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FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE MYTH OF ER

Libertad y responsabilidad en el mito de Er

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ABSTRACT

Plato uses the myth of Er in the *Republic* in order to carve out space for political freedom and responsibility for human freedom in the ordinary *polis*. While much of the *Republic* concentrates on the development of an ideal city in speech, that city is fundamentally a *mythos* presented in order for Socrates and his friends to learn something about political and individual virtue. The city in which Socrates and his friends exist is an imperfect city and myth of Er is intended for those audience members. Its emphasis on the necessity for personal responsibility in the midst of freedom can be understood as a political claim about the place of individual choice in a world that is constrained by both political and cosmic “necessity”.

Keywords: Plato, *Republic*, Freedom, Myth, Responsibility.

RESUMEN

Platón utiliza el mito de Er en la *República* con el fin de abrir un espacio para la libertad y la responsabilidad políticas en la polis común y corriente. Mientras que gran parte de la *República* se centra en el desarrollo de una ciudad ideal en el discurso, esa ciudad es fundamentalmente un *mythos* presentado para que Sócrates y sus amigos aprendan algo acerca de la virtud política e individual. La ciudad en la que viven Sócrates y sus amigos es una ciudad imperfecta y el mito de Er está dirigido a esos miembros del público. El énfasis que hace el mito en la necesidad de la responsabilidad personal en el ámbito de la libertad puede entenderse como una afirmación política acerca del lugar de la elección individual en un mundo constreñido tanto por la “necesidad” política como la cósmica.

Palabras clave: Platón, *República*, libertad, mito, responsabilidad.

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Book x of the *Republic* challenges its readers with its use of μῦθος. The poetic imagery of the myth of Er follows a critique of poetic images as inadequate, because they are too far removed from the truth. Socrates' criticisms seem to be especially pointed at Homer, and yet the myth of Er draws upon many images rooted in Homer. This final book of the *Republic* seems to place philosophy and poetry in opposition, yet the *Republic* as a whole is both a philosophic and a poetic work: the dialogue is a constructed story featuring an imagined conversation, and not the setting down of an historical event. Thus the purpose of the myth of Er at the dialogue's conclusion is a bit perplexing. Why might Plato turn to a myth of judgment of souls, so soon after criticizing the imperfections of poetry?

I would like to suggest that Plato uses myth at the conclusion of the *Republic* in order to carve out space for political freedom and responsibility for human freedom in the ordinary *polis*. While much of the *Republic* concentrates on the development of an ideal city in speech, that city is fundamentally a μῦθος, a story presented in order for Socrates and his friends to learn something about political and individual virtue. And yet the characters of the *Republic* live in a city with pressing and concrete political problems. The degeneration of the city laid out in books VIII and IX is not only a degeneration in abstraction. The city in which Socrates and his friends live is an imperfect city, struggling with revolution, faction, and imminent civil war. Their conversation is set dramatically in the midst of the burgeoning conflict between democrats and oligarchs. Many of them will suffer life and death consequences as a result of Athenian conflict. Plato's own audience would immediately have recognized Polemarchus as a victim of that civil strife, as the historical Polemarchus was brutally killed without trial when the Thirty Tyrants come to power. Socrates' own trial and death seems to have stemmed at least in part from his willingness to associate with ruthless oligarchs such as Critias and Charmides, as much as democrats. I suggest that Plato's myth of Er is intended as a reflection upon moral choice for those who reside in the ordinary and imperfect city, and not the ideal one. Its emphasis on a degree of personal freedom in the midst of disorder can be understood as a political claim about the place of individual choice in a world that is constrained by both political and cosmic "necessity".

My paper will proceed in two parts: First, I will summarize Socrates' criticisms of poetry and suggest that these criticisms might well apply back to the ideal *polis* of the *Republic*. Socrates quietly points out limits in their own previous discussion, in an effort to restore the "real city" of Athens to their horizon of inquiry. Second, I offer an interpretation of the myth of Er as a political myth that

grounds freedom within a cosmic and political framework that sets limits on human action. I conclude with a reflection upon Odysseus's choice in the myth and how his choice is reflective of a Socratic embodiment of autonomy and freedom within the constraints of cosmic and political necessity.

I

Socrates' criticisms of poetry in book x are primarily epistemological, but result in profound political implications. Poetry lacks "knowledge" of its subject matter. While the poet might be inspired, or might even accidentally say things that are true, even great poets such as Homer do not possess definite knowledge of what they describe. There is evidence for this claim, Socrates says. In order to demonstrate that the poet lacks knowledge of his subject matter, Socrates first sets up a description of the relationship between poetry and other imitative arts by drawing analogies between poetry and painting, and then drawing a disanalogy between poetry and the arts or τέχνη.

Socrates says that when it comes to the craft of a couch, there are three types of creation that are possible: the creation of the form or idea of the couch by a divine craftsman; the creation of a particular, actual couch in the world by a technical artisan, a couch maker; and the representation of the couch by a painter who paints a picture of the couch (597b-c; all translations from Bloom 1991). Socrates returns to the ontology that he had previously set out in the middle books, a division between forms and ordinary material things, but now additionally suggests that there are not only forms of moral or aesthetic goods (beauty, justice, and so on), but also forms of everyday objects.

While a craftsman is only one "remove" from the truth, that is, one remove from that which is and is unchanging –the form of the couch–the painter is two removes: he does not construct a physical, usable couch, but only a picture of one. The painter only imitates, but does not create. The painter does not imitate the truth, or the being of anything, but only imitates the look of something. For he lacks the knowledge of how to make the real object; if one were to ask a painter to make a couch, he will be unable to do so, *qua* painter, even if he is a master of imitation and can make a realistic looking painting. Thus, the painter's limit is not only epistemological, but also a creative limit. He cannot bring into being couches in the same way that a craftsmen does.

One naturally might object that the painter, of course, never intended to do so. A painter wishes to express something about his or her subject matter, and the manner of the construction of a "real" couch is incidental to that larger aesthetic meaning. Indeed, the *Republic* itself includes an image of a kind of couch: Cephalus is first

describes as seated on a “cushioned stool” in a courtyard in which a number of such stools are arranged in a circle (328c). No doubt Plato as author is not any more capable of constructing such seating than any other non-specialist, but his inclusion of seating in Socrates’ description lends information to us. For example, the cushioned stool implies that Cephalus is wealthy enough to afford such luxuries, not only for himself but also for his friends. We know that the participants in the conversation are seated in a circle in which all can see and hear one another equally. Plato’s own artistry depends upon a certain degree of imitation, not only of men and their λόγoi, but even of crafted objects.

Socrates does not offer a whole scale rejection of all poetry. Rather, he goes on to connect poetry’s tendency toward “removedness” from the truth to knowledge claims. While we know that there is no human being who is a master of all crafts, and of all knowledge associated with all crafts, some poets seem to make knowledge claims that range over many realms of expertise. Poets such as Homer attempt to imitate many things: warriors, kings, poor men, politicians, women, children, slaves, all sorts of people, and they the many sorts of activities that these different people might undertake. Moreover, these poets implicitly make *moral* claims about the thoughts, words, and actions of the characters whom they portray. They even represent the gods and attribute to the gods a variety of words and actions. The force with which they can convey their ideas may dazzle the audience who listens, for they bring an aesthetic power to their imitations. Instead of different colors of paint, the “colors” of the poet are rhythm, meter, and harmony, which make beautiful the things that he describes (601a). Socrates reminds his listeners, however, that they are no more –though perhaps also no less– capable of understanding the moral and theological realm than any other person. The strongest evidence of this is that a poet who really knew of all these things should be able to *act* in a way that demonstrates such knowledge, Socrates argues. But we have no evidence that Homer, Thales, or Anacharsis could govern a city, help to write its laws, win wars, educate, or even make shoes, although he can describe them being made (599c-600a). This imitator not only lacks knowledge, but even lacks right opinion, because he has no one who does know to guide him in his artistry. In this manner, Socrates dethrones the poet.

Socrates’ arguments perhaps culminate in his famous words that there is a great “quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (607b). One might be tempted to place the words of the philosopher in the realm of the one who knows truths according to their form, and does not imitate them, and so “solve” the problem of philosophy and poetry. On this reading, the poet merely imitates, while the philosopher

knows. However, this is an oversimplification, because of course, we also must note the imitative imagery that Socrates has used throughout this dialogue, both in narrating the dialogue's actions and in drawing comparisons between abstract ideas (such as the form of the good) and ordinary natural objects or artifacts (such as the sun, or proportionally divided lines).

Moreover, we might ask, why do philosophy and poetry "quarrel" at all? Is it a quarrel between a discipline that knows and one that does not –or more like a lover's quarrel, between two ways of seeking to know, where poetry and philosophy are in mutual attraction as much as mutual aversion to one another– as is intimated by Plato's own frequent references to poets, including tragic poets, throughout the dialogue? Another way of asking this question is to ask, for Plato, is there a distinctively philosophical language that can be entirely separated from poetry? Or is philosophical language itself at least sometimes also poetic and imitative, like the painter's imitation of the couch?

I would suggest that the philosophical language of the *Republic* is poetic, but that Plato seeks to develop a specifically philosophical form of poetry that sets itself apart from much of tragic poetry. Platonic imagery is set out in such a way that it encourages and even entices its audience into self-reflection and critical distance from our dearly held beliefs ideas in ways that tragic poetry might not. In the case of the *Republic*, such reflections on poetry ought also to lead the *Republic's* readers to question the limits (as well as to note the strengths) of the images of a city proposed in the dialogue. The various cities in speech, from the first simple city that Socrates proposes in book II, to a feverish city that eventually is purged, and onward to an ideal *polis* and its various degenerative relations in book VIII, are themselves poetic constructions.

In the *Republic* as a whole, Socrates' images are not distinct in the kind of language that they use: that is, they are not more or less metaphorical, more or less laden with sensory images, more or less precise, than tragic poetry's imagery. Compare Homer's description in the *Odyssey* of the sacrifice of a bull to a real sacrifice, and then Socrates' description of the sun as an image for the form of the good. Which image is clearer? Which gives us a better and more precise sense of the original that is being imitated? Arguably, the Homeric image is more accessible and precise.

However, Socrates' concern is neither with precision nor accessibility alone, but rather with the moral and political force of poetry. Socrates' concern with poetry is not whether poets describe a craft such as shoemaking in exact terms, so that a listener can then know the proper way to make shoes. Instead, he objects to Homer's being

revered as *the* educator of his time, as a moral and political *authority* who is not to be questioned or criticized. Socrates argues that tragic poetry chooses imagery that arouses the “lower” parts of our souls rather than the rational part. The tragic poet, by awakening the emotions and appetites in the soul also debilitates the upper part of the soul, weakening reason and calculation. Socrates’ images might also awaken the not only the rational part of the soul, but also the thumotic and perhaps even appetitive. However, such images do so in a way that intends to be in accordance with rational aims. For example, an interlocutor listening to the image of the cave might have his θυμός awakened and share in a desire to escape imprisonment, to desire intellectual freedom at an emotional level and not merely to agree to a judgment that such freedom would be good. However, his soul is united and not divided by such arousal of θυμός, which only enhances the energy that he might bring to seeking better to know with his reason.

Indeed, such philosophical poetry seems to be necessary in the case of highest goods such as the forms, for Socrates presents complete rational knowledge of the good as a regulative ideal rather than a current reality, at least in his own case. Socrates’ treatment of the philosophical mode is more of a stance rather than an accomplishment. In the middle, most overtly metaphysical sections of the *Republic*, Socrates emphasizes that he lacks knowledge and may be “blind” or “crooked” in what he can offer (506c-507a). Socrates insists that he has opinions about these things, but not knowledge. Still, he affirms the existence of the forms, even if his knowledge of them is incomplete. His stance is to seek the truth, to be oriented to a good outside himself, and to be willing to be transformed by the forms, and by his conversations with others (McCoy 2008). Socrates’ poetry is set apart from other kinds of poetry, insofar as his poetry explicitly promotes a philosophical stance. His poetic images point his audience not only towards the forms but also to a basic stance of *questioning* and *inquiry*. Socrates does not first work out philosophical content in some image free language, and then later, use images to communicate that knowledge. Rather, it seems that poetic images and Socratic questioning are both ways of engaging the friends with whom Socrates speaks, and pointing them beyond the image to the reality of the forms and also to the continued questions that can be asked about them.

Thus, Socrates suggests to Glaucon that we must either reject poetry, or make an apology (ἀπολογία) on its behalf so that we do not fall prey to its charms like foolish lovers (608a):

Just like the men who have once fallen in love with someone, and don’t believe the love is beneficial, keep away from it even if they have

to do violence to themselves; so we, too –due to the inborn love of such poetry we owe to our rearing in these fine regimes– we’ll be glad if it turns out that it is best and truest. But as long as it’s not able to make its apology [ἀπολογήσασθαι], when we listen to it, we’ll chant this argument we are making to ourselves as a countercharm, taking care against falling back again into this love, which is childish and belongs to the many. (607e-608a)

Yet Socrates does not shy away from using images in his philosophical discussions. The question naturally arises, then, as to what an ἀπολογία on behalf of philosophical poetry might look like. My suggestion here is that Socrates uses myth in a way that encourages critical reflection rather than discouraging it. Philosophical poetry as used by Socrates in the dialogue does not overcome the problems of tragic poetry by displaying omniscience of the whole, or image-free knowledge. Instead, I suggest that Socrates’ philosophical poetry incorporates its own limits within it. That is, Socrates uses philosophical imagery to point to realities that he admits to being somewhat perplexing. These images do not eliminate questions, but instead continue to deepen our questions further. Philosophical poetry attempts to awaken the best part of the soul rather than the worst, not by claiming that its author is fully wise or accomplished, but rather by orienting us to critical reflection and questioning of realities, such as the forms, whose reality is not exhausted by our inevitably incomplete accounts of them.

In some respects, the *Republic* itself serves as a limited kind of ἀπολογία for philosophical poetry. As Roochnik has observed, there are numerous places in the book of the *Republic* where the action of the *Republic* seems to include actions forbidden in the perfect city in speech. In the perfect city, there are to be no portrayals of unjust men, or any mention of unjust acts by the gods. Yet we hear of such unjust acts in Socrates’ discussion of poetry in books II and III. Thrasymachus is not only the image of an unjust man, but indeed offers a rather sophisticated defense of taking up a life of injustice. In the perfect city in speech, the practice of philosophy by those who have not yet gone through a rigorous program of mathematics is forbidden. Yet Glaucon, Adeimantus, and many other “untrained” friends are there, participating in an impromptu philosophical discussion in Cephalus’ home. The *Republic* is not an ideal city but rather a reflection upon the nature of an ideal city that takes places in the not-ideal city, where ordinary human beings actually reside.

Socrates’ criticisms about the limits of poetry might allow us then to return to the earlier sections of the dialogue and to consider the

limits of the images and ideas used thus far. For example, Socrates' ideal city includes women and men alike as necessary for the rule of the city. Yet the drama of the dialogue includes no women, only men, in its discussion. Its image of the philosopher is decidedly male in the characters chosen to discuss the ideal *polis*. Would the presence of a feminine voice have resulted in different conclusions about the elimination of knowing one's own biological children in the ideal city, or the relationship between *ἔργον* and knowledge? Polemarchus will soon be dragged off the streets and killed because he has chosen the side of democrats over oligarchs. He favors justice as helping one's friends and harming one's enemies (332d). His brother, Lysias, is silent throughout the dialogue, although present throughout the discussion, and known to be a famous orator. The historical Lysias will eventually argue for the moral culpability of those oligarchs such as Eratosthenes who stood by while persons such as Polemarchus were murdered, in his speech, "Against Eratosthenes". Yet the idealized discussion at Cephalus' house does not ask the question as to the moral culpability of bystanders –an issue that Lysias argues is central to political responsibility, even in civil war. It does not address the ambiguous status that resident metics held as fundamental to the success of Athens, yet deprived of political rights.

In other words, the dialogue form does not allow us to forget ourselves in our current condition, in favor of an ideal, even as it does try to awaken us to move towards that ideal. The dialogue continually moves us between the imperfect, yet human reality of our own world (through engagement with the imperfections of Athens' own), and the world of the forms, holding us in tension between them in the form of critical dialogue. In section II below, I shall attempt to illustrate how the myth of Er itself engenders such critical reflection and serves as a reminder of moral choice within the real and ordinary city, after a long time spent on ideal cities. While much of the *Republic* concerns itself with an ideal city and just action within it, the final myth turns to human choice and action in the context of political and social imperfection and evil.

II

Death, of course, is something of which we have no direct experience. While we may have experiences related to dying, the totality of that experience remains a mystery to all who are still alive, including Socrates who narrates the myth of Er. Socrates does not fully comprehend the cosmic context. Instead, Socrates sets his sights upon the cosmic whole in light of the reality of death. His story about death as a primary truth that is unknown, yet fundamental to our human

condition, sets the limits of the dialogue, as death sets a limit to life. The myth contextualizes human life within a larger scheme of the cosmos. Human life is presented in terms of a divine scheme, rather than only in terms of the needs of this particular city now, or the one person's particular goals at a single moment in his or her life. That is, the myth presents human life as possessing its fullest meaning only in view of a larger sense of the whole, but a whole not completely available to us. Socrates' earlier discussion of the perfect city in speech suggested the possibility of grasping the whole of justice. In contrast, this final myth offers Socrates' audience a picture of human life that is oriented towards human *limit* in a cosmos that exceeds human comprehension. The myth of Er points us to human limit and imperfection and not ideals. Thus the myth serves as a powerful example of critical poetry that encourages and engenders critical reflection, as some forms of poetry might not.

Critics are often puzzled by the myth of Er and its sudden introduction of cosmological themes in a dialogue so far that has limited itself to the scope of human justice. Annas, for example, characterizes the myth as a "messy" end to the dialogue (Annas 1982 353). Her criticism is not only aesthetic but rather deeply philosophical: the dialogue seems to undo the prior conclusion that just living is good regardless of external consequence. Moreover, it is disappointing that all reward and punishment seems to be temporary and fleeting, such that the universe really does not seem to care at all about what happens to human beings. At most, the myth seems only to reemphasize Socrates' original point that the just life is the happiest because the soul is in harmony and ordered when it is ruled by reason.

The myth occurs in the context of finalizing Socrates' argument about the superiority of the just life to the unjust life. The myth returns to justice what had been taken away from it in book II for the sake of argument. While Glaucon had insisted that Socrates examine justice apart from its consequences, both for this life and after, Socrates is insistent that we do not have a complete picture of justice until we *do* add back the consequences. Those who are just will not only be happy in their souls' being harmonious, but will also be rewarded (Annas 1981 122). Glaucon's desire for the examination of pure justice, in and of itself, even "on the torture rack", needs to be tempered by the recognition that justice mostly *does* "pay", while injustice does not (Johnson 3). However, the myth is not only oriented to the past decisions of those who have acted justly or unjustly, but also to the future choices of the ensouled lives *after* they have suffered reward or punishment and learned from their past actions. My focus here will

be on how the passages concerning the souls' choices of "new life" illuminate a Socratic concern with freedom in light of human limit.

Er, unlike the other souls he meets, experiences his own death and then returns to the world of living human beings in order to tell about it. Er is not required to drink from the river, Lethe, a river of forgetfulness from which all others must drink. He does not forget his origin, while the rest of humanity must forget. These themes of life, death, rebirth, memory, and the loss of memory, are best presented in mythic form since they all concern human limitation. The myth focuses on three kinds of human limit: the limits of knowledge; the limits of mortality as the end of life; and the limits of external necessity that constrain human control over external events. Facing death embodies each of these three kinds of limits. We do not know what it means to die, and what –if anything– follows death. We are limited in the length of life and have nearly no control over the timing or manner of its end. The circumstances that the dying encounter is generally a matter of external necessity: whether dying is short or drawn out; expected or sudden; the manner of death; and so on.

The structure of the myth parallels this lived experience of mortality, for the myth presents human beings as faced with a cosmos dominated by the forces of necessity (ἀνάγκη) and an order that is not subject to their own control at the time of death. The human beings who choose new lives must live within the cosmological limits set out within it. All must follow the directions of the judges who direct them either through the heavens or below the earth. Except for Er, all must drink and forget their past lives after they choose new ones. These souls are allotted a lottery number that narrows the range of lives that remain from which they might choose.

The three daughters of Fate each attend to different kinds of limit on human life. Lachesis, whose name is derived from λαγχάνω, or "to get by lot", allots the time of each person's life, measuring the thread that delimits its length. Clotho spins the thread, turning the outer revolution of the Spindle, and Atropos turns the inner portion, after which the thread is cut. Lots are chosen that determine the order in which souls might choose lives. Once a life is chosen, that life is bound to a soul by Necessity (ἀνάγκη). The limits set upon the souls' choice of a next life are substantial. Yet within this larger realm of Necessity, the human being has a range of choices available to him in response to his memory and past experiences that allow him to choose his own character in the future. Er hears a spokesperson for the Fates announce that the ultimate responsibility for choosing that life lies with the souls who choose:

A demon will not select you, but you will choose a demon. Let him who gets the first lot make the first choice of a life to which he will be bound by necessity. Virtue is without a master; as he honors or dishonors her, each will have more or less of her. The blame belongs to him who chooses; god is blameless. (617e)

The myth emphasizes that it is not the gods who are responsible for our choosing lives of justice and injustice, but rather we ourselves who choose. Although the judges direct just souls upward and unjust souls downward for a thousand years, the next years are in the power of the individual souls and not the gods. To this extent, Socrates sets himself apart from the tradition of Greek tragedy that had emphasized fate as the primary cause of human suffering or misfortune. While the Fates do run the larger cosmological system in which human actions occur, Socrates emphasizes that human beings bear a certain responsibility for ourselves and for our choices. Indeed the root of this freedom is virtue. In the passage above, Socrates personifies Virtue along with the Fates. Yet, virtue is not subject to the same kinds of limits found in the rest of the procedures of choosing a life. Virtue is without a master (617e).

Socrates' story also argues for the importance of philosophy in making good judgments about how to choose (Thayer 371-2). The decision by the man with the first allotted choice underscores the importance of not only knowing what is good, but also *why* it is good. This man who is habitually just has only seen a thousand years of beautiful and pleasant things, after his life of avoiding injustice. However, such a man is the same individual who chooses the life of the tyrant who eats his own children:

The man who had drawn the first lot came forward and immediately chose the greater tyranny, a due to folly and gluttony, chose without having considered everything adequately; and it escaped his notice that eating his own children and other evils were fated to be a part of that life. When he considered it at his leisure, he beat his breast and lamented the choice, not abiding by the spokesman's forewarning. For he didn't blame himself for the evils but chance, demons, and anything rather than himself. He was one of those who had come from heaven, having lived in an orderly regime in his former life, participating in virtue by habit, without philosophy. (619b-d)

The man who is just through habit alone lacks adequate grounds for choosing a new life. Er's account highlights two problems in particular with that man's capacity to choose. First, this man is apt to blame others rather than himself in refusing to take responsibility

for his eventual choice of the life of a tyrant. In this way, his actions as a tyrant actually mirror the orientation of the soul that first chose the tyrannical life in the lottery. The same soul who refuses to take responsibility for his choice of new life, will also express disdain for responsibility when he acts as a tyrant. This man understands his life as subject to external necessity rather than to the internal rule of virtue, and chooses a life accordingly.

Second, the man chooses from “folly [ἀφροσύνη] and greed” and “without having considered everything adequately [ἀνασκεψάμενον]” (619b-c). Although this man has been to the heavens and witnessed the rewards allotted to the just, he still lacks an adequate preparation to consider, i.e., more literally, he is not capable of “looking around” to understand the totality of the life of the tyrant, its losses as well as its seeming appeals. He does not know how to see.

Habit proves to be insufficient for virtue insofar as the future presents us continually with novel situations. While habit is perhaps a sufficient guide for the child who learns to share his toys with others when they share play space, some further examination of generosity is needed when exploring more complex political situations. It is not always clear what constitutes generosity in the particular moment when the scenario is new and unfamiliar. And yet this is precisely what the characters of the *Republic* themselves must face in the new conflicts between oligarchs and democrats.

Socrates himself navigates these novel situations remarkably well. In the *Apology*, he offers the jurors examples of two different situations in which he chose a just act rather than an unjust one. Under the democracy, Socrates reminds them, the assembly decided to judge as a group the ten generals who had failed to retrieve bodies after a naval battle, although it was not lawful to judge them without individual trials (*Ap.* 32b). Socrates had opposed their action as unjust. Although the situation was novel, and tempted many of those who voted that the generals be killed, Socrates spoke out against their actions and could identify these actions as unjust, despite the novelty of the particulars. Under the rule of the Thirty Tyrants, Socrates refuses to take Leon of Salamis and to arrest him unjustly, though it could easily have meant his own death to refuse (32d). His explanation is that he did not care about death as a motivating factor in his decisions (32d). For, as Socrates will go on to say in his trial, he understands that death is an inevitable limit of human life; whether one acts justly or unjustly, eventually death will come. Socrates’ philosophical reflections on death prepare him for addressing the novelty of these new moral challenges, and they are successful because Socrates is both oriented in a stance that embraces the goodness of justice itself, while also

acknowledging his own human limit and mortality. Socrates, when faced with the choice to kill Leon of Salamis, simply went home, a quiet choice that preserved his own integrity in the midst of political chaos. Socrates is not being apolitical, but rather making a decisive political choice in a quiet way that acknowledges his own limit to affect the current conflict. The soul that chooses the life of the tyrant does not acknowledge his own limit, perhaps even rejects such quiet actions, instead choosing a life that seems to illustrate an inhuman desire for limitlessness.

Still, Socrates does hold out one way in which the living can learn beyond the limits of their own lives: through listening to the narratives of others' lives. In the myth of Er, the dead souls who have just arrived after their journey in the heavens or under the earth set up camp together in a field, and spend a week in talk:

All those who were acquaintances greeted one another; and the souls that came out of the earth inquired of others about the things in the other place, and those from heaven about the things that had happened to those from the earth. And they told their stories to one another, the ones lamenting and crying, remembering how much and what sorts of things they had suffered and seen in the journey under the earth [...] and those from heaven, in their turn, told of the inconceivable beauty of the experiences and the sights there. (*R.* 615a-b)

Er specifies that these souls learn from one another how the impious and unjust are punished, and those who are incurable are continually so, unable to come back up even after a thousand years. The sharing of stories about the lives and experiences of the just and unjust alike are central to the process by which these imperfect souls become better prepared to choose their subsequent lives. Indeed, such narratives expand the range of moral scenarios available to the moral actor. Those who have heard others' accounts of the consequences of particular good or bad choices are less likely to come unprepared to situations like those they have heard. In other words, they learn how to discern through considering and reflecting upon others' narratives.

Socrates argues that such practice of discernment ought to be the lifelong practice of souls well before the choice of a new life; it is the task of the living and not only of the dead. Especially because lives are mixed with health and sickness, wealth and poverty, and varying levels of honor, the difficulties of discerning just from unjust actions, and desirable from undesirable lives, are considerable (618b). Socrates continues:

And on this account each of us must, to the neglect of other studies, above all see to it that he is a seeker and student of that study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the

capacity and the knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always to choose the better from among those that are possible [...] From all this he will be able to draw a conclusion and choose –in looking off toward the nature of the soul– between the worse and the better life, calling worse the one that leads it toward becoming more unjust, and better the one that leads it to becoming juster. He will let everything else go. For we have seen that this is the most important choice for him in life and death. (618e-619a)

While most people are distracted by wealth, honor, or health, it is more fundamental to the good life to seek to better understand justice. But coming to know *that* justice is more important than other goods is only gained through the experiences of seeing examples of poverty, wealth, beauty, ugliness, different habits of soul and stations in life and comparing the outcomes of these lives (618d). Certainly personal experience can offer some, limited experiences of the wide range of such goods and their relative lack of import compared with justice. But Socrates emphasizes that the observation of the lives of others and listening to the accounts of others' lives, can also produce learning. The possibility of freedom and genuine responsibility arises through reflecting not only on one's own life choices, but also carefully observing a wide range of human values and choices made in accordance with those values. Arguably, the dialogue form is one way in which the lives of others can be both observed and learned from. While Socrates criticizes tragic poetry for its simple presentations of unjust men, the presentation of Thrasymachus, his beliefs, the reasons behind his beliefs and the violence of his character as he rages, blushes, and calls Socrates names, together provide one model of a human life. Socrates and his care for justice even at the risk of his own death, provides a different model.

We might also read the myth of Er not only as a tale about death, but also about violence in the city and the chance to make new choices after violence. By the time that Plato wrote the *Republic*, its dramatic events were long over. Democracy had been restored. Some of the oligarchs and their supporters had been tried and executed, but others continued to live in the city and exercised their citizenship. While the harmony of the ideal city was never achieved, a kind of restoration of order after civil war did occur. In Athens' own history, a "new life" could only be chosen when the past life was forgotten in one sense. War and its divisive violence can only be healed when a certain degree of forgetting is possible. To this extent, the fact that souls must drink from the river Lethe has a political as well as cosmological relevance. Good, just choices must take account of the mistakes of the past, but

it is also in light of a forgetfulness of the past that the future is allowed to enter. Just as the individual souls in the myth both choose these new lives, in light of what they have learned from their old lives, and then drink to forget the past, so, too, did Athens have to learn how to forget some of its past divisions. Its own citizens must have remembered what they learned from their past actions, but then also choose to forget these past lives so that they might fully embrace their current reality as a post-war *polis*.

The myth of Er thus expresses a kind of political reality about the movement of the *polis* through time: to live in time means to embrace the change that comes with being a temporal being: the gains and losses of cities, friends, opinions, and even one's self. The *Republic* displays this kind of loss of the old self in the picture of the enslaved, chained resident of the cave who turns philosopher and leaves the cave has to forget his former life. The cave's philosopher, too, must forget at least something about her life of contemplation in choosing to return to the cave. Such forgetting is made possible because *we* are not the end of the universe, as Socrates presents it. Rather, the cosmos is ruled by necessity and a reason that transcends any individual reasoner. Even heaven and hell are themselves subject to a higher rational principle; they are not just arbitrary places to which souls are sent, but are governed by the goddess Ananke, who determines the universe according to a rational necessity (Johnson 8-9). Justice has a cosmological dimension that transcends our individual lives and our individual cities. So we cannot in the end regard the individual in isolation from the greater picture of the whole.

Plato's approach also differs from that of Homer in its mythological treatment of the character of Odysseus. In Homer, Odysseus' story is told to King Alkinoos. There, Odysseus recounts many of his travels, and in particular his descent into Hades and his return from it, precedes his true voyage home. Until he speaks to Alkinoos and Arete, Odysseus still wanders, and is not yet oriented toward home. Plato also offers us an image of Odysseus in the *Republic*. We see the character Odysseus not only overtly in the myth of the man who chooses the next life as a private life, but also perhaps in the figure of the freed philosopher who goes down into the cave, or in the character of Socrates himself, who "goes down" to the Piraeus at the beginning of the dialogue. In Homer's account, Odysseus' account emphasizes the terribleness of death. Among the most memorable characters in his description we find the description of Odysseus trying to grasp the ghost of his mother, who is only a shade, and so who cannot be grasped, and the glaring eyes of Aias who is still angry that Odysseus won a battle for honor and for arms on the beach at Troy

and who remains eternally in the state in which he died. Odysseus also describes Agamemnon, who is forever angry at his wife's betrayal while he is away at war, and the capstone of the whole section, Achilles, who laments that he would rather be a poor laborer breaking the earth for a little food than be the honored king of all of Hades. In Homer, we find the permanence of death, and characters who never escape the choices that they made in their lives. No one learns anything new about justice or virtue, and even the punishments that they receive seem to teach them little.

But those who “descend” in the *Republic* are all people who *do* learn from the descent because in each case their descent is connected with a prior ascent. Er learns from his experience and his life does not end on the battlefield. He comes back to tell about the choices he saw, and to make evaluations for others who will listen to him, for example, in his recognition that Odysseus' choice seems to have been the finest of all. Er was part of the community of the dead, but also takes his own experiences and even his own losses and uses them for the good of the larger, living community. The philosopher who descends back into the cave, has seen the forms; he is different from those who never ascended out of the cave, and whatever trials he might face in the return to the mundane world of politics, he at least has the comfort of having seen the forms, and being permanently changed by the sight of them. He seeks, perhaps, to free others so that they, too, might know this good that he has loved. Socrates, too, goes down to Piraeus, but he does not encounter characters who are permanently wedded to their views of the world: Glaucon and Adeimantus seem genuinely to learn about justice, and even Thrasymachus becomes a sort of a “friend” by midway through the dialogue. Reason and myth alike contain within themselves the possibility of a real transformation of the soul, although they do not guarantee it.

Odysseus' choice is clearly the culmination of the myth, and is an important counterpart to the idealistic and utopian qualities of the earlier books. Odysseus is not returning to a perfect world governed by philosopher kings. Having lived a life attached to war and to honor, this man who was skilled in many ways (πολύτροπος) chooses a simple and private life, one that involves neither eating his own children, nor the glory of an Achilles, or the escapism of being an animal rather than a human being. Instead, he chooses the life of a man who “minds his own business”; that is, he chooses the life of a just man, and seems content to lead that just life even in an imperfect and an unjust world.

In certain ways Socrates is like Odysseus: relatively uninvolved in politics and the machinations of either rule or revolution. Yet Socrates is political in a way that Odysseus is not, in demanding that others

care for their own souls, and attend to the importance of learning from their own mistakes, and learning about human limit. His political work is primarily directed to the care of his own and others' souls. Socrates' life takes place in the real, not ideal, city. Yet it is a happy one. The myth of Er points to the possibility of a just and happy life even within the limits of the imperfect, real world, and not only the utopia set out earlier in the *Republic*. In this way, we can easily enough imagine Socrates at the end of the discussion finally making his ascent back up from the Piraeus to Athens on a path that might seem somewhat less rugged and steep than the path leading out of the cave.

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