

Real Pain in a Fictive World: the Metaphysics of Punishment in Plato's Myth of Er

Three types of torture can be distinguished in Classical Athens (Gagarin 1996, Hunter 1992): the first, penal torture, is used against convicted criminals to punish their wrongdoings; the second, judicial torture, is used to obtain information during criminal investigations; the third, evidentiary torture, is an exclusively Athenian practice that targeted innocent slaves in the course of relatively unimportant civil suits. According to Gagarin, the latter type was mostly a rhetorical device employed by orators in order to gain an advantage in the trial: the threat of pain deterred masters from allowing their slaves to be tortured, because everybody knew that torture does not necessarily produce truth.

In this paper I argue that Plato's eschatological model, illustrated in the myth of Er, has its core in a fourth type of torture, which I call metaphysical and define as a point of intersection between Gagarin's types: the metaphysical torture shares the punitive purpose of penal torture, the coercive violence of judicial torture, and the rhetorical threat of evidentiary torture. Its function in the myth is to chastise the guilty through hyperbolic representations of pain, thus deterring the living from immoral acts. According to my view, Plato encloses in a myth all the forms of punishment existing in Athens (whether in practice or in words) in order to make torture after death as dreadful as possible. He thus reaffirms his teleology: the supernatural world tends to the supreme good. The realism, crudeness and infallibility of metaphysical torture all contribute to fortifying this Platonic idea: in Er's vision, every human deed is subordinate to an insurmountable system of justice, a reverberation of the good permeating all things.

Given the highly educational value of the myth of Er, I disagree with Annas (Annas 1981) and Cerri (Cerri 2000): the tale is not an inconsistent *addendum*, nor a contradiction of the ideas developed in the previous nine books of the *Republic*. Rather, it is the enactment of

precepts already stated at 2.377a-380d: if useful to the education of future citizens, tales (μύθοι) shall be impressed upon (ἐνσημύνασθαι) their minds. While displaying a teleological effort, Er's vision also reaffirms the essence of the Socratic ethical core: the personal care of the soul. In 10.612a-b, it is stated that justice in itself is the best thing for the soul, and every soul ought to pursue justice. By using his μῦθος as a rhetorical device of dissuasion from evil (De Luise 2007), Plato shows that unjust souls are destined to suffer, and that men should educate their souls to be just. In order to be still more persuasive, Plato has his Er describe a world comparable to the material one, and specifically to the judicial reality of Athens. The Athenian penal system, however, is perfected in the afterlife: punishments become infallible and the sinful pay a penalty far greater than each wrong they perpetrated. In chronological terms, this means ten times a hundred years. As for the nature of the punishment, Plato refuses to theorize and quantify it. Rather, he uses the example of the tyrant Ardiaeus (10.615d-616a), whose soul is described in terms of a suffering body. Careful to achieve the same realism as the orators do in resorting to evidentiary torture (for example, Dem. 18.133), the philosopher gives the soul corporeal plasticity and disfigures it: Ardiaeus is bound, flayed alive and mutilated with thorns. As Foucault (Foucault 1975) observes, "from the judicial torture to the execution, the body has produced and reproduced the truth of the crime".

By ascribing the Athenian tripartite system of torture to a fictive, supernatural world, Plato practices what Socrates theorized in book 2: his mythical sinners leave an indelible impression (σημαίνοντες) upon the minds of those contemplating them. The pain of the dead educates the living towards recognition of the good.

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