Discord in Psalm 42

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I.

The psalmist in Psalm 42 expresses three interrelated modes of agonizing experiential discord. The most external and visible is the social discord of the psalmist's victimization at the hands of others: "Why must I walk in gloom, oppressed by my enemy?" he asks (v. 10). This oppression likely includes an element of physical violence, which, as real or threatened, usually underlies social discord. In Psalm 43 (originally part of the same psalm, as the repeated refrain in 42:6, 12, and 43:5 shows), the psalmist prays for deliverance from his unjust and deceitful enemies (43:1), showing that he is in some sense subject to them. But the worst part of their oppression is the cruelty of their taunt, "Where is your God?" (v. 4, 11), the agony of which the psalmist compares to physical suffering: "As with a crushing in my bones, my adversaries taunt me" (v. 11).

This taunt shows that the psalmist's social discord is bound up with a second and more radical form of discord: the experience of divine absence and abandonment. "Why have you forgotten me?" he asks (v. 10). In the opening words of the psalm, his expression of animal desire for God is also a confession of this divine absence: "Like a hind crying for water, my souls cries for you, O God; my soul thirsts for God, the living God; O when will I come to appear before God!" (vv. 1-2). Similarly, the fact that he remembers appearing before God in the past (in vv. 5 and 7) and hopes for God in the future (in vv. 6 and 12) bittersweetly underscores God's inexplicable absence in the present.

Third is the astonishing range of internal discord and conflict to which the psalmist gives expression and which is, it seems to me, the heart of the psalm. In general, this discord occurs between the linguistic self who speaks the psalm and the suffering 'soul' that it expresses, addresses, and commands throughout the psalm. I find at least five particular modes of this inner conflict:

1. **Pain:** the immediate subjective experience of discord and conflict ("My tears have been my food day and night," he says in v. 4.)
2. **Desire:** a motive force for change, which presupposes the conflict between an undesired actual state and a desired possible state (expressed above all in the psalmist's animal yearning for God's presence in vv. 2-5.)
3. **Memory:** the conflict between the remembered past and the painful present (In v. 5, his past participation with the crowd contradicts his present inability to do so.)
4. **Hope:** the conflict between the painful present and the anticipated future (In vv. 6 and 12, he anticipates praising God for his deliverance.)
5. **Command:** an authority’s attempt to determine the actions of a subordinate through language backed by the threat of force. (The commanding self orders the wavering soul to "have hope in God" (vv. 6 and 12) and to "remember" previous experiences (v. 5))

Obviously this extraordinary internal discord is inseparable from, not least instigated by, his social and spiritual discord. The violence of others and the absence of God leads to the threat of the fracturing of the self.

The psalmist also hints at a fourth discord, to which he seems to appeal to make sense of his own contradictory experience. If God is in some sense the power that brings order and harmony, the experience of extreme conflict could be taken as a sign of discord in God himself. If God is the ‘God of my life’ (v. 9), perhaps he must be a God characterized by the discord in which the psalmist lives. The psalmist offers a number of hints in this direction: "By day the LORD commands his love" (v. 9). But must God too command himself, as the psalmist must? Is God’s love as wavering as the soul is? Although the next verse seems to assert God’s stability by calling him "rock," the psalmist immediately goes on to speak of God "forgetting" him, which only renews the charge of divine instability. We might also ask why God commands his love by day. Is God’s love somehow more steadfast at night? Perhaps his enemies oppress him during the day, while awake, and so the psalmist sings "a prayer to the God of my life" (v. 9) in the nighttime because only then, safely home, does he have confidence in God’s love. Or is night an ominous time, when God’s love is most questionable – where all that remains for him is a mere prayer? We can hear the same possibility of divine discord in v. 8: "Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your breakers and billows have swept over me." God himself is like the violent rough and tumble of water against water, like the chaotic "deep" (tehum) that preceded the first words – commands – of creation (Genesis 1:2), as if to say that when God ‘commands’ his love, is it like the creation of order from chaos.

All this, it seems, must be ventured for the poet to make sense of his threefold experience of discord, as it is ventured by those communities that pray this psalm in the face of violence, divine absence, and inner turmoil.

II.

Our task is to hear Oded Zehavi’s "Psalm 42" as a kind of commentary on or response to this psalm. My reading takes its cue from the interplay between harmony and discord in Zehavi’s dissonant piece. I suggest that Zehavi gives expression to the discords of the psalmist’s experience, while also ordering and reconfiguring them by charting a possible temporal progression through them.

Zehavi’s piece is a duet for cello and piano. It begins with a recurring trope, the cello holding long notes that leap large intervals across its range. These intervals allow Zehavi to
express harmony and dissonance in their most elemental forms (elemental harmony as the octave and the fifth, elemental dissonance as the half-step and the tri-tone). The cello holds its low C, then up an octave and a fifth to a G, then moves a tri-tone to answer with a scratchy, squeaky high Db, and finally down to a Gb. Deep harmony is answered by painful discord. The piano answers with two long, descending notes a tritone apart, and then the cello again: low C, up two fifths to a D, and then a high, scratchy, dissonant C#. The effect of all this is to suggest harmonious order to the listener – and then violently wrench it away. Frequently, especially in the first half of the piece, a few measures of movement are interrupted by moments of this elemental discord: briefly in measure 24; descending in measures 32-3; in 36-7 introducing an eerie melody; in 42-44, more lyrically; and the most obvious and emphatic recapitulation of this theme in measures 57-60. (Already, however, the very repetition of this discord establishes a kind of order.)

Even where the piece opens up into something more recognizably melodic, the melodies also take great leaps, as if trying to find and imitate these elemental harmonies. The cello plays a haunting, lyrical melody in measures 14-24 that briefly settles into Eb during measures 16-19. This harmonic moment culminates in an octave leap, but a few measures later, the cello traverses through an increasingly discordant cycle of tones (Db – Gb – C – E). The cello seems to find the key of E for a few more measures, but the right-hand of the piano is completely dissonant. This pattern of melodic leaps in the cello also repeats itself frequently: it traverses up a circle of fourths in 30, up an octave at 51. In measure 53, the cello leaps an octave and a half-step from E to F, although the piano resolves to a D minor chord, prefiguring the possibility of a harmonious resolution to discord. Similar melodic leaps continue throughout the cello’s melodic lines.

For its part, the piano in the first 40 measures is as if struggling between the regular order of rhythmic open fifths and irregular dissonant chords. Beginning in measure 11, the right hand plods eighth notes on an open fifth while the left hand ascends with dissonant chords. As already observed, a melody first emerges in 14-24, only to disappear again quickly in the piano’s dissonant chords and the elemental leaps of the cello. At 45, suddenly a steady, driving Phrygian melody in C minor emerges in the cello line, which, after passing through a haunting measure 48 dominated by whole tones, opens up into a Bb major scale and a final harmonious resolution in D minor. The left hand of the piano then takes over the first line of the same melody in B, but with a tritone in place of a perfect fifth. This tritone signals a return to discord, and indeed it is two measures later that the cello echoes most decisively its opening agonized leaps (measures 57-60). This is roughly the midpoint of the song.

An order slowly emerges. From measure 77 to the end, the piece more or less settles into the key of Em. Though discordant notes persist, from this point on they are always dissonant with reference to this base key of Em. The cello takes up a long, lyrical melody in Em without accidentals (for 5 measures, it is simply pentatonic), and when the cello interrupts its melody with agonized scratchy notes in 96-102, its leaps this time resolve harmoniously. The cello offers another lyrical melody (104-112), to which the piano responds with another simple E minor melody reminiscent of the cello’s in 77-93. Nevertheless, having established a kind of
order, the ending remains ambiguous. The piano slowly walks up an E minor scale, ending on an open fifth (E – B). The cello leaps once more through open intervals (no tritones or half-steps). Its last note, however, is a plaintive C, ill at ease with the piano’s implied E minor. The cello’s final note fades away, wavering and scratching, until finally disappearing. This C is ambiguous because, although it is plainly dissonant with the piano’s B, it remains comfortably within the E minor framework of the song’s closing section. Though not resolved, dissonance is located and ordered.

III.44

The progression of Zehavi’s piece suggests that Psalm 42 may also be read as a struggle to wrestle order out of the self’s discord. To clarify this, we need to linger for a moment with the notions of harmony and discord, musical terms which I have applied liberally as metaphors of the self. (Much of what I say here is cognate with and has benefited from Rashkover’s discussion of repetition, rhythm, and life.) Harmony and discord, as elemental musical relations, presuppose both difference and time. They presuppose difference because both are necessarily relations between different notes; identical notes can be neither harmonious nor discordant. They presuppose time because notes are necessarily temporal phenomena: notes must endure over time to be heard. More fundamentally, the aural qualities of notes and other sounds depend upon the vibration of air at particular frequencies. Though our ear apprehends a note as a unity, a note is actually the self-repetition of a wave over time and, thus, the regular repetition of a temporal event. Pitch being rooted in rhythmic repetition, one might say that rhythm is more fundamental to music than pitch.

Harmonious notes are those whose frequencies are proportional. The most elemental harmonies (the octave and the fifth) are built on the simplest proportions (1/2 and 2/3, respectively). A high C is a wave that repeats itself twice as often as a middle C one octave below; a G repeats itself three times for every two repetitions of the C below it. They harmonize because their different movements in time are in sync with one another, fitting together like the interlocking rhythms of a drum beat. Harmonious notes mutually support one another as they move through shared airspace. Dissonant notes, by contrast, stand in no simple proportion to one another. In the half-step and the tritone above all, the elemental relations of dissonance, the notes are not related by any simple fraction. Their sound waves periodically collide and come into conflict, as if fighting for the same airspace, tending toward the dissolution of both waves.

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1 There is an important qualification to this. We rarely if ever hear a single pure tone (which has the flat quality of a computer’s beep). If a voice or an instrument sounds e.g. a C, it actually activates many other proportional frequencies, its ‘overtones.’ A trained ear can sometimes hear a G, an E, a Bb, ringing above that C. The particular constellation of these overtones is what determines the distinctive character of the sound that a given instrument produces. The identity of a note like ‘C’ is non-exclusive: even considered in isolation, one note can and does include within itself many other different notes in a rich and complex harmony.
Our ear registers proportional (rhythmic) vibrations as harmony, disproportional vibrations as discord.

All of this can help us to reflect on the forms of anguish suffered by the psalmist. Let us begin with the implication that he suffers bodily violence. Violence, the possibility of one person striking another, depends upon the basic physical fact that solid bodies cannot occupy the same space. When two solid bodies collide, one or the other must give way or be broken. The linearity of destructive violence is a radical form of discord, since by destroying its victim, violence seeks to remove the possibility of its own repetition. By contrast, the harmonious movement of bodies is only possible in some kind of circular repetition of movement, where both bodies occupy the same space at different times, as with two planets orbiting one another, or two partners dancing. In both cases, by introducing frequency and rhythm, a harmonious interrelation of bodies becomes possible. Insofar as the self has a body, its self-repetition is subject to the linear threat of radical discord represented by violence — ultimately, the threat of death. The recurring screeching sounds of the cello in Zehavi's piece, not even dissonance but simply unpleasant noise, are potent musical icons of violence. Seidel rightly notes that the cello here sounds ‘uncannily like a human voice,’ imitating the cry of a violated human being expressing pain by making a painful sound painful.

But it is the self’s character as a temporal unity that makes it so apt for musical expression. If the self is like a piece of music, its unity is not that of an underlying substance (Hebrew nefesh is not the substantial Platonic soul), but of repeating patterns in time. The self is the elusive unity of a complex living process that includes both repeated and unique events in consciousness. The temporality of the self makes harmony and discord possible for it and rhythm, as Rashkover implies: "Rhythm is therefore an expression of life’s perpetual effort to persist."). By his use of elemental harmonies and dissonances, Zehavi thus powerfully evokes a self shattered nearly into pieces, "as with a crushing in my bones."

But since discord itself presupposes a repetition, it does not give rise to a zero-sum game the way linear collision of solid bodies does, even though discord may in the end lead to destruction. Discord depends on its temporal persistence, and so it holds open the possibility of change, of wrestling some kind of harmony out of the chaos. Discord is also a relation of two incompatible repetitions, and so it does not in itself determine which of the two repeating patterns will prove decisive. The suffering of the present may prove an aberration; it may be changed. Discord leaves room for hope. It may even become productive, generating, as it does for the psalmist, desire, a new courses of action, and above all, prayer. Zehavi's piece, I believe, offers a picture of this struggle for harmony, and thus a kind of recourse for the elemental crying with which the piece begins. He clearly does not envision the possibility that the soul’s churning can simply be overcome, the self and its relations to others and God neatly wrapped into a simple chordal triad. But his piece does slowly carve out a determinate space – his E minor – a

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2 The sine wave shape of sound is related to circular movement: one point on a rolling wheel viewed from the side will trace a sine-wave.
background of sense against which the cries of the second half of the song become both meaningful (because they appear against the background of a kind of regularity) and more manageable. The plaintive final note of the cello is no less painful than those with which the cello begins, but it is no longer alone, and it borrows order from the piano’s harmony.

The final order of Zehavi’s piece is too partial to represent the deliverance for which the psalmist prays. What order does Zehavi suggest is possible, then, before the time of deliverance, in the time of the psalmist determined by discord and divine absence? Perhaps this background of order against which discord becomes manageable and meaningful is the order created by the psalm itself. Since discord threatens the self’s repetition of itself, a mitigating order must also be a mode of repetition. In this light, the quasi-liturgical repetition of the refrain, "Why so downcast, my soul, why disquieted within me? Have hope in God; I will yet praise Him, my ever-present help, my God," in verses 6 and 12 (and in 43:5) take on a particular significance. Even the psalm’s unique words are presumably to be repeated in prayer, since this is a liturgical and scriptural text. The repetition of the psalm helps create patterns in the self against which discord may be interpreted and in light of which discord may become productive, without being denied or ultimately resolved. The final refrain of the psalm testifies to the possible productivity of discord: discord gives rise to questions ("Why so downcast?") and imperatives ("Have hope in God"), but both questions and imperatives require a response and, thus, portend a future.

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