

Abstract for IPS 2010

A Literal Interpretation of the Myth of Er in the *Republic*

Satoshi Ogiwara

I propose a literal interpretation of *Rep.* 614b-621d.

The following consideration has motivated non-literal interpretation. Er's story presents the idea that our prenatal choice irrevocably predetermines certain aspects of the course of our life. This idea seems incompatible with what Plato should consider a fact, which is that during our lifetime we responsibly make certain choices as to how we live. Think of tyrants. According to the myth, they had already been predestined, by the time of birth, to become tyrants. But of at least some of them it should be true to say that they responsibly chose, after birth, to be tyrants. How could one be responsible for what is predetermined?

However, (1) the passage has nothing to prevent us from saying that in this life one can responsibly choose how one lives, in the sense that one can deliberate ('*sylogisamenon*', 618d5-6), sensibly or otherwise, as to how to live and act, and choose one's course of action and of life on the basis of that deliberation. Those choices are certainly made in *given* circumstances including the options for choice and the conditions of one's soul (let us disregard, for now, the issue of *how* those circumstances are given). But so is any choice, including the prenatal choice of life in Hades. For all choices we are held responsible in spite of the restricting circumstances. (2) What is predetermined is the broad outline of the course of life, which may be realized in a variety of ways (although the variety may be reduced by the fact that the conditions of life specified in the chosen sample affect other aspects of life such as one's moral character [618b3-4]). This predetermination on loosely specified courses is not outright incompatible with the contention that there is room for our free choice. (3) This contention will be relevantly fleshed out by assuming that our guardian spirits lead us to our destination by tactfully arranging our situations in response to the free choices that we have made so far (this concerns the above-mentioned issue of how the given circumstances are given).

Some more sketch of my interpretation. Our choice of life in Hades for next reincarnation reflects the dominant concern that we have acquired or developed in our previous life. In particular, some may philosophize and obtain the right belief as to how to choose the best course in each situation. It becomes their dominant concern to make the right choice based on this belief on each occasion, for the

moment in and for this life. But the same belief will enable them, after death, to choose the best life for next reincarnation. To bring this belief from here to there to use it for the choice of life, though, they must hold on to it 'adamantly' (619a1), lest a thousand years' joy may melt it away. Before reincarnation they are made to forget everything including that belief. In Hades they can only *maximize the likelihood* of recollecting the belief through philosophy after birth.

Affiliation: Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan

Address of contact:

Up to the end of March 2010:

Apartment 14, Clare Hall, Herschel Road, Cambridge, CB3 9AL UK

From the beginning of April 2010:

2-5-3-602, Omachi, Aoba-ku, Sendai, Miyagi 980-0804 JAPAN

(〒980-0804 宮城県仙台市青葉区大町2-5-3-602)

E-mail address: sogihara@sea.plala.or.jp

Fax: none

For a parallel (i.e. shorter) session