Five works of art in Plato

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Resumo: Se é possível dizer que há uma teoria da Arte em Platão, ela está relacionada à reflexão do filósofo sobre a Alma do Mundo e a Alma do Homem, seja no **Timeu**, na **República**, no **Fédon** ou **Leis**. Pretendo discutir outros aspectos desta questão atualizando o paralelismo existente entre a demiurgia da Alma do Mundo como objeto-arte e a pólis ideal como objeto-arte ambos fabricados por um intelecto que contempla o Bem.

Abstract: If it is possible to say that there is a theory of Art in Plato, it is related to the reflexion of the philosopher about the World Soul and Man's Soul, whether in the **Timaeus**, in **Republic**, **Phaedon** or **Laws**. I intend to discurs other aspects of this issues studyng the existing parallelism between the demiurges of the world soul and the ideal pólis as art-object both fashioned by an intellect that contemplates Good.

Palavras-chave: arte, mimética, demiurgia, alma
art, mimetic, demiurgy, soul

If there is one thing that most readers of Plato (and for that matter several who have never in fact read a word of him) think they know, it is that he had a very jaundiced view of the fine arts, and as evidence they point triumphantly to large sections of two dialogues in particular, the **Republic** and the **Laws**. Not only, they add, is his view jaundiced, he even backs it with theory, and a preposterous, theory at that, in which he claims that all that passes for art appeals to the very lowest possible part of our soul, the so-called *epithymetikón*, and that, as far as its ontic content goes, it lies (inclusively) a full three moves away from the truly real, a shadow of a shadow of the Forms. This is too well known to deserve more than passing mention here, and it will no doubt be much discussed during the present paper. So let me say merely that I personally find the criticism not without plausibility as far as it goes, and leave it to others to argue a detailed case for or against it.

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My own task in this paper will be very different one. In their haste, I shall claim, excoriate Plato's views on art many people forget two things, one relatively slight, one very critical. The relatively slight thing is that not all contemporary art suffers Plato's strictures; some things, like certain types of military music, certain statuary, certain types of literature (like Aesop's fables, or at any rate a good number of them), and certain public monuments will do splendid service in the Ideal Society. The critical thing is that, over and beyond what counts for art in the accepted sense of the word, Plato has a view of art that reaches to the cosmos itself, and what a view it is, for those who are prepared to listen carefully to his arguments.

Let me deal first and relatively briefly, with his positive views on what would count as worthwhile art in his Ideal Society. It will be art that appeals, as far as can be the case, to the intellect and *thymós* rather than the gut-emotions, and will serve the purposes of the State in possessing beauty of form and truth in content. The proviso of truth in content will ensure that most contemporary verbal art will be banished, including much of Homer and the great tragedians, and pretty well all of the comic dramatists, on the simple grounds that if "like produces like" (a central Platonic tenet which I shall call "the Empedoclean"), all contain too much that is ugly (like crime and generally vicious action) and untrue (like stories suggesting the gods are subject to all-too-human emotions). What will remain (and will be added to by approved poets) will be morally/socially/politically improving literature.

The overall grimness of this picture is, however, lessened somewhat when one looks at the plastic and architectural arts, which after all played a very large part in the overall education of the citizen. lf harmony of form is of the essence of beauty, as Plato clearly thinks it is, much of the statuary of Greece will easily survive, and all or most of the temples, along with many other shrines and secular buildings. As far as truth of content is concerned, much of the pedimental sculpture and many of the friezes in various temples will survive too, those only being abandoned which suggest that the gods do evil or portray evil or unmanly conduct among mortals. Hypothetical examples of these, [though I can think of none in reality], would be portrayals of Aphrodite and Hephaestus caught in the net, surrounded by gods doubled up with laughter, or Achilles weeping over the body of Patroclus, and so on. If one looks for an example of something wholly acceptable one should probably look at the Parthenon, where there is no reason to doubt that the harmonious lines of the whole, coupled with the statue of Athena within, the august portrayal of the gods in the pedimental sculpture, and the portrayal of the panathenaic procession on the frieze, would have satisfied all of Plato's criteria with relative ease.

While this no doubt mitigates the overall devastation Plato's views would have wrought had contemporary Athens been magically transformed into his Ideal Society, many will still find the price too high to pay and will continue to look on his theory of art as a significant aberration. And if asked what they see as the root cause of the problem, they are very likely to say: the "mimetic" theory of art, in conjunction with an indefensible metaphysics and philosophical psychology. I shall for the moment leave them to this discussion (which seems to have gone on from the time Aristotle walked into the Academy, if not earlier), and turn my attention to something much less adverted to, and that is the concept of a just soul, and its analogue the ideal, just society. One reason why it is less adverted to is very likely our deep assumption that an art-object is usually just that – an object; it is to us *prima facie* surprising that anyone might ever take a living to be an art-object, which for us is a thing fashioned by something itself alive. In rare cases it might be deemed to be the result of pure chance, like the 'found objects', or items based on found objects, that occasionally grace museums, but even here there is seldom a claim the found objects do anything other than receive their artistic status from the operation of appreciative human intelligence. And on occasion one will hear an animal, like a gazelle, referred to as "work of art", either by analogy if the utterer of the word is a non-believer, or as an expression of fact if the utterer is thinking of God as an artist of life-forms.

It is this latter point that brings us back to Plato. Even before he wrote the **Timaeus** (possibly a couple of decades before), Plato speaks in the **Republic** of the Demiurge not just as the fashioner of the universe (530a6) but as the fashioner of the senses (507c6-7). As fashioner of the universe he is the fashioner of a universe that is alive and hence ensouled, and of all the living and ensouled creatures that inhabit it, a point admittedly not made explicitly in the **Republic** but one naturally inferrable from the context and in any case stated in great detail later in the **Timaeus**, where it is more germane to the overall topic of the dialogue. Equally importantly, the human soul, in the **Republic**, is seen as possessing two critical qualities: 1) it is not simply a life-principle, but itself a living substance; and 2) it is tripartite. This substantial and tripartite status turn it immediately into a candidate for the title "art-object" if, as Plato clearly does want to say, anything fashioned by the Great Artificer is by definition an art-object. And the quality of artistry evinced by such an art-object will turn upon the skill of the fashioning of its component parts into a functioning, harmonious whole, and the degree with which, operating as this harmonious whole, it is able to reach the *télos* the Artificer lays down for it.

As the burden of the **Republic**, and later the **Timaeus**, makes clear, this object of beauty, the fully operative human soul, in which each part in the ensemble does exactly the job the Artificer lays down for it, is the fully just soul. Such a soul will, we can be sure, be an object of delight (*ágalma*) to the Artificer, just as the living universe he fashions in the **Timaeus** is said to be an object of delight: – the delight of any artisan in the crafting of an art-object that operates with harmony and proportionality, works perfectly to achieve its end, and is appreciated for what it is by the discriminating and sensitive mind.

We are, of course, operating here simply at the level of the ideal, as in most aspects of the **Republic**. We are looking merely at the soul-as-art-object of the philosopher ruler if ever there were to be any such person, as Socrates somewhat discouragingly points out when questioned on the matter for a third and final time. But it is nonetheless an art-object, and an art-object that for Plato far transcends any possible human artefact. And it is also an art-object that falls within Plato's basic stipulations for the genre: it obeys the Empedoclean principle, in that the most perfect of Artisans produces the most perfect of art-objects; it is an object of attraction to the highest rather than the lowest self of those who come into contact with it; and in terms of its ontological status it is merely two degrees inclusive removed from the Forms as far as *thymós* and *epithymetikón* are concerned, and even less in the case of *noûs*.

It comes as no surprise, given the careful and detailed parallelism drawn by Socrates between soul and State in the **Republic**, that the same can be said of that other great art object of the dialogue, the Ideal State itself. Like the human soul, it too has three parts, and its beauty as an art-object lies in the right functioning and coordination of these parts to produce the noblest of all *téle*, justice. The Artisan in this case Socrates sees as a set of philosopher rulers, who are described as first scraping the whole canvas clean and then painting on it a truly just Society. The metaphor is powerful, clear and direct, and the fact that it is a metaphor not just a simile makes explicit just how deep Plato's commitment is to the existence of a set of truly worthwhile art-objects, beginning with the just human soul and the just Society. And the fact that neither might ever be fully instantiated does not detract from such status; on the contrary, in operating at a paradigmatic level they even more closely than their putatively instantiated versions approximate the status of their own ultimate paradigm the Form of Beauty.

In all of this Plato is operating on the basis of the very precise mimetic theory of art that had underpinned his strictures on most Greek art. But its

Socratic base should not be passed over. Notoriously, in the so-called 'Socratic' dialogues Socrates is forever comparing the virtues to the various arts and crafts, and this seems to me a clear and natural point of departure for Plato, if not perhaps for Socrates himself, to make the move to the whole mimetic theory of physical art-objects and their more ontologically robust counterparts that we have just been discussing.

But we have still not yet moved beyond the **Republic** (few people do). And we ought to. Because it is in later dialogues than the **Republic**, especially the **Timaeus**, that the universality of the range of Plato's art-objects makes itself manifest. In this dialogue we discover, not surprisingly after the **Republic,** that, in that greatest of all Societies which is the cosmos itself, the analogue to the philosopher ruler in the Ideal State is the Demiurge, and a whole series of political and domestic metaphors re-inforce the point for anyone who might have missed it. Operating as always, on the cardinal Empedoclean Principle, Plato describes how the Demiurge fashions a World Soul from three components, Intermediate Sameness, Intermediate Difference, and Intermediate Being or Reality. It is like its counterpart the art-object that is the human soul in that it is fashioned from components the harmonious combination and functioning together of which will make it the entity that it is. It is unlike the human soul and an art-object of greatly more robust ontological status, in that it is pure Intelligence; the *thymós* and *epithymetikón* that tied incarnated human soul to the physical, and vanished upon physical death, are not part of its nature.

Some have inferred from this and other supposed evidence that such Intelligence and the Intelligence that is the Demiurge are one and the same, but this seems to me to be mistaken. On the one hand it compromises, for no good reason, Plato's overall theory of art, in which artificers produce art-objects by reference to a paradigm. And it passes over the fact that the Intelligence which is World Soul has something material in it (hence its 'intermediate' status between Form and sense-object in the critical realms of ontic content self-coherence and difference from all other realities). In so doing it also passes over what seems to be a remarkable attempt by Plato, spurred on perhaps by criticisms from his students, to grapple with the central problem of all psycho-physical dualism, and that is the modalities of any supposed contact between a physical substance and a putative1y immaterial one. One possible way of dealing with the issue, Plato seems to be suggesting here, is to posit that soul in its immortal form, that is Intellect, is not in fact purely immaterial after all. If it turns out to be as part of its essential nature also material, this will allow us to postulate that it has in its very essence a link with the physical.

It's a very interesting new move on Plato's part, if I have understood his intention, and a genuine attempt to deal with a very real problem in a way quite different from earlier attempts, as in for example the **Phaedo**. Though, more importantly for present purposes, it succeeds in differentiating such cosmic Intelligence from the Intelligence that is the Demiurge, an Intelligence that really is immaterial. And of course in also describing the Demiurge as operating in accordance with a formal paradigm, Eternal Living Creature, in the way the philosopher ruler, *pari passu* operates according to the formal paradigm, Justice, it comfortably preserves Plato's basic commitment, found in detail even in his very last dialogue, the **Laws**, to a mimetic theory of art, the formal features of which are constituted by artifact, artisan, model, and creative act. Or so it seems to me, since I must here spend a little time defending this picture of the Demiurge, given that it has been and continues to be denied.

Notoriously, from the very first generation after Plato, and perhaps even in his lifetime, a certain school of interpreters of Plato have satisfied themselves that the story of the world's formation in the **Timaeus** is to be read figuratively, not literally. Even though **Timaeus**, in a context in which the possibility of an eternal universe has been mentioned for discussion says very directly "It has come into being" (*gegonen*), many have argued that he in fact means it is eternal. A number of them have also gone much further than this, suggesting that the Demiurge of whom Timaeus speaks is simply an anthropomorphic variant for the term Word Soul, or for Intelligence within World Soul. On this interpretation the world and its soul are co-eternal, and the possibility that World Soul, or the world as a whole, might have been thought of by Plato as an art-object simply does not arise, there being no Artificer in the scheme of things distinct from the supposed artefact.

But this is to short-change Plato of one of his most brilliant and compelling ideas. Following Proclus and others in omitting the adverb *aeí* at 28b1, and thus restoring validity if not soundness to Timaeus's argument (it is a first-figure Darii syllogism), one has the following remarkable set of statements:

- The specifying features of any sense object are seeability, touchability, and the possession of bulk.
- But the universe is seeable and touchable, and has bulk.
- Therefore the universe is a sense object.

But a further feature of sense objects is that they all come into being as such objects and pass out of being as such objects by the agency of something other than themselves. Therefore the universe, given its status as a sense

object must have come into being as such, and would, but for the *fiat* of the Demiurge (a *fiat* Timaeus does in fact attribute to him), in fact at some time pass out of being as such.

It is remarkable argument, rich in implications that cannot be discussed here. For present purposes I touch upon it to stress simply its implications for Plato's theory of art in the cosmos. For if Plato, through the mouth of Timaeus, is saying what he clearly seems to be saying, then the universe is an object of everlasting duration (i.e., with a beginning in time but without an end in time), by contrast with matter and the Forms, which are eternal. As an object whose changes are measured in time it is like any other object in Plato's scheme of things, and to that degree would qualify as an art-object if it could plausibly be seen as the product of an artisan operating according to a model. But there is an artisan and there is a model, and Timaeus talks lovingly of that artisan crafting the world's soul like a cosmic potter, the Urstoff from which he works having been pre-mixed by him to give him the intermediate types of Sameness, Difference, and Being that he needs.

The parallelism with the operations of the philosopher rulers in the **Republic** "painting" a Just Society could not be more striking. All features of the mimetic theory Plato loves so much are there in detail: artefact, artisan, model and creative act. And underpinning it all is the time-honoured Empedoclean Principle. If like really does only produce like, then the Demiurge, says Timaeus, can only directly, being transcendental Intellect, produce Intellect, be it the Intellect that is World Soul, or the intellect that constitutes the superior part of human soul. The two lower parts of the soul, and the body of the cosmos we know, will be the product of lesser gods of his creation.

We are talking here of an aspect of art not been touched on so far, but is in Plato's eyes crucial and that is the constraints under which it is necessarily produced. In the case of the human artisan the constraints range from all the ills that flesh is heir to (as far as the artisan himself/herself is concerned) to all the recalcitrance of his/her tools and the material with which he/she works. In the case of the cosmic artisan the constraints are less obvious but no less real, and they stem from a feature of matter which Timaeus calls Necessity but which we might, following a beautiful translation by Erik Dodds, translate 'cussedness', or less anthropomorphically, the fact that the laws of science will not permit certain combinations and possibilities, like the putative fashioning of wax statues that will not melt if placed in front of a fire. So the works of art will never be anything but imperfect representations of the paradigm that informs their fashioning.

Instances of this are clear enough in the case of human artefacts, on Plato's understanding of things; one need only point to the beginning, mutability and death of things, by contrast with the eternity of their paradigms, to make the point. But the matter is dramatically different in the case of the last two art-objects I wish to mention, and those are a) the cosmos itself, soul and body combined, and b) the just and good person, soul and body combined. Those who have followed Plato's argument so far will have a good idea of where he will take us in this, perhaps his noblest conception. That greatest of all living creatures which is the universe is, says Timaeus, in a phrase later to be picked up by Leibniz (and ridiculed by Voltaire), the most beautiful of all objects he could, as the best of all causes, have fashioned, given the constraints, and it is also as such, we are clearly expected to infer, the greatest of all art-objects that, in his capacity as the Greatest of all Artisans, he could have fashioned. In the case of its soul the constraints are few, but they are there, and it takes the Great Artisan to mix the ingredients, composing them in a way that will produce the most rational and balanced, and hence most artistically pleasing result. In the case of its physical structure it will, unlike any other living creature, be everlasting duration, on three grounds:

a) by the *fiat* of the Demiurge;
b) by the fact that there are no invasive forces "outside" of the system that might by their incursions bring it down, since the universe is the totality of things; and
c) by the internal proportionality and symmetricality of the whole, which makes for stability and immunity from rapid and easy breakdown. In stressing the world as the greatest of all art-objects I am of course setting out to rescue from near-oblivion what seems to me one of Plato's most extraordinary contributions to both metaphysics and aesthetics.

While a number of commentators from the beginning have, against a very strong tide that continues to run, pointed out a series of important features of Plato's thought that turn upon a literal and straightforward interpretation of the **Timaeus** account of the world's formation, none to my knowledge has pointed out, still less emphasized, the powerful implications it has for Plato's theory of art. If he is to be read merely figuratively, as many still want him to be, then all talk of demiurgic construction is metaphorical at best, and the notion of the world as a living art-object metaphorical at best. But Plato nowhere in the dialogue uses the language of metaphor in this regard, still less the language of simile. The Demiurge really is a Demiurge, and the world he makes is not just like an art-object; it is an art object.

For those whose vision is less cosmic than Plato's, the picture Timaeus paints of the balanced individual offers a view of the human being as art-

object that is in its own way as compelling and as stirring as his view of the cosmos as art-object. Again, he is at pains to stress the constraints, so that no individual can be expected to be an art-object without some degree of imperfection. But art-object this individual can undoubtedly be, thanks to the formal psychical and physical structures crafted by the Demiurge and his cohort gods. The psychical structures I mentioned earlier in the paper when discussing the individual human soul. The physical can be briefly mentioned now, since they too play a pivotal part in the dialogue. As those of you who know the work will recollect, Timaeus is at pains throughout to show that the human frame the cohort gods made is as perfect a functioning whole as the constraints of matter, time and space will permit, with each organ and each other bodily item, from skin to toe-nails to teeth, playing a legitimate and valuable role in the right functioning of the whole, under the overall coordinating capacity of intelligence.

Now the picture can be completed, as Timaeus himself completes it, by looking at the "whole" person, body and soul combined, and it is at this point that the similarities between it and the "universe" as art-object become striking. Let me try to tabulate them.

1. The universe as art-object and the good, balanced individual as art-object have as their intellectual, moral and aesthetic base an intellect directly fashioned by the Demiurge. They differ only, though critically, in this regard in that for the one, World Soul, this intellect is one and the same as its soul, whereas in the other it is the ruling element in a tripartite soul.

2. The universe as art-object and the good, balanced individual have as the base of their physical appearance physical structures formally set up in both instances by the cohort gods. And again they differ only, though critically, in this regard in that the physical structures of the world will never, according to Timaeus, break down, whereas those of all other living things will.

3. Just as the optimal state in World Soul and human soul is one of balance and co-ordination under the command of intelligence, and in the world's body and human body a similar balance and co-ordination, so too the optimal state for the "composite" which constitutes the universe and the composite which constitutes the human being will be one of balance and co-ordination between *psychê* and body. And again, those of you well acquainted with the **Timaeus** will remember the detail of the moral and intellectual exercises, combined with the physical, that Timaeus talks about to re-inforce both the inner balance of each of soul and body and the balance that must also necessarily obtain "between" them. It is the first careful statement

in the West of the now truistic doctrine of *mens sana in corpore sano*. But also, I would argue, the first statement of the rules for the maintenance in sound order of what Plato saw as a truly magnificent art-object.

I can only add, to complete the picture, that here, as in all other areas of his theory of art, Plato is driven by the assumption that a necessary if not a sufficient condition for an object's being a work of art is its harmony and coordination of parts (as in say the Parthenon or any number of other civic buildings) and the validity of the time-honoured principle that 'like produces like'. And a classic example of its use at 47bc serves to bring together beautifully his two great art-objects, the world and the human individual, in a way such that the one helps restore within itself any lost perfection by contemplating the undying perfection of the other. As Timaeus puts it, talking about our power of sight:

> The god invented and gave us vision in order that we might observe the circuits of intelligence in the heaven and profit by them for the revolutions of our own thought, which are akin to them, though ours be troubled and they are unperturbed; and that, by learning to know them and acquiring the power to compute them rightly according to nature, we might reproduce the perfectly unerring revolutions of the god and reduce to settled order the wandering motions in ourselves' (tr. Cornford).

I have stressed in this paper the precision with which Plato applies what are for him a small number of elementary principles in constructing a theory of art and of art-objects, ranging across a spectrum that covers everything from a Ming vase to the Parthenon to the just individual to the structure and operation of the universe itself. It has taken all of my time, given the possible unfamiliarity with some at any rate of what I have had to say, to simply outline what I think Plato has been trying to say. And a powerful vision of art, and art's role in the real, it is. But philosophers, of course, see it as part of their task, in trying to understand particular theories, to unmask as best they can the conscious or unconscious assumptions underpinning theories. In this case the assumptions, as I have mentioned in passing that work at every level of Plato's theory are 1) the doctrine that like produces like; 2) the notion that balance, harmony and co-ordination of parts are at least necessary features of any art-object; and 3) that the necessary conditions for the production of any art-object are the presence of appropriate material, an artisan, a model, and a creative act. All of these deserve careful examination and, if need be, challenge, if Plato is to be treated with the respect *cum* scepticism that any good philosopher deserves. But that will have to be another paper.