

***The Myth of Er* – the Bizarre Conclusion to One of the Great Literary Achievements of Hellenic Culture**

Does Plato's *Republic* Close with an Ancient Near Death Experience?

By Edmund Schilvold

November 2011

The following essay will be centered around the part of Plato's *Republic* that some have termed the *Myth of Er*. It occupies only a rather miniscule part of Plato's famous work, covering a mere six pages in the Allan Bloom translation of the *Republic*, which is the version I will be referring to here. It does, however, form the final part of the final chapter – *Book X* – and this placement seems to me to indicate that the author must have valued it quite highly and thought it more than a little important to impart its content to his readers. The conclusion does, after all, tend to be one of the parts of a literary work – if not *the* part – that we remember in the most unobstructed fashion, ponder the most completely and come to attach the most significance to.

My second reason for choosing the *Myth of Er*

Upon reading the *Republic* for the first time, and encountering the above mentioned myth, I also felt that it stood out from the rest for other reasons. There seemed to occur something of a departure from the established format of the book – that of dialogue and rational, step-by-step inquiry. Instead came, quite unexpectedly, a number of very long paragraphs, constituting a fairly extensive monologue, and in the place of incisive questions and considered replies pertaining to distinct subjects, were a content which by comparison seemed bizarre, exotic and almost purely mythological – far more reminiscent of the raptures and allegories of Scripture than of the stringent philosophizing of Socrates.

External sources for the myth?

My later readings have only validated that initial reaction, and I have heard other readers of the *Republic* express similar sentiments. The *Myth of Er* does indeed appear to be a text quite distinct from the rest of the *Republic*. The question naturally arises: Did Plato compose the myth himself? Did Socrates invent it? Or did its creation actually precede them both?

Before I continue, I should probably point out that I am relatively new to Plato, and that I, with the exception of the *Timaeus*, have yet to read his other works. I am therefore obviously not able to view the *Myth of Er* in a wider context in the way that a more seasoned reader of Plato would be. My remarks must therefore be seen as a summary of certain first impressions by one who is only a neophyte with regard to Plato and his authorship.

In the *Myth of Er*, Plato lets Socrates recount the curious story of the spiritual, dream-like journey of a man called Er, whom we are told was “son of Armenius, by race a Pamphylian.” According to the tale, this Er was believed to be dead, killed “in war,” as the text states. Presumably he was a soldier of some kind, who took part in a battle and then appeared to have been slain. Yet when the corpses were “picked up,” an event which took place on the tenth day after Er’s alleged death, his body was still “in a good state of preservation,” and on the twelfth day, when his kinsmen were about to burn his body on a funeral pyre, he suddenly “came back to life” and told his audience of what he had experienced “when his soul departed.”

It is these recollections that make up the main part of the *Myth of Er*, and they are certainly no ordinary or prosaic ones. In them are elements of what most present-day readers would term Heaven and Hell and associate with Christianity, Judaism or Islam, but there is also the element of reincarnation, and a rather novel version of it to boot – at least to those of us who are only familiar with the kind of reincarnation espoused by Buddhism.

However, to this reader, the most striking and original part of Er's story is the one concerning a huge pillar of light, "stretched from above through all of heaven and earth," and with a complex, layered structure, continuously revolving, and in appearance like the rainbow, only "brighter and purer." There is also music – the pillar is accompanied by eight Sirens, each uttering a distinct note, and together they produce "the accord of a single harmony," to which three other beings sing their songs. These three are Lachesis, who reigns over the past, Clotho, who controls the present, and Atropos, who has power over the future.

The Tree of Life

Is there anything in the religions and cosmologies that are known to us today that we can liken this beautiful and peculiar vision of a pillar of light to? Personally, I can only think of the pagan Nordic myths of Yggdrasil, the World Tree, or the Tree of Life as it appears in Kabbalah and other esoteric faiths – Alchemy, Freemasonry and the like.

The reincarnation scene

But let us for a moment step back and look at some of the other aspects of the text. Apart from the scene outlined above, the most memorable one is to my mind the one in which the souls of the deceased are gathered together and compelled to choose their new incarnation. When I in the above used the adjective "bizarre," this was one of the aspects of the myth that I was thinking of, for in the reincarnation scene, each individual soul actually has the freedom to choose its next life – and in this, the concept of reincarnation found in the *Myth of Er* differs a great deal from that which Eastern religions have made us familiar with today.

But that is not all. In the *Myth of Er*, the souls are free to choose between the lives of human beings and the lives of animals. No insurmountable barrier of religious dogmas is drawn up between the two categories, and some of the souls that are present actually

decide to avoid reincarnation into human beings out of an acquired contempt for mankind, or a remembrance of the suffering that the human condition inevitably entails. According to the myth, Orpheus picks the life of a swan, while Ajax decides on that of a lion and Agamemnon settles for a future as an eagle.

Nor does there appear to be anything to prevent souls that have been lodged in the forms of men from becoming attached to women, or vice versa. Epeius, the son of Panopeus, is one example – his soul enters “the nature of an artisan woman.”

Non-judgmental

I could be mistaken, but to me it seems that this part of the myth affords us a glimpse of an outlook on life that is remarkably free of harsh dogmas, artificial categories and oppressive prejudices – a philosophy which recognizes the value and the dignity of all forms of life, including both genders. The description of the reincarnation scene actually seems to imply that souls have no fixed gender – and if that was truly the opinion of the author, we have identified a feature of thought which I would label as nothing less than astonishing when the age of the *Republic* is taken into consideration.

The text also has a wonderful mixture of tragedy and humor, solemnity and lightheartedness – as when we are told that Er observes the soul of the “buffoon Thersites, clothing itself as an ape,” or that the soul of Odysseus, cured of its former love of honor, spends “a long time looking for the life a private man who minds his own business,” and that it “with effort” finally finds such a life “lying somewhere, neglected by the others,” and is delighted to take possession of it.

Plato had humor

The author is, as we may infer, not unaware of the character of the reincarnation scene: “He [Er] said that this was surely a sight worth seeing; how each of the souls chose a life. For it was pitiable, laughable, and wonderful to see”. That Plato, whom some have

portrayed as a stern totalitarian, would choose to end a work which he surely viewed as one of his most significant in the manner just described, should surely be of interest to us, and worth a closer examination.

Mystery and timelessness

But let us move on to some of the other distinctive attributes of the text. Close to the very beginning of the myth, we find an expression which the translator has rendered in English as the classic idiom “once upon a time.” This, along with an allusion to the Odyssey explained by the translator in his notes, contributes to setting the stage for Er’s story. There is no mention of any concrete time, age or place – the only hint we get with regard to where Er died “in war” and whence he came is that he “by race” was a Pamphylian, and the occurrence of a conversation regarding a former tyrant of a city in Pamphylia.

This lack of information naturally creates a sense of mystery, and a feeling of something unresolved that makes us want to read on. It also reminds us of the fairytales that were a common staple of the upbringing of countless European children right up until the transformation of everyday life brought about by electricity, television, computers and – perhaps most of all – lack of time.

The absence of information also infuses the text with a certain timelessness – and we are probably correct if we assume that the author intended this to happen – this was to be a text for all people and all ages.

The lack of bodily decay

The next aspect of note is that we are told that on the tenth day, when most of the bodies of the slain had begun to decompose, the body belonging to Er remained untouched by the usual signs of decay. After ten days on what was likely an open field, in what we must assume to have been a more or less Mediterranean climate, that is indeed extraordinary.

However, those of us who have read at least some of the accounts of the deaths of Christian men and women of renown – the kinds of people who were often later recognized as saints – know that a lack of post-mortem corporeal decay is almost commonplace when saintly characters are involved.

One example which springs to mind is the story of the death of the ancient king and patron saint-to-be of Norway, Olaf II Haraldsson, related to us in *Heimskringla*, the book of sagas written by the medieval Icelandic author Snorri Sturluson. If we are to believe the words of Sturluson, Olaf II Haraldsson died the violent death of a warrior while fighting forces opposed to the introduction of Christianity. Yet even several days after his death, his body appeared like that of a person who is only asleep – his skin still had a healthy reddish tinge, his hair had increased visibly in length, and the same was true of his nails.

Perhaps such phenomena – or, if we want to adopt a more skeptical approach – the literary device that such accounts could perhaps be said to constitute – were common in the world of ancient Greece as well. As of yet, I do not have sufficient knowledge to be able to determine with any degree of certainty whether that was the case or not.

The role of the paranormal

What does seem to be beyond a reasonable doubt is that the paranormal – I am deliberately using this term instead of “superstitions” and “the supernatural” in an effort to avoid the bias of the two latter – figured prominently in the world of the ancient Hellenes, as well as in that of the other peoples in the Mediterranean region. While reading Herodotus, I was somewhat struck by the extent to which precisely the paranormal was an integral part of people’s lives – whether they were kings or common men. The respect paid to oracles, the importance placed on dreams, the frequent divinations, the initiations into mystery schools, the festivals to the gods – who, by the way, should perhaps be called archetypes or principles instead of gods, as this would

likely do greater justice to the thinking of those who were informed – to a modern reader, submerged in the imperceptible premises laid down by secular science, it is all somewhat perplexing – even disconcerting. A layman will easily, due to the shortcuts and oversimplifications so frequent in public education and popular culture – get the impression that the Greeks in general, and the Athenians in particular, were all and always paragons of reason and intellectual inquiry. Perhaps they in some ways really were. But this much seems clear: To men like Herodotus, there was no contradiction between reason and reverence, between lucid writing and the portrayal of phenomena such as the prophetic abilities of certain oracles as likely to be real.

Judging from what I myself have read and heard of comments and analysis pertaining to ancient Greek culture, its paranormal and mystical aspects are more often than not dismissed as empty myths or fantasies, or simply ignored. Yet the existence of a realm beyond the material world, and of phenomena related to it, were believed in and reported by men of great intelligence and prominence, and to me, it seems arrogant to simply reject the parts of their testimonies and philosophies that deal with these matters as mere superstitions, while we more than willingly analyze, and often even extol to the greatest of heights, other parts of their works.

I am not attempting to proclaim the eternal validity of any and all Hellenic mindsets and beliefs – far from it – but I do believe the question should be posed more often: Have we, in our effort to be rational and to distance ourselves from the sometimes destructive superstitions of our forefathers, overlooked or dismissed as nonsensical certain parts of Hellenic culture deserving of more serious and open-minded attention?

A near-death experience?

If the reader will bear with me, I will take that line of thought a step further and introduce the to me rather obvious similarity between the Er's unexpected awakening and his subsequent account of a soul journey, and modern-day near-death experiences reported by hospitalized patients – experiences which credible research has shown to be far more

common than previously thought, and less easy to dismiss as individual hallucinations than the insistent skeptics among us would have us believe.

There are also the many accounts of shamans, common in primitive, tribal societies, who fall into a state of ecstasy or unconsciousness and afterwards claim to have visited “the other side” or to have received information from spirits. But as I realize that I would enter a hotbed of controversy if I continue down the road that my present speculations are bound to lead me, I will for now cease to explore this topic and move on to other noticeable features of the *Myth of Er*.

Location

An obvious question to ask, it would seem, is this: Where is it that the journey recounted in the *Myth of Er* takes place? It is clearly not somewhere on Earth, as Er makes his observations while he is presumed to be dead, and while his body is either lying on the battlefield, being transported back to his home or about to be burned on the funeral pyre. Nor does the journey occur within the confines of Er’s own mind, for the myth boldly proclaims the objective reality of the realm of which it speaks by way of the following statement: “And when he himself [Er] came forward, they said that he had to become a messenger to human beings of the things there, and they [the judges] told him to listen and to look at everything in the place”.

What may we derive from this? Certainly that Er has been given access to, and will be allowed to return from, a world that most human beings have little or no knowledge of, and the “judges” have deemed him fit to disseminate information on it when he gets back to more familiar surroundings.

Is it on some kind of “spirit plane”, then, that Er embarks on his incredible voyage? Is the realm of the pillar of light that of the mysterious “ether” of arcane religion, or could it be the same as that which New Age sometimes speaks of as “the astral dimension”?

The mixture of the material and immaterial

Complicating the effort to reach a conclusive answer is the strange mixture of the material and the immaterial, of the corporeal and the ethereal, that the *Myth of Er* presents us with. There are the souls of the dead and openings leading to heaven, but there are also “dirt and dust” and openings leading into “the earth”. Another example of the same is souls experiencing “stifling heat” and arriving at the plain of the river Lethe, which is “barren of trees and all that naturally grows on earth”.

Many of the words and sentences that seem to concern actual, physical objects may, however, have been intended to be interpreted as metaphors – similes for spiritual structures and attributes that human beings can only describe to one another by employing language pertaining to that which is known to us all because it exists here on Earth.

Thus it may be that it is only by viewing all the “material” parts of the myth as allegorical, and imagining them to refer to something which is actually indescribable and beyond our present comprehension, that we can grasp how the myth was meant to be understood, and this conjecture of mine does indeed seem to be supported by the text itself, where it states that the water of the Lethe – “the river of Carelessness” – is of a sort which “no vessel can contain”.

Lethian water, then, is not water as we know it on Earth, and the river is no ordinary river. From this it logically follows that when the souls “drink,” they are not really drinking in the way that human beings do, and if all this is indeed so, then we may assume that their thirst is not a corporeal thirst, that the plain is not a physical plain, that the midnight spoken of is not a midnight like the one we are accustomed to here – et cetera. In other words, many of the words that in a spiritual context seem out of place, may be symbolic, and may hence be rendered coherent with the context after all.

Kinship to the *Divine Comedy*

Here it seems relevant to mention another monumental work in the Western tradition – Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*. Not only does it deal with some of the same themes as Plato’s *Republic* – the content of the *Myth of Er* bears so many similarities to the scenes of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* that it is tempting to call the *Myth of Er* a condensed version of *the Divine Comedy* – even though it naturally lacks the specifically Christian features of Dante’s great work, and, unsurprisingly, adds some specifically Hellenic or Socratic ones.

Whether this kinship is due to Dante having read and taken inspiration from Plato’s dialogues, or to medieval Christianity having absorbed in a more or less unaltered form Platonic cosmology, or to an ability of both ancient Greek philosophers and devoted Christians to perceive, independently of each other, something of the nature of an actual, immaterial reality – that is a question for a separate essay, as a convincing answer would require far more reading than I have done at present, as well as far more space than I have available here. All I will say now is that I suspect an adequate response to be anything but straightforward and black-and-white, and to contain elements of all the aforementioned possibilities.

In any case, the conclusions reached above concerning where the myth takes place and what we should make of the curious mixture of material and immaterial elements, have obvious implications for how we should look at that which I initially called “the most striking and original part of Er’s story” – the description of the pillar of light, “stretched from above through all of heaven and earth.” The text does not make it entirely clear how this structure and its adjoining ones should be visualized, but simply stated, the pillar seems to consist, in part at least, of several layers or “whorls”, eight in number, which are all somewhat different in size, hue and luminosity. They all have a revolving motion, but the speed and direction of rotation varies. Now according to dictionaries, these whorls have traditionally been assumed to represent the orbits or “layers” formed by the heavenly bodies of our solar system – the sun, the moon and the various planets. But is

this the only possible interpretation – and if not, is it even the most reasonable one? It is a well-known fact that literature at the level of the *Republic* and the like often contains more than a single layer of meaning, and that its message may, in a sense, depend a great deal on the mood and the inclinations of the individual reader.

One possible alternative interpretation is that the layers of light represent different dimensions or planes of existence – like the “seven heavens” of traditional folklore – and the number seven, which certain traditions have long considered sacred, does indeed occur in the description of the whorls, for we are told that “within the revolving whole, the seven inner circles revolve gently in the opposite direction (...)”.

In order to defend the above idea, I will now point out, although it is probably by now unnecessary to spell it out, the fact that *if* the Myth of Er takes place in a different, spiritual world – as it clearly does – and all references to material structures are allegorical, then there is no need to equate the pillar of light and the various whorls with structures and features of our own, material universe – including planets and planetary orbits.

But not only is there no need for such a comparison – it may be off the mark as well. The purported similarity between the whorls and the motion of heavenly bodies as seen from Earth could be a coincidence – or, it may be that the author of the myth deliberately created a possibility for doubt and bewilderment, intending to show how one set of words can come to refer to several ideas at once in the mind of the reader, each appearing as a modified echo of its antecedent.

A heliocentric outlook?

To this we may add yet another line of argument – if the pillar of light is at the very center of the cosmos – whether the cosmos in question is material or immaterial – then how is this placement in any way compatible with a view of the cosmos where the Earth is at the center? Or did Plato or Socrates espouse a heliocentric outlook? To my

knowledge, none of them did – and even if they did, the pillar of light and the Sun do not seem to have much in common – the former being described as “a straight light, like a column”, while the latter has clearly always been circular, and would hardly have been depicted as a column, unless it was supposed that the Sun was actually a pillar, but that it was always seen from directly above or below, which seems unlikely.

We should of course resist the temptation to construe Europe’s Philosopher King as more informed or more complex in his thinking than he really was. However, we also need to take care so as to avoid overlooking or rejecting the possible depths of his writings by settling for the most obvious and simple interpretations, and excluding all that to minds of the twenty-first century seem far-fetched and unfamiliar.

Thus, even though there are eight whorls, and there may appear to be a correlation between the properties of these and those of the objects that make up our solar system, they could also represent different planes, dimensions or heavens, beyond which there lies an ultimate plane or reality – that of the divine. In the *Myth of Er*, that ultimate reality could correspond to the place where the souls of the dead congregate and are judged, and where the souls that are done with their journeys through Heaven and Hell once again reincarnate into a physical existence.

Much more could be said of the various parts of the *Myth of Er*, but as I believe I have covered the most significant content quite thoroughly, I will now attempt a conclusion.

Was Plato really a totalitarian?

Since the *Myth of Er* occupies such a prominent position in the *Republic*, our way of looking at its meaning must by necessity have consequences for our understanding of the *Republic* as a whole.

Now, if the *Myth of Er* is primarily about the journey and the choices of the soul, and highly allegorical, then it seems likely that this is also valid for the rest of Plato’s work.

Yet it is often claimed that the *Republic* is primarily concerned with how one might create and run an ideal state, or establish and uphold a perfect government.

However, even the most careful proclamation of such goals as these is enough to make bells of alarm chime loudly in the mind of anyone who is familiar with a terrible havoc wreaked over the course of the past one hundred years by the totalitarian ideologies of Nazism, communism and Islamism, which all claimed to have a perfect state – the Third Reich, the Worker’s Paradise or the revived Caliphate – as their ultimate goal for human existence – and that is as it should be.

But suppose it could be shown that the *Republic* was never meant to be about the establishment of the ideal society, but about the ideal state of the soul? Then much of the present-day criticism of Plato as a totalitarian would be rendered irrelevant, as it would become evident to all that it is based on a superficial and erroneous understanding of Plato’s intention. For that which is right for the individual, immaterial soul is not necessarily right for a large and complex society consisting of human beings of all kinds of preferences. Indeed, it may not be right at all, but dangerous, harmful and impossible to attain. Everyone has the power to begin correcting one’s own thinking and demeanor, but no one has the ability, except if they are willing to use force and a reign of terror, to make every member of collection of human beings conform to a particular idea.

Well – does not the *Republic* state that “(...) first we’ll investigate what justice is like in the cities. Then, we’ll also go on to consider it in individuals, considering the likeness of the bigger to the idea of the littler?”

Then, this: “If we should watch a city coming into being in speech,’ I said, ‘would we also see its justice coming into being, and its injustice?’ ‘Probably,’ he said. ‘When this has been done, can we hope to see what we’re looking for more easily?’ ‘Far more easily.’”

The *Myth of Er*, then, puts the capstone on the long exploration of justice and the ideal state of mind related to us in the preceding part of the *Republic*. As Socrates remarks when he has recounted approximately two-thirds of the tale:

“From all this he will be able to draw a conclusion and choose – in 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 juster. He will let everything else go. For we have seen that this is the most important choice for him in life and death.”

Sources/Bibliography:

Bloom, Allan 1968, *The Republic of Plato. Second Edition. Translated with Notes and an Interpretive Essay by Allan Bloom*, Basic Books, United States.

© Edmund Schilvold

E-mail: edmund@schilvold.com