

Choosing to be a tyrant: what does it tell about your soul?

Text 1: Souls choose their future life

Εἰπόντος δὲ ταῦτα τὸν πρῶτον λαχόντα ἔφη εὐθὺς ἐπιόντα τὴν μεγίστην τυραννίδα ἐλέσθαι, καὶ ὑπὸ ἀφροσύνης τε καὶ λαίμαργίας οὐ πάντα ἰκανῶς ἀνασκεψάμενον ἐλέσθαι, ἀλλ' αὐτὸν λαθεῖν ἐνοῦσαν εἰμαρμένην παίδων αὐτοῦ βρώσεις καὶ ἄλλα κακά· ἐπειδὴ δὲ κατὰ σχολὴν σκέψασθαι, κόπτεσθαι τε καὶ ὀδύρεσθαι τὴν αἴρεσιν, οὐκ ἐμμένοντα τοῖς προρρηθεῖσιν ὑπὸ τοῦ προφήτου· οὐ γὰρ ἑαυτὸν αἰτιᾶσθαι τῶν κακῶν, ἀλλὰ τύχην τε καὶ δαίμονας καὶ πάντα μᾶλλον ἀνθ' ἑαυτοῦ. εἶναι δὲ αὐτὸν τῶν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἠκόντων, ἐν τεταγμένῃ πολιτείᾳ ἐν τῷ προτέρῳ βίῳ βεβιωκότα, ἔθει ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας ἀρετῆς μετεληφότα. ὡς δὲ καὶ εἰπεῖν, οὐκ ἐλάττους εἶναι ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις ἀλίσκομένους τοὺς ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἦκοντας, ἅτε πόνων ἀγυμνάστους· τῶν δ' ἐκ τῆς γῆς τοὺς πολλοὺς, ἅτε αὐτοὺς τε πεπονηκότας ἄλλους τε ἐωρακότας, οὐκ ἐξ ἐπιδρομῆς τὰς αἰρέσεις ποιεῖσθαι. (*Resp.* 619b7-d5)

After these words, Er said that the first in the lot came up at once and chose the greatest tyranny. And in the grip of folly and gluttony he chose without having considered everything adequately, but he failed to see that the destiny contained in the life meant that he would eat his own children and suffer other evils. When he examined the life at leisure, he began to beat his breast and lament his choice, ignoring the priest's earlier pronouncement: for it was not himself that he blamed for these evils, but fortune and the gods and everything *but* himself. He was one of those who had come from the sky after living his previous existence in a well-ordered state, and having had some share of goodness by habit but without philosophy. In general, there were just as many of those from the sky who were caught in such predicaments, because of their lack of training in hard toils; while the majority of those from the earth, because they had toiled themselves and had seen others doing so, did not make their choices impulsively. (transl. Halliwell 1988, italics are the translator's)

Text 2: Souls may cause harm when they do not realise that human affairs don't work like the heavens

ἐπεὶ καὶ τὸ τυραννίσιν ἐπιτρέχειν διὰ τὰ κράτη τῶν οὐρανίων ἐγγέγονεν ταῖς ἐξ οὐρανοῦ κατιούσαις· καὶ τοῦτο ἐκ συνηθείας τῆς περὶ τὰ οὐράνια, τὸ δὲ ὅλως εἰς ἄνθρωπον χωρεῖν ἐκ τῆς ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀφίξεως· μίξασαι οὖν ἀνθρωπίνην πολιτείαν καὶ δύνάμιν κρατητικὴν εἰς ὄρεξιν τῆς τυραννικῆς κατέστησαν ζωῆς, ἀφελοῦσαι μὲν τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης πολιτείας τὸ τεταγμένον, ὅπερ ἐποίησεν αὐτὰς τῆς ἐν οὐρανῷ λήξεως τυχεῖν, τῆς δὲ ἐν οὐρανῷ δυνάμεως ἀγνοήσασαι τὸ κατὰ νοῦν, διότι καὶ ἄνευ νοῦ πεποιήντο τὴν ἄνοδον· (*In Remp.* II.326.15-24 ; see also II.301.9-302.8)

Then, that [souls] run to tyrannies happens though there having been ruling powers in souls descended from the heavens; this comes through [these souls] being accustomed to heavenly things. But that all these souls go [down] to human existence, this comes from their having come to the heavens from human existence. So, having mixed the human State and the ruling power [of the heavens], they developed the desire for the tyrannical life. For they removed from the human State the fact of being ordered (that which had brought them to their stay in the heavens), and they were ignorant of the conformity of heavenly rule to intellect, because they had made their ascent [to the heavens] without intellect. (transl. O'Meara 2016)

Text 3: Socrates deemed Alcibiades worthy of love because of his ambitions

Ἔστι μὲν οὖν καὶ ταῦτα λέγειν περὶ τῶν ψυχῶν, ὡς ἀξιεράστους αὐτὰς ποιεῖ τὸ ἡγεμονικὸν τοῦτο καὶ τὸ μεγαλουργόν, καὶ διὰ ποίαν αἰτίαν. ἔστι δὲ αὐτὸ κάκεινον λέγειν οἶμαι τὸν λόγον, ὃν ἐν Πολιτείᾳ Σωκράτης παραδίδωσι περὶ τῶν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ κατιουσῶν ψυχῶν, ὅτι ἄρα πᾶσαι αἱ τοιαῦται ταῖς δυνάμεσι διαφερόντως ἐπιτρέχουσι καὶ τοὺς ἀρχικοὺς βίους καὶ ἡγεμονικοὺς ἐπιδιώκουσι. συμπεριπολήσασαι γὰρ τοῖς οὐρανίοις θεοῖς καὶ θεασάμεναι τὰς δυνάμεις αὐτῶν τὰς κρατητικὰς τῶν ὄλων καὶ τὰς βασιλείας τὰς δικηκούσας ἄνωθεν ἄχρι τῶν ἐσχάτων καὶ τὰς σειρὰς τὰς ἀνεχομένας ὑπ' αὐτῶν, ἐφίενται καὶ αὐταὶ τῆς ὁμοίας ζωῆς καὶ βούλονται πλείστων ἄρχειν καὶ ὑπερανέχειν τῶν ἄλλων ἀνθρώπων, ὡς ἐκεῖνοι τῆς γενέσεως, καὶ κυβερνᾶν τὰ τῶν ὄλων, ὡς ἐκεῖνοι τὰ καταδεέστερα πάντα· τούτου δὲ ὀρεγόμεναι ταῖς τυραννίσιν καὶ ταῖς δυνάμεσι καὶ

ταῖς τιμαῖς ἐπιτηδῶσι, καὶ αἱ μὲν αὐτῶν φιλότιμον, αἱ δὲ τυραννικὸν αἰροῦνται βίον. οἶδεν οὖν ὁ Σωκράτης ὅτι τὸ φίλαρχον τοῦτο καὶ φιλότιμον ἐκείναις προσήκει ταῖς ψυχαῖς ταῖς οὐρανίας συμπεριπολήσεώς ποτε τυχούσαις κάκειθεν εἰς τὸν περὶ γῆν τόπον ἀφικνουμέναις. διὸ καὶ ἐν τούτοις πρὸς τὸν νεανίσκον φησὶν ὅτι πάλαι ἂν ἀπήλλακτο τοῦ ἔρωτος, εἰ ἑώρα αὐτὸν τὰ παρόντα ἀγαπῶντα. σμικρᾶς γὰρ τοῦτο καὶ ἀγεννοῦς ἐστὶ φύσεως καὶ κάτωθεν ποθεν ἐκ τῶν ὑπὸ γῆν τόπων ἀφικνουμένης καὶ διὰ τοῦτο στεργούσης τὸ παρόν, πρὸς δὲ τὸ ὅλον καὶ ὑπερέχον οὐκ ἀναβλεπούσης οὐδὲ διὰ μεγαλοουργίαν ἀξιεράστου τυγχανούσης. (*In Alc.* 137.3-138.9)

So much one may observe in regard to souls, how this quality of leadership and enterprise makes them worthy of love, and for what sort of reason. I think one may mention too the well-known account which Socrates relates in the *Republic* about the souls descending from heaven *viz.* that all such especially run after power and hunt after the lives of rulers and leaders. For having accompanied the gods of heaven and be held their powers that rule over the universe and their kingdoms which range from on high to the lowest and the series upheld by them, they also desire a similar life and want to rule over the largest possible number: to excel the rest of men, as the gods do the world of process, and to govern the affairs of the universe, as the gods govern all that lies inferior to them; in their yearning for this, they jump at tyrannies, positions of power and honours, and some choose a life of ambition, others a life of one-man rule. Now Socrates knows that this love of authority and honour belongs to those souls which once shared the company of heaven and have come from there to the region about the earth. Therefore in this passage he says to the young man that "he would have long ago given up his love" if he saw him content with things present. For this is a sign of a small-minded and ignoble nature and of one that has arrived from the parts somewhere underneath the earth and for this reason is satisfied with the present, but does not look up to the universal or the pre-eminent nor through great achievement attain qualities worthy of love. (transl. O'Neill 1971)

Text 4: Some souls remember being in the company of the gods

ὁ μὲν οὖν μὴ νεοτελής ἢ διεφθαρμένος οὐκ ὀξέως ἐνθένδε ἐκεῖσε φέρεται πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ κάλλος, [...] ὁ δὲ ἀρτιτελής, ὁ τῶν τότε πολυθεάμων, ὅταν θεοειδὲς πρόσωπον ἴδῃ κάλλος εὖ μεμιμημένον ἢ τινα σώματος ἰδέαν, πρῶτον μὲν ἔφριξε καὶ τι τῶν τότε ὑπῆλθεν αὐτὸν δειμάτων, εἶτα προσορῶν ὡς θεὸν σέβεται, [...] καὶ οὕτω καθ' ἕκαστον θεόν, οὗ ἕκαστος ἦν χορευτής, ἐκείνον τιμῶν τε καὶ μιμούμενος εἰς τὸ δυνατόν ζῆ (*Phaedrus* ; 250e1-2; 251a1-5; 252c8-d2)

Now he whose vision of the mystery is long past, or whose purity has been sullied, cannot pass swiftly to see Beauty's self yonder [...] But when one who is fresh from the mystery, and saw much of the vision, beholds a godlike face or bodily form that truly expresses beauty, first there comes upon him a shuddering and a measure of that awe the vision inspired, and then reverence as at the sight of a god [...] And so does each lover live, after the manner of *the god in whose company he once was*, honouring him and copying him so far as may be. (transl. Hackforth 1972, my italics)

Text 5: High-minded souls choose high-standing lives

τὸ γὰρ τῶν παρόντων μὲν ὑπερφρονεῖν ὡς ἐσκιαγραφημένων καὶ οὐδενὸς ἀξίων, ἄλλο δὲ τι πρὸ τούτων ἐπιζητεῖν μέγα καὶ θαυμαστὸν καὶ ὑπερέχον τῶν πολλῶν τεκμήριόν ἐστιν ἐμφανὲς τῆς περὶ αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν ὠδίνος τῶν ψυχῶν. τοῦτο δὲ καὶ ὁ ἐν Πολιτεία Σωκράτης ἐνέφηνε, τῶν ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ κατιουσῶν ψυχῶν τὸ ἡγεμονικὸν καὶ ἀδρὸν καὶ μεγαλόφρον ἐν ταῖς αἰρέσεσι τῶν βίων ἴδιον εἰπών· ἔτι γὰρ ἀπήχημα φέρουσι τῆς ἐκεῖ ζωῆς καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ταῖς δυνάμεσιν ἐπιτρέχουσι καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων ὡς μικρῶν καὶ οὐδενὸς ἀξίων ὑπερορῶσιν. ἔστι δὲ τοῦτο τὸ πάθος, εὖ παιδαγωγηθέν, ἀρχὴ τῆς σωτηρίας τῶν ψυχῶν. (*In Alc.* 99.9-100.1)

To despise what lies at hand as illusory and worth nothing and to seek after something else superior to this, something great and wonderful and surpassing the common variety is a clear sign of the travail of souls in regard to beauty itself. This was indicated by the Socrates of the *Republic*, when he said that in the choices of lives the authoritative, lofty and high-minded was a characteristic of the souls descending from heaven; for they still bear an imprint of life there and for this reason run after power and despise all else as insignificant and worth nothing. This condition, when carefully trained, is the beginning of salvation for souls. (transl. O'Neill 1971)

Text 6: Critias the Tyrant is as such very capable, for he is used to rule the world with the gods

ἔπειτα ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ τυραννικὸν εὐφυΐας ἐστὶ τεκμήριον, ὡς οὖν Πολιτεία διδάσκει μῦθος τὰς ἐξ οὐρανοῦ κατιούσας ψυχὰς διαφερόντως ἐπὶ τὸν τυραννικὸν ἄγων βίον· εἰθισμένοι γὰρ ἐκεῖ συμπεριπολεῖν τοῖς θεοῖς καὶ συνδιοικεῖν τὸ πᾶν κἀνταῦθα ταῖς φαινομέναις ἐπιτρέχουσι δυνάμεσιν, ὡς οἱ τοῦ κάλλους τοῦ νοητοῦ μνήμην ἔχοντες τὸ φαινόμενον ἀσπάζονται κάλλος. (*In Tim.* I.70.29-71.6)

Next, note that the tyrannical element itself is also evidence of natural gifts, as the myth in the *Republic* teaches us when it shows those souls ‘who come down from the heaven’ specially drawn towards the tyrannical life. That’s because, after becoming used to ‘spinning about with the gods [up] there’, and managing the universe with them, they rush off to what appear to be roles of power here too – just as it is those who have a memory of the intelligible beauty who welcome the appearance of beauty. (transl. Tarrant 2007)

Text 7: The memory of heavenly life leads to the choice of tyranny

ὅλως γὰρ αὐτὸ τὸ τυραννικὸν ψυχῶν ἐστὶ μεγέθους ἀντιποιομένων καὶ ὕψους καὶ δυνάμεώς τινος· οὕτω καὶ ὁ ἐν Πολιτεία Σωκράτης τὰς ἐξ οὐρανοῦ κατιούσας ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ τυραννικὸν φησιν αἰρεῖσθαι βίον· ἄνω γὰρ οὔσαι συμπεριεπόλουν τὸ πᾶν, οὗ δὴ καὶ ἐν ταῖς αἰρέσεσιν φαντασίαν ἴσχουσαι τὰς δυνάμεις καὶ τὰς τυραννίδας ἀσμένως διώκουσιν. (*In Parm.* I, 693.14-21)

In general the tyrannical element is characteristic of souls that aim at greatness, or dignity, or power. So Socrates in the *Republic* describes the souls that return from heaven as choosing, for the most part, the life of a tyrant; for when they were up there they traversed the whole of things in their revolutions, and of this they retain a memory when in their choices they go after power and tyranny. (transl. Morrow&Dillon 1992)

Text 8: Aristotle the tyrant is the least capable of Parmenides' listeners

Οὕτω τοίνυν καὶ ὁ Παρμενίδης, ἅτε δυνατώτατος ὢν, καὶ τὸν ἐλαχίστην ἔχοντα τὴν ἐπιτηδειότητα τῶν συλλεγέντων ὠφέλησε· δηλοῖ δὲ τὴν ἀμυδρότητα τῆς ἐπιτηδειότητος τό τε νεώτατον αὐτὸν λέγεσθαι τῶν παρόντων, ὃ ἐστὶν ἀτελοῦς ἕξεως σύμβολον, καὶ τὸ προσκεῖσθαι τοῖς περὶ αὐτοῦ λόγοις ὅτι δὴ τῶν τριάκοντα γέγονεν ὕστερον εἶς, ὅθεν καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰκότως πρὸς τὰς ψυχὰς αὐτοῦ παραλαμβάνομεν ἀναλογίαν, αἱ καὶ ἐνθουσιῶσι ποτε καὶ ζῶσιν ὁμοῦ τοῖς ἀγγέλοις, ὥσπερ δὴ καὶ οὗτος ἅμα τῷ Πυθοδώρῳ πεποιήται τὴν εἴσοδον, ἀποπίπτουσι δὲ τῆς δυνάμεως ταύτης· (*In Parm.* 691.30-692.11)

So therefore Parmenides, being the most competent, helps even that member of the company who has the least aptitude. Plato indicates the weakness of his capacity by calling him the youngest of the group, which is a symbol of his undeveloped nature, and by adding to the words about him that he later became one of the Thirty. From this we draw the plausible analogy between him and souls who are at one time inspired and live with the angels (just as Aristotle here made his entrance with Pythodorus), but later lose the capacity to do so. (transl. Morrow&Dillon 1992)

Text 9: Even pure souls choose tyrannical lives by λαιμαργία and sophisticated/popular lives by ambition

ὅτι μὲν γὰρ τὴν ἄλογον ζωὴν ὁ Πλάτων καὶ μετὰ τὴν τοῦ ἐνύλου σώματος διατηρεῖν βούλεται φθοράν, δῆλον ἡμῖν ποιεῖ δι' ὧν καὶ κολαζομένην ἐν Ἄϊδου παραδίδωσι τὴν ψυχὴν διὰ τε θυμοῦς καὶ ἐπιθυμίας, οὐδὲν δεομένην κολάσεων, εἰ πάντων ἀφήρηται τῶν παθῶν (λόγος γὰρ ἂν ἦν καθαρός), καὶ πρὸ τοῦ σώματος ἐν ταῖς αἰρέσεσι τῶν βίων τυραννικοὺς βίους αἰρουμένην ὑπὸ λαιμαργίας καὶ σοφιστικοὺς καὶ δημοκοπικοὺς ὑπὸ φιλοδοξίας, καὶ ταῦτα τὴν πρῶτως ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ κατιούσαν καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν νεοτελεῖ ψυχὴν. (*In Tim.* III.235.13-22)

That Plato wants to preserve the non-rational life even after the destruction of the material body, he makes clear to us, through his accounts of the soul being punished in Hades on account of its bouts of anger and its desires, when it would need no punishment if he had been stripped [already] of all its passions (for it would be pure reason); and also, before [it receives] the body at the choice of lives, making it choose tyrannical lives out of 'sheer greed' (*laimargia*), or 'sophistic and demagogic' lives out of ambition, and all that when a soul is descending for the first time from heaven and 'newly initiated' (transl. Tarrant 2007)

Platonic doctrine: Souls which are virtuous but ignorant are rewarded by heavenly bliss, then choose tyranny. (T1)

Proclean interpretation: Such souls ruled the world with the gods, then wrongly assume they can rule human affairs in the same way, hence the choice of tyranny. (T2-6)

Consequence 1: Therefore, a soul craving for power is promising and close to the divine. (T5-7)

OR

Consequence 2: Therefore, a soul craving for power is incompetent and close to the base affects. (T8-9)

A possible solution:

Text 10: Honour-loving souls are fallen but φιλοτιμία is the second best condition

Ἐκ δὴ τρίτων λεγέσθω καὶ ὅτι μετὰ τὴν κατὰ τὸν λόγον πολιτείαν ἡ φιλότιμός ἐστι καὶ τιμοκρατικὴ προσεχῶς γὰρ αὕτη μετ' ἐκείνην ὑφίσταται καὶ ἢ τε ἔκβασις ἀπὸ ἀρίστης ζωῆς εἰς ταύτην πρώτην πρόεισιν, ὡσπερ φησὶν ὁ ἐν τῇ Πολιτείᾳ Σωκράτης, καὶ εἰς ἄνοδον ἀπὸ ταύτης ἐσχάτης καθαίρεται. διὸ καὶ ὁ Πλάτων ἐσχατον χιτῶνα τῶν ψυχῶν ἀπεκάλει τὴν φιλοτιμίαν. χρημάτων μὲν γὰρ ὑπεροψία καὶ ἡδονῆς καταφρόνησις πάρεστι καὶ ταῖς μετριωτέραις τῶν ψυχῶν, τιμῆς δὲ καὶ δόξης καὶ δυνάμεως πολλοὶ καὶ τῶν δεινῶν οἰομένων ὑπάρχειν ἠττήθησαν. ἀνιοῦσιν οὖν ἡμῖν καὶ ἀποδυομένοις τὰ πάθη καὶ τοὺς χιτῶνας οὓς κατιόντες προσειλήφαμεν, ἐσχατος χιτῶν ἐστὶν ἀποδυτέος ὁ τῆς φιλοτιμίας, ἵνα γυμνήτες, ὡς φησι τὸ λόγιον, γεγονότες ἑαυτοὺς τῷ θεῷ προσιδρύσωμεν, λόγος καθαρὸς καὶ εἰλικρινῆς γενόμενοι καὶ πάντα καταλιπόντες τὰ πάθη περὶ γῆν, ὅπουπερ ἐτάχθη, καὶ ταῖς θείαις ζωαῖς ἑαυτοὺς ἐξομοιώσαντες. εἰ τοίνυν ἡ πρώτη τῶν ψυχῶν κάθοδος ἡ φιλότιμός ἐστι ζωὴ, δῆλον ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν ἡ ἔφεσις αὕτη τῶν εἰς βάθος πεσόντων, ἀλλ' ἐν προθύροις τοῦ λόγου στρεφομένων. διὸ δὴ καὶ ὁ Σωκράτης ἀξιέραστον εἶναι τὸ τοιοῦτον ἦθος ὑπέειληφεν ὡς ὑπερανέχον τῆς γενέσεως καὶ τῷ λόγῳ συγγενέστερον· ἐγγυτέρω γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ θυμὸς ἡμῶν ἢ περὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία. διὰ ταύτας μὲν οὖν τὰς αἰτίας τὴν φίλαρχον καὶ φιλότιμον ζωὴν ὁ Σωκράτης ἀξίαν ἐρωτικῆς ὑπέλαβεν εἶναι κηδεμονίας. (*In Alc.* 138.7-139.10)

In the third place let it be observed that after the constitution which is in accord with reason comes the honour-regarding and timocratic form of government; for the latter arises immediately after the former and the departure from the best form of life proceeds to this kind first, as Socrates observes in the Republic, and on the way back is purified from this last of all. Therefore Plato called love of honour the "last garment of the soul." Disdain of wealth and contempt of pleasure are also qualities of the more moderate souls, but many even of those considered powerful characters succumb before honour, reputation and power. As, then, we ascend and cast off the emotions and the garments which we have acquired in our descent, the last garment to be cast off is that of ambition, that being made "naked," as the oracle says, we may establish ourselves near to god, after becoming pure and undefiled reason, leaving behind all the emotions in the region of earth, which is the place assigned to them, and assimilating ourselves completely to the divine life. Now if the first descent of souls is the life that loves honour, clearly this desire is not characteristic of those who have fallen to the depths, but of those who haunt the doorway of reason. Precisely on this account Socrates has considered such a character to be worthy of love, as being superior to the world of process and more akin to reason; for our spirited appetite is nearer to reason than our sense appetite. For these reasons, then, Socrates considered the life that is eager for rule and honour to be worthy of loving care. (transl. O'Neill 1971)