

MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ESCHATOLOGICAL THINKING IN LATE ANTIQUITY *

Western intellectual advances are often viewed as footnotes on the margins of Plato, legal thinking included. Indeed, Plato invented the concept of personal eschatology and connected moral responsibility with the afterlife of the human soul. The idea had had a lasting influence and, through Christianity, found its way in the European legal thinking.

In his dialogues Plato addresses the question at least three times. In *Phaedo* (107d сл.), the *Res publica* (X 614a–616b) and the *Gorgias* (523a ff.). In the *Gorgias*' myth Plato is mostly concerned with the judges, in the *RP*' myth – with the souls that undergo their judgment, while in the *Phaedo*' myth – with the topography of the other world. Besides, in the *Phaedrus* 248 c ff. he introduces a mysterious law of Destiny (*Adrasteia*).

Since the picture that emerged from the dialogues was far from being clear, the interpreters had advanced, in the course of the centuries, a series of interpretations, often focused on the one side of Plato's thought at the expense of the others.

What I hope to do in this paper is to present a certain retrospective picture of Platonic thought, as reflected in the Late Neoplatonist Iamblichus (c. 240–325) who, in his lost treatise *De anima* and elsewhere criticized his predecessors and advanced a highly original view on the nature of the soul and linked it to the concept of the highest end of human responsibility.

The passages to be discussed:

1. Zeus' legal reform (*Gorgias*, Lamb's translation)

[523c] Then spoke Zeus: «Nay,» said he, «I will put a stop to these proceedings. The cases are now indeed judged ill and it is because they who are on trial are tried in their clothing, for they are tried alive. Now many,» said he, «who have wicked souls are clad in fair bodies and ancestry and wealth, and at their judgement appear many witnesses to testify that their lives have been just. Now, the judges are confounded not only by their evidence [523d] but at the same time by being clothed themselves while they sit in judgement, having their own soul muffled in the veil of eyes and ears and the whole body. Thus all these are a hindrance to them, their own habiliments no less than those of the judged. Well, first of all,» he said, «we must put a stop to their foreknowledge of their death; for this they at present foreknow. However, Prometheus has already been given the word [523e] to stop this in them. Next they must be stripped bare of all those things before they are tried; for they must stand their trial dead. Their judge also must be naked, dead, beholding with very soul the very soul of each immediately upon his death, bereft of all his kin and having left behind on earth all that fine array, to the end that the judgement may be just.

2. The Topography of the other world; Punishments and rewards (*Phaedo*, Fowler's translation)

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[113e] and for their good deeds they (souls) receive rewards, each according to his merits. But those who appear to be incurable, on account of the greatness of their wrongdoings, because they have committed many great deeds of sacrilege, or wicked and abominable murders, or any other such crimes, are cast by their fitting destiny into Tartarus, whence they never emerge. Those, however, who are curable, but are found to have committed great sins—who have, for example, in a moment of passion done some act of violence against father or mother and [114a] have lived in repentance the rest of their lives, or who have slain some other person under similar conditions—these must needs be thrown into Tartarus, and when they have been there a year the wave casts them out..., and if they prevail they come out and cease from their ills, but if not, they are borne away again to Tartarus and thence back into the rivers, and this goes on until they prevail upon those whom they have wronged... But those who are found to have excelled in holy living are freed from these regions within the earth and are released as from prisons; [114c] they mount upward into their pure abode and dwell upon the earth. And of these, all who have duly purified themselves by philosophy live henceforth altogether without bodies, and pass to still more beautiful abodes which it is not easy to describe, nor have we now time enough.

3. The Law of Destiny (*Phaedrus*, Fowler's translation)

[248c] And this is a law of Destiny, that the soul which follows after God and obtains a view of any of the truths is free from harm until the next period, and if it can always attain this, is always unharmed; but when, through inability to follow, it fails to see, and through some mischance is filled with forgetfulness and evil and grows heavy, and when it has grown heavy, loses its wings and falls to the earth, then it is the law that this soul [248d] shall never pass into any beast at its first birth, but the soul that has seen the most shall enter into the birth of a man who is to be a philosopher or a lover of beauty, or one of a musical or loving nature, and the second soul into that of a lawful king or a warlike ruler, and the third into that of a politician or a man of business or a financier, the fourth into that of a hardworking gymnast or one who will be concerned with the cure of the body, and the fifth [248e] will lead the life of a prophet or some one who conducts mystic rites; to the sixth, a poet or some other imitative

artist will be united, to the seventh, a craftsman or a husbandman, to the eighth, a sophist or a demagogue, to the ninth, a tyrant. Now in all these states, whoever lives justly obtains a better lot, and whoever lives unjustly, a worse. For each soul returns to the place whence it came in ten thousand years; for it does not [249a] regain its wings before that time has elapsed, except the soul of him who has been a guileless philosopher or a philosophical lover; these, when for three successive periods of a thousand years they have chosen such a life, after the third period of a thousand years become winged in the three thousandth year and go their way; but the rest, when they have finished their first life, receive judgment, and after the judgment some go to the places of correction under the earth and pay their penalty, while the others, [249b] made light and raised up into a heavenly place by justice, live in a manner worthy of the life they led in human form. But in the thousandth year both come to draw lots and choose their second life, each choosing whatever it wishes.

4. If the descent of the souls is a sort of punishment imposed on it, do all the souls undergo the law of destiny? Iamblichus (c. 240–325) in his lost treatise *De anima* and elsewhere in his works tries to solve this contradiction in the following way (fr. 29 Finamore–Dillon): I actually think that the purposes for which souls descend are different and that they thereby also cause differences in the manner of the descent. For the soul that descends for the salvation, purification, and perfection of this realm is immaculate in its descent. The soul, on the other hand, that directs itself about bodies for the exercise and correction of its own character is not entirely free of passions and was not sent away free in itself.

The soul that comes down here for punishment and judgment seems somehow to be dragged and forced. <Certain more recent philosophers> – especially Cronius, Numenius, Harpocration and their school – do not make these distinctions, but, lacking a criterion of differentiation, they conflate the embodiments of all souls into one single kind and maintain that all embodiments are evil.

5. Cf. also Iamblichus' *Letter to Macedonius*, On fate (fr. 4 Dillon)

And in so far as the soul contains within itself a pure, self-subsistent, self-motive, self-generative and perfective reason-principle, thus far it is emancipated from all outside influences; but on the other hand, insofar as it puts

forth other levels of life which incline towards generation and consort with the body, thus far it is involved in the order of the cosmos.

6. *De mysteriis* 8.6 (Clark – Hershbell – Dillon’s translation)

For as these writings (the *Hermetica*) tell us, the human being has two souls: 440 one derives from the primary intelligible, 441 partaking also of the power of the demiurge, while the other is contributed to us from the circuit of the heavenly bodies, and into this there slips 442 the soul that sees god. 443 This being the case,

the soul which descends to us from the (celestial) realms 444 accommodates itself to the circuits of those realms, but that which is present to us in an intelligible mode from the intelligible transcends the cycle of generation, and it is in virtue of it that we may attain to emancipation from fate and ascent to the intelligible gods.

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