

Problems with Prayer : the subversive nature of Plato's Second Alcibiades.

1. Pl. *Euthyphro* 14c6:

οὐχὶ ἐπιστήμην τινὰ τοῦ θύειν τε καὶ εὐχεσθαι;

Prayer and sacrifice are regularly linked in the texts that I discuss here, including:

2. [Plutarch] *Consolatio ad Apollonium* 118f-119a (chapter 33):

Ξενοφῶντα δὲ τὸν Σωκρατικὸν θύοντά ποτε ... πυθόμενον ὅτι υἱὸς αὐτοῦ Γρύλλος ἀγωνιζόμενος ἐτελεύτησε, περιελόμενος τὸν στέφανον ἐξετάζειν τίνα τρόπον ἐτελεύτησε. τῶν δὲ ἀπαγγειλάντων ὅτι γενναίως ἀριστεύων ... μικρὸν παντέλως διασιωπήσαντα χρόνον καὶ τῷ λογισμῷ τὸ πάθος παρακατασχόντα, ἐπιτιθέμενον πάλιν τὸν στέφανον ἐπιτελεῖν τὴν θυσίαν, καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἀγγέλους εἶπεῖν ὅτι “θεοῖς ἠϋξάμην οὐκ ἀθάνατον οὐδὲ πολυχρόνιον γενέσθαι μοι τὸν υἱόν (τὸ γὰρ τοιοῦτον ἄδηλον εἰ συμφέρει), ἀγαθὸν δὲ καὶ φιλόπατριν, ὃ δὴ καὶ γέγονεν.”

[They say that] once while Xenophon the Socratic was sacrificing ..., after hearing that Gryllus his son had died in battle, removed his garland and inquired how he had died. When they announced that [he died] in the noblest valour ... after a very short period of silence and after holding his emotion in check by reason he replaced the garland and completed the sacrifice, telling the messengers “I prayed to the gods not that my son should be immortal or long-lived (for it is unclear whether such a thing is an advantage), but that he should be good and patriotic, which actually came about.”

Notes:

τὸν Σωκρατικὸν: since the list of bereaved persons who reacted properly is 1. Anaxagoras, 2. Pericles, 3. Xenophon, 4. Dion of Syracuse, 5. Antigonus II, it seems likely that some link with a Socratic line of philosophy is presumed.

μικρὸν παντέλως διασιωπήσαντα χρόνον: cf. on Anaxagoras' and Antigonus' reaction reaction to bereavement, the phrase μικρὸν ἐπίσχοντα (118d-e, 119c).

τῷ λογισμῷ τὸ πάθος παρακατασχόντα: exemplifies the *metriopatheia* that Crantor advised (104c), overlaid by a little of Arcesilaus' *epochê*. [NB: Crantor mentioned at: 102d, 104c, 114c, 115b, his *On Grief* being a major source; Arcesilaus who revised some of Crantor's work, mentioned at 110a. The Antigonus episode postdates Crantor's death.]

3. Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.3.2-3:

καὶ ἠϋχετο δὲ πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς ἀπλῶς τὰγαθὰ δίδοναι, ὡς τοὺς θεοὺς κάλλιστα εἰδότας ὅποια ἀγαθὰ ἐστὶ· τοὺς δ' εὐχομένους χρυσίον ἢ ἀργύριον ἢ τυραννίδα ἢ ἄλλο τι τῶν τοιούτων οὐδὲν διάφορον ἐνόμιζεν εὐχεσθαι ἢ εἰ κυβείαν ἢ μάχην ἢ ἄλλο τι εὐχοίντο τῶν φανερῶς ἀδήλων ὅπως ἀποβήσοιτο. (3) θυσίας δὲ θύων μικρὰς ἀπὸ μικρῶν οὐδὲν ἠγεῖτο μειοῦσθαι τῶν ἀπὸ πολλῶν καὶ μεγάλων πολλὰ καὶ μεγάλα θύοντων. οὔτε γὰρ τοῖς θεοῖς ἔφη καλῶς ἔχειν, εἰ ταῖς μεγάλαις θυσίαις μᾶλλον ἢ ταῖς μικραῖς ἔχαιρον·

And he prayed to the gods simply to grant what was good, on the grounds that the gods knew best what sort of things were good, while he thought those who prayed for gold, silver tyranny or something else of the kind were uttering a prayer no different from praying for a dice-game or battle or some other thing whose outcome was totally unclear. ... For he said that it didn't show the gods in a good light if they took more satisfaction in magnificent offerings than in humble ones.

The *Alcibiades II*:

4. 138a: SOC: Hi Alcibiades. Are you on your way to the god to offer a prayer?

5. 142a: [SOC:] Those of them [would-be generals] who appear to come off best have survived many dangerous and terrifying situations; and it was not only during their actual period of generalship, but, on returning to their own country, they continued being besieged by informers just as viciously as by enemies' armies, so that some of them would pray to have missed being appointed [εὔχεσθαι ἀστρατηγητοὺς εἶναι] rather than to have served as general. If the dangers and labors had been bringing some benefit, there would have been reason for it, but as things are it is quite to the contrary. ... In the same way you will discover much the same situation applying to children as well—that some people have prayed to have them this instant, and as a result of their birth they have got into the greatest personal disasters and discomfort. In some cases, when the children have been unremittingly nasty, people have spent their whole lives in distress; but others, when the children have turned out well <c> and suffered some catastrophe, so leaving them bereaved, have fallen into no less misfortune than the former group, and would have preferred them to be unborn than to have been born [βουλομένους ἂν ἀγένητα μᾶλλον εἶναι ἢ γενέσθαι]. ... The vast majority would turn down neither a tyranny, if offered, nor a generalship, nor many other things <d> that are more likely to bring harm than benefit by their presence—in fact they would actually pray to get them if they didn't happen to belong to one already. Then after a little hesitation [ἐπισχόντες] they sometimes change their tune [παλινφύδουσι], trying to pray away the things they had initially prayed for [ἀνευχόμενοι ἅττ' ἂν τὸ πρῶτον εὔξωνται]. ... <e> At any rate, Alcibiades, that poet might perhaps be wise—the one who, it seems to me, had been dealing with foolish friends, and on seeing them both striving and praying for what was less than good, composed a prayer for all of them collectively. He speaks in some such manner as this: <143a> “King Zeus,” he says, “give us good things both when we pray for them and when unprayed for [τὰ μὲν ἐσθλά, φησί, καὶ εὐχομένοις καὶ ἀνεύκτοις ἄμμι δίδου],” but he tells him to “ward off evils even when we pray for them.” It certainly seems to me that the poet is speaking well and safely.

6. 148a: [SOC.] So if the god to whom you happen to be going even now were to stand revealed to you, and asked before you had uttered any prayer whether one of those things of which we were first speaking would suffice for you, or whether he should actually entrust you with making a prayer, what do you think would have the timeliest outcome, accepting one of his offers or offering your own prayer?

ALC.: Goodness gracious, I'd have nothing to say to you, Socrates, straight out. It seems to me to be rather buffoonish, and really a matter for considerable caution so that a person does not inadvertently pray for bad things when thinking that they are good, then, “after a little hesitation,” as you too were saying, “change his tune, trying to pray away the things he had initially prayed for.”

SOC: Then was it not with some knowledge greater than ours that the poet whom I mentioned at the start of the discussion asked [Zeus] to “ward off evils even when we pray for them”?

ALCIBIADES: It seems so to me at least.

SOCRATES: Well then, Alcibiades, it is in emulation of this poet, <c> or else by a similar examination [of the issues], that the Spartans regularly employ a very similar prayer both in private and in public, once again asking the gods to bestow upon

themselves what is noble as well as what's good. Nobody could hear those people praying for any more than this.

7. ALCIBIADES: How could I, Socrates? Very well, I am going to crown you with this garland here, seeing that you seem to me to have given great advice. As for the gods I'll give them garlands and all the other customary honors just as soon as I see that the day we have spoken of has arrived. It will come without too much delay if they are willing.

SOCRATES: Well not only will I accept this, but I'd also be glad to see myself accepting another of the gifts that come from you. Think how Euripides depicted Kreon, on seeing Teiresias crowned with garlands and on hearing that he has received them as first fruits from [Athens'] enemy plunder in return for his skill, as declaring:

I take your crowns of glorious victory as a [victory] portent,
For we lie in the path of a storm, as you know yourself. [E. *Ph* 858–859]

8. 141c: SOC. SOCRATES: So do you see that it is not safe either to accept without a thought things that are offered <by others> or to pray for them oneself—certainly not if one <d> is going to be harmed because of them or to be deprived of one's life altogether.

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