

Rereading Plato's *Republic* through Er: The Clash of the Political and the Theoretical

Readers have long been puzzled about why Plato concludes the *Republic* with the myth of Er. The key question, as Johnson has suggested, is whether Er “does any philosophical work” or offers instead a kind of poetic *mimesis* (Johnson 1999, Albinus 1998). Perhaps most critical, however, is the apparent contradiction between the messages of this mythic narrative and the frame that envelops it. As Annas has famously put it, the myth of Er is a “painful shock,” offering a “lame and messy” ending to an “otherwise impressively unified book” (1981). It is certainly difficult to disagree with her: from the beginning of the text, Socrates and his interlocutors have been attempting to argue that justice is to be pursued for its own sake, not just for the rewards it can offer. Yet the myth of Er seems to abandon this line of reasoning and suggest that one should choose the just life to prevent suffering in the afterlife and in reincarnation. This is the kind of argument likely to persuade the practically-minded Cephalus rather than Socrates (Bloom 1991) or, to put this another way, to appeal to those who may have held traditional views about the afterlife (Halliwell 2007).

But the contradictory ending, while certainly messy, need not be lame. Since the problem of interpreting the *Republic*, which appeared to be a “unified whole” until we get to the myth of Er, hinges on its last few pages, then we should certainly feel invited to reread the text with this unexpected ending in mind. Perhaps we, as Winkler might say, “have been made to misread the tale before us” (1989). In this paper, I will suggest that the myth of Er closes the text precisely so that we continue to consider the practical-political in tandem with the theoretical-philosophical. In order to make my case, I propose a thought experiment that begins from the premise that the second-reader's experience of a text is different from that of the first reader. Awareness of the “contradictions” presented in the myth of Er allows us to notice how, or perhaps even if, the

dialogue was foregrounding the contradictions all along. While I believe that a great many of the arguments made in the first nine books of the *Republic* would show greater nuance if we were to read them through the lens of Er, I will focus on only a few here, namely those that deal specifically with the intersection between philosophical and political wisdom.

In retelling Er's story, Socrates focuses on electing new lives, a process that should apply philosophical knowledge gained by "seeking the subject that will enable him to distinguish a good life from bad" combined with the memory of one's practical experience (618c). This process, I will argue, can be used as heuristic device for interpreting what the dialogue may be saying elsewhere about the nature of philosophical education and, by extension, about the political life. To take one example, if we read the dialogue's conclusion first, Er's *katabasis* to the underworld in Book 10 flows seamlessly into Socrates' *katabasis* to the Piraeus in Book 1, and we may therefore see Socrates performing a particularly Er-like function as he presents Glaucon and Adeimantus with a philosophical alternative to the political tyranny offered by Thrasymachus. But rather than suggesting that his interlocutors eschew the political, I will argue that, in a few critical passages, namely the "The Ring of Gyges" in Book 2, "Noble Lie" in Book 3, and the "Cave" in Book 7, Socrates-as-Er perhaps endorses a position often associated with liberal democracy: that everyone can be educated and, through that education, participate in the political or practical life—a view not generally attributed to Plato or his *Republic*. But, on my reading, the *Republic* embraces rather than eschews contradiction; for it is both a philosophical work making a philosophical claims, and also itself a myth, wherein Socrates plays the part of Er, inviting his interlocutors, as much Glaucon and company as us, to select new lives in philosophy.

Works Cited

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