

INTERNATIONAL PLATO SOCIETY

11

DEZ 2011

ISSN 2079-7567
eISSN 2183-4105

Established 1989
<http://platosociety.org/>

PLATO JOURNAL

Société Platonicienne
Internationale
Associazione Internazionale
dei Platonisti
Sociedad Internacional
de Platonistas
Internationale
Platon-Gesellschaft

THE CHOICE OF LIFE IN THE MYTH OF ER

Satoshi Ogihara (Tohoku University)

In this paper I wish to elucidate the notion of one's prenatal choice of one's life presented in the myth of Er in the *Republic* (614b2-621d3, esp. 617d2-620e6). It is common to interpret the choice of life as allegorically representing choices we make in and for this life. Without intending to reject this allegorical interpretation, I would like to stick to the literal meaning of the myth on the present occasion.

Socrates starts narrating the myth to give an account of the reward and punishment that the just and the unjust person, respectively, receive after death. According to the myth, the souls of those judged to have lived justly are sent upwards to heaven to enjoy a beautiful sight for a thousand years. The souls of those judged to have been unjust, by contrast, go under the earth to be punished. The souls of those who committed serious crimes (most of whom were tyrants) receive especially severe punishment and are finally thrown into Tartarus (614b8-616b1). In a thousand years all the souls except those eternally damned join from up above and from down below, and travel to the center of the universe reigned by Necessity (616b2-617d1). The souls then come before Lachesis, one of the three Fates, and are told to choose the lives that they are going to live for the coming reincarnation. Samples of lives are displayed, and the souls are each to pick up one from among them in turn. The order in which they choose has been decided by a lottery (617d2-620d5). After making the choice, each soul is given its own guardian spirit and is insolubly bound to the chosen life (620d6-e6). The souls drink from the river Lost Care and forget everything. They are then born to this world (620e6-621b5).

Let us begin by asking what the 'samples of lives (*biōn paradeigmata*, 617b5, 618a2)' are like. Each sample gives some information about the life to be lived by the soul that chooses it. It is on the basis of this information that the souls make choices. What kinds of things are 'written' on the life-samples?

For each life-sample, the species is specified. As for non-human lives, it is unclear whether they provide any more information. Samples of human lives, on the other hand, provide information on such things as:

- (1) sex;¹
- (2) the name value of the family (good, bad, or middle [similarly with 3-7 below]);²
- (3) economic condition;³
- (4) physical strength, and ability in competitions (as well as good or bad reputation derived from such qualities);⁴
- (5) physical beauty;⁵
- (6) health condition;⁶
- (7) some natural and acquired conditions of the soul, such as ease and difficulty of learning;⁷
- (8) social status, occupation, etc.;⁸ and
- (9) some remarkable events such as eating one's children.⁹

The specification of a condition may contain reference to some change, or lack thereof, in the course of life, such as 'a tyrant throughout' and 'a tyrant then a beggar'. Some pieces of information written in a sample are readily visible, while others are only read by souls that examine the sample closely (Inwood calls them 'large' and 'small print'¹⁰).

There is one thing that is *not* written on life-samples. It is the *taxis* (arrangement, 'overall disposition' [Griffith]) of the soul (618b3). I take this to be the moral and philosophical condition of the soul. Its varieties include: (1) justice

¹ 618a8, b2. cf. 620b7, c1, 7.

² 618a8-b1. cf. d1.

³ 618b8, b6, cf. d1c8, 619a2.

⁴ 618b7, b6, cf. d2c8, 619a2.

⁵ 618a7-b1. cf. d2.

⁶ 618b7-b1. cf. d2.

⁷ 618b3-6. Moral and philosophical conditions are not included. See below.

⁸ 618d2: Moral and philosophical conditions (cf. 619a3) included. See 618d5 as a phase of a

⁹ A tyrant: 618a5-7, 619b8 (greatest tyranny) (cf. 619a3); an exile: 618a7 (as a phase of a life); a beggar: 618a7 (as a phase of a life); a (successful) athlete: 620b6; an artisan: 620c1; and a private person: 620c6, cf. 618d2.

¹⁰ 619c2.

¹⁰ Michael Inwood, 'Plato's eschatological myth', in Partenie (ed.), *Plato's Myths*, Cambridge UP, 2009, p. 43. I owe much to this paper.

grounded in philosophical understanding (i.e., perfect justice, which philosophical understanding necessitates);¹¹ (2) justice not grounded in philosophical understanding but acquired through mere habituation (i.e., merely civic justice); and (3) injustice.

Is there a philosophic life among the samples? The answer depends on what we mean by a 'philosophic life'. If it means a life in which one makes philosophy her business, this might be among the samples. But if it means a life in which one philosophizes and *acquires philosophical understanding* during her lifetime, this cannot be among the samples. For, if it were, this would contradict the myth's contention, as I take it, that 'the arrangement of the soul' should not be specified in life-samples.

Giovanni Ferrari, by contrast, says: 'The philosophic life is certainly meant to be one of the available choices'¹² (where '[t]he philosophic life' means that in which one philosophizes and acquires philosophical understanding). His claim is based on his reading of 619d7-8:

However, if there is anyone who every time he enters this life here, consistently pursues philosophy in the right way, *and* if the way the lot falls out does not put him among the last to choose, the chances are, if Er's report is correct, not only that he is happy here, but also that his journey from here to there and back again will be along the smooth, heavenly road, not the rough, terrestrial one (Ogihara's emphasis)¹³.

Ferrari understands the italicized '*and*' as having the nuance 'that is'¹⁴. In other words, the first condition (that each time one enters this life, he consistently pursues philosophy in the right way) and the second condition (that the way the lot falls out does not put him among the last to choose) obtain or fail to obtain together. In this interpretation, both conditions obtain if and only if each time he chooses the next life, he chooses the philosophic life. '*kai*' must mean 'that is' rather than 'and besides', Ferrari holds, because otherwise one's genuine

¹¹ Cf. 619c8-d1.

¹² Giovanni Ferrari, 'Glaucón's reward, philosopher's debt', in Partenie, *ibid.*, p. 129.

¹³ The translation is Tom Griffith's (G. Ferrari [ed.], *Plato – the Republic*, Cambridge UP, 2000), as below. Here I have modified the translation.

¹⁴ Accepted by Stephen Halliwell ('The life-and-death journey of the soul: myth of Er', in Ferrari [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, Cambridge U.P., 2007, n. 33 on p. 466).

engagement in philosophy in this life might fail to guarantee one's heavenly journey after death, which possibility Socrates would not grant.

Now Socrates' phrase for the first of the two conditions is ambiguous. It reads: '*ei tis aei, hopote eis ton enthade bion aphiknoito, hygiōs philosophoi* (my emphasis)'. Ferrari takes this conditional clause as implying that during each incarnation one *achieves* the proper philosophical understanding that guarantees a heavenly road. But it is equally possible to take it to mean that during each incarnation one *engages* in philosophy in the right manner (i.e., under the guidance of the right kind of person, for instance). (This reading is possible because '*philosophoi*' is present¹⁵.) In this case the conditional clause does not imply that one achieves philosophical understanding. That is to say, one may stop philosophizing, by diversion to a different way of life, premature death, or the like, before arriving at the goal. Then it is the satisfaction of the second condition – that about the lot being not too bad—that helps, if it does,¹⁶ to prevent one's philosophizing from being interrupted like that. (Possibly samples of lives that end prematurely mention this destiny.) On this reading, the present passage does not indicate that some life-sample is specified as philosophic in the sense that the person who lives the life achieves philosophical understanding during her lifetime. I adopt this reading, which fits the myth's contention, as I take it, that no life-sample mentions the person's moral or philosophical status.

How are prenatal choices of lives made?

First, what is the function of the lottery? The number of the samples is much greater than that of the souls going to choose. But when choosing a sample a soul takes it away with her, so that it will be unavailable to the souls choosing after her. The priest of Lachesis addresses the souls: 'Even the last to come forward, provided he chooses sensibly and lives with integrity, has a worthwhile life before him, not a bad one. There is [...] no cause to despair if you choose last'

¹⁵ Compare '*hygiōs philosophoi*' at 619e1 with '*philosophōsōsi gnēsīōs te kai hikanōs*' at 473d1-2, where at issue is rulers achieving philosophical understanding (as opposed to [merely] engaging in philosophy). First, the verb at 473d1-2 is not present but aorist. Second, if '*gnēsīōs*' at 473d2 can be taken to correspond to '*hygiōs*' at 619e1, '*hikanōs*' has nothing to correspond to there.

¹⁶ While Ferrari takes Socrates to mean that according to Er's report the satisfaction of the substantially single condition expressed in two ways will *guarantee* a heavenly road, I take Socrates to mean (merely) that according to the report the simultaneous satisfaction of the two distinct conditions will make a heavenly road *likely*.

(619b3-4). That is, a bad lot is never decisively damning. Nonetheless the priest *has to* say this to prevent despair. This indicates that being a late chooser tends to be disadvantageous.

Besides the lottery, there are two more factors that influence the souls' choice. One is the strong concerns that the souls have acquired or developed in their previous lives. 'For the most part', says Socrates, 'their choice matched the character and habits (*synētheia*) of their previous life' (620a2-3). For instance, the soul of Orpheus chose the life of a swan, because the experience of being killed by women had made it hate them so much that it refused to be conceived by a woman. The souls of musical animals like a swan chose human lives.

(As this and other examples show, the souls that belonged to animals also choose their lives for the coming reincarnation in Hades. This means that those souls are capable, in Hades, of understanding information given in life-samples and making choices on the basis of that understanding.)

Moreover, when a soul has led its previous life unjustly, and posthumously suffers punishment under the earth, this toil makes her more cautious in choosing the next life. It is not clear whether a heavenly experience is meant to have a counterpart effect on the soul, such as that of making it complacent¹⁷.

The soul of someone who led a philosophic, virtuous life should want to live in the same way for its coming reincarnation. But how does she have to choose, when there is no life-sample the choice of which would guarantee that she will live virtuously and philosophically? More generally, how does a soul have to choose so as to live as happily as possible?

Socrates says (618c7-e3):

[A man] needs to know what the effect is, for good or bad, of beauty when mingled with poverty or riches – and what the effect is of noble or ignoble birth, of private life or public office, of strength and weakness, of ease or difficulty of learning, and all such matters as are concerned with the soul either by nature or acquisition, when they are all mingled with one another. Taking all these things into consideration, he must be able to choose, defining the worse and better life with reference to the nature of the *soul*, calling that worse

¹⁷ Cf. Inwood, *ibid.*, p. 42. The first soul to choose may already have been complacent in heart in the previous life, his just behavior being merely conditional upon the presence of the social system of sanction.

which leads the soul along the road to greater injustice, and that better which leads along the road to greater justice. He will pay no attention to anything else.

Here we have two classes of things: (a) poverty or riches, noble or ignoble birth, private life or public office, strength or weakness, ease or difficulty of learning, etc.; and (b) justice or injustice. As we have seen, the conditions in the first category are mentioned in life-samples, while those in the second are not. One has to choose a life in which the conditions it mentions are such as to make the soul the most just.

What kind of life is this, more specifically? Socrates continues (618c7-e3):

After all, this is the crucial choice, as we have seen, both during his lifetime and after his death. Fast as adamant must he hold to this opinion as he goes to Hades, so that even there he can avoid being distracted by evils like wealth, and so plunging into the life of tyrant, into the sort of behaviour in which he will commit countless crimes for which there is no remedy, and suffer an even worse fate for himself. No, he will know how to choose the middle way in such matters, avoiding the two extremes both in this life, as far as he can, and in the whole of the life hereafter. This is the way to the greatest happiness.

For the prenatal choice (as well as for the choices in this life) Socrates recommends a life of the mean, in which one is neither extremely rich nor extremely poor, neither extremely well-born nor extremely ill-born, neither extremely healthy nor extremely sick, etc.

Why is the mean to be preferred? I suggest that this has to do with the fact that the life-samples provide little information about the lives to be lived.

As the dialogue has emphasized, one's moral and philosophical development depends, to a great extent, on the kind of upbringing and education one receives since infancy. However, it seems that the life-samples do not mention the kind of upbringing and education to be received. This crucial piece of information lies behind the veil of ignorance for the souls going to choose their lives.

A related point that is particularly relevant to the above-raised question concerns the fact that the life-samples seem to tell nothing or significantly little about the kind of society a soul will be born into. To make this point out, try the following thought experiment. Suppose a soul will be born into a Kallipolis, and that it somehow knows this destiny. Then, to live as happily as possible, the soul would have to try to be a philosopher-ruler. So it would have to choose a life of a

ruler rather than a farmer, and a life of someone who has, for instance, ease of learning (this being one of the qualities that a would-be philosopher has to have [cf. 485a-487a, 490a, 535a-536a]).

Suppose, on the other hand, a soul will be born into a corrupt society like contemporary democratic Athens, and that it somehow knows this destiny (and nothing more). Then it would have to try not to stand out with regard to beauty, wealth, birth, physical strength, influential family connections, ease of learning, etc. For, as Socrates argues at 490e-495c, if a child has such merits, which promise her bright future, then she is likely to be corrupted by flatterers who intend to make use of her when she has grown up and gained power to benefit them. At the same time the soul would avoid the negative extremes in such regards as mentioned above. At least some degree of health, mental capacities, and wealth will be necessary for a moderate degree of development and exhibition of virtues. So under the imagined circumstance the soul would have to choose the middle way regarding such conditions.

Now, as I have said, the souls in Hades seem to have no or significantly little idea of what kind of society they will be born into. But the likelihood of it being a Kallipolis is extremely small, and that of it being a corrupt society very high. So it is reasonable for a soul to choose a life on the assumption that she will be born into a corrupt society. This is why, I suggest, the soul has to choose a life of the mean.

Since a soul in Hades knows little about the lives she could possibly live, including the one she ends up choosing, there is no way in which she can have it guaranteed that she will acquire virtue or philosophical understanding in the coming life. It is true that what life she chooses significantly affects what kind of person she will be morally and philosophically (618b3-4), but she does not know *how*. The same condition, for instance wealth, may bring about very different consequences for the 'arrangement' of the soul. Much depends on still-unknown aspects of the next life. Moreover, if a soul acquired in the previous life a correct belief as to how to choose, she certainly keeps this belief still in Hades, but she is not allowed to bring it to the next life so as to have it guaranteed that she will make correct choices there. For before birth she has to drink from the river Lost Care and forget 'everything' (621b1), which I think includes that belief. (If the soul sensibly drinks no more than a specified amount, this may make it easier for her to recollect the belief after birth.)

Although there is little that souls, when choosing lives in Hades, can do for their well-being in next reincarnation, there is one important thing that they can do unless they are too unlucky in the lottery. It is avoidance of becoming a

tyrant. It is not the case that an absolute ruler is bound to be morally corrupt. But it is very likely that he will. So it is advised never to choose a life of tyrant in Hades (as well as on earth).¹⁸

In the above-quoted passage at 618e4-619b1, Socrates refers not only to the prenatal choice of lives by disembodied souls in Hades but also to choices in and for this life by humans. The meaning of his prescription for the mean as applied to the choices in this life has been illustrated at 591c-592a. There Socrates says that in regulating her pursuit of health, wealth, and honor, any sensible person will take into consideration nothing but her contribution to the achievement of the harmony of her soul. Notice the difference between the choice in this life and the prenatal choice. In this life the person takes current concrete situations as a starting point for her attempt to perfect her soul. (Some of those conditions are supposed to have been chosen by her soul in Hades.) So the consideration to be taken in the choices in this life is much more concrete and complex than that to be taken in the prenatal choice of life.

In taking the prenatal choice of life literally, I take the predetermination of life literally. But this idea, taken literally, may appear to contradict what seems obvious, that is that we humans make choices as to how to live as we go on living. It does not seem to make sense to say, of what has already been determined to turn out to be one way rather than another, that by choice someone makes it turn out to be one way rather than another. Is it then an illusion that we make choices in this life?

One thing to be said in reply to this worry is that the predetermination talked about in the myth concerns only restricted aspects, or a 'broad outline',¹⁹ of life. So the predetermination does not prevent us from determining some of the remaining aspects of our life. Furthermore, the myth allows that it is up to us whether we live our lives 'with integrity' (*syntonōs*) or not, and that this makes some difference to the quality of our lives (619b3-6).

But what about aspects of life that *are* supposedly predetermined, for instance, becoming a tyrant? According to the myth, tyrants have become tyrants because their souls had chosen, in Hades, to do so. Does this mean that, insofar as

¹⁸ This probabilistic viewpoint also explains the fact that wealth is treated as an 'evil' at 619a2-3, although it may be used wisely and beneficially.

¹⁹ Inwood, *ibid.*, p. 45.

the myth is read literally, it is an illusion that someone appears to decide to be a tyrant after birth? Not necessarily. Any choice is made in a given set of circumstances, which not only restrict the available options but also influence the choice. So we can reconcile the idea of predetermination with the contention that humans make choices as to how to act and live, by making the following assumption. It is that there is some mechanism that goes on arranging circumstances for one's future choices in response to the choices that one has already made in this life, so that one may be led to the predetermined path. This job of arranging circumstances for one's choice may be ascribed to one's guardian spirit, 'the one who fulfils the things that were chosen' (621e1).

Suppose that we take the myth on the prenatal choice of life literally and seriously. What lessons are we supposed to learn from the myth?

The myth has two kinds of implications for us, as we can see our current life as something we chose in our last stay in Hades or as occasion for preparation for the choice that we will make during our next visit there. With regard to preparation for the coming choice in Hades, the myth tells us that as humans we should acquire, through philosophy, a correct belief as to how to make choices generally, and that at death we should hold to it 'adamantly' (619a1) so as to bring it to Hades and use it for the choice of the next life. What lesson are we supposed to learn from that aspect of the myth which says that our current life is something we ourselves have chosen? This we have to speculate.

I would like to point out two contexts in which Socrates might be interested in presenting the idea of our current life as our own choice. The first is related to his criticism of tragedy for its emotional –and eventually moral—effects on its audience earlier in Book X (603b10-607b1). His ultimate target is tragic emotional outburst (tragedy is dangerous in that it gives excuse for indulgence in this sort of emotion even to those who in real life know how to take misfortunes calmly as 'reason and established custom' command). Now if we think that misfortunes are caused by some god or other, we may tend to blame him or otherwise address him in a tragic situation. Such a reproach or appeal is a typical form taken by tragic emotional outburst. The implication of the myth that we are responsible for at least some of our own misfortunes has, if taken seriously, the effect of eliminating that god-involving route to our justifying our indulgence in tragic emotions. I would like to suggest that this may be part of the intended effect of that implication.

Secondly, Socrates seems committed to the following three views. First, divinity somehow governs the universe including us mortals; second, we are

responsible for our choices; and third, luck plays a certain role in the determination of human destiny, but it is far from being decisive. However, some individuals strike us as being victims of bad luck, such as a very ill person, and someone who is given chance to be a tyrant, and who takes the chance and becomes miserable in the end. Such cases may lead us to think that luck exercises decisive power over human destiny. Moreover, this thought may be detrimental to our belief in divine governance and/or human responsibility. The implication of the myth that at least some of our misfortunes, which may look to happen by bad luck, are really a result of our choice has the effect of preventing us from being impressed too much by the power of luck. I speculate that this effect might be part of what Socrates intends.

The three views that I have ascribed to Socrates concern divine governance, our responsibility for our choice, and a limited effect of luck. By these I meant, primarily, divine governance of this world, our responsibility for the choice we make in this life, and luck's limited effect on humans. But those three phenomena are also witnessed in Hades according to the myth. Necessity has control over the starry motions, Lachesis supervises the procedure of the choice of lives, etc. The souls choose their lives, and their responsibility is asserted by the priest. And the order in which the souls choose lives is decided by the lottery, and yet it is made clear to the souls that it plays a limited role. One may say that divine governance, our responsibility, and a limited effect of luck are more visible in Hades than on earth.

It is tempting to take the three phenomena in Hades as allegorically visualizing those same phenomena in this life. In fact, I find such an interpretation plausible. What I have attempted in this paper is to consider certain details of the picture that the myth, taken literally, presents, in which souls go through an eternal alteration of incarnate and disembodied stages.²⁰

²⁰ I thank David Sedley among many others for comments. Earlier versions were read in the Centre for the Study of Platonic Tradition in Trinity College, Dublin in February 2010 and in the eighth *Symposium Platonicum* at Keio University, Tokyo in August 2010.