

Pythagoras, Plato, and the Lyre-Soul

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Abstract: The soul is singing! And it delights in playing its music. It does so spontaneously and naturally, not because it discovers music by chance or studying systematically the art of producing sounds; but because in its essence, at the very core unaffected by spatial and temporal coordinates, there *is* music, sonorous vibration, harmony or however we would want to call this peculiar art. At least this is what Pythagoras and then Plato let us understand, as two of the most convincing philosophers who believed such a truth. The personality of a psychologist – like of the philosopher - is craving for metaphors able to contain and to give meaning for the very own study “object”: the soul as a whole. No doubt, the soul is singing; it is playing; and the metaphor I considered to be the appropriate one is that of the lyre-soul.

Keywords: soul, sound, music, lyre, metaphor

From the American humanist psychologist Gordon Allport (1961) we know that behind any theory of personality there is a hidden philosophy. Although only a trained eye can detect it, this marriage is impossible to avoid if one sets his mind to study not merely psychical processes or elementary behaviors by empirical methods, but the entire psyche in its entirety. This means to take into account empirical outcomes and concomitantly to decide to proceed in a rational way and to think deeply on the paradoxes that make the story of the soul so difficult to tell.

And the paradoxes that make the essence of the soul so difficult to grasp stand in plain sight, two of them standing right in front of us as we speak. The first paradox is centered on the uncertain spatial and temporal coordinates of what we too lightly call the ‘soul’. That psychological time is not the same as the physical one; it is something all psychologists accept, and not only them. More interesting for us is the fact that the soul, not having a shape and being not affected by

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coordinates such as up and down, left and right, can take any shape. So our imagination runs free and wild, and we can imagine the soul as it befits our interests, as a clepsydra (Dîrțu et al. 2015), as a pyramid (Maslow), ecosystem (Rogers), window (Johari), iceberg or leopard skin (Freud), just to list a few of the innumerable possible shapes that were metaphorically described by the researchers of the soul. The second paradox to be taken into consideration by psychologists shall be described to the end of this article.

For the time being, in order to get closer to our purpose, we may start by saying - without being too wrong - that the entire philosophy of the ancient Greece revolves around the ideas of *psyche* and *kalokagathia* - the ideal envisaging human perfection as union of goodness and beauty. Plato makes it clear for us that the beauty of the soul is the one yielding beauty to the body and clearly not the other way round. The proof lies in the *Theaetetus* dialogue where the least beautiful character, after a lively exchange of ideas, is praised by Socrates with the words: “How beautiful you are, Theaetetus” (Plato 1989). The perfection of the soul not only prevails over, but also cures body imperfections.

Even the reputed adversaries of Socratic philosophers, the Sophists and/or the Hedonists placed at the heart of their concerns for wellbeing the ideal of *kalokagathia*, even if this ideal was conceived such as it disputed point by point the others’. If for the Socratics you become good, beautiful and wise after you (re)discover your inner harmony (Moreau 2015), harmony that prevails despite any storm caused by fighting for fame and power in the big-city, for Sophists and/or Hedonists, you become good, beautiful and wise only after, armed with the sharp and efficient weapons of rhetoric which enable you to control the masses, you get full social recognition and become a tyrant leader. And when they said tyrant, the Sophists were thinking of a leader above the laws dictated by the weaknesses and fears of the masses, (Dîrțu 2016).

Hoping we are not going to be harshly criticized, we advance the idea that, like many other writings of the Greek philosophers, *The Republic* dialogue is one about the soul, that is to say more about the just order of the city-state. Plato says that there are two entities looking alike a lot: the soul and the city. The resemblance is so striking, that the truth giving identity to the two is written with the same letters, which differ only in size. So, in the book on the Soul the truth is written with such small letters that the mean size of the letters of the

book on the City is the only reason that made Plato to decide analyzing the City and not the Soul:

“The inquiry we are undertaking is not an easy one but calls for keen vision, as it seems to me. So, since we are not clever persons, I think we should employ the method of search that we should use if we, with not very keen vision, were bidden to read small letters from a distance, and then someone had observed that these same letters exist elsewhere larger and on a larger surface. We should have accounted it a godsend, I fancy, to be allowed to read those letters first, and examine the smaller, if they are the same. (...) but what analogy to do you detect in the inquiry about justice?” “I will tell you,” I said: “there is a justice of one man, we say, and, I suppose, also of an entire city.” “Assuredly,” said he. “Is not the city larger than the man?” “It is larger,” he said. “Then, perhaps, there would be more justice in the larger object and more easy to apprehend. If it please you, then, let us first look for its quality in states, and then only examine it also in the individual, looking for the likeness of the greater in the form of the less.” (Plato 1986, 368d, 368e, 369a)

Against the background of such preoccupations of the ancient Greeks to discover the soul harmony and supported by other arguments that we are going to bring forth as we go on, it should not surprise that I chose the Lyre as being the most suggestive metaphor to represent the soul in Ancient Greece. Regarding the illustrative power of the Lyre metaphor, it is worth saying that when he decided to bring this metaphor into play, Plato started from the analysis of the Soul and then he analyzed the order in the City, and not the other way round.

To be more precise and brief, *emotions*, mostly negative emotions, are considered the reflection of the lowest chord of the lyre and are associated with the lower classes of society, which are farmers, shepherds and craftsmen. The next level is the will or the “*fire*”, corresponding to the mean chord of the lyre. Will or “*fire*” becomes soul attributes characteristic for guards, for order and law defenders in the ideal city of Plato. At the last level, the finest chord of the lyre is the correspondent of wisdom that should characterize the ideal soul and at the level of society we have the balanced leader, who governs observing the universality of the laws. Thus, the harmonic and consonant spirit of the Lyre inspires the tripartite structure of the soul that is reflected, as Plato considers, in the tripartite societal structure.

Nevertheless, the above does not make clear why the ‘lyre-soul’ metaphor may claim to be one of the strongest soul-related metaphors

of the ancient Greek world. The simple resemblance of the chords of this instrument to some virtues of the soul is not enough convincing. Still, the metaphor acquires deeper meanings when we recall that the lyre is the favorite instrument of god Apollo. And the god Apollo is the favorite god of the Socratic philosophers. The famous phrase “Know thyself” was not coined by an ordinary mind, it is the verb of the god, written on the frontispiece of the temple, as Socrates said and Plato witnessed during the trial that would bring about his conviction to the death penalty.

On the other hand, it is well known that Plato always preferred Apollo with his lyre, snubbing Dionysus, the god of the grape harvest, winemaking and wine, ritual madness and religious ecstasy, of all and any excesses, whose favorite instruments were wind instruments, promoting a frenzied music meant to facilitate the temporary exit of soul from the body (soma)-prison. God of wisdom and light, Apollo was the exponent of music that predisposes to calm and beneficial meditation.

For Plato, music in its true sense was only this type of Apollonian music (Stamou 2002). And the fact that going of light and wisdom was the one conducting this type of music made the laws of sound production and instrument tuning to be of divine origin. Actually, it is not that only Plato thought that way. For the ancient lyre players, the laws of harmony were immutable and eternal, so that all musicians tuned their instruments abiding by these laws only.

Infringing on these universal laws could have been and often was considered a capital sin. There is a famous case of one of the best Spartan musicians who made the mistake of improving the lyre, adding two new chords. The reaction of the conservative and inflexible Spartan society was extremely prompt and brutal. Indifferent to the fact he was the best interpreter and composer, the judges convicted him for troubling the laws of universal harmony whose exponent and conductor was god Apollo himself. And making the god angry was for Sparta of those times something unforgivable, as troubling the divine cosmic order reflected directly on the social life. In a society placing all the stakes on conserving tradition, the corruption of the young by inciting them to innovation and disobedience endangered the entire social order.

The myth of the musical duel between Apollo on lyre and the satyr Marsyas on flute was well-known in those times and the cruel punishment he received from the god for daring to defeat him in the

contest: Apollo skinned him alive. The punishment given to the Spartan musician was not as cruel, yet it was not easy at all. The innovative musician was expelled from the city. The contemporary man finds it hard to understand the extreme harshness of this punishment. To be expelled, to be no more the citizen of a polis meant losing one's identity, your identity and, which is worse, your family's. We cannot forget that Socrates preferred death to running to another city than the one in which he spent his whole life.

The harshness of the punishment received by the Spartan musician shows also the importance that traditional societies showed to music in educating the new generation, the more so as in the epoch the "art of muses", expression of particular semantic richness, comprised poetry and dance. So important was music in the consistent soul organization, that Plato recommended firmly in *Republic* the use of a restricted number of modal musical scales (Ionian and Dorian) because he considered the other modes (Lydian, Mixolydian, Phrygian) may lead the soul to laziness, passivity, melancholy.

Yet we believe that the metaphor of the lyre-soul is significant in the psychology of personality also because of the intrinsic qualities the sonorous vibration has, qualities discovered first by Pythagoras and that reached Plato through the Pythagorean disciples. It is known that Pythagoras is the first who isolated a chord and tested empirically how vibrations are produced and therefore how the sound is produced. If noise is unordered vibration, Pythagoras discovered that the main characteristic of the sound is orderly vibration. What Pythagoras discovered is confirmed by the modern musical theory, that is orderly vibration of a sound is not produced only on the total length of the chord or of the air flow that enters and exits the wind instruments, it is also produced on halves, quarters, eighths, etc.

The concomitant vibration on various lengths achieved in an orderly fashion shows us that even if our ear seizes one sound only, in reality we have a complexity of sonorous vibrations. From here to studying musical harmony by means of mathematics and to consider the sound a microcosm was just a step Pythagoras took instantly. The line of reasoning seems simple. Where there is order there is mathematics, and where there is dynamic order and mathematics, there also must be sound, the basic element of music, with its modal or total scales.

Pythagoras' discoveries regarding the production and the mathematical nature of sound and their popularization by Pythagoreans led to Plato's conception that Soul, Society and Cosmos have in their

essence the same nature and organization (Laertius 1998). Although the three entities appear at a first glance different, the psychologist Gordon Allport, inspired by the Gestalt psycho-philosophical theory, says that two or several things or phenomena do not have to resemble to be alike. More precisely, if the same entities have the same operating principles, they may belong to the same family. To make a clearer distinction between apparent resemblance and fundamental resemblance, Allport distinguished between resemblance and similarity. Resemblance may often be superficial, yet surely similarity, which has nothing to do with superficial resemblance, is a deep structural and functional likeness. Using this line of reasoning, Pythagoras and Plato spoke about the likeness between Soul, Society and Cosmos. The metaphor of the lyre and sound production has an explanatory power at all these three levels of reality. Certain elements and structures of the Soul, Society and Cosmos may get relaxed or tensed, as it happens when you get tense or release the lyre chord. It is not surprising at all that Pythagoras, noticing that planets are moving, concluded that the Universe is singing.

Yet the conception from ancient times that sound is a microcosm of orderly movements facilitated a later discovery, namely that the sound has a universal vibratory nature identified by a trained ear on a musical scale. Yet it concomitantly has a unique structure given by the multitude of harmonics produced as main sound is produced. In other words, the identity of a sound is given by the strong vibrations of the entire chord, of the half, of the quarter and of the eighth (vibrations that produce three sounds of the same type, even if at different octaves, and a quint that reinforces the identity of the dominant sound). Then later, one by one, harmonic sounds emerge, produced by the vibration of significantly smaller chord parts that render unicity to the sound, which is called - in musical language - tone color. More precisely, if we have an orchestra in which instruments are tuned, we will have the same 'La' sound, produced by the first vibrations that are always the same and give identity to the sound, and as many tone colors as instruments are there, produced in a unique way by micro-vibrations.

Maybe I insisted too much on the phenomenon of sound production because it seems a metaphorical solution to the second paradox of the psychology of personality that I try to reveal in the end. Gordon Allport drew attention to the fact that psychological phenomena can either be seen as mediated by contingent necessary and universal conditions, having a nomothetic character, or as being inherently

unique and unrepeatable, having an idiographic character. In other words, either we see human being in terms of its resemblance to other human beings or in terms of a unique combination of traits and habits, we are never able to perceive it from both the perspectives at the same time. Nevertheless we notice that the way sound is produced in our metaphorical model shows how the basic structure of orderly vibrations is the same in sounds occupying the same position in a musical scale, but at the same time different from the perspective of harmonics determining its unique tone color. And which is more important, the basic vibrations and the harmonic vibrations overlap with the laws of order and harmony. The metaphor of the lyre seems to indicate there is a possibility to reconcile, within the personality, the universal and the uniqueness of the human being.

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