

## THE CHOICE OF ODYSSEUS

### Justice and Suffering in Plato's Myth of Er

Abstract: The myth of Er highlights a tension between the freedom and responsibility of the souls, that choose their next embodied lives, and the aspects that influence their choices: external conditions, self-ignorance, and previous life experiences. The experience of suffering plays a crucial role: many souls are said to make a bad choice because they are unpractised in labours, while others make a good one because they experienced labours. However, I will argue that mere experience is not sufficient: only the reflection on the cause and meaning of suffering leads to choosing a truly good life. This is exemplified by the choice of Odysseus: it is grounded in the memory of his former suffering, and his reflection on it enables him to attain the self-knowledge necessary to make a good choice. He abandons the desire for honour that determined his previous life and chooses a life that will make the pursuit of justice possible. His choice shows that there is a solution to the tension described above. In addition, it can be read as an image of all the choices that men are faced with in this life, where the pursuit of justice is at stake.

Keywords: Plato, *Republic*, Er, Odysseus, suffering

#### 1. Introduction

The myth of Er, which concludes the *Republic*, has been analysed in every aspect: its sources, its cosmology, its relationship with the rest of the dialogue. As for its moral meaning, commentators generally agree that the myth stresses human freedom and responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Their views in this regard are clearly based on the description of how the souls in the hereafter choose their next lives. Lachesis' spokesperson tells them they are the masters of their own virtue; they are responsible for their own choices, therefore they are free; the gods are not to blame.<sup>2</sup> Virtue can be achieved only

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1) The most complete commentaries on the myth are Adam 1902, Untersteiner 1966, Halliwell 1988, and the interpretative essays in Vegetti 2007. Calabi 2007 offers a summary of the myth's sources. As for its cosmology, see also Brumbaugh 1954. On the frame-structure of the dialogue, see Voegelin 1957, 46–62, and Vegetti 1998; on its argumentative structure, see Johnson 1999 and Barney 2010.

2) Resp. 617e3–7: “A demon will not select you, but you will choose a demon ... Virtue is without a master (ἀρετὴ δὲ ἀδέσποτος), as he honors or dishonors

by making choices that lead towards it.<sup>3</sup> In addition, each soul's choices are rooted in their personal history: their decisions are not grounded on an impersonal capacity for ethical reasoning, but on an intertwining of cognitions, memories and desires. Past life experiences determine the souls' self-understanding.<sup>4</sup>

F. Gonzalez challenges this interpretation, highlighting that the myth describes how carelessness, luck, external conditions have an influence on men's choices and jeopardise their pursuit of virtue. The myth shows the fundamental opacity of human life, thematising all those aspects that do not fall under the control of the agent and therefore defy understanding.<sup>5</sup>

I will argue that there is a solution to the tension between freedom and responsibility, on the one hand, and all the aspects that influence one's life, even though they resist understanding, on the other. This solution can be found in the description of the choice of Odysseus. His choice is directed by the memory of his former suffering. It is therefore necessary to understand how reflection on his suffering made a good choice possible,<sup>6</sup> and there are two aspects of the myth in particular which can enlighten us on this point: the content of the life-pattern and the complexity of its choice (section 2), and the description of the choices of life (section 3). I will then turn to Odysseus' choice and the role suffering plays in

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her, each will have more or less of her. The blame belongs to him who chooses; god is blameless (αἰτία ἐλομένῳ· θεὸς ἀναίτιος)". Translated by Bloom 1968. I will always use this translation.

3) Cf. Friedländer 1964, I 198; Untersteiner 1966, 207; Jaeger 1944, I 643, followed by Mondolfo 1958, 489. See also Thayer 1988, Ogihara 2011, and McCoy 2012. Only Annas 1981, 349–353, proposes a deterministic interpretation, according to which the myth leaves no room for freedom in one's embodied life. She is sceptical about the possibility of "demythologizing" the myth and reading it as an allegory of the choices we make in this life. I will address this problem below.

4) De Luise 2007 stresses that self-knowledge is crucial to making a good choice.

5) Gonzalez 2012. McPherran 2010 and Larivée 2012 notice the relevance of luck and the externals of life to the meaning of the myth, but they do not stress this tension as much as Gonzalez does: he goes as far as claiming that "the *Republic* leaves us with an irresolvable tension between what the philosopher demands and the tragicomedy of human life depicted in the myth" (259).

6) This topic is only hinted at by Mondolfo 1958, Dorter 2006 and de Luise 2007. Reale 1999, 311–326, Napolitano <sup>2</sup>2013, 143–161, Napolitano 2015 deal with the problem of Odysseus' suffering. However, they agree in pointing out that further research on this topic is needed.

it (section 4). Finally, I will consider the overall meaning of the myth in the light of this choice.

## 2. *The content of the life-pattern and its choice*

The souls must choose the pattern – or paradigm – of life (βίων παραδείγματα, 618a2) to which they will be bound in their next incarnation. The life-pattern includes: species; sex; nobility or obscurity of origin; virtue of the ancestry; economic condition; reputation; physical features (beauty, strength, health); social status; having a life with a happy or unhappy end (only in the case of tyrannies); the intermediate states between health and sickness, wealth and poverty (618a–618b).<sup>7</sup> The pattern of life, despite being extremely detailed, does not include a crucial feature: the order (τάξις) of the soul,<sup>8</sup> because the soul becomes different according to the life it chooses (ἄλλον ἐλομένην βίον ἀλλοίαν γίνεσθαι, 618b4–5).<sup>9</sup> I take ψυχῆς τάξις to be the moral condition of the soul, that is, its justice or injustice.<sup>10</sup> The τάξις of the soul is therefore the order of its three parts: where the soul is well-ordered there is

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7) Ogihara 2011, 2, and Larivée 2012, 239–240. However, they include in the life-pattern the acquired conditions of the soul, that is, the habits acquired during one's embodied life (618d6). The following discussion will demonstrate that these conditions cannot be part of the life-pattern. If the acquired habits of the soul were included in the choice, the deterministic reading proposed by Annas 1981 would be correct, but both Ogihara and Larivée reject this position.

8) The word τάξις has been translated in different ways. I agree with Vretska 1958 (“bestimmte Ordnung der Seele”), Bloom 1968 (“ordering of the soul”), Ferrari and Griffith 2000 (“overall arrangement of the soul”), Leroux 2002 (“arrangement particulier de l'âme”), Vegetti 2007 (“ordine di valore”). I disagree with Chambry 1934 (“régulé pour le rang des âmes”), and Sartori 2001 (“gerarchia di anime”). These translations, indeed, do not fit in with the Greek text (in which there is the singular ψυχῆς, not the plural ψυχῶν). Moreover, it is not clear how a single paradigm could contain a hierarchy among different souls.

9) This is the only passage in the dialogue that refers to a τάξις of the soul that transforms the soul itself. The word τάξις in the rest of the dialogue refers to the disposition of the army (468a5, 471d4, 522d3, 522e3, 525b4), the ordering of the system of musical and physical education (424b6), of life in general (561d5), of reason and law (587a11), the disposition of the souls in front of Lachesis (617d3, 620d7).

10) Cf. Ogihara 2011, 2. Larivée 2012, 238, notes that “we do not choose a life which is, in itself, virtuous or vicious”.

a correct relationship between the parts, hence justice; conversely, where the soul lacks a correct order between the three parts, there is injustice. This interpretation is supported by a passage in book 9, where Socrates compares the order of the soul with that of the city: as in the tyrannical city the worst part rules over the best, so in the tyrannical soul there is disorder due to the appetitive desires ruling over the rational ones.<sup>11</sup> Hence, Socrates' cryptic statement, *ἄλλον ἐλομένην βίον ἀλλοίαν γίγνεσθαι*, means that each soul will become different, according to the life it chooses, because this choice will lead it to develop a different *τάξις*, and therefore to become more just or unjust. The justice or injustice of the soul are not inscribed in the life-pattern; nonetheless, they are influenced by the life conditions it contains.

The complexity of the features inscribed in the life-pattern and the multitude of the available patterns make the choice difficult and risky. The souls must care to note the difference between the good and the bad life and make the best choice possible: they must understand how the chosen life conditions will influence their capacity for becoming more just or unjust.<sup>12</sup> A complex combinatory calculation is required: the souls must take into account all the features of the paradigm and how they are related to each other, because different combinations produce different effects.<sup>13</sup> Given all the possible combinations and the complexity of the intertwining, the overall outcome is hard to foresee. The verbs used by Socrates highlight the complexity of the calculation: "making com-

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11) Resp. 577d1–5: "If, then, a man is like his city, isn't it also necessary that the same arrangement (*τάξις*) be in him and that his soul be filled with much slavery and illiberality, and that, further, those parts of it that are most decent be slaves while a small part, the most depraved and maddest, be master?"

12) Resp. 618b7–c4.

13) Resp. 618c4–e3: "He will take into account (*ἀναλογιζόμενον*) all the things we have just mentioned and how in combination and separately they affect the virtue of a life. Thus he may know the effects, bad and good, of beauty mixed with poverty or wealth and accompanied by this or that habit of the soul; and the effects of any particular mixture with one another of good and bad birth, private station and ruling office, strength and weakness, facility and difficulty in learning and all such things that are connected with a soul by nature or are acquired. From all this he will be able to draw a conclusion and choose – in looking off toward the nature of the soul (*πρὸς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς φύσιν ἀποβλέποντα*) – between the worse and the better life, calling worse the one that leads it toward becoming more unjust (*εἰς τὸ ἀδικωτέραν γίγνεσθαι*), and better the one that leads it to becoming juster (*εἰς τὸ δικαιωτέραν*)."

parative calculations” (ἀναλογίζομαι), “taking into consideration”, and “reaching a conclusion”, knowing how to choose the “middle way” (τὸν μέσον, 619a6), avoiding the extremes. While making this calculation, the chooser must always look to the nature of the soul (πρὸς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς φύσιν ἀποβλέποντα). The nature of the soul Socrates refers to here must be what is described in the previous books of the dialogue. The chooser must be aware that there are in the soul different motivational drives<sup>14</sup> (the three parts), and must therefore understand how these relate to each other to engender a correct equilibrium among them, and also how they are affected by the externals of life.

There is a complex intertwining of freedom and necessity, self-determination and hetero-determination. The souls are free and responsible for their own choices. On the other hand, the externals of life influence their capacity for pursuing justice or injustice. These, indeed, are the setting of the next embodied life in which the souls will actually live and make their choices.<sup>15</sup> The *Republic* provides two clarifying examples. Theages developed a sincere interest in philosophy because his physical ill-health prevented him from pursuing a political career.<sup>16</sup> Political life would have prevented him from philosophizing, but his life conditions lead him in a different direction. Conversely, in book 9 Socrates remarks that many people have tyrannical souls. Most of them live as private citizens and are not a danger to the community because the laws of the city hold in check their appetitive desires. Only a few achieve political power and become actual tyrants: their life conditions will enable them to give free rein to their appetitive desires.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. *The choices of life*

The wretched fate of the tyrant is exemplified by the soul that chooses first, rushing headlong into a tyrant’s life without examining all the available patterns. Blinded by the riches and power

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14) I borrow the expression “motivational drives” from Cross / Woozley 1964.

15) Cf. Inwood 2009, 45.

16) Resp. 496b–c.

17) Resp. 578b–c; cf. Larivée 2012, 242.

promised by such life, he does not realise that he is dooming himself to terrible misfortunes (619b7–c3). Although justice is not part of the pattern, the life conditions this soul chooses are so bad that they leave no room for living a just life.<sup>18</sup> Socrates remarkably adds that this soul had lived his previous life in a well-ordered city (ἐν τεταγμένη πολιτείᾳ, 619c7), participating in virtue by habit, without philosophy (ἔθει ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας, 619d1). His virtue was grounded on habit born of the laws of the city, not on inner reflection and self-knowledge: the good τάξις of his soul was merely the mirroring of the good τάξις of the city.<sup>19</sup> This soul is devoid of both solid inner criteria and the coercion of the laws to orientate his choice, so he chooses the worst life possible, without making the combinatory calculation. Then, Socrates points out:

and, it may be said, not the least number of those who were caught in such circumstances came from heaven, because they were unpracticed in labors (πόνων ἀγυμνάστους). But most of those who came from the earth, because they themselves had labored and had seen the labors of others, weren't in a rush to make their choices. On just this account, and due to the chance of the lot, there was an exchange of evils and goods (μεταβολὴν τῶν κακῶν καὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν) for most of the souls.<sup>20</sup>

Many souls lack sound criteria when choosing and do not carry out the combinatory calculation. Conversely, those who experienced punishment and suffering (πόννοι) under the earth choose more carefully and thoughtfully.<sup>21</sup> The pain they experienced themselves and they saw others suffer leads them to be more cautious. However, these souls are not better than the ones that make bad choices:

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18) Cf. Resp. 575a.

19) De Luise 2007, 354, comments: “l’assunzione di abitudini virtuose in un sistema politico ben ordinato non è una garanzia sufficiente per la predisposizione a compiere scelte etiche al di fuori di un tale contesto.”

20) Resp. 619d1–7.

21) Defining πόνος is difficult: it has to do with pain, labour, suffering, and the toil involved in accomplishing tasks or reaching aims (see, for instance, the Labours of Heracles, the πόννοι par excellence in Greek culture). De Luise 2007, 355–356, poses the problem, but leaves the question unanswered: “quale significato possiamo attribuire a questa parola, che include la fatica e il travaglio del combattimento, la difficoltà dell’acquisizione di una disciplina? . . . Forse la palestra platonica del dolore prevede livelli diversi di esercizio e la *gymnastike* richiesta ai giusti per diventare buoni deve misurarsi con un *ponos* più difficile”. Given the wide semantic range of this word, I will translate it with both “labour” and “suffering” in the following discussion.

they choose ἔθει ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας τοῦ.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, their choices are not grounded on the desire to pick up a good life pattern for its own sake, but on the desire to avoid suffering the same punishment again at the end of the next cycle of incarnation. Their calculation, grounded on the memory of the past and the expectations for the future, takes into account only the punishment suffered in the hereafter and the desire to avoid it at the end of their next life: in other words, they avoid making the same mistake.<sup>23</sup> Their choices are not grounded on the understanding of the reasons why they were punished in the hereafter (this would require reflection on the nature of the soul, its justice and injustice, that is, self-knowledge).<sup>24</sup> They learnt that being unjust is not advantageous and they act accordingly: their calculation is not aimed at the justice of the soul.

The meaning of the “exchange of evils and goods” (μεταβολὴν τῶν κακῶν καὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν) is now clearer. It does not mean only that the souls that were rewarded often make a bad choice, while those that were punished make a good one, but also that they all exchange good and evil because they do not have a correct perspective on what is truly good or bad. They might choose something bad, mistaking it for good, or something good, without being completely aware of why it is so.<sup>25</sup>

Socrates then goes on to describe the choices of eight famous people. They are grounded in the habits of their former lives (κατὰ συνήθειαν . . . τοῦ προτέρου βίου, 620a2–3).<sup>26</sup> Orpheus chooses the

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22) De Luise 2007, 355. Her interpretation constitutes a key advancement in the understanding of the role suffering plays in the myth. Previous interpreters (Stenzel 1928, 182; Mondolfo 1958, 491 n. 1; Untersteiner 1966, 230, 320) remarked only that the souls that experienced suffering make their choices more carefully.

23) Cf. also Dorter 2006, 343–344.

24) At the beginning of the myth the unjust souls are sent under the earth to suffer one thousand years of punishment. They wear the marks of the judgments made about them on their backs: they cannot see why they are punished. Schreckenberg 1964, 99–101, comments that the truth about us can be “behind us”: as it happens in life, we know the faults of the others, but we do not acknowledge our own ones.

25) On the mistakes of perspective made by men in judging what is good and bad, and on the possibility of learning a correct perspective on pain and pleasure, good and evil, see Napolitano <sup>2</sup>2013.

26) On these choices, see Moors 1988. The reader is not told whether these souls are punished or rewarded in the afterlife, and their afterlife experiences seem to have no influence on their choice. This seems inconsistent at first sight: punish-

life of a swan. Thamyras that of the nightingale. Ajax, remembering the shame of not winning Achilles' armour, reincarnates into a lion: a courageous warrior reincarnates into the animal that symbolises courage.<sup>27</sup> Agamemnon, out of hatred for humankind, chooses an eagle (a symbol of kingship). Atalanta, who cannot do without the prizes and glory awarded to athletes, reincarnates into a male athlete; Epeius into a woman skilled in the arts. Thersites chooses the life of a monkey, an animal subject to ridicule. Despite the painful experiences of their previous lives, these souls do not rid themselves of their former habits and make choices without reflection. They do not care about justice and injustice: as they suffered in their previous lives, so they try to avoid it for the future, demonstrating that they do not understand the value of their freedom of choice, thus nullifying it. They choose ἔθει ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας, ironically reproducing their former lives. The description of these choices highlights the relevance of labour and suffering to the meaning of the myth. Such experience orientates life-choices. Having no experience of labours can lead to a bad choice. However, the mere experience of suffering does not necessarily lead to a good one, that is, to a choice grounded on the understanding of the reasons why that pain was suffered.<sup>28</sup> How must suffering be experienced so that it can lead to making a good choice? The choice of Odysseus is the key to understanding this. He chooses his life gladly, remembering his former suffering. It is necessary to understand both which labours Socrates is referring to and how this experience can lead Odysseus to making a truly good choice.

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ments and rewards seem to be pointless. I think this detail hints at the possibility of interpreting the myth as a metaphor of the choices that are made in this life. I will deal with this problem below.

27) It can be said that Ajax incarnates the spirited part of the soul. Plato, indeed, uses the lion as a metaphor for this part of the soul at *Resp.* 588b. In the description of Ajax's choice there is a clear reference to the *Odyssey*: as in the myth of Er Ajax is the twentieth soul to choose, so in the *Odyssey* he is the twentieth soul Odysseus meets in Hades (*Od.* 11.469, 543 ff.). I will compare Odysseus' and Ajax's choices below.

28) Cf. Napolitano 2015. De Luise 2007, 350–351, remarks: “Un preciso rapporto . . . collega la scelta di ciascuno all'esperienza della vita precedente, ma non c'è alcuna meccanicità a determinare che la scelta avvenga per somiglianza o per contrapposizione: è solo il modo in cui l'anima ha vissuto interiormente quella esperienza a spingerla a scegliere in un senso o nell'altro, nel momento in cui è per lei possibile mutare le circostanze esterne in cui si muoverà”. De Luise, however, does not deal at length with Odysseus' choice: she refers to it briefly in a note (351 n. 73).

#### 4. *The choice of Odysseus*

The soul of Odysseus chooses last, and the description of his choice is detailed:

and by chance Odysseus' soul had drawn the last lot of all and went to choose; from memory of its former labors it had recovered from the love of honor (μνήμη δὲ τῶν προτέρων πόνων φιλοτιμίας λελωφηκυῖαν); it went around for a long time looking for the life of a private man who minds his own business (βίον ἀνδρὸς ιδιώτου ἀπράγμονος); and with effort it found one lying somewhere, neglected by the others. It said when it saw this life that it would have done the same even if it had drawn the first lot, and was delighted to choose it.<sup>29</sup>

In order to understand this choice it is worth taking a step back: this is not the only place in the *Republic* where Socrates reminds the reader of the hardships endured by Odysseus during his journeys and the toils he suffered to regain power at home. Indeed, in book 4 Socrates quotes a verse from book 20 of the *Odyssey*.<sup>30</sup> In this passage Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, is trying to sleep, lying on the ground in his own house. He is kept awake by the laughter of his servants, who are going to spend the night with the suitors. He is outraged by their behaviour, and he wants to kill them immediately. However, he restrains himself, so as not to reveal his identity and jeopardise his plans. So he yields to enduring this pain, telling himself: “endure, my heart”.<sup>31</sup> Socrates quotes verse 17: “he smote his breast, and rebuked his heart” (στῆθος δὲ πλήξας κραδίην ἠνίπαπε μύθῳ).<sup>32</sup> He interprets it thus:

29) Resp. 620c3–d2. It is worth noting that, as in the case of the other named life selections, afterlife punishments or rewards have no influence on Odysseus' choice.

30) Resp. 441b5. As far as I know, commentators have never exploited this passage in book 4 to make better sense of Odysseus' choice in the myth of Er.

31) Od. 20.18–20. The translations of the *Odyssey* are from Murray 1919.

32) This verse is quoted, along with verse 18, at 390d4 as an example of good poetry that portrays the κατεργία of a famous character. The same verses are quoted at Phaed. 94d8–e1. Here they are quoted to back the argument according to which the soul is different from the body and is capable of controlling bodily passions. Therefore, these verses are quoted in different contexts to support different arguments. It can be said that Plato does not aim at providing a philosophical exegesis of Homeric verses, but that he exploits them to impress the interlocutor with a vivid image that helps clarify the philosophical arguments. The problem of Plato's relationship with poetry is too complex to be treated here. Halliwell 2000 relates Plato's citations of the poets to the “cultural habit of drawing on poetic texts to lend

here, you see, Homer clearly presents that which has calculated about better and worse (τὸ ἀναλογισάμενον περὶ τοῦ βελτιονός τε καὶ χειρόνος) and rebukes that which is irrationally spirited (τῷ ἀλογίστως θυμουμένῳ) as though it were a different part.<sup>33</sup>

Socrates uses this verse of the *Odyssey* to offer the interlocutors a vivid image of the difference between reason and spirit, and how the latter can submit to the guidance of the former. Homer – in Socrates’ view – describes the clash between two parts, rational and spirited, driven by different motivations (the calculation of what is best to do and the desire to punish the servants for their behaviour), and the victory of the former over the latter. According to Socrates, Odysseus was able to preserve the correct τάξις of the soul, restraining the impulses of the spirited part, and following the rule of reason. However, the victory of reason does not eradicate the drive of the spirited part.<sup>34</sup> This victory is hard-fought and causes suffering nonetheless: the Greek reader would surely have been able to recall the rest of this passage of the *Odyssey*. Here Homer describes Odysseus’ inner struggle with a powerful metaphor: “as a bitch stands over her tender whelps growling ... so his heart growled within him in his wrath” (20.14–16). Socrates therefore chooses Odysseus as an example because he is the hero who experienced in himself the ἀταξία of the soul, the inner clash of the parts of the soul and the suffering caused by it. Odysseus was able with great effort to safeguard the correct order of the soul and to allow the impulsivity of the θυμοειδής be ruled by reason. He experienced not only the hardship of the wanderer, but also the inner suffering he had to endure when faced with difficult choices, in which he was able to preserve the correct τάξις of the soul and master the impulses of the inferior parts.

It is worth noting Socrates’ lexical choices in the passage quoted above: the rational part of the soul, opposed to τῷ ἀλογίστως θυμουμένῳ (a periphrasis for τὸ θυμοειδής), is not referred to here with the customary τὸ λογιστικόν. Instead, Socrates uses the sub-

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colour, wit and force to other forms of discourse” (97). He demonstrates that Plato quotes the poetic text not in order to interpret it on the grounds of the internal context (as the modern literary critic would do), but to extrapolate ethical implications that can be questioned by the philosophical λόγος.

33) Resp. 441b6–c2. Here Socrates is distinguishing the three parts of the soul, and quotes Homer to prove that λογιστικόν and θυμοειδής are different.

34) Cf. Od. 20.22–24.

stantivised participle of the verb ἀναλογίζομαι, τὸ ἀναλογισάμενον. As noted above, in the myth of Er this verb describes the kind of reflection necessary to make the choice. This reflection calls for a combinatory calculation that foresees, as far as possible, how the externals of life influence one's actions and decisions in such circumstances.<sup>35</sup> In both passages the verb denotes the capacity for weighing the external circumstances and the different motivational drives in the soul, and for making a choice that takes into account all these variables. Insofar as this calculation is difficult and risky, it is toilsome and painful. Indeed, the description of the choice of Odysseus in the myth highlights the suffering that comes with it: he wanders for a long time, examining many life patterns, and with great effort and difficulty he finds a suitable one, lying somewhere, almost hidden.<sup>36</sup>

During his wandering Odysseus makes the combinatory calculation recommended by Socrates, weighing the features of the life-patterns and examining how they influence the possibility of living a just or unjust life. This calculation takes into account the memory of past suffering and the expectations for the life to come. Unlike the other souls, Odysseus learns from his suffering and gives a new orientation to his life. Socrates indeed specifies that he abandons φιλοτιμία, the desire distinctive to the spirited part of the soul.<sup>37</sup> In book 4, Socrates had already shown that Odysseus, in his past experiences of suffering, had been able to restrain the impulses of the spirited part of the soul, the φιλοτιμία that would have led him to kill the servants immediately and jeopardise his plans. Odysseus in his previous life experienced the suffering caused by both the external circumstances and the inner struggle of the soul, when reason struggles to maintain the correct τάξις while other drives threaten to disrupt it. In the afterlife, Odysseus, remembering these former labours, understands how to give a new orienta-

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35) This verb can be found only in two other passages of the *Republic*: 524d9, where the discussion deals with mathematical science, and 330e5. Here Cephalus says that old people, who are approaching death, recall the tales concerning the punishment suffered by unjust people in the afterlife. Scared by these tales, they check whether they did any unjust actions in their lives. This is a retrospective analysis of one's actions aimed at foreseeing what consequences can be expected in the afterlife. I will come back to this relevant passage below.

36) Cf. Napolitano 2015, 454.

37) Cf. *Resp.* 581b.

tion to his soul: as recommended by Socrates, he looks to the nature of the soul and abandons the desire for honour that would jeopardise the good *τάξις* of the soul. The other souls, unlike Odysseus, are not able to reflect on the cause and meaning of their past experience of suffering. Odysseus, conversely, reflects on how his past experiences influenced and determined the *τάξις* of his soul, his choices and actions. He understands which is the correct *τάξις* and he abandons the desires of the spirited part that would jeopardise it. The peculiarity of Odysseus' choice can be highlighted by comparing it with the ones described in the previous paragraph.

The first soul, which chooses the life of a tyrant, does not care about justice or injustice. He has never experienced suffering, the disorder of the soul, because his good *τάξις* has always been safeguarded by the laws of the city. Unlike Odysseus, he has never experienced the suffering that would allow him to understand the difficulty of making good choices. Also, the souls that were punished in the hereafter do not choose a good life-pattern because they want to live a just life: their choice is not grounded on an inner reflection on the good order of the soul. Their behaviour is similar to that of Cephalus. As mentioned in note 35, Cephalus, being old, recalls what he did during his life in order to understand whether he will be punished or rewarded in the afterlife. His combinatory calculation does not aim at the justice of the soul. It is the kind of calculation proper to the merchant, who cares about leaving a good inheritance to his heirs and paying back his debts. For him, justice has nothing to do with the order of the soul.<sup>38</sup>

It cannot be denied that Orpheus, Thamyras, Ajax, Agamemnon experienced great suffering in their previous lives, but all of them are *πόνων ἀγύμναστοι*, because their experiences did not lead them to reflection. Ajax, for instance, embodies *φιλοτιμία*, and his desire for honour – and corresponding shame for not winning

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38) Campese 1998, 143, stresses that for Cephalus justice does not depend on the soul, and it is not a good in itself. Justice depends on external subjects (the laws, the gods, the other citizens). What scares him is not the risk of being unvirtuous, but the risk of being punished. I disagree with Reeve 2013, 37–52, who argues that both Cephalus and Odysseus are virtuous by acquaintance. Indeed, I am trying to show that while the former thinks that virtue depends on the externals of life, the latter understands that it depends on the order of the soul.

Achilles' armour – leads him to commit suicide. Yet still he chooses the life of a lion, the animal that symbolises φιλοτιμία, as it stands for the spirited part of the soul. His past experience of suffering does not lead to any betterment of the τάξις of his soul. As he was φιλότιμος in his previous life, so he chooses a life that is nothing but the ironic duplication of the previous one, as if the desire for honour did not depend on his choice. He chooses an animal life to avoid human suffering again, but he does not think about giving a new orientation and a better τάξις to his soul to achieve this aim. Odysseus, on the other hand, learns from his suffering and changes the τάξις of his soul as a result, abandoning φιλοτιμία. The reflection on and understanding of his past suffering leads him to re-orient his future life. He chooses the life of a private man (ιδιώτης) who does not care about the political affairs of the city (ἀπράγμονος). These life conditions will keep him away from the desire for honour that caused suffering in his previous life and that is proper to the political life. He does not choose a just life: this feature is not contained in the life-pattern. He chooses the life conditions that, as in Theages' case, make the pursuit of justice easier, keeping him away from the allures of a political life that would stir the desire for honour.<sup>39</sup> He makes the choice that will lead his soul towards becoming more just, because the chosen life-conditions will allow for the preservation of the good order of the soul.

### 5. *Justice as an ἐπιτήδευμα*

The description of the choice of Odysseus is peculiar, and helps shed light on the overall meaning of the myth. The choice in the afterlife can be read as an image of each and every choice made in this life. This interpretation is generally accepted by the more recent

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39) Baracchi 2002, 205–206, commenting on Odysseus' choice, notes that ἀδικία is defined at Resp. 444b as a στάσις caused by πολυπραγμοσύνη and ἀλλοτριπραγμοσύνη of the three parts of the soul. As for the choice of a private life (ιδιωτεία), she draws an analogy with Ap. 32a1–3: “someone who genuinely fights for the just (μαχούμενον ὑπὲρ τοῦ δικαίου), if he is to save his life even for a short time, necessarily has to be a private citizen (ιδιωτεύειν), not a public figure”; her translation. However, I disagree with her claim that Odysseus chooses a just life: indeed, in section 2 I argued that justice is not included in the life-pattern.

commentators of the myth,<sup>40</sup> and it is not inconsistent with a literal reading; on the contrary, there seems to be a complex intertwining between these layers of meaning.<sup>41</sup> The entire narration blurs the dichotomy between this world and the other world.<sup>42</sup> The souls behave as if they had a body: they talk to each other, share their experiences, undergo bodily punishment, and choose. It seems a description of what happens in this life.<sup>43</sup> In addition, there are two passages in the myth that highlight the relationship between the mythological hereafter and this world. In the first, the spokesperson of Lachesis addresses the souls, urging them to take care of their choices:

even for the man who comes forward last, if he chooses intelligently (σὺν νόῳ ἐλουμένῳ) and lives with integrity (συντόνως ζῶντι), a life to content him is laid up, not a bad one. Let the one who begins not be careless about his choice. Let not the one who is last be disheartened.<sup>44</sup>

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40) Cf. Thayer 1988, Gonzalez 2012, Napolitano 2015. However, the metaphorical interpretation had already been proposed by Stenzel 1928, 185–187; Friedländer 1964, I 197; Untersteiner 1966, 230. Only Annas 1981 is doubtful about such “demythologization” of the myth (see n. 3 above).

41) This blunt remark raises many questions concerning the debated problem of the interpretation of Plato’s myth. This problem is too complex to be treated here. As for the myth of Er, see Halliwell 2007, who devotes the first part of his essay to enucleating a hermeneutic frame. He admits that the myth “tests the limits of understanding . . . because its densely allusive texture yields a surplus of possible meanings that cannot be adequately encompassed by any single interpretation” (445). He concludes: “interpreting Platonic myths, then, is an exercise in tracing the relationships among shifting layers of meaning, both literal and non-literal” (456). I disagree with Thayer 1988, who argues that the literal meaning must be discarded and the immortality of the soul is nothing but a stylistic device.

42) Cf. Gonzalez 2012, 260. Ferrari 2009, 126, notes that the myth, despite being set in the hereafter, is deeply rooted in the problems of this life.

43) I agree with Halliwell 2007, 461–462, who notes that “Er’s account oscillates between talk of souls, *psuchai* (with corresponding feminine pronouns and gender-inflected participles / adjectives), and talk of persons (masculine grammatical forms, plus references to named individuals), switching between, and even merging, the two idioms without qualm”. He comments that this “reflects the way in which the myth juxtaposes, or rather superimposes, two models of the soul: that of a notionally disembodied set of capacities for ethical reasoning, desire and emotion and that of a self-conscious identity of a person, built around memory of, and continuity with, a personal history”. Halliwell thus acknowledges that the influence the personal history of the souls has on the choice is relevant to the understanding of the meaning of the myth. This topic is examined more closely by de Luise 2007. I exploited myself the ambiguity underlined by Halliwell, referring to the souls sometimes with neutral pronouns, sometimes with masculine ones.

44) Resp. 619b2–6. Bloom’s translation slightly modified.

The spokesperson comforts the souls: even the one who draws the last lot can choose a good life, provided that he meets two conditions. First, he must choose “with intelligence” (σὺν νῶ), that is, he must make the complex combinatory calculation recommended by Socrates. Second, he must “live with integrity” (συντόμως ζῶντι). The integrity referred to here must be the integrity that makes one’s choices consistent with reason, because reason alone can lead to good choices. Thus, the goodness of one’s life does not depend only on the choice in the afterlife, but on each and every choice made during this life: the agent must always look to the nature of the soul to make a choice that leads it towards becoming more just. The integrity of life is not part of the pattern, but must be achieved by making thoughtful choices aimed at justice in the soul. The critical instant of each and every choice in one’s life requires a constant effort of integrity to keep the correct τάξις of the soul.

The second passage comes a few lines below. Socrates recounts the choice of the tyrant, remarking that many souls make bad choices because they are “unpractised in labours”, and for this reason there is often an “exchange of evils and goods”. Then, he goes on:

however, if a man, when he comes to the life here, always philosophizes in a healthy way (ὑγιῶς φιλοσοφοῖ) and the lot for his choice does not fall out among the last, it’s likely (κινδυνεύει), on the basis of what is reported from there, that he will not only be happy here but also that he will journey from this world to the other and back again not by the underground, rough road but by the smooth one, through the heavens.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that philosophy must be practised in this life, and that this practice can bring happiness in it and rewards in the afterlife. This connection among the practice of philosophy, happiness in this life and afterlife rewards is stressed in the very last lines of the dialogue. Socrates asserts that the rewards of justice, both in this life and in the hereafter, can be enjoyed only by “practis[ing] justice with prudence in every way” (δικαιοσύνην μετὰ φρονήσεως παντὶ τρόπῳ ἐπιτηδεύσομεν, 621c5–6). The very last time justice – the main topic of the *Republic* – appears in the dialogue, it is described not as something that must be merely known, but as something that must be practised (ἐπιτηδεύειν).<sup>46</sup> Thus, the “healthy philosophy”

45) Resp. 619d7–e5.

46) These passages make me think that it is insufficient to define philosophy only as “knowledge of the ideas”, as Gonzalez 2012, 269, does.

that must be practised in this life is the capacity for comparing different life conditions, always aiming at justice, always making those choices that lead towards it, continuously giving shape to one's moral self.<sup>47</sup> Each and every choice in this life leads towards becoming more just or unjust, and virtue is acquired or lost in every moment of one's life: this is why each choice must be accompanied by reflection.<sup>48</sup> Without it, actions can have negative unforeseeable consequences, as the choice of the tyrant's life shows. The myth exhorts us to practise philosophy throughout our life: the agent is always responsible for his choices, and must always ask himself which one can lead him towards living a just life.<sup>49</sup> At the same time the myth warns the reader that many features of one's life do not fall under one's control. Such factors influence the pursuit of justice. The externals of life constrain and limit the development of a correct *τάξις* of the soul. The agent must be able to understand how they influence his life and to find a correct equilibrium – the one that makes justice possible – within these limitations.<sup>50</sup> Living justly requires constant effort and practice (*συντόμως ζῶντι*), because the *τάξις* of the soul is not given in the life-pattern, but constantly shaped by one's choices.

This is not enough to guarantee happiness in this life or the afterlife: the risk inherent in choosing is irremovable. Socrates warns that “here . . . is the whole risk for a human being” (618b7), and that even if philosophy is practised, spending one thousand years on the “smooth and heavenly road” is not guaranteed, but only likely (*κινδυνεύει*). Choosing is risky because there are so many variables and possible combinations that the overall outcome of their intertwinement is unforeseeable. The chooser must accept

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47) Cf. Mondolfo 1958, 492–493. Larivée 2012, 249–252, argues this position at length.

48) Cf. Goldschmidt 1949, 85: “Le future du mythe traduit notre condition présente; la vertu, cet ‘unique nécessaire’, ne s’acquiert ni ne se perde dans un ‘instant critique’, mais au cours d’une longue série d’efforts ou d’abandons; le jeu décisif ne se joue pas dans l’au-delà, mais à chaque instant du présent”. Each instant of our lives is a critical one (113).

49) The protreptic aims of the myth have been sufficiently highlighted in previous scholarship: cf. Larivée 2009 and 2012.

50) Halliwell 1988, 23, comments: “Plato is acknowledging, it would seem, that the quest for justice must always be pursued anew within the circumstances and limitations of an individual life. If knowledge and virtue are to be achieved, it must be a choice which is rooted and lived out within a particular existence.”

the risk and be aware that there is an opaque and unforeseeable element that cannot be fully understood.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, Gonzalez is right in arguing that the myth highlights the opacity of human life. However, the externals of life – those elements the agent has no control over – are not the only ones that resist full understanding. The analysis of the choices of life demonstrates that most souls lack self-knowledge: they are “opaque” to themselves.<sup>52</sup> However, the myth is not pessimistic: the choice of Odysseus shows that, in spite of everything, and through great effort, a good choice is always possible. Odysseus endured great suffering during his life, due both to adverse external circumstances and to the inner struggle of the soul. Reflecting on his past experience, he understands how the externals of life influenced the *τάξις* of the soul, and that there is always the danger of giving in to the desires of the lower parts of the soul. Thanks to this reflection, he is able to give a new orientation to his life. The *γυμνάσια* on his *πόνοσ* enables him to attain the self-knowledge the other souls lack and to understand how to make a good choice.

Odysseus’ choice exemplifies the choices that must be made during one’s life. The myth illustrates that men are always faced with difficult choices that will hinder or help the pursuit of justice. These choices are influenced by past experiences, which are often painful. However, mere experience is not a good criterion for choice: what matters is the reflection upon it that enables an understanding of how to orient one’s future life. Not only is this reflection grounded in past suffering, but it is itself suffered, because it has to face aspects of one’s life that resist full understanding and their unforeseeable consequences. The mere experience of suffering is not sufficient to become “practised in labours”. The distinctive mark of a truly good choice is the capacity for reflecting on the meaning of the suffering that was endured. This is difficult, because it has to deal with the opacity of the externals of life and, above all, of one’s own self. Odysseus shows that only this “practice in labours” can lead to making a truly good choice, that will lead the soul towards becoming more just.

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51) Gonzalez 2012, 276–277.

52) It seems to me that the lack of self-knowledge is not stressed enough by Gonzalez 2012 and Larivée 2012, who focus their attention on the externals of life. De Luise 2007, conversely, focuses on self-knowledge as a key to interpreting the myth.

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Verona

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