

The Soul's Choice of Life

Most dreams are forgotten, perhaps even before the night has passed. Others obtrude into daytime thought, even as their meaning remains obscure. They haunt us, and seem to promise a rare and precious revelation. Their coming insistently to mind implies a faint undertone of reproach, like hearing your name repeated on waking, before you are quite sure who you are. Such dreams seem to call from afar, and from where we stand, they can only seem alien. But we also suspect that we are the ones who are out of place, and that the dream is calling us back from our wandering. In this recollection of the unfamiliar, we sense dimly that we are tied to what is familiar by only a specious kinship and that our true home lies elsewhere.

This sort of strange appeal that calls us back from estrangement can characterize not only dreams or visions, but also deliberately produced works of art such as poems, paintings, and stories. In refusing to make any ordinary sort of sense, they refute our understanding and invite us to speak along with them in something like a foreign tongue. The dialogues of Plato, in particular, contain many examples of images or tales of this sort, beguiling works of imagination. For those of us who read and talk together about Plato with some frequency, such tales or images have become part of the vocabulary of our thought—perhaps even a large part, just as loan-words can come to outnumber a language's own stock of true-born names. Reflecting briefly on a familiar one—the image of the cave in the *Republic*—will show something of how this process works and what it has to accomplish. Socrates has his interlocutor Glaucon imagine a cave in which people are chained in such a way as to see only the cave wall before them, on which shadows are projected by a fire above and behind them. Glaucon exclaims that these are “strange prisoners” (515a). “Like us,” Socrates replies. But then something odd happens. At the very

moment when we might expect Socrates to offer the key by which to decipher these unfamiliar letters, he instead continues to speak in the language of the image. The prisoners are “like us,” he says, “for do you suppose such men would have seen anything of themselves or one another other than the shadows cast by the fire on the wall facing them?” Now, this is not so strange a move as to pose an impossible task of interpretation, especially to someone who has thought about the image for some time. We might start with the idea that our ordinary efforts to know are wrongly oriented and thus largely unsuccessful, and from there move on to the idea that this concerns not only our attempts to know the world but even our self-knowledge and knowledge of others. That sounds about right. But we should try to imagine what Socrates’ reply would sound like to someone who had never heard the rest or had the time to think about it, someone who does not know where he is going. To this person, Socrates’ response must seem pretty nearly the opposite of the explanation that Glaucon’s remark implicitly requested. After hearing it, Glaucon would probably still say that the prisoners are strange, perhaps as a sort of polite way of saying that the man telling him about the prisoners is strange, and it would be hard to disagree.

But whether or not Glaucon meant his remark as a reproach, and however strange Socrates’ speech is, its strangeness does not stem from some madness of his, some disordered state of his powers of thought or imagination. What is truly strange here is not the image to which he gives voice, but the situation it is intended to portray, namely, the fact that creatures destined for knowledge should spend their lives so unaware of and so unwittingly cooperative with the powerful impediments to knowing that characterize their situation. The proper way to hear Socrates’ response to Glaucon’s remark about the prisoners’ strangeness is thus affirmatively—not “the prisoners are not strange; they are like us,” but, “they are like us, strange.” And his explanation is an explanation not of the prisoners’ likeness to us but of their

strangeness; again, “do you suppose such men,” those described in the image, “would have seen anything of themselves or of each other than the shadows?” Given what Socrates is trying to accomplish, deflecting the question of likeness and going farther into the image may be the only way to make it work. The image presents important features of our epistemic situation that are normally difficult to discern, but that we can come to perceive if we take up an initially unfamiliar and awkward perspective, make it our own, and then turn this view back on what had previously gone unquestioned. In order to know, we must learn to speak strangely.

With a few small though significant differences, this kind of change in understanding is what is aimed at by the final pages of the *Republic*, the so-called Myth of Er (614b-621b). It, too, is a fantastical story that represents in figurative form an important but overlooked dimension of our actual situation. Its fantastical character is not a product of wild genius, but arises from Plato’s rigorous attention to both the nature of human freedom and the difficulty of discerning this nature from within our ordinary perspective.

In the case of the cave image our learned familiarity with it makes it relatively easy to put a name to what it is about; unlike Glaucon, we have read the *Republic*. And we get some more help from the fact that Socrates tells us outright what the image is meant to be an image of. “Make an image,” he says, “of our nature in its education and want of education” (514a). The Myth of Er, by contrast, is not presented as an image of anything at all. It is ostensibly the report of a man who returned from the dead to tell of what awaits souls after life. Socrates presents it as the completion of the dialogue’s investigation of justice, inasmuch as it gives an account of the good and bad that come from being just or unjust not in this life, but after death.

In this connection, the story is a fitting end for the dialogue, in that it recapitulates a theme first sounded very near the beginning. Cephalus reports that as a young man he scoffed at

the stories of punishment in the afterlife, but that old age has found him and his age-mates more fearful of what is to come. They are looking back over lives that contain perhaps no small measure of wrongdoing. Cephalus is thankful for his wealth, above all for the ability it gives him to conduct the costly private rituals of expiation that his fear has made seem prudent. Socrates' return to this theme at the end of the dialogue, then, seems to endorse Cephalus' anxious piety, at least in confirming that there is something to fear for those who have done wrong. But the story contains much more than is necessary for this purpose and for that reason demands interpretation. Also, it is just very strange. Even with some degree of paraphrase, it will take a few minutes to recount it. So, here it is.

Upon his death, the soul of Er traveled along with other souls of the dead and came to a place where there were two openings in the earth and two in the sky, above and across from them. Between the pairs of openings sat judges, who directed the just to continue to the right and upward through the opening in the sky, and the unjust to go to the left and downward into the earth. Er himself they instructed to remain, observe, and report what he saw on his return to the world of the living. What he saw first was this: as some souls were going into the two openings indicated by the judges, other souls were coming out of the others, some up from earth, others down from the heavens. All those who had returned went off with delight to a nearby meadow, where they made camp and engaged in conversation. Those who had known each other in life greeted each other and asked what it was like in the other place. So they all told their stories, some lamenting and crying as they recalled all they had seen and undergone in the thousand-year journey beneath the earth, the others telling of the beauty of the sights and experiences above. In general, those who came from below the earth said they had received a tenfold punishment for each of their acts of injustice, once each hundred years, on the grounds that a human life was

about a hundred years long. For acts of impiety towards the gods, the penalty was yet worse. Of one particularly terrible tyrant named Ardiaeus it was related that when it was his turn to go up, he and other perpetrators of unholy deeds were rejected by the opening. Men standing nearby seized them, then bound them, flayed them, and dragged them along the rough ground in the sight of the others, and finally cast them into the pit of Tartarus, from which none return. Fear of being rejected by the opening was thus the last of the punishments for souls who had lived an unjust life. The rewards for justice were said to be the counterparts of these.

On the eighth day, the souls who had returned were made to leave the meadow and continue their journey. In four days' time, they came to a place from which they could see a sort of pillar of light stretched from above through all of heaven and earth, like a rainbow. This light was said to bind the earth and the heavens and be connected to a complex, interlocking arrangement of whorls forming a sort of spindle, said to be that of goddess Ananke or Necessity. Her daughters, the Fates Atropos, Clotho, and Lachesis, put their hands to the turning of these otherworldly whorls and were associated with the three dimensions of time: Atropos who cannot be turned with the future, Clotho the weaver with the present, and Lachesis the dispenser of lots with the past.

The souls were then brought before Lachesis. Her spokesman gathered up the lots and patterns of lives that lay in her lap, and then delivered the goddess' message to the souls arrayed before him. He said: "This is the speech of Ananke's maiden daughter, Lachesis: 'Ephemeral souls, this is the beginning of another death-bringing cycle for the mortal race. A spirit shall not be allotted to you, but you shall choose a spirit. Let the holder of the first lot make the first choice of a life to which it shall be bound by Ananke. Virtue is without a master; as each honors her, it shall have more or less of her. The blame belongs to the chooser; the god is blameless.'"

Then the lots were distributed to the souls and the patterns of lives were laid out on the ground before them, lives of all sorts—lives of animals and tyrants, lives of the famous and the unregarded—and these lives far outnumbered the souls present.

The spokesman continued: “Even for the one who comes forward last, if he chooses intelligently and lives earnestly, a life to be happy with has been laid out, and not a bad one. Let the first not be careless in his choice, nor the last disheartened.”

Since the soul’s choice of life is my theme, let me read without paraphrase the section that follows, which deals most directly with that choice.

“And the first to choose came forward and immediately chose the greatest tyranny, and, because of folly and gluttony, chose without having considered everything adequately; and it escaped his notice that eating his own children and other evils were fated to be a part of that life. When he considered it at his leisure, he beat his breast and lamented the choice, not abiding by the spokesman’s forewarning. For he didn’t blame himself for the evils but chance, demons, and anything rather than himself. He was one of those who had come from heaven, having lived under an orderly constitution in his former life, partaking of virtue by habit, without philosophy. And, it may be said, not the least number of those who were caught in such circumstances came from heaven, because they were unpracticed in labors. But most of those who came from the earth, because they themselves had labored and had seen the labors of others, weren’t in a rush to make their choices. For just this reason, and because of the chance of the lot, there was an exchange of evils and goods for most of the souls.”

“He said that this was a sight surely worth seeing: how each of the several souls chose a life. For it was pitiable, laughable, and wonderful to see. For the most part the choice was made according to the habit of their former life. He said he saw a soul that once belonged to Orpheus

choosing the life of a swan, out of hatred for womankind; because he died at their hands, he refused to be generated in and born of a woman. He saw Thamyras' soul choosing the life of a nightingale. And he also saw a swan changing to the choice of a human life; other musical animals did the same thing. The soul that got the twentieth lot chose the life of a lion; it was the soul of Telamonian Ajax, which shunned becoming a human being, for it remembered the judgment of arms. And after it was the soul of Agamemnon; it too hated humankind as a result of its sufferings and therefore changed to the life of an eagle. Atalanta's soul had drawn one of the middle lots; it saw the great honors of an athletic man and couldn't pass them by but took them. After this he saw that of Epieus, son of Panopeus, going into the nature of an artisan woman. And far out among the last he saw the soul of the buffoon Thersites, clothing itself as an ape. And by chance the soul of Odysseus had drawn the last lot of all and went to choose; from memory of its former labors, it had recovered from love of honor; it went around for a long time looking for the life of a private man who minds his own business; and with effort it found one lying somewhere, neglected by the others. It said when it saw this life that it would have done the same even if it had drawn the first lot, and was delighted to choose it. And from the other beasts, similarly some went into human lives and into one another—the unjust changing into savage ones, the just into tame ones, and there were all kinds of mixtures.”

So far the report of Er. Socrates interrupts the tale just once, to emphasize the supreme importance of this choice of a life and to point out that we really ought to devote all our energies to acquiring the art of making this choice well. His way of talking about what would make for a good choice is very interesting, and I will return to it near the end of my talk. But for now, let us reflect on the many ways in which the story gives the attentive reader pause and does not simply

supplement the dialogue's account of justice and its effect on souls. The story, it must be said, does not do just what it was said to do.

In the first place, it is worth reflecting on how extravagant the whole section on souls' choice of life is. The account was introduced and admitted on the pretext that it would supplement the dialogue's account of the power that justice has in the soul without the assistance of reputation or other external benefits. Like other such familiar tales, it accomplishes this by adding to whatever uncertain external benefits justice and injustice might win in life and among humans, a certain and unerring exactitude in punishment and reward from the gods in a sort of life after life. So, one might reasonably inquire how this purpose is advanced at all by the elaborate account of the spindle of Necessity or the whole idea of souls choosing their next life, not to mention the many examples of particular choices made by souls famous and unknown. At most, one might argue that the fact that the lives for which the souls are being rewarded or punished were of their own choosing underscores souls' responsibility for their own justice or injustice and thus shows that the rewards and punishments are deserved. Even according to this explanation, however, the wealth of detail concerning particular souls' choices as well as the cosmic backdrop would be only so much ornament.

More significant than this reason for taking the Myth of Er as a figure for something other than what it is said to be is the fact that the rewards and punishments are at best ineffectual if not entirely impossible.

That the rewards for a just life are ineffectual we learn from the example of the soul that draws the first lot and chooses its next life first. It had come from heaven, and apparently a thousand years' worth of beautiful sights and enjoyment was not enough to persuade it of anything but its own fitness to be the biggest tyrant of all. Although it was happy enough to reach

immediately for this life, it was also particularly resistant to taking responsibility for its own choice when it became clear that the life contained many evils. This kind of remorse over bad choices, Socrates' summary indicates, was not uncommon among those who came down from the heavens.

What of the others? Those who had toiled and suffered below the earth and had seen the toils and suffering of others were said to choose more carefully, and thus on the whole, we are told, there was an exchange of goods and evils for most souls. This might lead one to the conclusion that while the rewards do not promote the choice of justice, the punishments do.

But several things undercut this confidence we might have in the efficacy of posthumous punishments: in particular, the fate of the incurable or unholy, the complete forgetfulness of the living, and above all the impossibility of adequately representing injustice to the unjust perspective. As for the first, there are those like Ardiaeus, for whose crimes, it seems, no finite punishment could be adequate, on the grounds that his soul was incurable, and possibly also because of the enormity of his crimes, which transcend the horizon of justice altogether, being not only unjust but also unholy.

A second problem with the notion that the punishments of the afterlife are effective in curbing injustice lies in the fact that souls are made to drink from the river of Carelessness on the plain of Forgetfulness before continuing into the life they have chosen, and as a result, forget everything. Those who have chosen a just life, being the majority of those who completed the underground passage, will go through it and then join those who make the heavenly passage. Now having forgotten their former labors, they are likely to choose hastily and with misplaced confidence in their ability to discern what is a good life. Interestingly, this "exchange of goods and evils" for most souls was already inscribed, so to speak, in the topography of the place of

judgment: the opening that leads out of heaven is located above and opposite the one that leads into the earth, as the one that leads out of the earth lies below and opposite the opening that leads back into heaven. Forgetfulness and carelessness seem to guarantee that there will be a revolution not only of whorls, but also of souls. But forgetfulness and carelessness are not magical effects brought about by the eponymous plain and river. If punishment is the engine driving the motion of souls upwards and towards justice, then the beautiful sights and enjoyment found in the heavenly passage do no less to drive them down, towards injustice. The image is precisely not that of a world-order that uses rewards and punishments to produce justice with mechanical accuracy and inevitability, but of one that strongly inclines souls towards an eternal and predictable alternation of good and bad. Why should this be the purpose of the cosmos?

A third problem with the account is that it is difficult to see what the souls must be in order for their passage to be able to teach them anything. This difficulty is thrown into relief by a significant omission. Of the souls returning from beneath the earth, Socrates says: “They were punished for each injustice once every hundred years; taking this as the length of a human life, they could in this way pay off the penalty for the injustice ten times over. Thus, for example, if some men were causes of the death of many, either by betraying cities or armies and had reduced men to slavery, or were involved in any other wrongdoing,” and here I interrupt to note that just where one might hope to learn precisely how such acts are answered in that other place, Socrates concludes simply, “they received for each of these things tenfold sufferings”—in other words, with no specific information. Plato handles the issue of narration very deftly here, for he has Socrates preface this section with a warning about its incompleteness; Socrates says, “Now, to go through the many things would take a long time, Glaucon. But the chief thing is this,” and then

proceeds with the summary I just read. But if the purpose of resorting to summary was to avoid trouble, then it is difficult to understand Socrates' choice of examples.

In the first place, the list of specific forms of injustice by itself leads one to expect a similarly specific list of punishments. Also, the fact that each "cycle" of punishments is calibrated to the length of an average human life supports the expectation that punishments will somehow correspond to, mirror, or just repeat in inverted form the particular wrongs one has done. But the examples of injustice do not fulfill any of these expectations, for the important reason that the victims of these injustices are in each case many in number. If a man betrays an entire city, how can his single life (or afterlife) stand any chance of comprising the myriad ills his betrayal occasioned in the lives of his fellow citizens? If he sold dozens into slavery, how could his life encompass suffering the same fate dozens of times? Even if somehow it could, it would also have to contain dozens of instances of the state of freedom that slavery destroys. And each of these would have to be in some way pristine, so that the evil that is enslavement could have its full effect on the soul being punished in this way, for one person's being enslaved twice is arguably not the same as two different people's being enslaved. In general, then, a single life cannot easily have the evil it does to many represented to it effectively.

One solution to this conundrum, of course, is to take one sort of evil to stand for all others, to serve as a kind of medium of exchange. Maybe pain could serve as such a punitive currency, repaying specific evils with generic badness. The extravagant punishment of the soul of Ardiaeus, however, is both an example of this sort of thinking and a sign of its insufficiency. The punishment is not only of infinite duration; it is also unimaginably intense, and the one being punished in this way does not in any way signal to us what his experience is. Now, it is possible, of course, that we hear nothing from the soul of Ardiaeus because there is no need. If his soul is

incurable, perhaps his punishment is not for him but an example to others, and in order for him to serve as an example, all that matters is that they *take* his experience as an example, whatever he himself may think of it. Consistent with this interpretation is the presence of the guards who point out to the others why these souls are being singled out for such treatment; that is, it seems at least in part to be a show put on for them. Also consistent with this view is the claim that what improves the judgment of those who make the underground passage is not just that they have labored and suffered themselves, but also that they have seen the labors and sufferings of others. Nonetheless, the absence of the directly suffering soul's perspective on the single particular punishment we get any report of underscores the problem outlined by omission in the preceding passage, the problem of how a soul's evil can be represented to it; and this remains a problem.

If the soul's thousand-year journey below the earth is to teach it anything—as the improvement in its choice of life suggests it does—then the soul must somehow have the evils it engaged in as though they were something good presented to it as what they in fact are. But in order for one's wrongdoing to be recognizable as such, one must have a different perspective than one had in doing it, and this kind of thoroughgoing change in perspective is precisely what we have learned is terribly difficult. In the cave image, it is represented as a turning around that can be a passage from what is darker to what is brighter (and thus an actual improvement) and at the same time from what is perceived clearly and comfortably to what is perceived only dimly and painfully (and thus an apparent worsening). Something else is needed: a guide who is trustworthy and trusted and can articulate what is happening to the soul being forcibly turned around in this way. In the end, pain by itself is too diffuse, too immediate, and too uncontextualized to bear the articulated meaning that would be necessary in order to effect this change, a fact that is perhaps hinted at by the punishment's tenfold repetition. Even the

exemplary suffering of the souls of the unholy requires agents standing by to explain it, which is as much as to say that it cannot bear its meaning within itself on its own.

In the case of both punishments and rewards, then, the report of Er sets up certain expectations or requirements that it then pointedly does not or cannot fulfill. The rewards for a just life, we feel, ought to reinforce the choice of justice, but instead they are presented as promoting the careless haste and entitled self-importance that lead to a bad choice of life. As for the punishments, while they are said to have the effect they ought to, still, the mechanism by which they are meant to accomplish this is markedly obscure, and inquiring more closely into it only makes the confusion more intense, particularly by directing attention to what lies at the root of all: the soul and its perception of or perspective on the good. If the myth's self-presentation is at odds with its content, we have to turn elsewhere to discover its real import. One thing that is clear, as we have just seen, is that the story concerns the soul. Just what is the soul in this story?

One phrase in the description of souls' choice of lives incidentally brings to the fore one of the key features of the myth's portrayal of the soul. Er saw "a soul that used to belong to Orpheus" choosing the life of a swan. The striking phrase "used to belong" underlines something that must be assumed in order for the story to work at all, and it does so compactly and forcefully. For the myth to work, a soul, whatever else it may be, cannot be identical with any named person. The name "Orpheus" must indicate the temporary composite of an otherwise anonymous soul with the singer's life whose story we know from myth. Any name, then, must miss the soul and indicate only such a composite, even my name or yours. The possessive in the phrase "*my* soul" becomes particularly obscure. If I spoke in this way of "my soul," who would I be saying the soul belongs to, and what would I be taking myself to be that is distinct from my soul? Who or what is speaking when the words "my soul" are uttered? Whatever we thought it

was before, the story is now telling us that a soul is not identical with a life or a person, since it precedes and outlives both.

One possible source for this strange conception of the soul is the discussion of its immortality earlier in Book 10. There, the question arises how the soul can be both immortal and capable of being at odds with itself. Self-opposition (of the sort examined in Book 4) is associated with being composite, and this, in turn, is associated with change and decay. A soul composed of parts, it seems, could only be mortal. Instead of investigating this dilemma, Socrates merely suggests that the view of soul that we have—and that he and his interlocutors have had throughout the whole of the dialogue—is like the view one would have of how a man looks if one were to see only the statue of him that had lain at the bottom of the sea for many years and become disfigured and covered with shells, seaweed, rocks and so forth, as in the case of the statue of Glaucus. Our embeddedness in body, change, and manyness, the image more or less directly asserts, has made our souls unrecognizable. This is an unpromising starting point, but Socrates remains confident and ventures the guess that the soul's true nature is to be found by our looking to its *philosophia*, its love of wisdom. This recalls another account of the division of the soul that emerges from the yet earlier discussion of the terrible evils of tragic poetry in Book 10. This account divides the soul's philosophical, calculating, law-abiding part, which suffers misfortune in silence and tranquility, from another part, which indulges in loud lamentation. The latter is itself indulged by writers of tragedies, who trick even the decent man into weeping immoderately at the misfortunes of another on the grounds that this is at least not self-pitying, and is only a kind of play. The gist seems to be that the first part of the soul would do its work better without the second. Both accounts, then, solve the problem of manyness by making one part stand for the whole. Whatever the technical merits of this solution, we should consider that

if the true identity of the soul should turn out to be only its rational part understood in this way, then the whole drama of existence—the stories of our lives as we commonly understand them—would be wholly irrelevant, composed entirely of a sort of encrustation of alien matter that only serves to obscure the soul from view. By themselves, souls might have nothing to do with lives.

While these two prior discussions of soul seem relevant to the myth and are consonant with some aspects of its sharp distinctions between soul and person and between soul and life, they are at odds with others. Souls in the myth are not heartless calculating machines, but beings capable of feeling and expressing emotion. When the souls complete their respective journeys, they go off “with delight” to the meadow where they confer. When those who came from the underground passage recount what they have seen and undergone there, they cry and lament in recalling it. When these souls are nearing the exit and see some like the soul of Ardiaeus being rejected, they experience a great fear, which they note is only one among many they have suffered. In sum, then, these souls respond emotively and expressively to their situation, even during this time when they are presumed to exist in separation from body and life.

In addition to transitory affections such as a moment of fear, souls in the myth also have longer-standing dispositions or traits of character. The soul of Ajax, son of Telamon, bitterly recalls the judgment that granted the arms of the departed hero Achilles to Odysseus instead of to him, and so flees humanity. The souls of Orpheus and Agamemnon, in turn, make their choices of animal lives out of long-standing hatred, of women in the first case and of humanity in general in the second. In each case, these quasi-permanent states were crystallized, so to speak, by the trauma of their previous lives (the very ones we associate with their names). They appear to have persisted unchanged and utterly undiminished throughout their millennial journeys. Their hatreds and resentment are very much not the passions of a moment. A final, most significant example of

a state or characteristic of soul allowed by the myth is that of the soul of Odysseus, which “from memory of its former labors, ... had recovered from love of honor.” Somehow, the soul as portrayed in the myth is capable of being affected by its life, and affected in such a way as to be able to learn, not just greedily carry forward the savor of bitter memory. In either case, however, what we see is that however distinct souls may be from lives, their lives affect them. In light of this, perhaps it is time finally to turn directly to what the story must take a life to be.

This is in one way the most straightforward and familiar element of the story; everyone knows what a life is, what it is composed of, why it is important, what makes it good or bad, and so forth. In another way, however, what the central conceit of the myth of Er requires a life to be makes it almost impossible to understand. The life, recall, contains elements like wealth or poverty, good or bad birth, strength, beauty, political office or rule, and indeed everything that could characterize a life, or almost everything. For, as was explained, since the soul that lives the life must be changed by it, the life considered by itself does not contain an “ordering” or “arrangement” of soul (taxis). If our question is what we ought to remove in thought from our usual conception of what a life is in order to arrive at an idea of what the lives whose paradigms lie in the lap of Lachesis are, the answer is both simple and devastating. We must remove only this: everything that soul is. As it has done in many places, the dialogue is once again causing a problem by treating a distinction as a separation. When Socrates manages to bring the conversation to a halt of this sort, he often turns to an image or example that retroactively modifies one of the discussion’s starting points. We could try the same, and instead of trying to proceed with delimitation or definition, we might look at an example of what the myth takes to be a life.

None of the lives is very extensively described, but the first example of a life that is chosen is perhaps the fullest. The soul that drew the first lot—which “participated in virtue out of habit, without philosophy” after living in “an ordered regime”—picked the life containing the biggest tyranny straightaway, “but it escaped its notice that eating his children and other evils accompanied this.” It escaped his notice. How strange. How can we understand this? Should we agree with the old song that “the large print giveth and the small print taketh away”? Do the events or elements of a life presented to choice differ in their prominence, such that some would count as the large print, and some as the small? And what would determine which appear more or less prominent? Just what is written or figured on the paradigms of lives in the lap of Lachesis? In the example just considered, the great tyranny looks good at first, but when the soul “considered the life at its leisure,” it discovered its evils, and was unhappy with its lot.

In a way, this latter portrait of what a life is is familiar and cogent: a life containing an apparent good may of necessity also contain actual evils, such that they counterbalance or even outweigh the apparent good. But in another way, this is an unsatisfactory way of talking about a life. It tries to mark the badness of the life that contains one sort of fact sometimes thought to be good (being a tyrant) by pointing out that it also contains another sort of fact, which is generally acknowledged to be bad (eating one’s children). The whole question of what makes a life good or bad has been reduced to the piecemeal evaluation of particulars, and the summation of such judgments, as in what is sometimes called a rubric.

But we really ought to doubt this soul’s assessment of its chosen life, since we have already been told that it makes the choice affected by folly and gluttony. It could be so misguided as to be mistaken about which of the life’s elements is good and which bad. In fact, we have already been told in Book IX that the worst possible eventuality for a soul that is tyrannically

inclined is for it to become an actual tyrant. Conversely, it may be that something as horrible as eating his children is an appropriate accompaniment to the “large print” of his being a tyrant.

But just inverting the assessment this foolish soul made of each of these facts does not really solve the deeper problem, of which the problem of the relative prominence of a life’s parts—its large and its small print—is just a symptom. The component elements of a life in the myth seem subject to two contradictory demands: they must be “without an arrangement of soul” and thus somehow meaningless, and they must be capable of “leading” the soul to being just or unjust and thus somehow have a meaning.

As for the former term of the contradiction, given that there are good and bad among rich and poor alike, wealth, to pick one example, looks like the sort of thing that the Stoic Epictetus would call indifferent, something that is of no importance when compared with the greater question of whether we are living well, and that does not by itself answer it. As for the latter, however, the soul that has learned the art of choosing lives well, Socrates says, will call lives good or bad depending on whether they “lead to virtue or vice.” But now we have to ask: how can events be said to “lead” to virtue or vice at all unless they have within them the germ of a sense, an incipient significance that is preserved in what it gives rise to?

As in other similar cases, the commentary on the myth is quite relevant and helpful, if in part by oblique paths. Socrates portrays the person who has acquired the art of choosing lives well in some detail. He says: “He will take into account all the things we have just mentioned and how in combination and separately they affect the virtue of a life. Thus he may know the effects, bad and good, of beauty mixed with poverty or wealth and accompanied by this or that habit of soul; and the effects of any particular mixture with one another of good and bad birth, private station and ruling office, strength and weakness, facility and difficulty in learning, and all

such things that are connected with a soul by nature or are acquired. From all this he will be able to draw a conclusion and choose—while looking off toward the nature of the soul—between the worse and the better life, calling worse the one that leads it toward becoming more unjust, and better the one that leads it to becoming more just” (618ce).

One of the most striking things in this passage, I think, is the intensity of its emphasis on combination. The possessor of the art of choosing lives is said to consider the elements of lives both “separately and in combination” but all the examples are of complex configurations. Here, then, is one way in which something can both have a meaning and not have it in itself: it can have its meaning in being combined with something else. Note that the myth helps us here. The composition of elements that makes up each life is not something chosen; the lives have already been assembled by the time the souls have to choose them. Rather, souls are to call lives good or bad on the basis of no element in them, but on the basis of what living such a life will work in the soul that lives it. That is, the choice was already not happening at the level of the particular feature or event of the life, whether or not the choosers noticed this.

Another striking feature of the passage is how thoroughly confusing it makes the separation of life and soul that lies at the basis of the myth. In the first place, the possessor of the art is said to know about the effects of mixtures that include elements such as “this or that habit of soul.” This just seems in direct opposition to the claim that lives are without an “ordering” or “arrangement” of soul. By itself, though, including this states the problem well; the soul that sets out to have wealth or any other good thing will be changed by its pursuit, with the result that there is no guarantee it will still want or be able to enjoy what it was pursuing by the time it gets it. The one who possesses the art would have to be able to predict what changes the living of a life would work in the soul. In short, what makes elements of a life part of a life that can be

called good or bad is their connection with the soul that has to live that life: the suffering, rejoicing, experiencing, remembering, and thinking being. These powers are what lend to those events or conditions whatever sense they have. Here we see another way in which a life has a meaning, but not in itself; it has a meaning for a soul.

To state the matter most generally, elements of a life are capable of having a meaning that is not in them because that's just what it is to be an element of a life: to be a 'Here' that is also, with all the weight Plotinus gives the word, a 'There'—to be a 'Now' whose meaning is 'Later' or 'Forever.' The seeming paradox is just the reality of our situation, and one that Plato has been at pains throughout the dialogue to turn our attention to. We spend as much time as we do in this dialogue on the proper organization of an educational program not merely for the stated reason, that we need guardians who will be both harsh with the city's enemies and gentle with its citizens. Rather, as the central books show and the final myth signifies, the deeper issue is that what is most immediately apparent is always somehow a distraction from the intelligible reality of what is. But the sensible is not merely something other than the intelligible: it is the region wherein the intelligible shows itself; it is where we live. The small things matter. The ball I learn to catch may be little more than arbitrary mineral, vegetable, and animal products refashioned to the measure of a human hand, but the act of catching that it makes possible is an emblem and anticipation of all sorts of future forms of mastery. The little bumps and tussles of playground life are like prophetic utterances spoken to us in childhood that foretell adult life's disappointments—its alliances and betrayals, its kindness and its savagery—and they foretell them with both the accuracy and the obscurity that are characteristic of an oracle.

This strange mode of being of the elements of our lives is a feature of the world of the myth of Er that also happens to be a feature of our world; it is the literally true thing at the center

of a mass of figurative falsehoods, and around which the whole turns. It is the true thing that seems strange to us who have become strangers to it. The elements of lives can appear big or small, cruel twists of fate, or irrelevant impediments to powers we find we do not need to get by. We who live them do not experience ourselves as having chosen them, but reflecting on what it would mean for what our souls are to choose what our lives will be can awaken us from the dream-state in which we treat the meanings of our lives as beings, as *ta onta*, as things that always are and have no tincture of ambiguity or self-opposition, no dependence on perspective or interpretation, no horizon of possible transformation. Rather, we should recognize them in their truth: they are the materials—somehow both indifferent and essential—out of which souls weave the tissue of meaning they put on and inhabit, elements that stand to our souls and hearts as do those other elements—earth, air, fire, and water—to the multifariously capable bodies of living beings of all kinds, as their material support and flesh. When the elements of our bodies or lives fail us, we break, but when they cooperate, what we succeed in being is something they would not be on their own, something other and beyond.

For our part, the myth is saying, we need to learn how to cooperate with these elements and their ways, so that we may make a good passage in this life and the next, and perhaps in the next after that. But what would make for a good passage? What should we hope for? A well-deserved reward? Or a suffering that makes the soul better? The beautiful sights and good experiences that the myth sets up as a reward for a good life carry with them the same ambiguity as the goods of this life: many souls are not improved by them, but made worse. To answer the question, we might think of the soul that once belonged to Odysseus. Of this soul we were not told whether it came down from heaven or up from the earth, only that memory of its former labors had cured it. Those labors could have been carried out on earth as part of the life we

associate with Odysseus' name—where he struggled to regain his home after long years in foreign lands, losing all his comrades—or they could have been performed as payment in that place beneath the earth, some days' journey from the spindle of Necessity where lives are woven. Perhaps our hope and prayer should be the same as his could have been: may we all perform such labors and remember them and be cured of what ails us.

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