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A Dialogue on Plato's Conception of the Afterlife

Philosophy 601.01 Winter 2010

Betsy McCall

**Characters:** Ann, Betsy, Cash, David<sup>1</sup>

[The scene is Ann's kitchen, in Western-Central Pennsylvania. She is grandmother to the other characters. Betsy is sitting at the kitchen table, on the bench along the wall, near the entryway where the door to the patio and the door to the basement both meet. On the opposite side of the table is another bench along the length of the table, and a single chair at the head of the table, with its back to the door. Another bench covering the radiator sits under the window between the door and the oven. It is covered with coats and magazines. The table is covered with a tattered, yellow-plaid, plastic tablecloth. The far side of the table is covered with more magazines and religious paraphernalia against the low wall between the kitchen and the dining room. The house itself is more than sixty-years-old and looks it. Betsy is startled when the door to the patio opens and Cash walks in with his young son in tow, followed shortly thereafter by their cousin David.]

BETSY: Hey, what are you doing here? I thought you were at the wake.

CASH: I was, but Braeden was getting cranky, I decided to bring him up here for a nap. Jen stayed up at the hotel for the afternoon, so I'll be right back. C'mon little guy.

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<sup>1</sup> For some context, Cash is my brother, a year younger than me, with a wife, Jen, and a young son currently under a year old, Braeden (both are mentioned only in passing). Beyond that, I am quite hard-pressed to explain him, although he is no stranger to esoteric conversations of this sort. Once, "for fun", he borrowed my copy of the *Republic* to read, though he's never actually completed a college degree of any kind. David is our first cousin. Cash and I are a year apart in age, and David is between us. Though currently a state patrol officer in Montana, he spent six years in Korea teaching English and doing graduate work in philosophy. The thought of doing philosophy in Korean boggles the mind! Ann is the mother of fourteen children (two of whom are mothers to the three of us), and a devout Catholic. The woman whose funeral was going on, Ella, did actually die last year, though the rest of the context of the dialogue is fictional and slightly anachronistic as none of us have been in Pennsylvania at the same time that recently. The Paul, whose funeral I describe, was our great-uncle Paul, Ann's younger brother, which was at least four years ago while I was still living in Pennsylvania.

DAVID: (taking a seat on the bench across from her) You didn't go to the wake at all?

BETSY: (Raising an eyebrow at him archly) Are you kidding? The last time I went to a Catholic wake when Uncle Paul died, I had to leave and go stand in the parking lot because the priest just made me furious. I didn't know Ella, so it seemed like the better part of valour to let it go this time.

DAVID: What bothered you so much?

BETSY: The lies. It's intended to be comforting, but I was offended by the insistence that everything would be just fine, hunky-dory, best-possible scenario. Even if you believe Catholic doctrine, few people should really deserve to be in the sight of Jesus immediately after death, and insisting to people that their loved one was one of the blessed who would be... and they tell everyone the same thing, even if the guy is an arch-criminal... it's nothing more than a lie. And, worse, I don't believe even that much of it, so it's doubly damning. At Paul's wake, the priest came and spent forty-five minutes telling the family about the glories of god, instead of talking about what kind of man Paul was in life and how we should remember him. It felt to me like taking advantage of their grief to sell them snake-oil. It was extremely difficult *just* to walk out, and not to insist that the guy shut-the-hell-up!

DAVID: Wow, that's a little harsh, don't you think?

BETSY: You asked why I wasn't there. I told you. There's nothing "harsh" about it. That's how I felt.

CASH: (returning from the bedrooms through the dining room, without Braeden) You forget, David, I'm the apatheist. Betsy can hardly be accused of lacking passion about anything.

Whether it's reasonable or not is another story.

BETSY: Hey, now. The afterlife is a fascinating topic, in a clinical sort of way. But, clearly, I need to be avoiding Catholic wakes. It's easier to analyze away from the topic, but I'd never been to a full Catholic wake before that, and I was unprepared. Some warning would have been helpful. I'd have left as soon as the priest showed up. Even Granddad's funeral<sup>2</sup> wasn't that bad, and I still stood outside with several of our aunts and uncles who couldn't listen to it themselves. Don't try to paint me as the oddball here.

DAVID: What is it about the afterlife that you think is interesting?

BETSY: It's not the beliefs themselves per se, I suppose, but how they change and interact with each other. It's easier to think about it uncritically when I look at it with the eyes of history, than as a current superstition.

CASH: (sitting in the chair at the head of the table) What makes you think it's superstition?

BETSY: Oh, come on. You know I'm a raging materialist and a demanding empiricist. My first reaction to every one of these beliefs is "Prove it!" Even if near-death experiences count as proof<sup>3</sup>, which I would argue they aren't, you still are stuck with the details. You don't get those from NDEs, just that there's maybe *something*. How does a "white light" elaborate into Dante? But it's really not even that, so much as what it says about the person with such beliefs (aside from their superstitions or lack of critical thinking), but about their psychology, what is important to them, and what motivates their actions. What problems do they perceive, and what are they trying to solve with these beliefs?

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<sup>2</sup> His was a Protestant funeral, but my grandmother dragged the Catholic priest to everything trying to save his soul.

<sup>3</sup> Hasker, pg. 9.

CASH: What does your belief--or lack of it--say about you?

BETSY: It says I'm a materialist and an empiricist, of course! Seriously, I don't believe in the soul. The soul is a fuzzy concept perhaps better defined by life (which isn't well-defined itself), or consciousness or mind<sup>4</sup>. I don't believe in an immortal soul, I don't believe there is something after this that I can look forward to, to make me feel better, or give me a second chance, or to achieve justice that failed me in this life. And that means it's important to me to cherish life, and to not waste a single day. I don't intend to die regretting that there was something I didn't get done, or something I wanted to try and didn't. But neither am I going to be reckless and cut my one chance at life short. It says a lot about my willingness to gamble, and when I will and won't take chances. And it explains why the only thing I could do with what I believe is to go back to school, because until I have the astronomy degree I always wanted, I will never be complete, and my life will be wasted. And given all that, what other people think about my going back to school is irrelevant...just to use one example.

CASH: But how can you be sure there is no afterlife?

BETSY: Well, I can't of course, because I'm not dead. But holding on to a position of "I don't know" for a very long time seems to me to be extremely difficult. Even people, like you, who insist on being agnostic on the issue, you act in ways that suggests you lean in one direction or the other, or else simultaneously hold very contradictory views that you've never fully analyzed. It's hard to remain purely agnostic, unless you are that apathetic, and that doesn't seem to me to be a good way to live at all. Even someone like you does think one thing about it or another; you just deny it, so the rest of us are left to speculate about what you *really* think.

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<sup>4</sup> Lorenz, pg. 1

DAVID: I see what you mean. Our views of death and the soul are naturally intertwined. When I was in Korea, we studied a lot more about eastern philosophies than western ones.

BETSY: I'd like to meet the one guy in Korea who can translate from Ancient Greek into Korean!

DAVID: I'm sure you would, though I'm also sure there is more than one, though not many. Though we did talk about the western giants like Plato, of course, it was a lot of Buddhist and Confucianist giants. No one either of you would have heard of.

CASH: If we are going to talk about this, we should start with someone I'm marginally familiar with, like Plato. What did Plato think about the afterlife?

BETSY: Well, that's not entirely clear. His views changed over time in the dialogues, so some questions remain about what he believed, if he believed what he wrote, or if they were myths intended to make a point<sup>5</sup>, or if, especially in the early myths, some of what he wrote was just the beliefs of Socrates and not his own<sup>6</sup>. But they all have some common threads.

CASH: Like what?

BETSY: His early myths of the afterlife had a very clear Greek flavour to them, and over time, came to take on more characteristics that would be later palatable to Catholic theologians<sup>7</sup>. One wonders if he was cautious in the beginning because of Socrates being executed, or if it's mere coincidence that he starts with the most traditional of his eschatological myths. Or one might speculate it also has something to do with his audience changing, from being generally public as

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<sup>5</sup> Partenie, pg. 4-5

<sup>6</sup> Kraut, pg. 5

<sup>7</sup> Spade, pg. 3

Socrates was, or perhaps being more focused on a specific audience of students after a time<sup>8</sup>.

You remember that Socrates was executed for corrupting the youth and impiety, don't you?

CASH: Yes.

BETSY: In the *Gorgias*, which is apparently the earliest of the dialogues that discusses eschatology<sup>9</sup>, Plato presents a story of the afterlife that employs the traditional gods of the Greeks to make his point, and first makes it clear that he thinks the soul is immortal<sup>10</sup>.

CASH: Didn't the Greeks already think the soul was immortal?

BETSY: Yes, of course. Hades, the Elysian Fields... sure.

DAVID: Which you think is an unjustified assumption?

BETSY: Of course, but it is the assumption they made. But he adds here something that was perhaps understated in Greek myth, if not outright new, which is that those who "lived a just and pious life...[go] to the Isles of the Blessed, to make [their] abode in complete happiness, beyond the reach of evils." But that those who lived an evil life, go "to the prison of payment and retribution, the one they call Tartarus."<sup>11</sup>

CASH: You just said that these places existed already. Didn't heroes already go to the "Isles of the Blessed"?

BETSY: Yes, but that was just heroes and gods before. Plato is arguing that even the common

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<sup>8</sup> Partenie, pg. 2

<sup>9</sup> Stillwell, pg. 16

<sup>10</sup> Plato, 523ab. All references to and quoted translations of Plato will be from *Plato: The Complete Works*, Cooper (ed.) Hackett 1997 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

man can be rewarded with a pleasant afterlife if he lives his life correctly<sup>12</sup>. It's a very democratic view of the afterlife. Ironic, really, considering his view of democracy in the *Republic*<sup>13</sup>, but not entirely inconsistent either since it's about merit, not birth per se.

DAVID: The story in the *Gorgias* is quite democratic, as each man is to be judged according to his soul, not his wealth or fine clothes. He even goes so far as to demand they be judged naked so that if their souls are scarred by their wickedness they may be seen and not admitted to the Isles of the Blessed<sup>14</sup>. What always struck me about this particular story was how very different it was than, say, the treatment of David in the Old Testament, who, once chosen by God, could sin and do evil, and still be seen as blessed by God<sup>15</sup>, which is still accepted by some puritanical Calvinist Christian sects. Blessedness is not once given, but constantly earned.

BETSY: I am reminded of the story in Herodotus where Solon tells Croesus that no one is ever truly blessed until they are dead, for until then, things can still change<sup>16</sup>. Plato is making that argument here, in a different way. Only at the end of your life can the gods tell if you are good or evil, just or unjust, when all is laid out bare before them.

But we also see themes familiar to Christians in this myth, that those who are curable of their sin are punished. But even those who are incurable are punished, not because it will help them in any way, but because it is a supposed deterrent to others. And these punishments endure for all time<sup>17</sup>. A conclusion, I must say, I find just as unjust as the Christian conception of Hell: for what could be more unjust? An infinite punishment for finite injustice?

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<sup>12</sup> Stillwell, pg. 56

<sup>13</sup> Kraut, pg. 13

<sup>14</sup> Plato, 523d-525a

<sup>15</sup> Boettner, pg. 1

<sup>16</sup> Herodotus, 29-34 (pg. 11-13)

<sup>17</sup> Plato, 525b-d

DAVID: Didn't he also say that philosophers would be among those sent to the Isles of the Blessed?

BETSY: He did. It's hard not to read a smirk on his face when he says it either.<sup>18</sup>

CASH: Do you think that is Socrates talking about himself, or Plato talking about his dead friend and hoping for the best?

DAVID: Or perhaps Plato is talking about himself? Philosophers have no acquaintance with shame.

BETSY: Well, that aside, these kinds of myths are a clear way of dealing with the observed fact that many people do wrong in this life and go unpunished for it, like those who arranged for Socrates' execution. Providing this kind of eschatological myth provides an additional check on their behaviour—or so it is hoped—and serves as assurance to those that can't get justice in this life that they will have it one day. And, sadly, appeals to the visceral urge for vengeance. Plato never really escapes that in his subsequent myths, either.

DAVID: He tries to make a case for it logically, as a deterrent to others.

BETSY: When was the last time you picked up a criminal on the highway who didn't think he wasn't going to get caught? Who cared what the punishment for a crime was until *after* he got caught?

DAVID: Those are the people who commit the crimes anyway. What about all the people who don't commit the crimes that we will never know about?

BETSY: Most crimes are crimes of opportunity. We can argue from the dint of scientific

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 526c

evidence that criminals aren't deterred by severe punishments like the death penalty. They assume they will not get caught, or they tell themselves that their actions are justified and not really a crime<sup>19</sup>. Not that there aren't effective deterrents, but harsh punishment is not as effective as other methods. So, the deterrent argument is an empty one. Admittedly, Plato would not have had that evidence, but I don't see how it fits into his other arguments for justice, either, since one would be being punished for crimes that *other people might* commit, not ones that you yourself committed. At least in the *Minority Report* you were being punished for crimes *you* might commit. It is a troublesome problem.

DAVID: Another troublesome problem with this myth is the reliance on the traditional gods of the Greeks for a sense of justice, considering that he all but eviscerates them in the *Euthyphro*<sup>20</sup>.

CASH: How many of these myths of the afterlife does Plato have?

BETSY: Four<sup>21</sup>. Let's look at the *Phaedo*, though, where Plato spends a great deal more time discussing the soul and the afterlife.

DAVID: This is the dialogue where Plato introduces the idea of reincarnation or metempsychosis. I could speculate about this one for days: where did Plato get this idea? Could he have been influenced by the Far East, say, from India? Or was this something he originated on his own? Does he really believe it, or is it just part of a story intended to incline people toward a certain behaviour and not something he believes literally?

BETSY: The Far East isn't the only possible source. The Celts believed in reincarnation: they were said to be especially fierce warriors because they believed that if they died, they would

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<sup>19</sup> Carlsmith, et al.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, 6c-11c

<sup>21</sup> Stillwell, pg. 5

simply be reborn, so it was something floating around in Indo-European culture<sup>22</sup>. *Some* of the details are striking in their similarity to Indian or Buddhist beliefs in *some* ways, but without clear testimony that this was an inspiration, there is too much that is different to suggest a connection. Plato's turn of beliefs in this dialogue is usually attributed to Pythagorean and Orphic influences rather than Far Eastern ones<sup>23</sup>, and they were far more accessible. Reincarnation was still part of the milieu.

DAVID: But there are tantalizing hints. For instance, he suggests that there is a kind of *karma* at work in that when a wicked soul is reborn, it might be reborn into the body of a donkey, or that tyrants might be reborn as wolves, or those of popular, social virtue might become bees or ants<sup>24</sup>. A Buddhist or a Hindu would find these notions quite familiar, if not the specifics<sup>25</sup>. Like breeds like.

BETSY: I suppose, but when you allow for reincarnation, there aren't that many options open to you: either there is no connection between one life and another, like being put on a roulette wheel every time, or else it is deterministic in some fashion, so that it can serve as a deterrent for this life: good behaviour will be rewarded, and bad behaviour punished, now or in the future<sup>26</sup>. So, while there are similarities with the notion of *karma*, I am reluctant to ascribe a causal connection to it.

CASH: So how is the afterlife in the *Phaedo* different from the afterlife in *Gorgias*?

BETSY: Much of the *Phaedo* is spent justifying why the soul must be immortal, and Plato's

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<sup>22</sup> Haraldsson, pg. 23

<sup>23</sup> Huffman, pg. 12

<sup>24</sup> Plato, 81e-82b

<sup>25</sup> Becker, pg. 2

<sup>26</sup> Hasker, pg. 13

theory of recollection, in which the things we know are not really “learned”, but rather are recalled from a previous life in which we knew them<sup>27</sup>. Much is made of how Socrates can coax an illiterate slave into coming up with something akin to the Pythagorean theorem, though modern scholars see it as more of a good lesson in pedagogical techniques, and not true recall<sup>28</sup>. Still, this recollection stands as the basis for the claim that souls survive the death of the body<sup>29</sup>, and he then argues from this regarding whether the soul is immortal or whether it merely goes through a number of successive lifecycles before eventually also dying<sup>30</sup>.

CASH: So how does he justify that the soul is immortal? If the soul had not had an infinite set of incarnations, would there not have been a first one in which learning *would* have had to take place?

BETSY: Plato doesn't go that way. Rather, he essentially appears to be arguing that the soul is a Form, and therefore eternal, like the concept of the number three. These intangible and eternal concepts don't die, and for our souls to know them, it must be most like them<sup>31</sup>. There is a lot of debate on this point: is that what Plato meant, that the soul is a form? Or did he just mean they are most like forms and therefore share many of the same properties?<sup>32</sup> I don't find the argument convincing, and I'm not alone on that either.

DAVID: What do you see as the flaw?

BETSY: If the soul is a Form, like the good, or justice, or three, or human, these are all examples

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<sup>27</sup> Silverman, pg. 6

<sup>28</sup> Samet, pg. 3

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. pg. 4

<sup>30</sup> Plato, 88b

<sup>31</sup> Lorenz, pg. 8

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

of “one over many”, a universal that unites common properties of many particulars<sup>33</sup>. But what is the soul uniting? Our many particular past lives? What common property does that soul have, so that it is still many individual souls but not one big “World Soul”<sup>34</sup>, perhaps like what is described in the *Timaeus*? Or something else? And how are souls said to be good or wicked, or a philosopher’s soul or be in need of purifying—I’m skipping ahead, here, sorry. But Forms aren’t supposed to participate in properties, or at least not properties that aren’t inherent to them (like three and oddness). But is not claiming that the soul is inherently alive<sup>35</sup> beg the question? The Form of the good is just “good”, and nothing else. How are individual souls like this? Why do you have to be a Form to know Forms? If souls are not themselves Forms, but we participate in soul, then the soul might indeed be immortal if the rest of the argument holds, but no self-identity could survive death<sup>36</sup>. It strikes me as inherently self-contradictory.

CASH: What are you talking about?

DAVID: Let me explain the myth and that will help. In the *Phaedo*, Plato describes the afterlife as being divided into several different parts, like the last myth, only more finely divided. Souls that are incurably evil are sent to Tartarus to be punished for eternity<sup>37</sup> (no definition of what it means to be incurable is really provided), and curably evil souls are also sent to Tartarus for punishment, but are able to plead their case to those souls that they wronged. If they are forgiven, they are let out; if not, they are sent back down for more punishment<sup>38</sup>. Some philosophers seem to think that these souls will inevitably be released when they have fully paid

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<sup>33</sup> Silverman, pg. 4-5

<sup>34</sup> Ross, pg. 6

<sup>35</sup> Silverman, pg. 18

<sup>36</sup> Ross, pg. 5-7

<sup>37</sup> Plato, 113e

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 114a-b

for their crimes, but that isn't really said explicitly in the text<sup>39</sup>. Those that have done wrong, but aren't so evil to deserve punishment in Tartarus, will sit around a lake until they are purified and can be reborn into new bodies<sup>40</sup>.

CASH: This sounds a lot like Hell and Purgatory.

BETSY: True, though in Catholic theology Purgatory is said to be more like punishment than sitting around a lake biding your time<sup>41</sup>. It's more similar to what happens to the curable evil than the generally good. Purgatory has been described as being purged by fire, thus the name: a suitably extreme punishment for the minor infractions of venal sins<sup>42</sup>.

DAVID: Plato also divides the good into two groups. The good who are without philosophy go to live on the "true Earth", which, one might wish to equate to the Isles of the Blessed. The philosophers, on the other hand, Plato claims the highest spot for them, some formless ethereal realm where their souls can contemplate the Forms for eternity<sup>43</sup>.

CASH: Like Heaven?

BETSY: Yeah. In Catholic theology, we are told that simply "knowing God" will be enough to make us eternally happy<sup>44</sup>, and I think they mean it in the way that Plato did here, since he considered the Forms to be "true" reality in some sense, and you get the sense that a merely immaterial existence doing thought problems on the Forms is what he would find to be true Heaven. The terminology used in Catholic doctrine is often similar, in that you are contemplating God for eternity. What Catholic theology lacks, of course, is a second chance for

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<sup>39</sup> Stillwell, pg. 35

<sup>40</sup> Plato, 113e

<sup>41</sup> Pohle, pg. 83

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Plato, 114c

<sup>44</sup> Pohle, pg. 29

all one's beloved relatives who didn't make it that far in their "first" life. Grandma often complains about her children's and grandchildren's lack of religion by wondering how can she be happy in Heaven if she knows that we are burning in Hell? The guilt-trip would work better if I believed in either.

CASH: Catholics do believe in resurrection. Do you think they were influenced by Plato's philosophy?

DAVID: Well, yes, but perhaps not so much as you think, since resurrection isn't really the same as metempsychosis<sup>45</sup>. Many early Church fathers were familiar with Neo-Platonism, and deliberately strove to reconcile the two, Augustine, for instance, so that it had a lasting impact on the Church, until Greek philosophy was rediscovered in the late Middle Ages<sup>46</sup>. What Catholic resurrection lacks that Plato's conception of the afterlife has is that quality of a second chance. You get one turn on this Earth and everything is decided by that, which is why Catholics have such a hard time with reconciling unbaptized infants to their philosophy<sup>47</sup>. In Plato's scheme they would simply be passed on to another body, and no condemnation can take place because there is no notion of original sin that invites condemnation of the innocent.

BETSY: One of the new features of this myth is also that none of the traditional gods are even mentioned. The process of who is punished or rewarded seems to be almost automatic, with no opportunity for error, which was a serious flaw in Plato's previous myth of the afterlife<sup>48</sup>.

Indeed, he even says that the judges were set up and souls judged while naked because errors had

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<sup>45</sup> Spade, pg. 4

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. pg. 7

<sup>47</sup> Kvanvig, pg. 5

<sup>48</sup> Stillwell, pg. 37

been committed in the past<sup>49</sup>.

DAVID: This myth also contains several features that are familiar to Eastern religions, Buddhism in particular. While it lacks the specific claim that life is suffering<sup>50</sup>, it does seem to say that being reborn is a kind of punishment for failing to live a good enough life, and those who live the best lives are rewarded with eternal disembodiment<sup>51</sup>, even if not loss of self. Plato's preference for a life of total contemplation seems to suggest that he would agree with the assessment of the Buddha that life is suffering. Plato, through the mouth of Socrates, often advocates a life of temperance and moderation as a way of avoiding inflaming the senses, giving in to the body, and distracting the mind from contemplation of the Forms or higher level reasoning<sup>52</sup>.

BETSY: This is an interesting contradiction between this myth and with the one in the *Republic*, wherein the next eschatological myth occurs; it's striking. In the *Republic*, we have the myth of the cave—Do you know the myth of the cave?

CASH: Where people are chained down so they only can see shadows on the walls? They think this is reality until one of them gets up and leaves?<sup>53</sup>

BETSY: Yeah, that's the one. The myth of the cave encourages philosophers who have escaped the cave to return to the world of shadows in the cave and give up their lives of contemplation of the Forms only in order to spread good to others, to free them from their prisons<sup>54</sup>. But in the myth of the *Phaedo*, the philosophers escape the confines of the Earthly existence in order to

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<sup>49</sup> Plato, 523b-c

<sup>50</sup> Becker, pg. 2

<sup>51</sup> Stillwell, pg. 33-34

<sup>52</sup> Frede, pg.1

<sup>53</sup> Plato, 514-517

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 519c-520a

merely contemplate the Forms<sup>55</sup>, precisely the kind of ideal existence that Plato in the *Republic* asks philosophers to turn aside from, and which is impossible, really, in the way the afterlife is set up in the earlier dialogue.

But the *Republic*'s eschatological myth comes at the end of the dialogue, at the end of Book X, where Socrates recounts a story of man apparently killed in battle, but who revives on the pyre to tell of what he had seen in the underworld<sup>56</sup>. Several traditional Greek gods make appearances in this myth, but he is describing how the souls are reincarnated after a 1000 years, and how they choose their new bodies. The joys of Heaven as the rewards for living a good life, and the punishments of Hell are mentioned again, this time that each punishment or reward is tenfold the crime committed, or tenfold the reward earned<sup>57</sup>. This strikes me as unjust, particularly given that the dialogue just spent ten books talking about justice. The story describes how those who are about to be reincarnated choose their new lives. They are not chosen for them based on how well they've lived their lives as one might see in a Buddhist philosophy<sup>58</sup>, but rather each soul is given a selection to choose from, and the soul can choose well or poorly. (I am reminded of that scene in *Indiana Jones & The Last Crusade* where they have to choose the cup of Jesus, and after the first guy drinks from a rich, gold cup, the knight who's been guarding the cup says "You choose... poorly," before the bad guy disintegrates.) The myth describes how one soul that had spent time in Heaven foolishly chose a life of tyranny—<sup>59</sup>

CASH: He chose... poorly.

BETSY: --and how other great heroes were so wounded in their past lives that they allowed

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<sup>55</sup> Stillwell, pg. 33

<sup>56</sup> Plato, 614b-621b

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 615ab

<sup>58</sup> Becker, pg. 12

<sup>59</sup> Plato, 619bc

those feelings of betrayal to drive them to choose animal bodies to inhabit<sup>60</sup>, and how only Odysseus seems to have made a choice that Plato approves of.

CASH: What did he choose?

BETSY: The life of a simple, private man who is basically left alone by others to do his work<sup>61</sup>.

One of the interesting things here is that the philosopher is no longer exempted from the cycle of birth and rebirth<sup>62</sup>. Whether he merits a happy life in the next cycle or not will depend on how successfully he dispassionately considers the options and chooses well. There is a kind of direct causation between a past life and a future one, but there is no “destination” in the sense of moving up the chain of being if you live your life successfully or moving down it if you do poorly. The implication is that even if you are rewarded for a good life, if you learned no wisdom in that life to choose well in the next, you will essentially be punished for falling short of the ideal Plato wishes to advocate for<sup>63</sup>.

CASH: It seems like each one of these myths has a purpose. What is the last one about?

BETSY: In the *Phaedrus*, Plato tries to bring elements of all the myths together. He remarks on the evil souls being punished in Tartarus<sup>64</sup>. He includes the traditional Greek gods, although he disputes their nature<sup>65</sup>. He has a new proof for the immortality of souls<sup>66</sup>, but tries now to describe what it is like for those souls who merit rising up to the highest levels of the afterlife. He describes souls as being winged, like winged chariots, and when they are not well-formed or

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 620a-c

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 620cd

<sup>62</sup> Stillwell, pg. 43

<sup>63</sup> Plato, 619b

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 249ab

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 246e-247e

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 245c-e

burdened by concerns of their Earthly life, they can't fly high enough, long enough, to follow the train of the gods, and so fall to Earth to be reborn<sup>67</sup>. But those who are most like philosophers are able to follow the train of the gods the longest and glimpse the Forms, and remembering more of them when they, too, fall to the Earth to be reborn, become philosophers again in an attempt to see again what they had seen before<sup>68</sup>. The clear focus of this myth is on Heaven, and not on the lower realms as previous myths only mentioned but did not describe what Heaven was.

DAVID: He's clearly committed to several things at this point: 1) immortality of the soul; 2) reincarnation is universal (or nearly so); 3) punishment or reward for one's actions in each life; 4) philosopher's getting the choicest slice of Heaven in which contemplation of the Forms is the highest ideal.

CASH: Okay, so now that we've been through all the myths, what do you think these say about Plato's psychology?

BETSY: Well, for one thing, it's pretty clear that he's an elitist. This is confirmed in the *Republic*<sup>69</sup>, but nor is this any particular shock given what happened to Socrates. That kind of thing would turn me off on democracy as well. Hell, George W. Bush was more than enough to turn me off on democracy, and no one I knew died. Just the idea that you should choose a President because he seemed better to have a beer with?! Ugh! Yeah, well, don't get me started.

DAVID: Aside from that.

BETSY: His concern for justice in the afterlife is also probably directly connected to what

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 246a-248e

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 249a-251e

<sup>69</sup> Kraut, pg. 13

happened to Socrates. Socrates wasn't getting any justice in this life, and justice *is* important. That can create a strong desire to search for it elsewhere. And given that his arguments for the afterlife are among his weakest, his emotion is probably getting the better of his clear thinking, proving that Plato is human, and needs to take his own advice: the advice that he gives to souls in the myth of Er in the *Republic*, which is not to let your emotions dictate your choices<sup>70</sup>. Plato's philosophy is distinctly influenced by the state-sanctioned murder of his teacher.

CASH: You know all about that, don't you?

BETSY: (looking at him quizzically) Indiana? Well, that hardly compares to state-sanctioned murder, does it? But you're right in that I had a lot invested in that emotionally, for good reasons and bad, and it was a blow to be told I wasn't wanted after two years, for reasons that to this day don't make any sense to me. And that confusion and buried rage and helplessness do impact my choices. It is a battle I fight every day. Given that, I have to wonder how much Plato was aware of all the many ways those events might have influenced his thinking, because I wasn't aware of it either for a long time. But it is what it is.

(Everyone was startled by the door opening behind Cash when Ann arrived back from the funeral home.)

Hey, Gram.

ANN: Hi, Cash. Betsy. David. We missed you at the wake. Is anyone else back yet?

CASH: Nope, we've been guarding the door.

ANN: What have you kids been up to?

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<sup>70</sup> Plato, 619b

BETSY: (Smiling) Deciding the ultimate fate of the universe? We've been talking about the nature of the soul and the afterlife.

ANN: (dropping her coat on the bench under the window and sitting on the one beside David at the table) What have you decided?

CASH: May I? (when the others nodded, he gathered up some items for demonstration) What do all these things have in common, Gram?

ANN: (looking at the pile of things puzzledly) I don't know.

CASH: They are all instance of the number three. See? A picture of the trinity. A stack of three letters. Page three. The three of us. Taken together, the property they have in common is the concept of three-ness. We have a tendency to think of each of these things as "real" and the concept of the number three to be an abstraction and not exactly real, but a useful concept. Plato thought that the abstract properties were more "real" than any of us, and the soul's ability to think about these things was proof that the soul was immortal<sup>71</sup>.

ANN: Of course the soul is immortal.

BETSY: It's not really that obvious.

DAVID: Plato's argument falls a bit short. He's not very clear on how contemplating the Form makes the soul immortal or Form-like, if not a Form itself, which is what he wants to conclude.

ANN: You three need to read your Bible more. Jesus makes it quite plain that there is a soul and that if we follow his guidance we will be in heaven with him someday for all eternity.

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<sup>71</sup> Lorenz, pg. 9

BETSY: (looking at the others) I'd love to debate the Bible with you someday, Gram, but we were talking about Plato. You know, a lot of the way that the Church interprets the Bible depends on the way early Common Era philosophers reconciled the Bible with Plato<sup>72</sup>.

Understanding Plato is a good way to understand why the Church says the Bible says what it says.

ANN: (after a long pause) Would any of you like me to put on coffee?

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<sup>72</sup> Spade, pg. 3

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