate artefacts: the task of the physical trainer and doctor, too, is to bring order (*kosmos*) and arrangement into the body (504a). And, crucially, the *psychē* also requires arrangement (*taxis*) and order (*kosmos*) if it is to be good (*chrēstos* 504b). Proper arrangement and order in the body we call strength and health, and in the

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¹⁰ In his *Natural History* II.xviii.xx, Pliny the Elder attributes the theory to Pythagoras himself; but Pythagoras is a mysterious figure of quasi-mythical status, and many of the later teachings of the Pythagoreans were indiscriminately attributed to him. This cosmic harmony was later termed *musica universalis* and elaborated in particular by Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), who held that this ‘music’ was inaudible to the ear, but could be heard by the soul.

¹¹ See Dodds (1959, 338).

psychē we call them lawfulness, justice and temperance—in short, virtue and excellence (*aretē* 504e).¹²

Three things immediately strike us. Firstly, as we have seen, the terms *kosmos* and *harmottein* have aesthetic as well as purely pragmatic connotations: the order achieved through the correct assemblage of parts into wholes is beautiful and (in its general sense) harmonious. Secondly, in a living body, it is also healthy and good. Thirdly, and most important of all, the analogy between the well-ordered body and the well-ordered and virtuous *psychē* suggests that the orderly *psychē*, too, will be in a state of health (and at 507d-e Socrates also says that the person whose soul is in a virtuous state will flourish and be blessed). Although the *Gorgias* does not yet contain a sophisticated psychological theory to underpin such a claim, Plato is already feeling his way towards the theory of mental health which he will articulate most clearly a few years later in the tripartite psychology of the *Republic*.

The culmination of these beliefs comes in *Gorgias* 508a–b, where Socrates is trying to convince his intemperate interlocutor, Callicles, to abandon his dissolute ways. He adduces the testimony of certain ‘wise men’—almost certainly the Pythagoreans¹³—who say that

‘heaven and earth and gods and men are held together by communion and friendship, by orderliness (*kosmiotēs*), temperance and justice; and that is the reason, my friend, why they call the whole of this world by the name of order (*kosmos*), not of disorder or dissoluteness. Now you ... do not give proper attention to this ... but have failed to observe the great power of geometrical equality amongst both gods and men: you hold that grabbing more than your fair share is what one ought to practise, because you neglect geometry.’¹⁴

When, in the post-*Gorgias Republic*, Socrates outlines the higher education system for those Guardians selected to be trained as future Philosopher-Rulers, he does indeed not neglect geometry: the trainee philosophers are to study, in order, arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy and harmonics before finally being introduced to dialectic (521c–531c). Done correctly, the study of the unit is amongst those studies that are able to ‘lead the mind on and turn it to the vision of reality’ (524e–525a). Harmonics is said to be the counterpart of

¹² In 506e Socrates will say that the excellence of *everything* is a matter of regular and orderly arrangement. In *Phaedo* 85e–86d Simmias, who had studied with the Pythagorean Philolaus, discusses the conception of the *psychē* as an incorporeal *harmonia* which arises from the correct attunement and functioning of the parts of the corporeal body.

¹³ Dodds (1959: 337–8).

¹⁴ Translation by Lamb 1925: 471, revised by Hobbs 2022

astronomy, in that our ears are made to perceive the movements of harmony. Socrates here praises the Pythagoreans for apprehending the numerical relationships in audible concord, but also says that they have not gone far enough in their study of harmonics: we need to understand more fully which numerical relations are concordant, which not, and why (531c).

There is a story from later antiquity that over the entrance to the Academy that Plato set up in Athens there was a sign that read ‘Let no-one enter here who has not studied geometry’. Whether the tale is true or not—and I very much hope that it is—it certainly reflects the heart of Plato’s thought. This cosmos is beautiful, harmonious and good precisely because it is ordered on mathematical principles, on the ratios and proportions that underpin all the mathematical sciences, including geometry.

Microcosm and Macrocosm

The essential orderliness of the world and the importance of mirroring it in the individual *psychē* is also a prominent theme in the *Timaeus*. At 36a the character of Timaeus—a mathematician and astronomer from Locris in southern Italy¹⁵—details the mathematical ratios that play a key role in the generation of the cosmos (happily we do not need to concern ourselves with their highly intricate nature here); and at 87c he emphasizes the need to reflect these proportions in the human soul:

‘All the good and beneficial (*agathon*) is beautiful and fine (*kalon*) and the *kalon* is not disproportionate. So every living creature that is to be thus [*agathon* in body and mind] must also be of due proportion.’

At *Timaeus* 90 c-d when discussing the health of the *psychē* he continues:

‘There is only one way to look after anything and that is to give it its proper nourishment and motions. And the motions that are akin to the divine in us are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe (lit: ‘the whole’). We should each therefore attend to these motions and by learning thoroughly about the harmonies (*harmoniai*) and revolutions of the universe repair the damage done to the circuits in our head in connection with our coming into being, and so restore our understanding, in accordance with our original nature, to its likeness with the

¹⁵ Later tradition held him to be a Pythagorean, and that would certainly accord with some of the views attributed to him in the dialogue. It is not known whether or not he was a fictional or historical character.

object of understanding. When that is done we shall have achieved the goal set us by the gods, the life that is best for the present time and all time to come.’¹⁶

There is, however, one major development between the *Gorgias* and the *Timaeus*, and this development also applies to the *Republic* (in the *Timaeus* Socrates claims on the previous day they had been discussing the establishment of an ideal state, and the topics he mentions match those of *Republic* Books 2–5). Between writing the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* and *Timaeus*, Plato has come to the conclusion that the ultimate realities in the cosmos—the only things stable enough to be truly objects of knowledge and not simply of belief—are what he terms Forms: eternal, unchanging, perfect paradigms of goodness, beauty, justice and indeed all animate and inanimate objects. Forms cannot be directly apprehended by our sense organs, but only understood by our intellect. In the realm of the Forms,

‘everything is in order and according to reason’ (*Republic* 500c);

and it is to this realm that the philosopher looks for guidance and which

‘is the model which he imitates and to which he assimilates himself as far as he can’ (500c).¹⁷

Crucially, it appears that this rational order again depends on proportion: Forms are individually proportionate and so too is the realm they inhabit. It is this key fact that leads to Socrates at *Republic* 486d highlighting one of the most important qualities required in the true philosopher:

‘But furthermore we would say that a tasteless and graceless nature inevitably leads to disproportion.

Absolutely.

And is truth akin to proportion or disproportion?

To proportion.

So, in addition to all the other qualities, let us also seek a mind endowed with proportion and grace, whose nature will allow it to be led to the form of each reality.’

¹⁶ Translation by Lee (2007 3rd edition 1977), revised by Johansen (2008) and Hobbs (2022).

¹⁷ As we have seen, Plato makes it absolutely clear at *Republic* 540c (see also *Timaeus* 18c) that there are to be female as well as male philosophers, and indeed Philosopher-Queens as well as Philosopher-Kings.

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Once again, proportion is viewed as morally fine, aesthetically pleasing, and wholesome and beneficial. Given that at this point in the *Republic*, Socrates is arguing specifically for philosopher-rulers, the benefits will accrue not just to the individual philosopher, but to society as a whole. We will be returning to this point below, but first I want to suggest that the metaphysical underpinning of the connections Plato makes between the morally fine, beauty and health may not simply be the general proportionality of the Forms and their realm; I wish to suggest that the Form of Beauty is at the very least extremely closely connected to the Form of the Good, and may even be identical to it in reference if not in sense. As I discuss this possibility in detail elsewhere, I will only briefly mention some of the evidence here.¹⁸ At *Republic* 517c Socrates says that the Form of the Good (*to agathon*) is the inferred cause of all fine and beautiful (*kala*) things; yet at *Republic* 375-9 he had said that *kala* things are *kala* through participation in the Form of Beauty (*to kalon*). Socrates, in short, appears to be treating the two forms interchangeably. -Three more key texts are *Republic* 505d11-e1 and *Symposium* 210e4-6 and 211c2: in the *Republic*, it is the Form of the Good which is said to be ‘that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which everything is done’, while in the *Symposium* passages it is the Form of *Beauty* which is ‘that for the sake of which all previous labours were undertaken’, and which is the ‘final goal’ (*telos*), ‘that for the sake of which’ the lover ‘always strives’. For a discussion of the implications of this apparent identity in reference, and an explanation of how the two Forms still differ in sense, please see Hobbs 2000: 222–227; all we need emphasize here is the fact that Plato believes his theory of psychic harmony and a beautiful life has a transcendent basis.

The Shape of a Life

Let us now return to *Republic* 443–4 and 591, as we are now in a position to understand the thinking that underpins the need to attune the three psychic faculties, and further to attune *psychē* to body: it is only thus that we can live the harmonious life of the true *mousikos* (*Republic* 591d).¹⁹ -We are also in a much better position to appreciate the brief suggestion there that Plato’s approach to ethics

¹⁸ See Hobbs (2000: 221–227).

¹⁹ p. [3] in my draft – but I obviously don’t want to know what page number it will be in the published Handbook].

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‘leads naturally to the view that a person and their life can be seen and assessed in terms of narrative shape, of life models and role models, which in turn deepen the very close links in Plato between ethics and aesthetics’. (...[p.4 above in this version, but of course I don’t know what page it will be in the published Handbook](#))

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For Plato (and it would seem also for the historical Socrates), the fundamental ethical questions are ‘how should life be lived?’ and ‘what sort of person should I be?’ (*Gorgias* 500c; *Republic* 352d). It is an agent-centred approach, at least capable of taking on board the complexities of the lived human experience. It is because it considers the *whole person*, living a *whole* life, that it invites us to consider the structure, shape and narrative of a well-lived life (or for that matter a badly-lived one). It presents us with a story and perceives a life as capable of aesthetic as well as ethical evaluation. In Plato’s last work, the *Laws*, the main character (in this dialogue the mysteriously named Athenian Stranger, not Socrates)²⁰ says at 803a–b:

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‘Just as a shipwright at the commencement of his building outlines the shape of his vessel by laying down her keel, so I appear to myself to be doing just the same—trying to frame, that is, the shapes of lives according to the ways of their *psychai*, and thus literally laying down their keels, by considering by what means and by what ways²¹ of living we shall best navigate our barque of life through this voyage of existence.’²²

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A life, no less than a ship, can be viewed in terms of the proper relations between its parts, and between parts and the whole, and such considerations once more depend on notions of proportion and harmony: ‘structure, after all, can impart not only intelligibility but grace.’²³

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Philosopher-Artists: Shaping Society

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We saw above how it is the ruler’s task to model him- or herself on the proportionate Forms and their realm. But having formed themselves, they then need to rule. And both Socrates in

²⁰ Often thought to be a cover for Plato himself.

²¹ ‘Ways’ translates *tropous* (accusative plural); a *tropos* can also mean a mode, style, in music.

²² Translation [adapted-revised by Hobbs 2022](#) from that of Bury (1926: 5326:).

²³ Hobbs (2000: 67).

the *Republic* and the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* conceive of this task in terms of the *shaping* of both whole societies and the citizens within them on proportionate, harmonious lines. These rulers are to be philosopher-artists, sculpting society in the image of both individual Forms and the realm they inhabit. The passage in *Republic* 500c–501c quoted above continues:

‘Then if the philosopher is compelled to try to introduce [the standards] he has seen there into the habits of the people in both their private and public lives, and mould not only himself [but them too], will he lack the skill to produce self-discipline and justice and all the other demotic virtues?’²⁴

Certainly not.

And if the public discover that we are telling the truth about philosophers, will they still be angry with them and disbelieve us when we say that no state can flourish unless the artists drawing it use a divine pattern?

If they do make the discovery, they will stop being angry. But what sort of drawing do you mean?

The first thing our artists must do ... —and it’s not easy—is to wipe the slate of human society and human habits clean. For our philosophic artists differ at once from all others in being unwilling to start work on an individual or a city, or draw out laws, until they are given, or have made themselves, a clean canvas.

They are quite right.

After that the first step will be to sketch in the outline of the social system.

Yes, and then?

²⁴ Trans. Hobbs. ‘Demotic’ virtues here refer to the virtues as they are exemplified by ordinary citizens, based on true beliefs, rather than in their highest ‘philosophic’ instantiation (when they are based directly on full knowledge of the Forms).

Our artist will, I suppose, as he works, look frequently in both directions, that is at justice and beauty and self-discipline and the like in their true nature, and again at the copy of them he is trying to make in human beings, mixing and blending traits to give the colour of manhood ...

... He will sometimes delete and draw again, of course, but will go on until he has made human nature as acceptable to God as possible.

It should be a very beautiful picture.'

We shall be returning to the disturbing implications of this passage. For now we should note that the verb here translated 'mould' (*plattein*) is normally used of a sculptor shaping clay or wax, and that the same verb was used earlier in the *Republic* at 377b, where Socrates emphasises that it is important to start moulding children when they are very young and their natures are still soft and malleable.

In later dialogues the business of ruling is likened to other arts and crafts. In the *Statesman* (*Politicus*) 308–311 the task of the ideal ruler is to 'weave' together naturally courageous characters (the weft) with naturally restrained and modest characters (the woof) into a beautiful citizen body, partly through an education which aims at instilling shared beliefs and values, and partly through intermarriage. And in Plato's last work, the *Laws*, the philosophic lawmakers claim at 817b that it is they, rather than the dramatists and poets, who in framing the constitution write the most beautiful and best tragedies. All these comparisons—to painting, sculpting, weaving and writing—reinforce the notion that the material of a character and a life needs to be carefully and skilfully shaped.

Education in Beauty

The malleability of children's natures emphasised at *Republic* 377b is claimed by Socrates to make them not just impressionable but also naturally mimetic, and thus particularly susceptible to cultural influences. In this, Plato seems to have been influenced by the sophist Protagoras. In the dialogue named after him, the character of Protagoras says in his Great Speech that children are made to learn the works of 'good poets' by heart, since they contain,

‘Many admonitions, but also many descriptions and praises and encomia of good men in times past, so that the boy may, through envy, imitate them and long to become such as they.’
(*Protagoras* 326a)²⁵

In (suitable) literary texts children will find appropriate role models. But this is by no means the only way that cultural influences are absorbed. Protagoras goes on to claim (326b) that music teachers

‘Insist on familiarizing the children’s *psychai* with the rhythms and modes, so that they may become more gentle, and by gaining in rhythmic and harmonic grace may become effective in both speech and action. For the whole of a human life requires the graces of rhythm and harmony.’²⁶

Plato develops this basic position of Protagoras in the *Republic*, and applies it not only to musicians, poets and other writers, but to all craftsmen. Our opening quote concerning the importance of artists and craftsmen perceiving the real nature of what is beautiful, the *kalon*, comes from a key summary of early education for the Guardian children (400c–403c). The passage makes it clear that artistic and aesthetic influences can be absorbed and emulated both through formal education in literature and music (collectively called *mousikē*), and also informally through immersion in the human-made and natural environment. This is because, as the character of Socrates puts it, true, objective, outer beauty arises from true, objective inner moral beauty—a moral beauty which is the internalization of reason, of *logos*. It is such a central passage to our enquiry that it is worth citing at some length; in the lead up to our opening quote Socrates declares that

‘Good literature, therefore, and good music, beauty of form and good rhythm all depend on goodness of character ...

The graphic arts are full of the same qualities and so are the related crafts, weaving and embroidery, architecture and the manufacture of furniture of all kinds; and the same is true of living things, animals and plants. For in all of them we find beauty and ugliness. And

²⁵ Translation by Lamb 1924: 143, revised by Hobbs 2022.

²⁶ Lamb 1924: 145, revised by Hobbs 2022.

ugliness of form and bad rhythm and disharmony are akin to poor quality expression and character, and their opposites are akin to and represent good character and moderation.

... It is not only to the poets therefore that we must issue orders requiring them to portray good character in their poems or not to write at all; we must issue similar orders to all our artists and craftsmen, and prevent them portraying bad character, ill-discipline, meanness or ugliness in pictures of living things, in sculpture, architecture, or any work of art ... We shall thus prevent our Guardians being brought up among representations of what is evil, and so day by day and little by little, by grazing widely as it were in an unhealthy pasture, insensibly doing themselves a cumulative psychological damage that is very serious.'

Yet if artists and craftsmen who do truly understand the nature of beauty can be found, and the children in consequence benefit from such works as if breathing in 'healthy breezes from wholesome places', then they will without realising it be led from earliest childhood into 'close sympathy and conformity with beauty and reason' (401d). This, says Socrates, is why this stage of education is so vital:

'For rhythm and harmony penetrate deeply into the psyche and take a most powerful hold on it, and, if education is good, bring and impart grace and beauty; if it is bad, the reverse. And moreover the proper training we propose will make [the child] quick to perceive the shortcomings of works of art or nature, whose ugliness he will rightly dislike; anything beautiful he will welcome gladly, will make it his own and so grow in true goodness of character; anything ugly he will properly condemn and dislike, *even when he is still young and cannot understand the reason for so doing* [italics mine], while when reason comes he will recognize and welcome it as a familiar friend because of his upbringing.'

A key question to which we shall be returning is whether artistic beauty is able to penetrate into the psyche of an adult whose character has not been well formed when young. For now, let us note again the intimate connection between beauty (both sensible and moral) and the good and beneficial in this crucial passage. Socrates is claiming both **a**) that immersion in sensible beauty will help to inculcate moral beauty in the child and that this is to the benefit of the child's psychological wellbeing, and also **b**) that a child who can appreciate sensible beauty, and convert it into inner moral beauty, will naturally welcome the development of reason and the understanding it offers of *why* both outer and inner beauty is beneficial to our

psychological health. Both claims together lead us to the conclusion of *Republic* 445c that there is just one form of moral excellence (*aretē*). I submit that it is the internalization of proportional beauty.

The Tripartite Psyche: the Role of the *Thumoeides*

So how is this pre-rational penetration of the psyche by beauty to be achieved? To appreciate this, we need to consider the middle ‘part’ of the tripartite psyche detailed in the *Republic*, the spirited element or *thumoeides*. Although the innate reasoning capabilities of young children are not yet fully realised—it appears that they do not really develop until the child is about ~~ten~~10—the *thumoeides* is vigorously active from birth, and because it desires honour and success, it is instinctively inclined towards those characters, actions and works of art which are already honoured and praised in the surrounding society. It has a natural sensitivity to those things, people and actions which its society calls *kala*, fine and beautiful, and if this sensitivity is guided towards true *kala*, then the *thumoeides* will indeed be able to perform its proper function of being the ally of the reasoning element (the *logistikon*).²⁷ Although 410b–412a makes it clear that education in the arts is ultimately aimed at training the *logistikon*, while physical training (*gymnastikē*) is mainly aimed at the *thumoeides*, a properly guided *thumoeides* can nevertheless do much to pave the way for the proper development of reason.

411b–412a is central to our discussion in that it vividly describes the power of aural and visual stimuli to penetrate deep into the *psychē*, and the consequent need to achieve the correct balance between *mousikē* and *gymnastikē* in early education. Too much *mousikē*, or *mousikē* in the wrong harmonic mode, slackens and eventually destroys the ‘sinews of the *psychē*’, leaving the young person weak and cowardly. Excessive physical training, on the other hand, makes those same psychic sinews too taut and brittle: it is vital that the *logistikon* and the *thumoeides* are tuned to the right pitch. The educator who can do this, who can correctly tune the *psychē*, is thus able to produce music of far more significance to the state than any artist.

The Training of Eros

²⁷ The *thumoeides* is said to be the natural ally of the *logistikon* at 440b. For the relation between the two see also Hobbs (2000: 11–12; 16–17; 30–31; 229–230).

As both inner and outer beauty naturally attract us and inspire love and desire, the educational programme outlined by Socrates in the *Republic* is conceived in essence as the proper guidance of our capacity to love: at 403a, for example, in a discussion of sex, Socrates says that to love rightly is to love what is ‘orderly and beautiful’, but it is immediately (403c) made clear that this does not simply refer to sexual desire, but that teaching us to love both whom and what are truly beautiful should be the ultimate object of all education. To understand this better we need to appreciate three central points about Plato’s philosophy of eros, erotic love. Firstly, eros entails desire (*epithumia*),²⁸ so what is claimed of eros is claimed of desire too. Secondly, in Plato all three faculties of the *psychē* have their *own* desires (and loves); this is one of the key differences between his psychology and many modern conceptions of the relation between reason and desire, such as that of Hume.²⁹ Thirdly, these desires are not viewed as emanating from separate sources, but are conceived as a single stream of erotic energy which can be directed onto different objects, and the training of this erotic energy is utterly central to the wellbeing of both individual and community. The hydraulic imagery is explicit in *Republic* 485d, where our desires are likened to a stream which can be diverted in different directions (what should never be done, Socrates makes clear, is simply to block it, because then it will simply burst forth uncontrollably). This channelling and rechannelling of eros is powerfully depicted in *Symposium* 210–12, where the (almost certainly fictional) priestess Diotima recounts the lover’s ascent up the ‘ladder of love’, their erotic attraction being directed towards ever more abstract objects of beauty, until finally they dwell in communion with the perfect, eternal, non-sensible Form of Beauty itself.

Tellingly for our present discussion, in the *Symposium* it is not only artists and philosophers who think that eros comes under their provenance, but doctors too. The doctor Eryximachus gives a speech (186–188) in which he claims that a proper understanding of eros between different elements in the body leads to their correct proportions and the resulting healthy harmony (he makes an explicit comparison between medicine and music); furthermore, the expertise of the seer also involves an understanding of the proper erotic relations between humans and gods, and this understanding in its turn leads to friendship between the two.

²⁸ For eros entailing desire (*epithumia*), see *Symposium* 200a.

²⁹ Hume (1985: 462: year, p. —) ‘Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions’ (*A Treatise of Human Nature* III.iii.3).

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Afterlives

Plato's view that both outer and inner beauty is an objective matter of correct and harmonious proportions fundamental to our psychological health has been hugely influential in western culture, though it undeniably also raises some uncomfortable challenges. It was an approach taken up with devotion by the Neoplatonists—see, for example, Plotinus *Enneads* 1.6 and 1.3.2—and largely through them it fed into the thinking of Christian writers such as the seventh century John of Climacus, whose *Ladder of Divine Ascent* seems to be influenced in part by the ladder of love in Plato's *Symposium*, in addition to the explicit analogy the author draws with Jacob's Ladder.³⁰ We also find the image of the celestial ladder of love and beauty in Gregory of Nyssa, St. Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Boethius and St. Bonaventure.³¹ In the fifteenth century, the Florentine priest, philosopher and (covert) magician Ficino draws deeply on Plato's conception of beauty in his commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, the *de Amore*.³²

Nor do Plato's writings on beauty and harmony solely feed into spiritual traditions and practices; it is highly likely that they also profoundly influenced architecture and art in practical ways. The Roman architect and military engineer Vitruvius (first century BCE) advises in Book I.i of his *de Architectura* that the architect should be knowledgeable about philosophy and music as well as geometry and optics, and in his introduction to Book VII, where he is presenting his learned credentials, he lists Plato as amongst the very best and most gifted philosophers. It is eminently plausible to believe that Plato's writings on beauty, harmony and proportion helped shape Vitruvius' own deep commitment to proportion, which he discusses not only in relation to architecture but also to the human body: he holds it to be a 'truth of nature' that nature's designs are based on laws of proportion and symmetry. In I.i.3 he gives detailed specifications for a perfectly proportioned human body—specifications which Leonardo da Vinci took as the basis for his celebrated drawing *Vitruvian Man*.

³⁰ See Nygren (1953, § 594).

³¹ Leshner (2006, § 329).

³² See Hobbs (2019, § 243–258, especially 250–251). The *de Amore* is in fact only in part a commentary on (certain passages of) the *Symposium*—it is a rich alchemical brew of many different sources on eros—but it is nevertheless infused throughout with Plato's views on beauty, and the connection between beauty, goodness, and wellbeing.

For modern interest in the Platonic link between harmony and mental health we need to turn to Freud. Freud had a profound admiration for Plato and considerable—albeit apparently fragmentary—knowledge of some of his works, particularly the *Symposium* and parts of the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*.³³ Such respect strikes me as particularly illuminating in that Freud's thinking developed in part from extensive clinical practice—a resource which Plato clearly did not have at his disposal. Although Freud does not explicitly say that his tripartition of ego, superego and id is influenced by Plato's tripartition of reason, the *thumoeides* and the appetites, the connections between the two tripartitions suggest that there is at least a case to be made for subliminal influence;³⁴ we may particularly note the central importance in both thinkers of the notion of a healthy psyche being harmonious and integrated, as opposed to the discordant fragmentation of a psyche in ill health. Freud does explicitly remark on the similarities between his concept of the libido and Plato's conception of eros as a stream of erotic energy which can be guided onto different objects.³⁵ In fact there are significant differences between Platonic rechannelling and Freudian sublimation,³⁶ but the salient point here is that in both Plato and Freud blocking/repression is regarded as highly dangerous: if the object of desire is either unattainable or inadvisable, then the recommended course is to divert erotic attention onto healthier objects.

Beauty, Harmony and the Bad Life?

There is no question, then, that Plato's views on beauty, harmony and mental health have been highly influential. But what of the challenges that they raise? Clearly Plato's conception of beauty as grounded in objective mathematical truths—and indeed ultimately grounded in the Form of Beauty itself—will not be attractive to all who conceive of beauty as entirely subjective, existing solely in the senses of the perceiver. Disquiet, too, might be felt about the way Plato repeatedly privileges aesthetic experiences that take place *at a distance* from the perceived object, such as sight and hearing and smell—Plato always appears to be

³³ See Price (1990⁸⁹: 247–270); Santas (1988) and Hobbs (2000: 46–49).

³⁴ See Price (1990: 258–270); Hobbs (2000: 46–49).

³⁵ *Pelican Freud Library* (PFL) vii.43; xii.119; xv.269. For Freudian sublimation as a reworking of Platonic rechannelling, see PFL xiv.470. See Price (1990: 248 and 250–258).

³⁶ In Freud, eros works away from its original state, whereas in the *Symposium* eros is returning to it. Furthermore, Freud sometimes appears to be sexualizing all love, whereas in the account of the ladder of love in the *Symposium* the priestess Diotima seems to be de-sexualizing even originally sexual love. In Plato, moreover, there is no clear concept of the unconscious. Nevertheless, the emphasis in both Plato and Freud on the essential fluidity of desire and the importance of channelling and re-channelling it rather than simply thwarting it is highly significant.

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uncomfortable at the thought of the immediate physical contact required by touch and taste.³⁷ Some issues raised are even more disturbing. For Plato, true beauty is not simply a matter of objective perfection, but, as the ladder of love in the *Symposium* makes clear, that perfection is *homogeneous*: all instances of beauty in this phenomenal world are simply tokens of a type, and there is no room for individual artistic expression and experimentation.³⁸ Admittedly, in the considerably less than perfectly beautiful world which Plato admits we currently inhabit, there is a need for disruptors such as Socrates (and indeed Plato himself), but it does appear as if a Platonically beautiful heaven, if ever attained, might be rather dull.

Yet despite the rich and positive potential of identifying inner beauty and harmony to mental health, it is also an identification which contains very serious dangers. If moral goodness is to be identified with psychic harmony and health, and moral badness with psychic disharmony and illness, then this opens the door to psychiatric and political abuse. It opens the door to pernicious claims that, for example, political dissidents are not only morally bad but also mentally disordered, and in need of state ‘treatment’ through drugs or even lobotomies in the kind of secretive and out-of-the-way ‘sanatoria’ that existed in the Soviet Union under Stalin.³⁹ Is there any way of retaining the riches while avoiding such evils? I think there might be, through an account of psychological health which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, and an account of moral goodness which is not defined by any particular political or medical regime, but these are issues too large for the scope of our present enquiry. But before concluding, there is a further, an utterly fundamental challenge to Plato’s account of beauty, moral goodness and psychic harmony which I wish to address.

The reason this challenge is so fundamental is that it does not involve the contingency of a warped political or medical regime abusing definitions of moral goodness and health. It is a challenge to the heart of Plato’s claims that immersion in aesthetic beauty will help to form inner beauty, goodness and psychological health, and it arises from the well-attested fact that

³⁷ In *Philebus* 51a–e, for example, Socrates claims that the pleasures arising from sights, sounds and odours are pure, unmixed with the pain of lack, while at *Timaeus* 47a–d sight is praised for helping us see the divine heavens, and hearing for giving us access to harmony.

³⁸ As we have seen, Socrates in the *Republic* advocates strict censorship of what he regards as flawed existing artworks; however, once new works of art are created on philosophically ‘correct’ foundations in the ideally just state, he is equally keen that there should then be no innovation in artistic style: any change from perfection could only result in deterioration (see *Republic*: 424b–c). In the *Laws* 656c–657b, the Athenian Stranger expresses admiration for the unvarying (and morally fine) artistic practices to be found in Egypt.

³⁹ For an incisive analysis of such dangers, see Kenny (1973: 1–27).

many very wicked people, who committed the most terrible atrocities, took pleasure in the arts: Hitler and Goebbels, for example, both loved Wagner, and there is no reason to think that this was simply because of the ideology associated (both rightly and wrongly) with Wagner; there is no reason to think that they did not take real pleasure in listening to his music. Goebbels apparently also loved Schubert, with whom there are no such ideological associations. Yet clearly these aesthetic experiences did not make them into good people, or people we would point to as examples of fine mental health. Is there any possible Platonic response to such a grave charge?

Conclusion: The Tripartite Psychē Revisited

Again, I believe there is, though here too a detailed exploration is beyond the scope of this enquiry. The easy—and possibly lazy—answer would be to say that they were not sufficiently immersed in true beauty from early enough in childhood; another easy—and I think also lazy—response would be to say that Plato would not allow the music of Wagner and Schubert to be genuinely beautiful. But this will not do: Plato might well have had a number of objections to Wagner's operas, based on the censorship criteria outlined by the character of Socrates in the *Republic*, but it is harder to think that he would have objected to every composition by Schubert. And in any case it would surely not be hard to find artistic examples allowed by Plato to count as beautiful which have been enjoyed by morally bad people. If there is to be a more satisfying Platonic response to the challenge, I think it will lie in the tripartite psychology of the *Republic*, and the crucial passage we have been examining from 400-403: how *deeply* is the music—or whatever art form—penetrating into the *psychē*? Is the sound simply being enjoyed at a superficial level by the appetitive element, or is it also penetrating and shaping the spirited and reasoning elements, the *thumoeides* and *logistikón*? In the case of Hitler and Goebbels, I submit, Plato could say that at these deeper levels the music has simply failed to penetrate their *psychai*. And, if so, I think Plato would have a point. If, for example, a Nazi engineering the Final Solution claimed that they took pleasure in listening to Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, but still did not feel moved to alter their views or behaviour in any way, then I think we can justly say that at some deeper level the Nazi has simply failed to appreciate, absorb and internalise the full beauty of the music, and its powerful message. Plato's views on beauty, harmony, goodness and psychological health may indeed raise serious challenges for us to ponder—and

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Title of the contribution

Name of the author

Abstract (150-300 words of text)

Keywords (minimum 5, maximum 10)

Introduction (text)

The text (inclusive introduction and conclusion) should have between 7000-8000 words. It should be structured through subheadings without numbers (introduction and conclusion should be integral parts of the text structure).

Conclusion (text)

References

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they are certainly not fashionable— but I submit that they are of profound and lasting interest and importance, and it would be to our advantage to give them equally serious consideration.

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[Lee, D. \(translator\): \(2007\)1987\) Plato: *Republic* \(with an introduction by Melissa Lane 2007\). Harmondsworth: Penguin. \(with an introduction by Melissa Lane\). Harmondsworth: Penguin.](#)

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[Plato \(2010\). ---*Phaedo* \(trans. C. J. Rowe in *The Last Days of Socrates \(Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo\)*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. ---](#)

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[Plato \(1982\).---*Philebus* \(trans. R. Waterfield\). Harmondsworth: Penguin.---](#)

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[Plato --- *Laws* ---](#)

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