



THE MYTH OF ER

My story is not like Odysseus' "mighty long tale" to Alcinous, but its hero was a brave man, Er, the son of Armenius, a Pamphylian. He was slain in battle, and when the decaying corpses were gathered up ten days later, his alone was found whole. He was carried home, and at his funeral on the twelfth day, he revived as he lay upon the pyre and told what he had seen in the world beyond.

He said that when his soul had gone forth from his body, he journeyed with a great company until they came to a wondrous region. There were two openings side by side in the earth, and opposite them a pair set in the firmament. Between these sat judges, and after every judgement they bade the just take the right-hand path upward through heaven, having placed tokens of the judgement on their breasts. The unjust were ordered to take the left-hand path downward and the marks of their deeds were fastened to their backs. When Er himself drew near, they told him that he must become a messenger to mankind bearing tidings of the other world, and that he must listen to and observe all that occurred in that place. So here he watched the souls which had been judged departing by two of the heavenly and earthly openings, while through the other two openings souls returned — from the earth, stained and dusty, and from the sky, pure and clean. The arriving souls seemed to have been on a long journey and were glad to come into the meadow. They encamped there like pilgrims at a festival. Acquaintances greeted one another, and each asked the other what had befallen them. Some wept sorrowfully as they recounted what they had suffered and seen on their journey under the earth — a sojourn of a thousand years. Others recalled the bliss of heaven and visions of inconceivable beauty. The whole story would take long to tell, he said, but in sum it was this: wrongdoers paid for their deeds tenfold, once over in each century, since that is the span of human life. For example, those who cause the deaths of others, or their enslavement through betrayal of their city or

their comrades in arms, or who participate in any iniquity, suffer tenfold torments for each wrong. But beneficent deeds, and just and holy lives, are rewarded in like proportion. He spoke of infants who die, and of those whose lives are short, but that is not worthy of record. Recompense for honouring or dishonouring the gods and parents are even greater.

Er stood near and heard one soul ask another, "Where is Ardiaeus the Great?" Ardiaeus had been the tyrant of a Pamphylian city a millennium before. Among his abominable deeds it is said that he had murdered his own father and elder brother. "He has not come back here," the other answered, "nor will he ever come. This was one of the terrible sights we beheld. When our sufferings were at an end and we approached the mouth and were about to pass upwards, we suddenly saw Ardiaeus amongst others, most of whom were tyrants, though some were great wrongdoers from private life. Just as they thought they were going to pass upwards, the mouth would not receive them. It bellowed whenever the incurably wicked, or those who had not paid the full penalty, attempted to go up. Fierce men of fiery appearance stood by and understood the sound. They seized some and carried them off, but Ardiaeus and others were bound hand, foot and neck, flung down and flayed. They were dragged along the wayside, their flesh carded like wool with thorns. All who passed by were told why this was done and why they were being cast into the bottomless Tartarus. We passed through terrors of every kind, but none so great as the fear of that sound when coming up to the mouth. When it was not heard, each man was joyous." Such were the judgements and penalties and corresponding blessings which souls received.

After each group had tarried seven days in the meadow, they were required on the eighth to arise and travel on. Four days thereafter, they came to a place whence they could see a shaft of light, straight like a pillar, most akin to a rainbow, though brighter and purer. A day's march brought them to this light, and there at the mid-point of this light, they saw the ends of its chains stretched from heaven. This light is the bond of the firmament, holding together all the revolving vault, like the undergirths of a ship.

From the extremities the Spindle of Necessity is extended, by which all the orbits revolve. The Spindle's shaft and hook are of

adamant, while the whorl is of substances mixed with adamant. According to Er, it is like an ordinary whorl, but large and hollowed out, so that within it is a second smaller whorl, and within that a third, a fourth, and four more, all fitted within one another like a nest of boxes. There are in all eight whorls set inside one another, and from above, their rims appeared as circles constituting a single whorl around the shaft which pierces the very centre of the eighth. The outermost circle (fixed stars) is the widest, followed in width by the sixth (Venus), then the fourth (Mars), the eighth (Moon), the seventh (Sun), the fifth (Mercury), the third (Jupiter), with the second (Saturn) being the narrowest. The rim of the largest whorl is spangled and the seventh is the brightest. The eighth is coloured by the reflected light of the seventh. The second and fifth are like each other and more yellow, while the third is whitest. The fourth is rather ruddy and the sixth is of a lesser whiteness. The whole Spindle turns in a single motion, but within this whole, the seven inner rims slowly revolve in a contrary direction. The eighth moves most swiftly, and the seventh, sixth and fifth, moving together, are second in speed. The fourth is somewhat slower and appears to move opposite to the others. The third is next and the second is the slowest circle.

The Spindle turns upon the knees of Necessity. Upon each circle stands a Siren who is borne around with its revolutions and who sings a single sound of one note, so that from all the eight there is the concord of a single harmony. Seated on thrones at equal distances around all this are the three daughters of Necessity, the Fates, each robed in white and wearing garlands on their heads – Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos. They chant with the Sirens' music, Lachesis of the past, Clotho of the present, and Atropos of what is to come. Now and again Clotho gives a turn to the outer rim of the Spindle with her right hand, while Atropos turns the inner circles with her left, and Lachesis alternately turns both.

The arriving souls were compelled to go before Lachesis. An Interpreter first ordered their ranks, and then, having taken from the lap of Lachesis a number of lots and models of lives, he mounted a high platform and spoke: "Thus saith Lachesis, virgin daughter of Necessity. Souls of a fleeting day, here begins a new cycle of earthly life which ends in death. No *daimon* will cast lots for you, but you shall choose your own destiny. Let him who draws

the first lot choose his life, a life to which he will be bound by Necessity. But Virtue knows no master — as each man honours or demeans her, he shall have more or less of her. The blame is his who chooses; Deity is blameless.”

With these words, the Interpreter cast the lots among them all. Each picked the lot which fell nearest him and saw the number he had drawn. Er, only, was forbidden to take one. The Interpreter then laid out the models of lives before them on the ground, far more than the souls present. There was every kind: the lives of every living creature and of every condition of men — lives of tyrants, some powerful to the end, others destroyed in mid-life and ending in poverty, banishment or beggary; lives of men known for their beauty, or for strength and prowess; lives of distinguished birth and ancestry as well as lives of ordinary men, and lives of women likewise. All these qualities were commingled with each other in various ways, and with wealth or penury, health or illness, and with intermediate conditions. But nowhere in these lives were there determinants of the soul’s condition, for the soul must shape its character in accordance with its choice of life.

Here, it seems, is the greatest hazard for man. Because of this, we each should put aside all other learning, and alone study how we may discern one who can impart the knowledge needed to discriminate between a good life and a bad one; how to select the best within our grasp, balancing all the qualities mentioned; and how, together or separately, they bear upon the virtue of a life. We should seek, for example, to understand the effect for well or ill of beauty alloyed with wealth, or with poverty, and with various conditions of the soul, with lofty or lowly birth, with strength or weakness, cleverness or dullness of wit, and all other mental attributes, natural or learned — until these considerations allow us to choose between better and more evil lives in terms of the soul’s nature, for a life is better or worse as it induces the soul to become more just or unjust. Everything else we should set aside, for we can see this is the great choice for man, during life and after death. When a man passes over into the house of Hades, he should be firm as adamant in his faith, so that there he will not be stunned by wealth and other evil things, or fall into a tyrannical or other evil life, only to do incurable evils and suffer worse himself, but rather know how to follow the middle course between extremes,

both in this life as far as possible, and in every future life. That is the greatest happiness for man.

To pass on, the messenger from the other world reported that the Interpreter then said, "Even for the last to come forward, if there is discretion in his choice, and if he lives with good effort, a life awaits him in which he may be content. Let not the first choose heedlessly, nor the last despair."

These words pronounced, Er said that he whose lot was first immediately pounced upon the greatest tyranny he could find. Thoughtless in his greed, he failed to look carefully at every detail of the life he chose, and he did not notice its many evils: he was fated to devour his own children, among other horrible things. But when he inspected it at leisure, he began to beat his breast and lament his choice, and, ignoring the Interpreter's warning, he blamed fortune and fate, the decrees of the gods, and everything except himself. He was a soul returned from the heavens who passed his previous life in a well-ordered community, cultivating virtue by habit without a love of wisdom. Indeed, one might say that more than half of those coming out of heaven were ensnared in this manner, for they were not chastened by suffering. But most of those returning from the bowels of the earth, having suffered and witnessed suffering in others, chose without haste. That, as well as the chance of the lot, was the reason why most souls alternated from a good life to an evil one, or from an evil life to a good one. Nevertheless, if a man whole-heartedly searches out wisdom when he returns to life on earth, and if the lot falls so that he does not choose among the last, then according to the report there is good hope for happiness here and for a journey in the other world not by the rugged trail beneath the earth, but by the smooth path through the firmament.

It was a sight worth seeing, Er said, how different souls chose their lives, a sight inspiring at once pity, humour and astonishment. They chose mostly according to the habits of their former lives. Er saw the soul of Orpheus choose a swan's life, for it hated all women, having died at their hands, and refused to be born of woman. The soul of the over-daring singer Thamyras picked the life of a nightingale, while a swan chose a man's life, and other musical creatures did the same. The twentieth lot fell to a soul who selected a lion's life — Ajax, son of Telamon, shrinking from human birth

in remembrance of the award of Achilles' arms. Next in order the soul of Agamemnon, the conqueror of Troy who was murdered by his wife, took the life of an eagle, hating mankind for his sufferings. Atalanta's soul drew a lot in the middle of the numbers. Once a great runner, she could not pass by the honours of an athletic man, and she seized that life. After her, Er saw the soul of Epeius, the son of Panopeus who had built the Trojan horse, pass into the form of a craftswoman. Far off among the last lots, the soul of buffooning Thersites clothed itself in the body of an ape. But as chance would have it, the very last lot fell to the soul of Odysseus, whose memory of his previous toils dispelled his ambition, and he searched about for a long time to find a quiet and retiring life. When it was found, neglected by the others, he chose it gladly, saying that he would have made the same choice even if he had been first. Others did the same, beasts changing into men and into one another, unjust souls becoming wild creatures and just ones tame, in every possible mixture.

Once all the choices had been made, the souls proceeded in the order of their lots to Lachesis. She entrusted each to the charge of the *daimon* he had chosen, to accompany him through life in the fulfilment of his choice. The *daimon* first took the soul to Clotho, passing under her hand as it turned the whirling Spindle, thus ratifying the chosen destiny. After touching her, he led the soul next to the spinning of Atropos, which made the thread of destiny irreversible. Without glancing back, he passed thence under the throne of Necessity. When all had passed beyond the throne, they travelled together to the Plain of Lethe — Oblivion — through terrible stifling heat, for the plain is treeless and without any earthly vegetation. At eventide, they encamped beside the River of Unmindfulness, whose water no vessel can hold. Everyone was forced to drink a measure of its waters, and some were unwise enough to drink more. As each drank, he forgot everything. After sleep overtook them, thunder and earthquake came at midnight, and suddenly they were carried up to birth, in this and that direction, like shooting stars. Er was forbidden to drink the water, though how and by what means he returned to his body, he did not know. He suddenly opened his eyes and discovered himself lying on the funeral pyre at dawn.

This tale was preserved thus from destruction. If we listen well, it

can save us, and we can safely cross the River of Lethe, and we will not stain our souls. If we hold that the soul is immortal, capable of enduring all good and evil, we will keep to the upward path and practise justice under the guidance of wisdom. Then we shall be friends both to the gods and to ourselves, while we remain on the earth, as well as when we receive the rewards of justice, like victors in the games collecting their prizes. Thus here and in the journey of a thousand years, which has been described to you, we shall fare well.

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PLATO



It is Plato's doctrine, and none more defensible, that the soul before it entered the realm of Becoming existed in the universe of Being. Released from the region of time and space, it returns to its former abode . . . into communion with itself. After a season of quiet "alone with the Alone," of assimilation of its earthly experiences and memories, refreshed and invigorated, it is seized again by the desire for further trials of its strength, further knowledge of the universe, the companionship of former friends, by the desire to keep in step and on the march with the moving world.

In respect of our true natures, of what in truth we are and are capable of becoming, to what heights in knowledge, wisdom, power, the soul can climb, of all this science and philosophy have so far hardly yet spoken. Nor can any boundary be set, any "Thus far and no farther" to the expansion of the mind. In our present life we have acquired at the most the alphabet of this knowledge; and as for the universe, of the modes of existence and happiness of what it permits, of its possibilities as an abode for progressive beings like ourselves, we know less than nothing, and no single life could teach us what they may be. Nor can any reason be advanced why we should not in the end become its masters, mould it to our hearts' desires, and make of it a home, the natural and happy estate of the immortal spirits to whom it indefeasibly belongs.

The Human Situation

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