To Live Forever or Die in the Attempt

And that must end us, that must be our cure:
To be no more. Sad cure! For who would lose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
Those thoughts that wander through eternity,
To perish, rather, swallowed up and lost
In the wide womb of uncreated night
Devoid of sense and motion?

– John Milton*, Paradise Lost, 2.145-151*

Ian Johnston

The earliest and most famous extant extended discussion of immortality in our traditions begins with a casual and innocent-sounding question "Is [death] anything but the separation of the soul and the body?" (Plato, *Phaedo*) and proceeds from there to a series of "proofs" (in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*) that once it leaves the body the human soul must be eternal. The conversational style in both dialogues may raise more philosophical questions than it answers (and is one of the best illustrations of how a Socratic dialogue all too often is little more than, in the words of Thomas Wolfe, "a monologue punctuated by worshipful interruptions"), but there is no doubt that, whatever the precise nature of the arguments, Plato sees the doctrine of the immortality of the soul as essential to a new understanding of the good life.

Socrates stresses throughout these discussions that the principal concern of human beings in this life should be nurturing our souls in the appropriate ways as a preparation for what happens after death and reiterates again and again what those appropriate ways involve: turning away from the traditional concerns of successful public life and striving to gain knowledge of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, in order to "make [the soul] a calm of passion and follow Reason, and dwell in her, beholding the true and divine (which is not a matter of opinion), and thence derive nourishment. Thus she seeks to live while she lives, and after death she hopes to go to her own kindred and to be freed from human ills."

This concerted effort to redefine human virtue is, among other things, taking direct aim at traditional notions of the good life and, above all, at Homer – whose *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had for generations exerted a decisive influence in stressing that virtue was a matter of demonstrating in competitive actions one's human excellence in this life. Since the world is ruled by unpredictable, powerful, and often malevolent gods, since nature, although intensely beautiful, is governed by ceaseless conflict, suffering, and death, and since life is short, old age pathetic, and the afterlife nothing more than bare existence as an impotent, gibbering shade, the best human beings are those who assert their value by seeking to excel in everything they consider worth doing – in fighting, athletic competition, speaking, munificence, courage, friendship, and so on – and who publicly demonstrate their heroic qualities, their nobility, if necessary at

the expense of their own physical comfort and even their lives.

The purpose of their existence, as Helen of Troy observes in the *Iliad*, is to create stories that future ages will sing about for years to come. A significant existence after death is not an option (other than for rare legendary exceptions, like Hercules), and the possibility never enters their decision making. Odysseus, when offered ageless immortality by the goddess Calypso, emphatically rejects the proposal in favour of human life with his mortal wife, Penelope, and the shade of Achilles vehemently asserts that the meanest human life is worth far more than anything available in an effete shadowy afterlife in Hades.

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This heroic conduct is not based on service to any shared communal morality, historical mission, or divine fiat, as in, for example, Exodus. It is a freely undertaken assertion of an individual's human excellence in confronting the hazards of life as actively and bravely as possible – even (or especially) when those hazards are irrational or unnecessary, for example, in almost suicidal athletic competitions, pointless armed conflicts, or gratuitous expeditions into the wilderness. The reward for such a commitment to self-assertive competition is fame, and the glue which holds the ethic together is honour among one's peers and, above all, a fear of public shame for failing to live up to the highest standards of those who regard themselves as the best – *hoi aristoi*, the embodiments of virtue. If you want a modern approximation to this way of thinking, consider the closest thing we have to Homeric heroes: elite team athletes.

Why Plato, born (circa 425 BCE) into an aristocratic family and (according to Diogenes Laertius) ambitious to contribute to the noblest of aristocratic literary genres, dramatic tragedy, should launch such a prolonged attack on this famous tradition is not altogether clear, but I suspect the overriding reason was that he saw clearly enough that the tradition had failed. The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) – a long, vicious, and ruinous conflict among the Greek city states – had demonstrated the failure of the ancestral virtues (as defined by the Homeric tradition), swallowed up in tidal waves of corruption, dishonour, ambition, savagery, betrayals, demagogy, and lies. The culminating event (for Plato) of this civil and moral disorder was probably the trial and execution of his friend Socrates in 399 BCE, a few years after the war ended. Recognizing the need for an intellectual and moral revolution, Plato set aside his ambitions to be a tragic dramatist and dedicated his life to laying the groundwork for such a project, just as a number of European thinkers did in the 17th century – Réné Descartes and Thomas Hobbes, for example – when they found themselves in an analogous situation after the Peace of Westphalia and the English Civil War.

In stressing the point that true virtue consists in tending to the health of one's soul rather than to one's reputation and demonstrable excellence in competitive public activities, Plato insists that we require a new language, one based on mathematics, especially geometry. This new way of thinking— philosophy—will open a pathway to the "the Good, the True, and the Beautiful." The human mind, properly nurtured with the language of "calculation," can, in individuals with the right nature and education, apprehend these lofty eternal ideals inaccessible to sense experience and, with this knowledge, will be best equipped to rule the state. Such a project does not need, nor does it welcome, the language of traditional poetry, which misrepresents reality and upsets the equilibrium of the soul and thus has no place in the Republic.

Such censorship, Socrates acknowledges, creates a problem: most people are not particularly interested in or capable of philosophical speculation and rely on stories to guide their understanding of the good life, to educate their children, and to fuel their most important public festivals. If they cannot have their traditional myths, what do they do? Plato's solution to this problem is well known: the rulers must invent suitable fictions (variously translated as "noble lies," "magnificent myths," "opportune falsehoods," and so on) in order to align the people's beliefs about the good life with the understanding of the rulers. The highest goal of life may well be an understanding of the Truth (with a capital T), but "The rulers of the ... city may, if anybody, fitly lie on account of enemies or citizens for the benefit of the state; no others may have anything to do with it..." The beneficial fictions sponsored by the philosophical rulers will slake the people's endless thirst for stories in a manner that will encourage the spirited part of their souls in the rationally appropriate direction.

As if to demonstrate what he means, Plato concludes his argument in the *Republic* (to the acute chagrin of many of his admirers) with one of his most far-fetched opportune falsehoods, the Myth of Er, a lengthy vision of what awaits those who have perished: a judgement of each individual followed by a rich reward or severe punishment on the basis of how he or she behaved while alive. The account also includes, among other things, a lottery, in which each dead soul chooses from all available human and animal lives his or her existence for the next life (not surprisingly, perhaps, this part of the vision takes a gratuitous swipe at some traditional heroes, all of whom disparage the lives they led on earth: Ajax chooses to be a lion, Agamemnon an eagle, and Odysseus a private man without cares or ambition). Plato is, of course, by no means the first to attach these notions of judgment, rewards, punishments, or metempsychosis to an afterlife, but he is the first to give them such an emphatic place in an important and enormously influential work of philosophy.

As a rhetorical weapon against Homer and the tragedians, these ideas can be effective, because most of the old heroic stories make little sense if one believes in a significant life (pleasant or painful) beyond death: if competitive self-assertion corrupts the soul and is an almost certain route to eternal pain after death, then anyone who accepts, say, Achilles, or Oedipus, or Odysseus as a role model or takes the Homeric stories seriously is a fool or a sinner or both. So perhaps it is not all that surprising that the rise of interest in the immortality of the soul among philosophers and priests was accompanied by a decline in the importance and quality of traditional literary forms (especially tragic drama).

The notion of spending a quiet life nurturing the soul and earning a blissful afterlife does, however, raise an intriguing question: How does one make that boilerplate narrative interesting enough to provide dramatic stories that might compete with or replace the amazingly rich storehouse of traditional Greek tales? Some early Christians, many of whom welcomed Platonic philosophy as "a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ" (Clement of Alexandria), recognized the problem Plato had identified – the dangers of traditional fictions, especially when one compares these to the much tamer fare on offer for the faithful. After all, tales of Christian piety and immortal bliss tend to be inherently dull, repetitive, and predictable. The lives of the saints or the adventures of the apostles are generally simplistic and turgid in comparison with what Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Ovid, for example, have to offer.

Christian writers sought various remedies – reinterpreting old stories to make them fit a procrustean Christian template (inspired, in part, by Genesis 40:8, "Do not interpretations belong to God?") or rewriting them completely, censoring schoolbooks, attacking religious shrines promoting faith in the tradition, and so on. Their continuing assault on the old tales prompted Julian, a pagan emperor striving to protect and promote Hellenistic culture, to issue an edict (c. 362 CE) arguing on moral and religious grounds that Christians should not be permitted to teach Greek literature (a move that was prob-

ably counter-productive, since it aligned him with the hard-line Christian leaders who insisted that Athens had nothing at all to do with Jerusalem).

Among the polemical early hard-line Christian fathers, Tertullian (c. 200 CE) deserves special mention for a number of reasons, not least of which was his enthusiastic embellishment of the old "noble lie" of an afterlife featuring savage punishment, an idea that appears to have given him almost delirious pleasure. The eternal persecution of the sinners, he cried, would on the Day of Judgment provide the blessed a spectacle so delightful that it would eclipse anything available on earth:

> How I will be lost in admiration! How I will laugh! How I will rejoice! How I will exult, as I see so many great kings ... groaning in the deepest darkness ... along with Jove himself! ... And then those wise philosophers who convinced their disciples that nothing was of any concern to God and who claimed either that there is no such thing as a soul or that our souls would not return to their original bodies are shamed before those very disciples as they burn in the conflagration with them! And the poets, too, shaking with fear... Then it will be easier to hear the tragic actors, because their voices will be more resonant in their own calamity. The comic actors will then be easy to recognize, for the fire will make them much more agile. Then the charioteer will be on show, all red in a wheel of fire, and the athletes will be visible, thrown, not in the gymnasium, but into the flames, unless I have no wish to look at them then, so that I can more readily cast an insatiable gaze on those who raged against our Lord..." (*de Spectaculis*).

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Such a theme makes Tertullian the patron of all those who for centuries seized upon the idea of horrific eternal punishment for sin as a way of terrorizing people, especially in popular sermons and pamphlets, into compliance with the teachings of the Church. Long before Pascal formulated his famous wager, almost anyone could think through the probabilities and conclude that if one wanted to be certain of avoiding such dire penalties, then in the long run it was obviously more prudent to believe than not to.

To counter the obvious problems of such sadistic relish in the monotheistic worship of an omnipotent god of love and goodness, as well as to add a much needed element of drama to their religious beliefs (of the sort pagan worship enjoyed), the Christian theologians perforce invented their own lord of the underworld, the Devil (aka Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles), and over the centuries developed a extraordinary mythology and iconography of evil and, in effect, turned popular Christianity into a ceaseless Manichean struggle. In the process, Hell became a much more imaginatively interesting place and the Devil an inspiring figure for artists, sculptors, dramatists, and poets. For example, Satan's stand-in, the stock character of Vice, holds an important place in the development of medieval drama (the figure is the immediate progenitor of one of Shakespeare's most memorable characters, Richard III), and in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* the intensely dramatic activities in Hell are sufficiently exciting to subvert everything else.

Nowadays, we do not seem to dwell on the dramatic details of the Devil as much as

we used to, although faith in his existence still flourishes in certain religious congregations (many evangelical pastors still eagerly cultivate the heady whiff of hellfire and brimstone, and Pope Francis is a true believer). For this diminution of interest in the Devil as the Prince of Darkness, I suppose we have to thank the more enlightened rationalism of our times, which enables us cheerfully to name sports teams after him. Still, faith in his domain apparently remains quite strong: according to a fairly recent (2014) poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 58 percent of all American adults still believe in Hell as "a place where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished." The percentage for the alternative is somewhat higher: 72 percent believe in Heaven as "a place where people go who have lived good lives and are eternally rewarded." The results for those who are affiliated with religious institutions are, as one would expect, significantly greater. It would seem from studies like this that sustained scientific assaults on the notion of an eternal afterlife, which are at least as old as Lucretius's thirty or so poetical proofs that the soul must be mortal (in *De Rerum Natura*, c. 50 BCE), have not enjoyed unalloyed success in cracking the foundations of Er's "magnificent myth."

Mind you, if certain scientists are right in their predictions, the next few decades may well see a revolution in our thinking about immortality, as genetic medicine attacks the effects of aging and probes the biological roots of mortality. There is already an institute promoting an appropriately ambitious agenda of papers, forums, and conferences (Imminst.org: Advocacy & Research for Unlimited Lifespans); Peter Thiel, founder of PayPal, has donated millions to SENS (Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence), a research foundation committed to "undoing ageing"; and Google is on board, investing 1.5 billion dollars in the biotech company Calico (devoted to "solving death"). Stay tuned.•

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