

Platonic Eurhythmmy (4th century BC) - part 1

Saturday 24 December 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Eurhythmmy before Plato - Phenomenal Fitness](#)
- [Dangerous and Incorrect Rhuthmoi - The Republic, 3 \(ca. 380\)](#)
- [Eurhythmmy as Means of Education - The Republic, 3](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

The Platonic shift in the definition of the term *rhuthmós* had naturally aesthetic, ethical and political consequences. If rhythm was now to be used as a decisive way to link the concept of Time with that of Form, the ugly and hopeless Becoming with the beautiful and good Being, it naturally became necessary to elaborate the concept of “good rhythm” as a proper image in time of the timeless values and Forms. The entire ideal City should in the end be established upon *εὐρυθμία* - *euruthmía*.

This is a second point that we have to examine in this introductory section because it will have tremendous consequences in Western history until the 20th century and maybe still now. In the next volume, I will discuss Nietzsche's struggle to elaborate a non-Platonic concept of *eurhythmmy*. And we will see how important this concept became in Germany and in other countries at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

Eurhythmmy before Plato - Phenomenal Fitness

If Benveniste is right, before Plato transformed the meaning of the term rhythm, *euruthmía* possibly meant the aesthetic or practical good quality of an impermanent form or something flowing. Indeed this appears to be the case in the first recorded uses of the term which seem to date from the 5th century. A first occurrence shows that, before Plato, there were already expressions based on the term *rhuthmós* which were used to describe transformations—*metarrusmô/metarrusmízô*, “to change the form or fashion of a thing.” These expressions were not exactly referring to good rhythm, *eu-ruthmía*, and were formed instead with the prefix “*meta-*.” But their use by Democritus obviously entailed an improvement, an amelioration or a betterment. Hence in materialistic ethics, the “rhythmization of man” presupposed both that man was not a fixed and permanent but changeable “matter” and that the “good forms” brought about by education were only transitory. Man's nature was not given, instead man was to be dynamically “rhythmized” in order to make him reach his very changing nature. This naturally could be understood in two non exclusive ways: only a rhythmized human being is plainly human—which is an idea that was rediscovered many centuries later in many different cultures by Mauss, Evans-Pritchard and Granet (see Michon, 2016)—but maybe also only a good *rhuthmós* could allow a human being to find his or her singular way to live.

Wherefore Democritus well says, that nature and instruction are like each other. And we have briefly assigned the cause. For instruction [rhythmizes] [*metarusmoî*] man, and by [rhythmizing]

[*metarusmoûsa*] makes him natural [καὶ γὰρ ἡ διδαχὴ μεταρυσμοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον, μεταρυσμοῦσα δὲ φύσιο ποιεῖ] Other version: [καὶ γὰρ ἡ διδαχὴ μεταρυσμοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον, μεταρυσμοῦσα δὲ φύσις ποιεῖ]. (Frag. of Democritus B33 in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 4, 23, 149.4 trans. William Wilson, my mod.)

A second occurrence gives us some complementary hints on eurhythmy before Plato. Xenophon (c. 430-c. 354) recalls in his *Memorabilia* (composed after 371) that Socrates (470/469-399) used the adjective εὐρυθμος (*eurhuthmos*) to denote both facts that some human bodies were *well-shaped* and that some pieces of armor, shields or military capes were *fitting well* to a particular warrior body.

— But tell me, Pistias, he added, why do you charge more for your corslets than any other maker, though they are no stronger and cost no more to make?

— Because the shape of mine are better, Socrates. [ὅτι, ἔφη, ὧ Σώκρατες, εὐρυθμοτέρους ποιῶ - lit. *I make them eurhythmic*]

— But this shape [rhythm], is it by weight or measure that you determine for it a higher price? [τὸν δὲ ῥυθμόν, ἔφη, πότερα μέτρῳ ἢ σταθμῷ ἀποδεικνύων πλείονος τιμᾶι] For I presume you don't make them all of the same weight or the same size, that is, if you make them to fit.

— By Zeus, I made them for that; a corslet is of no use without that! [ἀλλὰ νῆ Δί', ἔφη, ποιῶ: οὐδὲν γὰρ ὄφελός ἐστι θώρακος ἄνευ τούτου.] (*Memorabilia*, III, 10, 10, trans. E. C. Marchant, my mod.)

— Then are not some human bodies well [eurhythmic], others ill-shaped [arrhythmic]? [οὐκοῦν, ἔφη, σώματά γε ἀνθρώπων τὰ μὲν εὐρυθμά ἐστι, τὰ δὲ ἄρρυθμα]

— Certainly.

— Then if a corslet is to fit an ill-shaped [arrhythmic] body, how do you make it well-shaped [eurhythmic]? [πῶς οὖν, ἔφη, τῷ ἄρρυθμῳ σώματι ἀρμόττοντα τὸν θώρακα εὐρυθμον ποιεῖς]

— By making it fit [ὥσπερ καὶ ἀρμόττοντα]; for if it is a good fit, it is well-shaped [eurhythmic]. [ὁ ἀρμόττων γὰρ ἐστὶν εὐρυθμος]

— Socrates went on. Apparently you mean well-shaped [eurhythmic] not absolutely [δοκεῖς μοι, ἔφη ὁ Σωκράτης, τὸ εὐρυθμον οὐ καθ' ἑαυτὸ λέγειν,], but in relation to the wearer [ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸν χρώμενον], as you might call a shield well-shaped [eurhythmic] for the man whom it fits, [ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ φαίης ἀσπίδα, ᾧ ἂν ἀρμόττη, τούτῳ εὐρυθμον εἶναι], or a military cape [καὶ χλαμύδα] — and this seems to apply to everything according to you., [καὶ τὰλλα ὡσαύτως ἔοικεν ἔχειν τῷ σῶ λόγῳ]. (*Memorabilia*, III, 10, 11-12, trans. E. C. Marchant, my mod.)

I chose here to translate εὐρυθμος (*euruthmos*) by “well-shaped,” because it does not introduce any hypothesis about what makes something eurhythmic, whereas “well proportioned,” as it is usually translated, already introduces a mathematical and idealistic criterion that seems anachronical in this instance. In ancient Greek, proportion as “relation of one part to another or to the whole with respect to magnitude, quantity, or degree” is usually expressed by the terms λόγος, συμμετρία, or ἀρμονία (*lógos, summetría, harmonía*) whenever it means “harmonious relation of parts to each

other or to the whole." Xenophon's text itself does not refer to any of these "word values," as Saussure put it. But it clearly associates eurhythmy with appropriateness or better yet fitness: "How do you make it well-shaped? [εὐρυθμον] — By making it fit [ἀρμόττοντα]; for if it is a good fit [ὁ ἀρμόττων], it is well-shaped [γὰρ ἐστὶν εὐρυθμος]."

In other words, eurhythmy denotes a form that is good, as Socrates emphasizes, "not absolutely" but "in relation to the wearer," i.e. because it fits a body that is each time different and that itself may be arrhythmic. The criterion of judgment transposes onto the axiological plan the idea that a *rhuthmós* is either a shape or a disposition of something that will soon change, something moving, or a way of flowing, a mode of fulfillment. When reading Xenophon, one remembers Benveniste's conclusion: a *rhuthmós* is not a "Form," an "Idea," an εἶδος, but a shape "as it presents itself to the eyes" of the observer. Far from being outer-worldly and abstract, it belongs to the phenomenal world. Moreover, it is not fixed, immobile, and eternal. On the contrary, it is "appropriate for the pattern of a fluid element," it is the "improvised, temporary, changeable form."

Ironically, *eúruthmos* is here explicitly opposed by Socrates to absolute Forms. It is the quality of a form which phenomenally fits something singular and each time different: the exact opposite of the universal and abstract quality pertaining to Platonic Forms but also of the essential unfitness of mundane things to the Forms which they can only imperfectly replicate.

We have no evidence that *euruthmía* was used as ethical or political concept before Plato. But these few instances show that, with all probability, something close to that existed. They open the way anyhow for the elaboration of a non-Platonic concept of eurhythmy.

Dangerous and Incorrect Rhuthmoi - The Republic, 3 (ca. 380)

Now we better understand the novelty and also the idealistic philosophical implications of the uses of *eúruthmos* which we find in Plato's works along with the new uses of *rhuthmós* we already previously surveyed. It is a complete reversal of its former meaning. Given the importance in Western culture of Plato's contribution, we need here to go into details. For this section, I used mainly the resources provided by the online Perseus project and the very helpful study recently made by Jacques Darriulat (Darriulat, 2015). See also Pierre Sauvanet's essay *Le Rythme grec d'Héraclite à Aristote* (1999).

When he was young, Plato seems to have been very suspicious about the power of musical and poetic rhythm. In one of his early dialogues *Ion* (bet. 399-387 BC), Socrates discusses with a professional rhapsode who also lectures on Homer, the question of whether the rhapsode gives his performance on account of his skill and knowledge or by virtue of divine possession. The rhapsode must choose between an illegitimate pretense to knowledge and recognizing that he is only the means of expression of a god.

But rhythm is then assimilated with savagery and danger to lose man's rationality. As the translator explains in a note, Socrates gives the example of "the Corybantes or priests of Cybele or Rhea, mother of Zeus and Olympian gods. She was worshipped with wild music and frenzied dancing which, like the bacchic revels or orgies of women in honor of Dionysos, carried away the participants

despite and beyond themselves.” (Note by W.R.M. Lamb, 1925)

For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise; just as the Corybantian worshippers do not dance when in their senses, so the lyric poets do not indite those fine songs in their senses, but when they have started on the melody and rhythm [*τὸν ῥυθμόν*] they begin to be frantic, and it is under possession—as the bacchantes are possessed, and not in their senses, when they draw honey and milk from the rivers—that the soul of the lyric poets does the same thing, by their own report. (*Ion*, 533e-534a, trans. W.R.M. Lamb)

The first elaborated definition of eurhythmia appears in Book 3 of *The Republic*. But Darriulat’s survey convincingly shows that we cannot understand the meaning of *eurhythmia*, or good rhythm, without first referring to what it must avert: dangerous invasive rhythms, on the one hand, and lack of rhythm, *arrhythmia*, on the other.

Dangerous invasive rhythms appear in the section dedicated to poetry. From 392c Plato discusses the nature of poetic charm, then of theatrical representation (394b). Both are condemned because they suppress indirect discourse, make abusively present their absent subject matter, and induce somehow intoxication, possession, trance, in the poet, the actor and the listener as well.

Interestingly, against this mimetic power of poetry which ruins one’s identity and balance, Plato sets a list of taboos which specify eurhythmia negatively. First poets and actors should not imitate women who lament the dead and therefore participate in the most obscure forces (395d-e), nor imitate the insane which are closer to beast than man (396a). But then Plato adds two more interdicts which are more surprising. Poets and actors should not imitate the beat of the smith and the cadence of the rowers. For, like “violent laughter” which “provokes violent reaction” in the mind (388e), poetic mimesis involves then a kind of rhythmic spasm that is growing and becoming unconscious trance. The rhapsode sings a poem: he regularly punctuates his verse. But, as in *Ion*, the rhythm is contagious and communicates irresistibly its intoxication. As women lament and insane verbiage to which it is closely related, poetic rhythm is here viewed as a demonic power which upsets the mind. It drives man crazy and makes him lose his humanity, i.e. his not-being-among-the-dead but also his manhood and his reason. The rhythm is proving a powerful mimetic factor of demonic possession.

— For while knowledge they must have both of mad and bad men and women, they must do and imitate nothing of this kind.

— Most true, he said.

— What of this? I said, are they to imitate smiths and other craftsmen or the rowers of triremes and those who call the time to them or other things connected therewith?

— How could they, he said, since it will be forbidden them even to pay any attention to such things? (*Republic*, 3.396a-b, trans. Paul Shorey)

The association of the prohibition to imitate smiths and rowers rhythms with that of women dirges and insane verbiage shows clearly how the rejection of poetic rhythm is socially and symbolically constructed. But a last taboo uncovers the deepest metaphysical meaning of this string of rhythmic interdicts. Poets and actors should not imitate natural sounds and uproar which are expressions of chaos and are therefore utterly inhuman.

— Well, then, neighing horses and lowing bulls, and the noise of rivers and the roar of the sea and the thunder and everything of that kind—will they imitate these?

— Nay, they have been forbidden, he said, to be mad or liken themselves to madmen. (*Republic*, 3.396b, trans. Paul Shorey)

— He [the poet or the actor] will think nothing unworthy of himself, so that he will attempt, seriously and in the presence of many, to imitate all things, including those we just now mentioned—claps of thunder, and the noise of wind and hail and axles and pulleys, and the notes of trumpets and flutes and pan-pipes, and the sounds of all instruments, and the cries of dogs, sheep, and birds; and so his style will depend wholly on imitation. (*Republic*, 3.397a, trans. Paul Shorey)

In other words, when the poet pretends only to hear and imitate the song of the world, when for this purpose he “rhythmizes” his words, he actually enables the inhuman sounds, the screams of bestiality, the hustle and bustle of the elements, the tumult of a universe in which man was not yet born, in essence everything that was not touched by the grace of the *lógos*, to rise from the chaos and devastate the human sphere. In these lines of Book 3, as in *Ion*, rhythm is noticeably not considered as “order of movement” but so to say as “movement of disorder.” Rhythm seems necessarily to be bad rhythm.

Jacques Darriulat gives a clear account of the historic conditions that explain this view, particularly Plato’s rejection of the new poetry of the time and his reactionary preference for traditional poetry and music.

In the 5th and 4th centuries, theater as music seek dramatic effect: Euripides brings pathos, uses stage machineries and musical effects. The rhythms are getting more complicated and diversified. Plato wants to stop this degeneration of the Greek ideal, this perversion of the measure, this invasion of pathos.

Thus, he condemns in 3.399c “instruments of too many strings”: we must stick to the seven-stringed cithara, which is *the* Apollonian instrument. Inversely we must condemn the instruments played by Marsyas, the flute of the satyr—the beast-man—expression of panic desire. “We do not do anything extraordinary in preferring Apollo and the instruments of Apollo to Marsyas and his instruments” (3.399e). Apollonian music of measure and harmony against Dionysian music of rhythm and drunkenness. In the 4th century, the flute, *aulos*, is mostly practiced by courtesans. *Aulos* player, *aulêtris*, became synonymous with *hétaíra* [prostitute] (Flacelière, *Daily life in Athens*, p. 129).

Hence the music degenerates by introducing unbridled rhythms and pathetic dissonance. Plato seems appalled by the regression into inhumanity provoked by the magic of mimesis. The poet is

possessed. He introduces the trance into the City and loses any measure. This is why he is treated like a god—perfume is spread upon his head and he is crowned with strips as it is done with statues of gods (3.398a)—but at the same time he is denied entry to the city. The poet—the mimetic man— makes the gods speak. He is the ventriloquist of the afterlife, he is possessed by the Beyond. But he has no place among men of the city. Philosophy is the dialogue between men. (Darriulat, 2015, my trans.)

Eurhythm as Means of Education - *The Republic*, 3

We remember that in the *Symposium* (between 387–361 BC), which like *The Republic* was probably written during Plato’s middle period, Plato defines musical rhythm as “produced by fast and slow” —or in Jowett’s translation as “compounded of elements short and long”—“once differing and now in accord,” just like harmony is “composed of differing notes of higher or lower pitch which disagreed once, but are now reconciled.”

Then he goes on by suggesting some of the ethical and social consequences one can draw from this definition. Since rhythm and harmony integrate respectively “slow and fast” or “short and long” time sections, and “higher and lower” pitch, they both introduce “mutual love and unanimity.” But he recognizes that it is difficult to switch from theoretical knowledge to application and falls short of defining eurhythm.

In all these cases the agreement is brought about by music which, like medicine in the former instance, introduces a mutual love and unanimity. Hence in its turn music is found to be a knowledge of love-matters relating to harmony and rhythm [καὶ ἔστιν αὖ μουσικὴ περὶ ἀρμονίαν καὶ ῥυθμὸν ἐρωτικῶν ἐπιστήμη]. Again, in the essential nature of harmony and rhythm there is no difficulty in discerning love which has not yet become double. But when you want to use them in actual life, either in the composition of songs or in the correct performance of airs or metres composed already, which latter is called education, then the difficulty begins, and the good artist is needed. (*Symposium*, 187c-d, trans. Harold N. Fowler and Benjamin Howett)

The first positive definition of *eurhythm* materializes a little further down in book 3 of *The Republic*. Indeed after having examined the mimetic and demonic power of poetry and theater, which is for the largest part a rhythmic power, Plato discusses another significant chapter of Athenian education: music, without yet completely leaving poetry aside as we will see. *Eurhythm* appears in these sections as one of the most important means of education, accompanied now by its milder opposite, *arrhythm*, literally “lack of rhythm.”

Plato begins with harmony (3.398d-e). He first repudiates the Ionian and Lydian modes which come from Asia Minor and produce Dionysian music associated with intoxication and trance. He accepts in the city only the “more genuinely Greek” Dorian and Phrygian modes because the former “would fittingly imitate the utterances and the accents of a brave man who is engaged in warfare or in any enforced business” (3.399a) and the latter express the power of the will (3.399c). The ideal is once again that of self-mastery and resistance to mimetic drifting.

Then Plato deals with rhythm, this time specifically as part of music and dance (3.399e & sq.), but he immediately and explicitly enlarges the subject up to the “rhythms of a life that is orderly and brave.” Musical rhythms are not to be considered *per se*, for the pleasure of technical complexity, but mainly because they entail educational and ethical values, i.e. because they could be taken, if properly measured, as models for the “rhythms of a life.”

— Come then, let us complete the purification. For upon harmonies would follow the consideration of rhythms: we must not pursue complexity nor great variety in the basic movements [steps] [1] [παντοδαπὰς βάσεις] but must observe what are the rhythms of a life [βίου ῥυθμούς] that is orderly and brave, [...]

In order to specify what a good rhythm could be, the participants of the dialogue first discuss the right balance between musical, dance and poetic rhythms. They agree that musical and dance rhythm must be submitted to that of the “speech” and not the other way around.

[...] and after observing them require the foot and the [melody] to conform to that kind of man’s speech [τῷ τοῦ τοιούτου λόγῳ] and not the speech to the foot and the [melody] [ἀλλὰ μὴ λόγον ποδί τε καὶ μέλει]. (*Republic*, 3.399e-400a, trans. Paul Shorey, my mod.)

This declaration shows that the dialogue runs now not only on music and dance but includes again poetry, which certainly reflects the loose way of discussing between friends that is supposed to be represented, but also the kind of artistic performance that was common in the 5th and the 4th centuries, where dance, poetry and music were most often mixed together.

It expresses also an aesthetic choice. In Socrates’ and Plato’s time, musicians were already commonly twisting the words to fit their music. But the rejection of this practice is not only a matter of taste or preference for older practices. In this instance, speech is *lógos*: in other words, the trance induced by rhythm and harmony must be averted by giving the supremacy to *rational discourse*, which defines man’s essence and supports throughout the Platonic City.

Here one may notice a perceptible change in the course of the dialogue: if the feminine, infernal, and Dionysian rhythmic craze that has been described before must be repelled, this operation is made possible by subjecting the wild rhythm and harmony of poetry and music with those of rational discourse—which, by the same token, is endowed with harmony and rhythm of its own.

To this subjection of dance and music by the *lógos* Plato then adds a second condition. Music itself must be composed and produced by carefully selected means.

Concerning harmony and melody, he suggests a drastic limitation of their complexity and range. No “instruments of many strings,” no “air instruments,” particularly no “flutes,” no “poly-harmonic instruments” will be allowed in the new City. Only “the lyre and the cithar” will be accepted since they are “instrument of Apollo.”

- Then, said I, we shall not need in our songs and airs instruments of many strings or whose compass includes all the harmonies.
- Not in my opinion, said he.
- Then we shall not maintain makers of triangles and harps and all other many stringed and poly-harmonic instruments.
- Apparently not.
- Well, will you admit to the city flute-makers and flute-players? Or is not the flute the most “many-stringed” of instruments and do not the pan-harmonics themselves imitate it?
- Clearly, he said.
- You have left, said I, the lyre and the cither.
- [...]
- We are not innovating, my friend, in preferring Apollo and the instruments of Apollo to Marsyas and his instruments. (*Republic*, 3.399c-e, trans. Paul Shorey)

Concerning rhythm, Plato exposes then the common prosodical knowledge of his time, at least as we can reconstruct it through Aristoxenus of Tarentum (4th cent. BC) and Aristides Quintilianus who lived much later (bet. 2nd-3rd cent. AD). There are basically three “rhythmic forms from which the feet are combined”: the equal as e.g. in dactyls (— ◡ ◡), spondees (— —) and anapests (◡ ◡ —), where the foot divides into two equal quantities; the 3/2 ratio, as in the so-called cretic (— ◡ —); the 2/1 as in trochee (— ◡) and iamb (◡ —).

- What those rhythms would be, it is for you to tell us as you did the musical modes.
- Nay, in faith, he said, I cannot tell. For that there are some three forms from which the feet are combined, just as there are four in the notes of the voice whence come all harmonies, is a thing that I have observed and could tell. But which are imitations of which sort of life, I am unable to say.
- Well, said I, on this point we will take counsel with Damon, too, as to which are the feet appropriate to illiberality, and insolence or madness or other evils, and what rhythms we must leave for their opposites; and I believe I have heard him obscurely speaking of a foot that he called the enoplios, a composite foot, and a dactyl and an heroic foot, which he arranged, I know not how, to be equal up and down in the interchange of long and short, and unless I am mistaken he used the term iambic, and there was another foot that he called the trochaic, and he added the quantities long and short. And in some of these, I believe, he censured and commended the tempo of the foot no less than the rhythm itself, or else some combination of the two; I can’t say. But, as I said, let this matter be postponed for Damon’s consideration. For to determine the truth of these would require no little discourse. Do you think otherwise?
- No, by heaven, I do not. (*Republic*, 3.400a-c, trans. Paul Shorey)

Interpretations of this passage by specialists are conflicting. Pierre Sauvanet, for instance, argues that since these rhythmic forms correspond to the three classical harmonic ratios, it shows that Plato's conception of rhythm was based on numbers. And indeed we know the importance of mathematics in Plato's Form theory and in the cosmogony exposed in the *Timaeus* (Sauvanet, 1999, p. 68). We will return to this below.

But other specialists underline the fact that the *Timaeus* was written around c. 360 BC, that is, quite late in Plato's career, anyway much after the *Republic*. They also emphasize that in ancient Greece the actual musical performance were not strictly regulated as they have been in modern classical music. In this instance "rhythm" clearly means an association of feet, but each foot is not yet defined as an association of "*chrónoi prôtoi*" or units of measurement, as it will be done by Aristoxenus a few decades later on an Aristotelian basis. Moreover, even for Aristoxenus these time units do not seem to have been of regular length and music was probably played quite freely and without following regular tempo and measure.

The unit of measurement was the χρόνος πρῶτος or —: and hence the dactyl. for example, has usually a τετράσημος ἄγωγή, the iambus a τρίσημος, and so on. See *Excerpta Neapol.* in von Jan's *Mus. Script. Gr.* § 14. The duration of the χρόνος πρῶτος was of course relative, and not absolute, so that the time occupied in singing or declaiming a foot often varied, and we are told that ἔστιν ὅτε καὶ ἐν δισήμῳ (sc. ἄγωγῇ) γίνεται δακτυλικὸς πούς (*Exc. Neap.* l. c.). But it is clear that in general the ἄγωγαί of the different kinds of feet were different from one another. Hartman ejects τοῦ ποδός, "cum apud Platonem πούς et ῥυθμός non discrepent." The distinction between πούς and ῥυθμός is not always preserved by writers on metre (e.g. Bacchius *Isag.* 100 ff. ed. von Jan), but Plato seems to make the πούς differ from the ῥυθμός as the unit from the whole. (Note on *Republic*, 3.400d by James Adams, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>)

As Nietzsche already noticed at the beginning of the 1870s, ancient *métra* - meter or feet, which were called *rhuthmós* when they were associated in longer strings, had nothing to do with modern *meter*. Indeed in the *Republic*, most often rhythm is not characterized by its numerical structure but by its supposed effects on the mind of the listener.

Anyway, whatever the view here supported by Plato, the question of the ethical qualities of the various poetic and musical "rhythms" (as defined above) is finally left open because it seems too technical for an informal discussion between friends and the participant of the dialogue commonly decide that it is possible to go further on without relying on specialized knowledge, by simply assuming a mere divide between "good rhythm" and "lack of rhythm." In addition to this binary opposition Plato seems to suggest, but it is not clear, that good rhythm could be itself of two kinds: one which would go with the Phrygian mode and express sobriety and self-control, the other which would join the Dorian mode in expressing courage.

Plato is then able to define the concept of *eurhythmy* and its milder opposite *arrhythmy*, now specified as mere lack of the only one positive principle. The artistic quality of poetry, music and dance, which is "an effect of *eurhythmy*," is best when rhythm and harmony "follow the speech." Since in this case speech is also song, "fair diction" (*kalé léxei*) entails not only fair articulation but also beautiful vocal performance. Their poor quality in turn is due to *arrhythmy*, literally "lack of rhythm" and is produced by the reverse supremacy of rhythm and harmony upon the *lógos*,

unbridled rhythms and harmonies, poor articulation and vocal performance.

— But there is no difficulty in seeing that grace or absence of grace is an effect of good rhythms [*eurúthmôî*] or lack of rhythms [*arrúthmôî*]. [*τὸ τῆς εὐσχημοσύνης τε καὶ ἀσχημοσύνης τῶ εὐρύθμῳ τε καὶ ἀρρύθμῳ ἀκολουθεῖ*]

— Of course.

— And, further, that good rhythm [*eúruthmón*] and lack of rhythm [*árruthmon*] [*τὸ εὐρυθμόν γε καὶ τὸ ἄρρυθμον*] accompany, the one fair diction [*καλῆ λέξι*], assimilating itself thereto, and the other the opposite, and so of the apt and the unapt, if, as we were just now saying, the rhythm and harmony follow the words and not the words these.

— They certainly must follow the speech [*λόγῳ ἀκολουθητέον*], he said. (*Republic*, 3.400c-d, trans. Paul Shorey, my mod.)

Then Plato links good rhythm with good temperament. If “all the rest,” viz. dance and music rhythm, follow and conform to diction [*léxeôs*] and speech [*lógos*], those in turn “follow and conform to the disposition of the soul.” A rhetorical string of positive concepts connects “good speech” to “good rhythm” through “good accord” in music and “good grace” in dancing, and finally those four to “fair disposition of the character and the mind.”

— And what of the manner of the diction [*ὁ τρόπος τῆς λέξεως*], and the speech [*ὁ λόγος*]? said I.

— Do they not follow and conform to the disposition of the soul [*οὐ τῶ τῆς ψυχῆς ἥθει ἔπεται*]?

— Of course.

— And all the rest to the diction [*λέξι*]?

— Yes.

— Good speech, then, good accord, and good grace, and good rhythm [*euruthmía*] [*εὐλογία ἄρα καὶ εὐαρμοστία καὶ εὐσχημοσύνη καὶ εὐρυθμία*] wait upon good disposition [*εὐηθεία*], not that weakness of head which we euphemistically style goodness of heart, but the truly good and fair disposition of the character and the mind. (*Republic*, 3.400d-e, trans. Paul Shorey)

Euruthmía, which requires this particular balance between rhythms of music, dancing and speech, where the latter is given precedence upon the former, and probably the use of limited harmonies and meters, reflects also a physical and moral virtue since it is the sensible manifestation of a Higher beauty or/and the sign of the genuineness/fairness/rightness of one’s soul. As Dariullat notices, the ethical criterion is here *euêtheía*, simplicity of the soul, kindness. But the Greek word is ambiguous, and also means simple-minded, silly. This is why Plato specifies: “not that weakness of head which we euphemistically style goodness of heart, but the truly good and fair disposition of the character and the mind.”

Naturally, “gracelessness, lack of rhythm and disharmony are akin to evil speaking [*kakologías*] and evil temper [*kakoêtheías*].” While *euêtheía* is simplicity and kindness of the soul, *kakoêtheías* means duplicity and dishonesty. The good eurhythmic man is genuinely one; the mimetic arrhythmic man is multiple and deceitful.

— There is surely much of these qualities in painting and in all similar craftsmanship—weaving is full of them and embroidery and architecture and likewise the manufacture of household furnishings and thereto the natural bodies of animals and plants as well. For in all these there is grace [*εὐσχημοσύνη*] or gracelessness. And gracelessness [*ἀσχημοσύνη*] and [lack of rhythm] [*ἀρρυθμία*] and disharmony [*ἀναρμοστία*] are akin to evil speaking [*κακολογίας*] and evil temper [*κακοηθείας*] but the opposites are the symbols and the kin of the opposites, the sober and good disposition [*σώφρονός τε καὶ ἀγαθοῦ ἥθους*]. (*Republic*, 3.400e-401a, trans. Paul Shorey)

Now the question of education which remained somehow implicit comes to the foreground. If “good speech, then, good accord, and good grace, and good rhythm wait upon good disposition,” it can be assumed that reversely good rhythm, good grace, good harmony and good speech may have beneficial effects upon the mind. Since wild rhythms and harmonies induce mimetic trance, perpetual metamorphosis and loss of identity—a sort of vertigo of shapelessness—if correctly composed and performed, i.e. according to correct harmonies and rhythms, poetry and music can help properly shape the soul by striving for beauty (*kalós*) and gracious form (*euskhêmonos*). In order to repel invading rhythms, avoid mere lack of rhythm, and beautifully shape the mind, *eurhythmoi* may be used to educate the young would-be citizens.

— Is it not for this reason, Glaucon, said I, that education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony [*ῥυθμὸς καὶ ἀρμονία*] find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained, and otherwise the contrary? And further, because omissions and the failure of beauty in things badly made or grown would be most quickly perceived by one who was properly educated in music, and so, feeling distaste rightly, he would praise beautiful things and take delight in them and receive them into his soul to foster its growth and become himself beautiful and good. The ugly he would rightly disapprove of and hate. (*Republic*, 3.401d-e-402a, trans. Paul Shorey)

At this point of the dialogue, Plato introduces the third great chapter of Greek education: gymnastics. We may be brief on this particular section, because it only extends most of the principles previously singled out while discussing poetry and music.

Yet a new idea is emerging. Similarly to music, gymnastics does not treat soul and body separately. Both strive for an “harmonious adjustment of these two principles by the proper degree of tension and relaxation of each.” Plato’s philosophy is generally based on dualism and he usually champions the superiority of the mind upon the body. But when he deals with education, he pragmatically recognizes that the latter should be based on both principles and that body and mind should be shaped simultaneously. At least, that is the reason, he says, why gymnastics, which *per se* does not entail any *lógos* and aims mostly at shaping the body, must be “blended with music,” i.e. dance and song, which while also being partly corporal would provide it with spirit. Music and gymnastics are as complementary as mind and body and this interaction may be precisely performed through their

common use of rhythm.

Plato does not speak yet of “rhythmic gymnastics” and the exercises he had in mind were certainly completely foreign to what we call now by that name, but he is probably the first to suggest a full educational program based on “rhythm”—at least on what he termed “rhythm,” since we should not forget that while discussing poetry, music and gymnastics, he precisely changed the meaning of the word itself.

— It seems there are two arts which I would say some god gave to mankind, music and gymnastics for the service of the high-spirited principle and the love of knowledge in them—not for the soul and the body except incidentally, but for the harmonious adjustment of these two principles by the proper degree of tension and relaxation of each.

— Yes, so it appears, he said. Then he who best blends gymnastics with music and applies them most suitably to the soul is the man whom we should most rightly pronounce to be the most perfect and harmonious musician, far rather than the one who brings the strings into unison with one another. (*Republic*, 3.411e-412a, trans. Paul Shorey)

In the final sections of Book 3, Plato does not give much more details about the education that should be provided to the average citizen, “the ruled,” but we can have a glimpse into it, by looking at that of the “rulers.” These would be the most strictly educated citizens not only because they should perfectly exemplify the basic values of the new society but also because they should protect them. Thus Plato imagines to test them by bringing each of “these lads while young into fears” and see if he “remains immune to such witchcraft and preserves his composure throughout, a good guardian of himself and the culture which he has received.” But preserving one’s ethos and the City’s culture would necessitate maintaining the “eurhythmy and harmony of his being in all those conditions.” In the ideal Platonic State, all behavior should be steadily eurhythmic and harmonic. And therefore the guardians’ as well as the citizens’ way of moving and thinking should be entirely shaped through carefully selected poetic, musical and gymnastic exercises.

— What, then, have we next to determine? Is it not which ones among them shall be the rulers and the ruled? [...]

— And in this case, since we want them to be the best of the guardians, must they not be the best guardians, the most regardful of the State? [...]

— Then we must pick out from the other guardians such men as to our observation appear most inclined through the entire course of their lives to be zealous to do what they think for the interest of the State, and who would be least likely to consent to do the opposite. [...]

— Then, said I, must we not institute a third kind of competitive test with regard to sorcery and observe them in that? Just as men conduct colts to noises and uproar to see if they are liable to take fright, so we must bring these lads while young into fears testing them much more carefully than men do gold in the fire, to see if the man remains immune to such witchcraft and preserves his composure/grace/bearing throughout [*εὐσχημῶν ἐν πᾶσι φαίνεται*], a good guardian of himself and the culture which he has received, maintaining the [eurhythmy] and harmony [*εὐρυθμόν τε καὶ εὐάρμοστον*] of his being in all those conditions, and the character that would

make him most useful to himself and to the State. (*Republic*, 3.412b-413e, trans. Paul Shorey, my mod.)

Plato does not say that the society itself should become eurhythmic, as it will be done in the *Lebensreform* movement in Germany at the end of the 19th century when the Platonic program will become inspirational for a lot of educators and social thinkers, but all elements of full-fledged *rhythm ethics and politics* are already present, provided that, once again, *rhuthmós* does not mean any longer an ephemeral form of something bound to change, or more broadly a way of flowing, but a form of a movement organized according to numbers and simple proportions, and reflecting ideal Forms.

[Next chapter](#)

Footnotes

[1] The word βάσις in the technical writers on rhythm generally means a dipody or combination of two feet under one main ictus: cf. Schol. in Heph. I 3.1 p. 124 ed. Westphal βάσις δέ ἐστὶ τὸ ἐκ δύο ποδῶν συνεστηκός, τοῦ μὲν ἄρσει, τοῦ δὲ θέσει παραλαμβανομένου. Such a technical use of the word would be out of place here, especially in the mouth of Socrates; and the word is employed throughout as equivalent simply to “step” or “foot.” Even technical writers sometimes so use it. (Note by James Adams: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>)