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R. K. Gaye

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION.

Οὐκ ᾔσθησαι, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ὅτι ἀθάνατος ἡμῶν ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ οὐδέποτε ἀπόλλυται ; Καὶ ὅς ἐμβλέψας μοι καὶ θαναμάσας εἶπε· Μὰ Δι' οὐκ ἔγωγε· σὺ δὲ τοῦτ' ἔχεις λέγειν ; Εἰ μὴ ἀδικῶ γ', ἔφην· οἶμαι δὲ καὶ σὺ· οὐδὲν γὰρ χαλεπὸν.

PLATO *Republic* 608 D.

To anyone reading the above passage the question naturally suggests itself: Why is Glaucon made to express surprise at the mention of a doctrine which must have been familiar by this time to all who sat at Plato's feet? The *Republic*, so far as I am aware, is by no one considered to be the earliest of those Dialogues in which a belief in the immortality of the soul is expressed or implied. Such a belief is hinted at in the *Apology*, perhaps the earliest of Plato's extant works; it appears with greater definiteness in the *Crito*; it forms the subject of a direct demonstration in the *Phaedrus*: and all these Dialogues are generally admitted to have been written before the *Republic*. To this question it is perhaps impossible to give a decisive answer. We must remember, however, that the *Republic* differs from all the preceding Dialogues in this, namely that in a truer sense than any of them it is a complete whole, an exhaustive statement of ethical, sociological, and educational opinions: and as such it sums up and co-ordinates all that is important in earlier works for the formulation of these

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opinions. In the *Republic* Plato lays before us a comprehensive system of Ethics constructed upon a plan peculiar to himself and differing from all previous or contemporary systems in that it professes to be founded upon a definite metaphysical basis.

In the elaboration of this ethical system the doctrine of the immortality of the soul plays an important part. From the beginning, however, it must be clearly understood that Plato does not in the slightest degree depend upon this doctrine for the formulation and justification of his system of Ethics. This is quite clear to anyone who follows the course of the discussion from the second to the ninth book of the *Republic*. It is in this part of the Dialogue that Plato works out in detail his educational system of Ethics, and here he expressly leaves out of account all considerations derived from the expectation of any future state of rewards and punishments. He consistently refuses to make self-interest of this sort the basis of the morality which he inculcates, holding as he does that 'justice' is not only more *profitable* but in its own essential nature *better* than 'injustice'; its superiority is natural and not dependent upon any ulterior considerations.

Nevertheless the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is a favourite one with Plato, and it is clear that for some reason it possesses in his eyes an importance of its own. We find him continually referring to it more or less distinctly throughout the Dialogues; in some of them it is one of the weightiest themes discussed; in one—the *Phaedo*—it is actually the weightiest. It would seem that when once the theory had begun to take shape in his mind it was never long absent from his thoughts, and he could not bring himself to leave the subject until

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he had made the doctrine thoroughly his own. From this point of view, then, it is not surprising that in the *Republic*, where he could not consistently with his own principles bring it to bear directly on the details of his ethical scheme, he should feel constrained to introduce it in the form of an appendix to the main body of the work.

In the *Republic*, as has been said above, all that Plato considers to be philosophically important in the preceding Dialogues is summed up and worked together so as to form a single harmonious system of Ethics. Whereas these Dialogues have dealt for the most part with one particular point, the *Republic* combines their results and forms a complete ethical treatise. An earnest student of the Academy, after a few preparatory dialectical and other exercises, could very soon be referred with advantage to the *Republic* without being made to study the earlier Dialogues first. This being the case, the surprise that Glaucon is made to express when the soul is declared to be immortal is perhaps not so hard to understand as would at first sight appear. It might very well be the first occasion on which the reader had been brought face to face with the doctrine in question, at any rate as a doctrine seriously entertained by Plato; and this expression of astonishment on Glaucon's part is very likely a means which Plato chooses to adopt in order to indicate not that the theory of immortality now to be brought forward is entirely new and distinct from what we find in earlier Dialogues such as the *Crito*, *Phaedrus*, and *Meno*, but that it is a theory essentially differing from such popular views of immortality as the student may have previously encountered. Moreover it is natural that Plato should draw attention to this distinction in

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the *Republic* rather than in any other of his writings because that Dialogue contains a complete exposition of doctrine so far as it was yet formulated in his mind.

It will be necessary to return later to a more detailed consideration of the *Republic* and its bearing on Plato's theory of immortality. Meanwhile it will be well in view of what has been said above, before proceeding to determine the precise nature of Plato's own theory, to sketch very shortly the form or forms of belief in the immortality of the soul which had hitherto been presented to the Greek intelligence, and afterwards to show from the Dialogues themselves how Plato differentiates his own theory from any such previous or contemporary belief.

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CHAPTER I.

PRE-PLATONIC VIEWS OF IMMORTALITY.

IN the earliest times of which we have any knowledge the Greek cherished an innate horror of the bare thought of death. Living as he did in a beautiful and smiling land, he took in the course of his daily life a child-like, if not indeed almost childish, delight in the enjoyment of the rarely failing sunshine, the shady groves, and the cool, sparkling fountains of his native Hellas. No life that he could imagine beyond the grave could be in any way worthy of comparison with that which he was accustomed to live and to see lived on earth; after death all was misery and gloom. Nowhere is this pessimistic attitude more prominently brought before us than in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, the so-called *Néκυια*. Elsewhere in Homer, but nowhere more emphatically than here, we are told that a man's 'soul' (*ψυχή*) is nothing more than a sort of wraith which informs the body during life and continues to a certain extent to resemble it outwardly after death, being hence called *εἶδωλον*, an 'image' or 'phantom.' This *εἶδωλον*, however, though it continues superficially to resemble the man, is not really the man's 'self' at all: for the word *αὐτός*, when it is used in speaking of a man after his death, means either the dead body or else the

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man as he was when he lived on earth. Only in one instance, that of Heracles, is the man himself said to 'dwell on high with the gods,' and the passage in which this statement occurs is now generally recognised as belonging to a much later period than the rest of the book. Nowhere 'below' is any joy to be found. Even Achilles, or rather his *εἶδωλον*, whose lot is ostensibly more cheerful than that of the others, refuses to be comforted :—

μη δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ·
 βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω,
 ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρω, ᾧ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἴη,
 ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.

(HOM. *Od.* XI 488—491.)

Thus the realm of Hades as Homer pictures it is nothing more than a world of shadows, so vague and shadowy in fact as hardly to imply a belief in immortality at all.

Nor can it be seriously maintained that anything more definite or more desirable than this dreary outlook was anticipated by the average Greek down to the time of Plato. He would doubtless be familiar with the *Νέκυια* and would have little or nothing to add to what his Homer taught him. Enough for him was the fact, only too plain for all to see, that after death the body did not live any more. Whatever the 'soul' might be, or to whatever place it might take its flight after being parted from the body, the cardinal fact remained that it *was* parted from the body, and while that was so it could not in any true sense be said to 'live' at all. The need of a body was felt to be imperative, as is clear from many passages in the poets. One instance will be sufficient here. In the *Choëphori*, when Orestes and Electra

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are invoking the shade of Agamemnon, Electra, knowing that an interview with him such as she desires cannot take place unless he has a body to appear in, prays to Persephone to give him one:—

ὦ Περσέφασσα, δὸς δ' ἔτ' εὐμορφον κράτος.
(AESCH. *Cho.* 490.)

And a remark of Orestes a little later (517—8),

θανόντι δ', οὐ φρονούντι, δειλαία χάρις
ἐπέμπετ',

shows that the description which Achilles gives of the state of a man after death is well remembered:—

ὦ πόποι, ἦ ῥά τις ἔστι καὶ εἰν Ἄϊδαο δόμοισι
ψυχῇ καὶ εἴδωλον, ἀτὰρ φρένες οὐκ ἔνι πάμπαν.
(HOM. *Il.* XXIII 103—4.)

With Pindar indeed the case is somewhat different. In him we find distinct allusions to the transmigration of souls and to an Elysium in Hades where the Blest live a happy life after death. Even Plato himself does not scruple to quote Pindar as an authority for the immortality of the soul:—

...Πίνδαρος καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ τῶν ποιητῶν, ὅσοι θεϊοὶ εἰσιν, ...φασὶ...τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου εἶναι ἀθάνατον, καὶ τότε μὲν τελευτᾶν, ὃ δὲ ἀποθνήσκειν καλοῦσι, τότε δὲ πάλιν γίγνεσθαι, ἀπόλλυσθαι δ' οὐδέποτε. (*Μενο* 81 B.)

But this is no evidence that the doctrine in question was at all widespread. On the contrary, in the passage just quoted Socrates introduces it as a doctrine belonging to a select class of people, certain *ιέρῃς* and *ιέρειαι*

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and such poets as are *θεῖοι*. It is clear that Plato is here thinking of the Mysteries, and it is under their influence that Pindar writes as he does about a future life in the fragments of the *Θρηνοὶ* and occasionally elsewhere. It was not a doctrine that appealed with much force to the ordinary man. Throughout the pre-Platonic era the body is of far greater importance to the average Greek than the soul. The body up to a certain point he could understand, the soul he could not; for the Greek mind was incapable of grasping a spiritual abstraction until we come to Anaxagoras; and even he speaks with no very certain voice.

With this Homeric belief, which so far as we can see formed with little or no variation the basis of the popular creed, Plato will have absolutely nothing to do. In the third book of the *Republic* he protests strongly against it and even denounces all allusion by poets to such a miserable outlook as is depicted in the Homeric poems as being thoroughly mischievous and likely to induce an enervating and demoralising fear of death. Whatever, then, may be his own view of immortality, we may rest assured that the existence of this shadowy tradition can have had—except possibly in a negative way—nothing whatever to do with its formation.

Far more important in this connexion, and at the same time quite distinct from the popular tradition, are the Mysteries mentioned above. Both the Eleusinian and the Orphic Mysteries seem to have recognised some sort of immortality, and, as we have seen, they influenced Pindar and probably others in this respect. But, whatever their influence, it must be remembered that these Mysteries were after all nothing more than religious cults; they were not in any sense systems of philosophy,

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for they could give no rational account of the doctrines they sought to inculcate, nor did they profess to establish any sort of philosophic basis for them. It seems that the rise of both the Eleusinian and the Orphic cults was to a large extent due to the natural and universal desire of mankind for continued existence, the desire to obtain at all costs a prolongation of life, if not in the world they know, at any rate in some other as good or better. But their adherents did not trouble themselves to think very profoundly what was the true nature of this 'soul,' about whose welfare they busied themselves so anxiously, or what was the real meaning of this 'immortality' for which they strove, how it was related to the whole order of things in the universe. The ordinary Greek who sought refuge in the Mysteries would be actuated principally by a desire to escape from the dismal prospect held out to him by the Homeric pictures of the underworld, to endeavour to secure for himself a better fortune after death than fell to the lot of even the greatest heroes of old time. The man who had been initiated into the Mysteries was considered by those 'who knew' to have a vastly more fortunate lot in store for him than the ordinary layman. The fond hope of the initiated was that, after faithfully devoting themselves to the service of Demeter or Iacchus or some other of the Chthonian divinities in this life, they would in one shape or another receive their favours after death in that underworld where these divinities had power to confer or withhold benefits at their will. The Orphic creed, however, seems to have gone further than the Eleusinian in that it recognised the doctrine of metempsychosis, which the testimony of Herodotus enables us to trace back to the crude religion of the barbarous peoples of

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Thrace, whence the Orphic Mysteries are supposed to have originally come.

These mystic cults were in reality little less vague, though doubtless in their higher form at least more ennobling, than the traditional popular religion of the age. Strictness and purity of life on the part of the initiated rather than any particular dogmatic creed would appear to have been their most important practical result. As regards their effect on Plato, it is obvious from several passages in his works, such as the one from the *Meno* quoted above, that he was well acquainted with the Mysteries, and it is probable that they may have served to keep before his mind such problems as the immortality of the soul; but it may be said at once that such influence as they possessed manifested itself rather in the form of his exposition, and perhaps in the asceticism of his life and precepts, than in the substance of his thought. What he cannot bring directly into line with his argument he often introduces under cover of a myth; and the fanciful imagery and general form of these myths we can easily believe to have been originally suggested to him by his acquaintance with the Orphic and Eleusinian Mysteries. But beyond this it is unlikely that he was seriously influenced by them. In fact in the tenth book of the *Laws* (905 D *sqq.*), where he is controverting the opinion of those persons who, while professing to believe in the existence of gods, imagine that they can be propitiated and turned from their deliberately determined course of action by means of judicious sacrifices and offerings, it seems most probable that he here has uppermost in his mind the debased and degenerate parody of religion to which in his time the Mysteries had in the hands of some people been de-