

## The Myth of Judgement from Plato's *Gorgias*

The first of three Monday evening sessions on the theme of "Myths of Life and the Afterlife" tonight we look at the myth of judgement which Plato presents us with in the last few pages of the *Gorgias*. The dialogue takes us through three linked conversations that Socrates has with Gorgias, Polus and Callicles: they pursue important questions concerning the shape and goals of life, and especially the principles that should direct us in the social and political life that humans as gregarious creatures live. As the dialogue progresses there is a sharp disagreement between Socrates and those he is arguing with: for them, the ideal seems to be the life of the tyrant, for him the life of justice. For them rhetoric and persuasive powers are primary, for Socrates such powers should be subservient to the wisdom which arises from true philosophy. The effects of living these different kinds of life according to Socrates are highlighted by his "myth of judgement" – but is this myth simply describing an after-death state, or does he also mean us to see it as a description of an inner state of our soul now? An important distinction made by Socrates is that between *pleasure* and *goodness*: if they are considered to be identical, his opponent's errors are sure to arise in our thinking. We might also note that the writers of the Platonic tradition distinguished philosophic from poetic myth: Plato worried that poetic myths told to the young and uneducated were liable to be taken literally, and would, in these circumstances, mislead their hearer; but philosophic myths were less likely to be harmful since, even taken literally, they would prompt the listener to a better way of life – nevertheless, these also contain symbolic truths hidden within their images, and are almost always presented to the reader towards the end of a dialogue, so that the reasons enshrined in the myth would have had their initial exploration accomplished in straight philosophic terms.

- 523a Socrates: Hear then, as they say, a very beautiful narration; which you indeed will, I think, consider as a fable; but I consider it as a relation of facts. For the particulars of the ensuing narration are true. As Homer says, then, Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades,<sup>1</sup> divided the government among themselves, after they had received it from their father. This law,<sup>2</sup> therefore, respecting men subsisted under Kronos, and always was, and now is,
- b established among the Gods, *viz.* that the man who has passed through life in a just and holy manner, when he dies, departing to the islands of the blessed, shall dwell in all felicity, removed from evil; but that he who has lived unjustly and impiously shall go to the prison of punishment and justice, which they call Tartarus.

But the judges of these, during the reign of Kronos, and even recently, Zeus possessing the government, were living judges of the living, judging on that very day on which any

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<sup>1</sup> In Greek myth these three Gods were the sons of Kronos: they divided the whole of existence into three kingdoms – Zeus become ruler of the sky and heavens; Hades became ruler of the underworld; Poseidon become ruler of the "middle kingdom" – the land and oceans upon which the constant coming and goings of our terrestrial lives take place. Hades (or Pluto) gives his name to his kingdom, so that the place Hades represents the whole experience of the afterlife – the isles of the Blessed and the pits of Tartarus – so that the common assumption that Hades is the Hell of the Christians (or the Jahannam of the Muslims) is incorrect.

<sup>2</sup> Neither *was* nor *will be* can be asserted of a divine nature: for *was* is past, and no longer is, and *will be* is imperfect, and is not yet. But nothing of this kind can be conceived of Divinity. As, therefore, Plato introduces this as a fable, on this account he uses the term *was*; since the fable is not poetic, but philosophic, he also introduces the word *always*. – Thomas Taylor.

one happened to die. In consequence of this they judged badly. On this account, therefore, Hades, and those to whom the care of the islands of the blessed was committed, went to Zeus, and informed him that men came to them who were unworthy, whether they were accusers or the accused. But Zeus said, I will prevent this in future. For now judgements are badly exercised; because those that are judged are judged clothed; for they are judged while living. Many, therefore, says he, whose souls are depraved are invested with beautiful bodies, are noble by birth, and rich; and when judgement of their conduct takes place, many witnesses appear in their behalf, testifying that they have lived justly. Hence the judges are astonished at these things, and are at the same time themselves clothed, while judging, as prior to their soul being concealed they have a veil before their eyes and ears, and the whole of their body. All these things, indeed, are placed before them, as well their own vestments as the vestments of those that are judged.

In the first place, therefore, says he, they must be deprived of the power of foreseeing death: for now they do foresee it. Hence, Prometheus<sup>3</sup> must be ordered to make this faculty in them cease: and afterwards they must be judged divested of all these things; for it is requisite that they should be judged when dead. It is likewise requisite that the judge should be naked and dead, speculating the soul itself, with the soul itself, every one dying suddenly, destitute of all his kindred, and leaving all that ornament on the earth, that the judgment may be just. I therefore having known these things before you, have made my sons judges; two indeed from Asia,<sup>4</sup> Minos and Rhadamantus; and one from Europe, Æacus. These then, after their death, shall judge in the meadow, in the highway, where two roads extend, the one to the islands of the blessed, and the other to Tartarus. And Rhadamanthus shall judge those from Asia, but Æacus those from Europe. But I will confer this additional dignity upon Minos, that he shall decide whatever may be inscrutable to the other judges, that the judgement respecting the path of men may be most just.

<sup>b</sup> These are the things, O Callicles, which I have heard, and believe to be true: and from this narration I infer that a thing of the following kind must take place. Death, as it appears to me, is nothing else than the dissolution of two things, *viz.* of the soul and the body from each other. But when they are mutually separated, each of them possesses its own habit, not much less than when the man was living; and the body conspicuously retaining its own nature, attire, and passions. So that, for instance, if the body of any one

<sup>3</sup> Prometheus is considered by the Platonic tradition to be the guardian of rational souls in their descent into the body and its world. The name Pro-metheus means literally before-thought or fore-thought.

<sup>4</sup> Olympiodorus suggests that the division between Asia and Europe should be taken as symbolic of the mixture of celestial and terrestrial natures within humankind (see his *Commentary on the Gorgias*, lecture 49, 2). Of course the ancient Greek-speaking world was divided into Europe (Greece, Macedonian, Southern Italy) and the Greek colonies in modern-day Turkey and around the shores of the Black sea – the "asian" world.

c while living was large by nature, or aliment, or from both, the body of such a one when dead will also be large; and if corpulent, it will be corpulent when dead; and so with respect to other things. And if any one while living was studious to obtain long hair, the hair also of the dead body of such a one will be long. Again, if any one while living had been whipped, and retained vestiges of the blows in his body scars from scourges, or other wounds, his dead body also is seen to preserve the same marks. And if the limbs of d any one were broken or distorted while he lived, these also will be conspicuous when he is dead. And, in short, whatever was the condition of the body of any one while living, such will be its condition entirely, or for the most part, for a certain time, when dead.

The same thing also, Callicles, appears to me to take place respecting the soul; *viz.* that all things are conspicuous in the soul, after it is divested of body, as well whatever it possesses from nature,<sup>5</sup> as those passions which the man acquired in his soul, from his various pursuits. When, therefore, they come to judge, those from Asia to e Rhadamanthus, Rhadamanthus stopping them contemplates the soul of each, not knowing to whom it belongs; but often seizing the soul of the great king, or of any other king or potentate, he beholds nothing sound in such a soul, but sees that it has been vehemently whipped, and that it is full of scars, through the perjuries and injustice impressed in it by its several actions; that all things in it are distorted through falsehood 525a and arrogance, and that nothing is right, in consequence of its having been educated without truth. He likewise sees that such a soul through power, luxury, and intemperate conduct, is full of inelegance and baseness. On seeing however a soul in this condition, he directly sends it into custody with disgrace; whither when arrived, it will suffer the punishment which it deserves.

b But it is proper that every one who is punished if he is rightly punished by another, should either become better, and derive advantage from his punishment, or become an example to others, that others perceiving his sufferings may be terrified and made better. But those are benefited and suffer punishment both from Gods and men, who have been guilty of curable offences: but at the same time the advantage which they derive both c here and in Hades, takes place through torments and grief: for they cannot by any other means be liberated from injustice. But those who have acted unjustly in the extreme, and have through such crimes become incurable, serve as examples to others. And these no longer derive any advantage, as being incurable: but others are benefited on perceiving these suffering through the whole of time the greatest, most bitter, and most horrid of punishments for their guilt, being indeed suspended in the prison of Hades as examples, d spectacles, and warnings to the unjust men that come thither. One of whom I say

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<sup>5</sup> Again the comment from Olympiodorus here is useful: we must not think that vice is natural to any soul, any more than a scar is natural to a body – but the life lived may allow vices to attach themselves to the soul. (*Commentary* 49, 6)

Archelaus will be (if Polus says true<sup>6</sup>), and every other tyrant who resembles him. I think too, that the greatest part of these examples will consist of tyrants, kings, and potentates, and such as have governed the affairs of cities. For these through their power commit the greatest and the most impious crimes. Homer also testifies the truth of these assertions. For he makes those to be kings and potentates, that are punished in Hades through the whole of time, *viz.* Tantalus, Sisyphus and Tityus; but he does not make<sup>e</sup> Thersites, or any other private unworthy individual, oppressed by the greatest punishments as if incurable: for I do not think he could be guilty of incurable offences; on which account, he was more happy than those who could.<sup>7</sup> But, Callicles, men extremely unworthy are among the number of the powerful: at the same time, nothing hinders but that good men also may subsist among these; and when this is the case they<sup>526a</sup> deserve the greatest admiration. For it is a difficult thing, Callicles, and deserves much praise, for a man who has great power of acting unjustly, to pass through life justly. Yet there are a few men of this kind; for they have existed both here and elsewhere, and I<sup>b</sup> think there will be hereafter worthy and good men, who will be endued with the virtue of administering justly things committed to their trust. A character of this kind, and of great celebrity among the other Greeks, was Aristides the son of Lysimachus. But the greater part, O most excellent man, of potentates are bad men.

As I said, therefore, after Rhadamanthus has taken any soul into his custody, he does not know any thing else respecting it, neither who it is, nor from whom it originated. But he only knows that it is a depraved soul; and seeing this, he sends it to Tartarus; signifying at the same time whether it appears to be curable or incurable. But the soul arriving thither<sup>c</sup> suffers the punishments due to its offences. Sometimes, too, Rhadamanthus beholding the soul of one who has passed through life with truth, whether it is the soul of a private man, or of any other - but I say, Callicles, especially of a philosopher, who has transacted his own affairs, and has not been engaged in a multiplicity of concerns in life - when this is the case, Rhadamanthus is filled with admiration, and dismisses the soul to the islands of the blessed. The same things also are done by Æacus. And each of them judges,<sup>d</sup> holding a rod<sup>8</sup> in his hand. But Minos, who is the inspector, is the only one that sits having a golden sceptre,<sup>9</sup> as the Odysseus of Homer says he saw him:

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<sup>6</sup> Archelaus had, earlier in the dialogue, been held up by Polus as an example of a tyrant who had exercised unchecked power during his life – for Polus, this power was something admirable and to be desired; he contrasted Archelaus power to execute any injustice without apparently being punished with Socrates who, he claimed, would not be able to defend himself in court if he were ever accused of a crime, even if he led a just and blameless life.

<sup>7</sup> Olympiorus suggests (in line with many in the Platonic tradition) that Plato does not mean that the most unjust souls are perpetually punished in Tartarus, but that for the soul there are great cycles of manifestation (made up of many incarnations) and that the worst of crimes are punished through one whole great cycle. (*Commentary* 50, 3)

<sup>8</sup> By the *rod*, says Olympiodorus, the straight, and the equality of justice, are signified.

<sup>9</sup> Again, says Olympiodorus, the *sceptre* signifies *equality*, but *golden the immaterial*. For gold alone does not rust, to which all other material natures are subject.

A golden sceptre in his hand he holds,  
And laws promulgates to the dead.

*Odyssey xi, ver. 756.*

I therefore, Callicles, am persuaded by these narrations, and consider how I may appear before my judge, with my soul in the most healthy condition. Wherefore, bidding farewell to the honours of the multitude, and looking to truth, I will endeavour to live in reality in the best manner I am able, and when I die to die so.

e I likewise call upon all other men, and you also I exhort to this life, and this contest, instead of that which you have adopted, and which I say is to be preferred to all the contests here. And I upbraid you because you will not be able to assist yourself, when that judicial process shall take place of which I have just been speaking. But when you  
527a shall come before that judge who is the son of Ægina, and he laying hold of shall examine you, you will there yawn, and be seized with a giddiness, no less than I am here. Someone too, perhaps, will strike you ignominiously on the face, and treat you in a manner disgraceful. These things, however, perhaps appear to you to be nothing more than the tales of an old woman, and you accordingly despise them. Nor would it be at all wonderful that these things should indeed be despised by us, if by investigation we could find anything better and more true.

But now you three, who are the wisest of all the Greeks existing at present, *viz.* you, Polus, and Gorgias, see it cannot be shown that it is requisite to live any other life than  
b this, which appears also to be advantageous hereafter. But among so many arguments, while others are confuted this alone remains unmoved, *viz.* that we ought to be more afraid of doing injury than of being injured; and that a man ought more than anything to endeavour not to appear to be good, but to be so in reality, both in private and public. Likewise, that if anyone is in any respect vicious, he should be punished; and that this is the next good to the being just, *viz.* to become just, and to suffer through chastisement  
c the punishment of guilt.<sup>10</sup> And further, that all adulation, both respecting a man's self and others, and respecting a few and a many, is to be avoided; and that rhetoric, and every other action, is always to be employed with a view to the just.

Being, therefore, persuaded by me, follow me to that place, whither when you arrive you will be happy, both when living and dead, as my discourse evinces. Suffer, too, anyone to despise you as stupid, and to load you with disgrace if he pleases. And, by Zeus, do you, being confident, permit him to strike this ignominious blow. For you will not suffer any

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<sup>10</sup> Earlier in the dialogue Socrates had made one of his famous counter-intuitive claims: that someone who had committed an injustice should prefer to be caught and punished rather than "get away with it" – this is because punishment, Socrates thought, should be entirely a matter of cure, not revenge. He compares the actions of a judge with those of a doctor – and just as the wise person will submit to a painful cure from a doctor, so he or she should submit to the proper administration of justice from a judge.

<sup>d</sup> thing dire, if you are in reality worthy and good, and cultivate virtue: and afterwards, when we have thus exercised ourselves in common, then, if it shall appear to be requisite, we will betake ourselves to political concerns, or deliberate on whatever we please, as we shall then be better qualified to deliberate than now. For it is shameful, in the condition we appear to be in at present, to boast of ourselves with juvenile audacity, as if we were something; we who are never unanimous about the same things, and things of the greatest consequence; at such a degree of unskilfulness have we arrived.

<sup>e</sup> Let us employ, therefore, as a leader, the reasoning which now presents itself to the view,- I mean, that which signifies to us that the best mode of life consists in cultivating justice and the other virtues. This, then, let us follow, and exhort others to the same, but not that, in which you confiding exhorted me: for it is, Callicles, of no worth.

*(Trans. Thomas Taylor, with minor amendments)*