THE CHOICE OF LIFE IN THE MYTH OF ER

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

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

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

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