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Chapter

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16 The Life-and-Death Journey of the Soul

Interpreting the Myth of Er

Puis elle commençait à me devenir inintelligible, comme après la métempsychose les pensées d'une existence antérieure.

Proust

The story of Er, a Pamphylian soldier who died in battle but several days later returned to life on his funeral pyre and reported what his soul had seen and heard in the world beyond, brings the *Republic* to a close in a visionary mode whose complexity tests the limits of understanding. For three (overlapping) reasons, the narrative raises more questions than it can answer: first, because it undertakes the profoundly ambitious task of presenting a symbolic perspective on the whole of reality, a figurative equivalent of Book 6's theme of "the contemplation of all time and all being" (486a); second, because its densely allusive texture yields a surplus of possible meanings that cannot be adequately encompassed by any single interpretation; and third, because it stands in a kind of challenging counterpoint, combining harmony and dissonance, with the rest of the *Republic*. Plato weaves into the account of Er's experience numerous strands from the materials of Greek philosophy, science, religion (not least, mystery religion), poetry, historiography, and even visual art. This fascinating multiplicity of sources and associations is not my primary concern here, though some pointers will be provided parenthetically as I proceed. I do, however, want to explore the character of the passage as an elaborate piece of philosophical *writing*, rather than as the vehicle for a set of putative authorial beliefs. While the myth's overall significance as an ultimate (i.e., cosmic and eternal) vindication of justice looks clear enough at first sight, it leads us, I shall contend,

into realms of irreducibly difficult interpretation. That, indeed, may be part of its *raison d'être*. The myth can fruitfully be thought of as inviting a “cyclical” reading in conjunction with the preceding dialogue, a reading that forms a hermeneutic parallel to the existential cycle of life and death pictured in Er’s account, but one that Plato’s text itself does not supply the means to bring to a definitive conclusion.

The story comprises three main sections, enacting in turn the three great ideas of eschatological judgment, cosmological necessity, and reincarnation or metempsychosis, though this sequence is interrupted more than once by comments that Socrates makes in his own voice. In the first section (614c–616a), Er’s soul, having left his body, travels with other souls to the site of postmortem judgment, where it observes their consignment to a millennium of rewards/punishments in (or above) the sky and below the earth. Er does not follow these souls further but hears others, returned from the sky or earth, recounting their experiences during the previous millennium, including what those who went below had witnessed of the horrific punishment of tyrants. In the next phase (616b–617c), seven days later, Er travels onward with the group of returning souls. On the fourth day of their journey, they see ahead a column of intense light binding together the universe. Inside the light hangs the spindle of Necessity, Ananke, the eight segments of whose hemispherical whorl correspond to an astronomical configuration of sun, moon, fixed stars, and five (known) planets. On the rims of the spindle’s segments sit eight Sirens, emitting the notes of an octave (and thus giving expression to a music or harmony of the spheres), as well as three Moirai or Fates (Lachesis, Klotho, Atropos), the daughters of Necessity. In the final part (617d–621b), a priest of Lachesis tells the returning souls that they must choose their next incarnate lives and take full responsibility for their destinies. The souls make their choices, with an extraordinary range of results: not least, many of those who have come down from the rewards of the sky now paradoxically condemn themselves to bad, unhappy lives in the next period of earthly existence. The choices are confirmed; each soul is accompanied by the *daimōn* (“spirit”) that it implicitly chose. These new persons then drink the waters of the river Heedless (*Amelēs*), in the plain of Forgetting (*Lēthē*), thus erasing (some of the) memories of their previous lives. They sleep, but are roused by thunder and an

earth tremor before being released into their next embodied lifespan. Er reawakes on his funeral pyre.

Er's soul journey, though a *muthos* (as Socrates himself calls it, 621b) qua act of storytelling, is neither a replication of a culturally canonical narrative nor a total invention of Plato's. Like its relatives in *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*, it traverses some familiar terrain of traditional Greek underworld mythology, recalling in part the visits to Hades of heroes such as Odysseus, Orpheus, and Heracles. But affinities with *Phaedrus* underline its combination of the story patterns of both descent and ascent, *katabasis* and *anabasis*.¹ It is, in effect, a reinvented myth, and as such one contribution to Plato's larger project of (re)appropriating the medium of myth for his own philosophical purposes. This was a project for which, of course, there were pre-Socratic precedents, not least in Parmenides and Empedocles, but also in Pythagorean myths, now lost, relating specifically to metempsychosis.² It was also an enterprise that involved Plato in a larger arena of intellectual competition over the uses of myth with Sophists, historians, and others. Above all, the myth of Er is a quasi-poetic piece of writing, as Socrates acknowledges at the start, with studied ambiguity, when he contrasts what he is about to relate, but thereby also prompts comparison, with Odysseus' "tale told to Alcinous" in the *Odyssey* (614b).

On one level the myth can be read as a philosophically transfigured *Odyssey*, with the soul's quest for eternal happiness, and the many dangers that imperil it, replacing the hero's quest for home. Odyssean motifs reinforce the point: the integration of (eight) Sirens into a model of cosmic harmony (617b), for instance, rewrites their status as (two) seductive but destructive demons in *Odyssey* 12, and the catalogue of figures at 620a–c contains several Odyssean echoes, including a refiguring of Odysseus himself as a soul that has learnt the futility of human honor seeking (*philotimia*).³ The myth's

¹ Albinus 1998 broaches some relevant themes.

² Pythagorean myths of metempsychosis: Aristotle *De Anima* 1.3, 407b21–3; cf. Plato *Grg.* 493a (note 19 below). Morgan 2000 investigates Plato's relationship to pre-Socratic myth.

³ The Sirens may be a Pythagorean borrowing: see Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica* 82, but this could equally reflect a subsequent Pythagoreanizing of Plato's own text. Odysseus's search for an inconspicuous life (620c–d) echoes both the philosophical repudiation of *philotimia* (cf. 545a–55a, 581b–86c) and the war-weary home seeking of his Homeric persona.

gestures of competition with the *Odyssey* remind us, more broadly, of the “ancient quarrel” between philosophy and poetry invoked earlier in Book 10 (607b), as well as the extensive critique of poetic “mythology,” including the mythology of Hades, in Books 2 and 3. The implied contest with poetry is rendered more acute by the fact that at 2.365e Adeimantus cited the poets as a primary source of culturally entrenched convictions about the afterlife, while at 10.596c Socrates mentioned the depiction of Hades (together with “things in the sky,” also pertinent to the myth) as one aspect of what he provocatively called mimetic art’s aspiration to “make everything.” Nor should we overlook, given Book 10’s specific analogy between poetry and painting, that the myth is also a rival to visual art, especially to Polygnotus’s great panoramic vision of the underworld, his *Nekuia*, in the Cnidians’ meeting-hall at Delphi.⁴ But to speak of rivalry prompts a hard question. If poets and painters cannot be trusted in their portrayals of Hades, why should Socrates himself (or Plato) expect to be? Why should Er be a more credible witness than Odysseus? The terms of the question are perhaps too blunt. A nuanced conception of rivalry must allow for some overlap of goals, not sheer antagonism. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates actually cites Homer more than once in support of parts of his own eschatological myth.⁵ We should be prepared to read the myth of Er, then, as a philosophical recomposition, not an outright rejection, of poetry.

In certain respects, however, Er’s soul journey could equally be said to have an *antimythological* and *antipoetic* slant. For one thing, the hero Odysseus, despite his cameo appearance in the story, is displaced as narrator by an apparently ordinary barbarian soldier, though a “valiant” one (*alkimos*, 614b, a poetic term found nowhere else in Plato). We are told nothing about Er himself other than his non-Greek name, patronymic, and ethnic identity, onomastic details in which it may be tempting to detect etymologizing puns.⁶ Furthermore, Socrates speaks from the outset with quasi-historical immediacy,

⁴ Polygnotus’s *Nekuia*, itself a “rival” to poetry, is described by Pausanias 10.28–31. Figures common to the painting and Plato’s myth are Agamemnon, Ajax, Orpheus, Thamyras/-is, Thersites.

⁵ *Grg.* 523a, 525d–e, 526d.

⁶ Er (for which both Iranian and Semitic roots have been proposed) might suggest “spring” (*ēr*) in Greek; more remotely, Armenius (attested as a real name at Athens in the fourth century) could evoke *ērmenos*, “raised up.” Pamphylian means “of the whole [human] race”: a hint of universalism? See further in Halliwell 1988,

as though chronicling a factual report received from a “messenger” (614d, 619b; cf. 619e). There are even some stylistic touches, such as the mannered verbal repetition at 614b (“he came back to life, and coming back to life . . .”), that remind us of Herodotus and help to create a kind of veneer of historicity, but at the same time an impression of artfully calculated narrative. It may be no coincidence that Herodotus’ work contains the story of Aristaeas of Proconnesus, a shaman-like messenger of the divine who supposedly made soul journeys while under trance and who possibly had Pythagorean connections.⁷

Also germane to the pseudo-historiographical impression is a striking literary trait, though one almost inevitably lost in translation. After the initial, scene-setting announcement at 614b, most of the account is couched in indirect speech. This feature makes the passage an exceptionally sustained piece of “foregrounded” *oratio obliqua* (as opposed to the background *oratio obliqua* of, for instance, the *Symposium*), offset only by three pieces of quoted direct speech (615d–616a, 617d–e, 619b) and by Socrates’ comments on the myth. If we compare this technique of writing with the tripartite scheme of diegetic modes established by Socrates in Book 3 (392c–398b), we find that the telling of Er’s story stretches and complicates the categories of that typology. In that earlier context, narrative (*diēgēsis*) was classified in three forms: “pure” or “simple,” that is, entirely in third-person, descriptive mode; “narrative through mimesis,” that is, direct speech or verbally dramatised enactment; and the alternating combination of these two, as in Homeric epic. The discussion in Book 3 illustrated the possible inclusion of indirect speech within a passage of “simple” narrative (393d–394a), but it did not anticipate the use of *oratio obliqua* to provide a complete framework of narration. The myth of Er thus has an intricacy of layering, including narrative within narrative (and even indirect discourse within indirect discourse),⁸ which exceeds the terms of Book 3’s schema.

pp. 170–71, with references on p. 169 for the larger question of the myth’s non-Greek affinities.

⁷ Herodotus 4.13–16 (with a possible allusion to reincarnation, 4.15).

⁸ In addition to the “embedded” narrative of 615a–616a, there is implicit indirect speech *within* indirect speech at 614c–d, 619c, 620d; at 616d Socrates assimilates an element of his own conjecture into Er’s report. On other aspects of the myth’s relationship to Book 3’s typology of narrative, see Bouvier 2001.

True, the form of the myth is consistent with Socrates' earlier anxieties about the allure of dramatized, "mimetic" storytelling and its capacity to imprint destabilizing patterns of feeling on the mind (394e–398b). But the point of this form is not only to keep the narrative "austere" (398a). The protracted use of indirect speech (not paralleled in scale by any other Platonic myth) is strangely obsessive.⁹ It is equally readable as a marker of transcription, purporting to transmit a message with total fidelity, or as a constant reminder that this is someone else's version of events. Its narrative point of view, moreover, is simultaneously that of the faceless character Er and yet, in a certain sense, that of the cosmos itself, beyond the subjectivity of a human eye. To make matters more elaborate still, all this is filtered, as it were, through Socrates' own poetic-authorial voice. There is consequently a sort of diegetic ambiguity to the myth, leaving it suspended between testimonial confidence and imagined distance, between an air of plain truth telling and of exotic fiction. All in all, the presentation of Er's story makes its status deliberately puzzling: ostensibly factual yet astonishingly bizarre; quasi-historiographical yet shot through with traces of the poetic; redolent of traditional Greek myths (in its underworld topography and most of its cast of named individuals; Ardiaeus, 615c–e, is an exception), yet with a putatively non-Greek origin that lies beyond reach of verification.

Despite these narrative ambiguities, all of which feed into hermeneutic problems I address below, one feature of Plato's engagement with the traditions of poetry remains salient. The "greatest charge" brought by Socrates against poetry earlier in Book 10 focused on the powerful psychological appeal of tragic emotions in both Homer and Attic drama. Socrates spoke there (605c–606b) of the pleasure of "surrendering" sympathetically to the passionate grief expressed by heroic characters, and thereby vicariously absorbing a tragic evaluation of life and death. The myth of Er, by contrast, places human life against a background of cosmic order and eternal justice. By the *Republic's* own criteria, it offers an antitragic vision of the world. That vision crystallizes in the choice of "the greatest tyranny" by the foolish, greedy soul at 619b–c. On realizing the "destiny" (*heimarmenē*) that follows from its choice, this soul collapses into

⁹ See Tarrant 1955; but her judgment on the myth of Er ("the impression of tidings from afar," p. 223) is vague.

a self-pity exhibited by profuse wailing and breast beating. Those gestures are precisely reminiscent of the description of tragic heroes earlier in Book 10 (605d); they are also linked to Book 9's claim that the tyrannical soul is especially susceptible to "regret," *metameleia* (577e), an emotion symptomatic of the internal psychic conflict of injustice (352a). Undone by his own ignorance into picking a life that condemns him to eat his own children (a horror that pointedly recalls the experience of Thyestes, subject of several known tragedies), the future tyrant indulges in a display of self-exculpation that is almost parodic of a tragic figure – Oedipus, let us say – who indignantly externalizes responsibility for his fate. The myth, in other words, echoes the psychological tones of tragedy in order to negate them with the force of a kind of cosmic irony.¹⁰

But there may be more than that to say about the relationship of this self-deludingly forlorn character – this parodic Oedipus, as it were – to the phenomena of tragedy. We can use his case to probe some of the issues that underlie the myth's place in the thematic architecture of the *Republic*. We learn that this soul (or person: see below) had previously lived in a well-regulated state and with a degree of virtue (*aretē*), but "without philosophy." After its judgment, it had been rewarded with a thousand years in "heaven." In one regard, this episode exemplifies the point, made twice at the start of Book 9 (571b–572b), that the lawless desires that flourish in the tyrannical soul are present in *every* soul, though in most people kept in check by law, "better desires," or reason. But the doom of the rash figure in the myth seems to give a pessimistic twist to that principle. Not only does its previous existence count for nothing; the same is true for its millennium of beatitude in the presence of a transcendent beauty. Now, this soul had in some measure *been* just; it could not otherwise have been sent up to the sky by the judges (see 614c). Its justice and virtue were, for sure, incomplete, because lacking in truly philosophical understanding; but that only seems to compound the ineffectiveness of the long period it has spent contemplating "visions indescribable in their beauty" (615a, echoing the form of the good, 509a). In the *Phaedrus* myth, souls that have been in the vicinity of the spectacle of true being, but have failed actually to "see" it, can at the worst fall back down into the life

¹⁰ See Halliwell 2006.

of a tyrant (248c–e). But the *Phaedrus* also states that living justly leads to improvement in the soul's destiny (248e), whereas the future tyrant in the myth of Er has been deemed (partially) just, yet still falls into the most evil and unhappy of human conditions – unlike, one should also note, the comparably virtuous but unphilosophical souls mentioned by Socrates in the *Phaedo*, outside the myth.¹¹ The *Republic* elsewhere certainly allows for the corruption of good, even philosophical natures, both individually and collectively. But while such corruption occurs *within* human life, the soul's choice of tyranny in the myth appears to introduce an element of failure into the cosmic apparatus of justice. If a rewarded soul can regress so catastrophically, would not some form of suffering in the world beyond have made better sense? On the most pessimistic reading, this soul, having previously lived a life of some justice, may now fall into the category of the “incurable,” and thus become eternally unredeemable.¹²

Grappling with such problems encourages us to reflect on interpretative strategies toward the philosophical and literary character of Platonic myths, which constitute a complex class of compositions. Plato's own usage of *muthos* and its cognates must of course be consulted, but that usage, itself embedded within dramatized speech, cannot do all the work of interpretation for us. Within the *Republic*, *muthos*-terms are applied to a diverse spectrum of materials: the folktale parable of Gyges' ring, the subject matter of poetry, everyday storytelling, traditional mythology, the “noble lie,” the scenario of the dialogue's hypothetical city building, and, by implication at least, the triform image of the soul at the end of Book 9.¹³ But if Books 2–9 are framed as a thought-experiment that in its entirety can be called a *muthos* by Socrates, then the application of the same term to the story of Er (621b) cannot justify a clean split between

¹¹ *Phd.* 82a–b: reference to “habit” (*ethos*) and the phrase “without philosophy” (*aneu philosophias*) both parallel *Rep.* 619c.

¹² Incurables: *Rep.* 615e, *Grg.* 525c–6b, *Phd.* 113e. The Neoplatonist Proclus refused to take this concept (like much else of the myth) literally: see Kroll 1901, pp. 178–79. On the paradoxically bad choices made by previously rewarded souls, cf. Annas 1982, at p. 135, but she overstates the position: 619d (reference misprinted in Annas) does not say that “most” of the souls from heaven made bad choices, but, more indeterminately, that “in rough terms, just as many” of those ensnared in bad choices had come from heaven as from below the earth.

¹³ 359d, 377d–98b passim, 350e, 376d, 377c, 415a–c, 501e, 565d, 588c.

logos and *muthos*. The dialectical creation of the ideal city and the recounting of the myth of Er both involve narrative-cum-imaginative perspectives from outside ordinary experience. Indeed, when introducing the subject of the guardians' education at 2.376d, Socrates speaks of the exercise simultaneously as one of "storytelling" (*muthos*, *muthologeîn*) and of "discussion" or "argument" (*logos*); similarly, he refers later to "the regime whose story we are telling in argument/discussion" (*muthologoumen logōi*, 6.501e). *Muthos* and *logos* are, it seems, in some sense intertwined throughout the *Republic*.

Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, no simple, unqualified *muthos/logos* dichotomy is presupposed in Plato's work.¹⁴ The juxtaposition of the two terms, when it does appear, has contextual not overarching force and can be used to draw more than one distinction. Thus, in different settings and for different purposes (and in the mouths of different characters), it can appeal to a contrast between poetic story forms and nonpoetic statements (*Phd.* 61b), between narratives and speeches/dialogue (*Prt.* 320c, 324d, 328c), between fiction and history (*Ti.* 26c–e), or between a "mere tale" and a seriously credited contention (*Grg.* 523a, 527a, but contested by Socrates there). Since *logos* can mean "discourse" in the broadest sense, it is not surprising that *muthos* is often subsumed under *logos*, and the situation is complicated further by the fact that Plato sometimes uses *muth-* terms in an archaizing sense of "speech" or "utterance."¹⁵ Within the *Republic*, Socrates' critique of poetry in Books 2 and 3 classifies all *muthoi* (stories, mostly poetic) as *logoi* (376e–7a), pieces of discourse, or speech acts, whose significance and acceptability are to be judged by reference to the underlying convictions or values they are capable of conveying to their audiences. This helps to suggest why something might count as a *muthos*, qua discourse with a narrative dimension, yet still form part of the larger "argument" or *logos* of a dialogue: consider how, for instance, the myth of

¹⁴ For critiques of the *muthos/logos* distinction, see Annas 1982, pp. 120–22; Murray 1999; Edmonds 2004, pp. 161–71. Brisson 1998 offers a full but somewhat overschematized account.

¹⁵ *Muthos* subsumed under *logos*: e.g., *Rep.* 376eff., 398b, 522a, 565d–e, *Phdr.* 237a, 241e, *Ti.* 29d, 30b, 55d, 56a; cf. *Ti.* 59c (*muthos* as medium of *dialogizesthai*). *Muthos* as "utterance" (Homeric usage, e.g., *Rep.* 389e, 390d): *Laws* 773b, 790c, 812a.

the *Politicus* impinges on the direction of the overall discussion, checking one line of analysis while broaching another. We need, therefore, to beware the pitfall of equating a formal dialogue/myth distinction with a functional argument/myth distinction. The latter cannot be altogether clear-cut, if only because there is no uniform model of “argument” in Plato’s writings as a whole: whatever may be *said* about philosophical method, the dialogues (not least, the *Republic* itself) stage discussion that proceeds through a blend of claims both tested and untested, inferences both deductive and inductive, analogies and similes, images, examples, and anecdotes. The philosophical role of Platonic myths or narratives varies with the thematic and dramatic counterpoint in which they stand to their compositional settings. Myths, for example, that occur within an ongoing conversation, like those in *Phaedrus* and *Politicus*, have a rather different dialogic dynamic from those, including *Gorgias* and *Republic*, that sound the final note of a work. Nor does it make much sense to draw a sharp dividing line between narratives, like that of Gyges’ ring, that are called *muthoi* in Plato’s text, and those, such as the cave in *Republic* 7 (itself, notice, evocative of Hades: 521c), that are not.

The myth of Er actually constitutes the last part of Socrates’ “argument” for the external rewards of justice, the part dealing with posthumous rewards from the gods (612b–c, 614a), although within the main vista of the story those rewards as such are largely out of sight (only alluded to at 615a).¹⁶ The myth is therefore an extension of the case for justice that has been made since Book 2; it is a component of the *Republic*’s overarching *logos*, the cumulative organization of its discussion. The fact that the credentials of Er’s narrative are not exposed to scrutiny distinguishes it to some extent, but not absolutely, from the procedures of argument followed elsewhere in the work, procedures that incorporate many other unexamined (even highly counterintuitive) propositions. One further, crucial consideration, to which I shall soon return, is that Socrates interposes into the myth interpretative statements of his own, finding in it a moral (in every sense) for life, treating it as material for reflective

¹⁶ Ferrari 2008 deftly situates the myth in relation to the *Republic*’s theme of the “rewards” of justice.

reasoning (denoted by the verbs *analogizesthai* and *sullogizesthai*), and taking it as grounds for belief (*doxa*) of varying strengths.¹⁷ So the myth could be said to involve a sort of shadow dialectic, conducted by Socrates with himself in his two “voices” as detached summarizer of Er’s account and as explicator or exegete of that account.

In the light of what has already been indicated about both the terminology and the variable uses of *muthos* in Plato’s dialogues, we should not expect to find a definitive key to the reading of any Platonic myth. Instead, we should accept the existence of multiple levels of significance within such philosophically framed narratives, levels that can accommodate elements of the literal, the metaphorical, the personificatory, the symbolic, the allegorical (i.e., systematically symbolic), the speculative, and, ultimately, the mystical (a category definable in terms of intrinsic resistance to rational interpretation). Technical classifications in this area, both ancient and modern, are labile. We may choose, for example, to call the fullest surviving ancient reading of the myth of Er, that of Proclus, substantially “allegorical,” even though Proclus’s own language is always that of “symbolism” (*sumbolon*, etc.) and “enigma” or “hidden meaning” (*ainissesthai*, etc.), never of *allēgoria*. Such technicalities need not detain us here. Plato’s own dialogues abound, in fact, in acknowledgments of the availability of numerous kinds of oblique, veiled, and cryptic discourse. Such acknowledgments open up more options than they close down; we should not adduce them selectively to construct a pure paradigm of Platonic myth. It is unwarranted, for instance, to treat the Socrates of the *Phaedrus*, who at one point belittles rationalizing interpretations of traditional myth (229c–e), as ruling out allegorical interpretation per se, especially when, for example, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* can just as easily commend a philosophical allegory (155d, involving Iris, with her correlate symbol the rainbow, which happens to appear in the myth of Er, 616b). It is equally mistaken, though commonplace, to extract a general repudiation of allegory from *Republic 2*’s dismissal of subtextual meaning

¹⁷ *Analogizesthai*, 616c (cf. 524d), *sullogizesthai*, 618d (cf. esp. 516b, 517b, 531d); see note 29 below. The myth warrants *doxa* of “adamantine” strength at 619a, but at 619e Socrates talks in terms of probability or likelihood (*kinduneuein*).

(*huponoia*, “underthought”) as a defense of ostensibly immoral stories about the gods: that passage targets its point only at what the young are capable of grasping.¹⁸ Other Platonic passages – among them the hypothetical Aesopic fable by which Socrates expresses the perplexing relationship between pleasure and pain in the *Phaedo*, an esoteric construal of the “mud” of Hades in the same dialogue, and the water-carriers section of the *Gorgias* – appeal to the potentially positive use of symbolism and allegory: to do so, they sometimes employ the terminology of *ainittesthai* (to encode meaning in cryptic form), which we know was current in Plato’s day in the interpretation of various texts, including Orphic writings, as the Derveni papyrus shows.¹⁹ A full Platonic typology of kinds of discourse, if such a thing were feasible (and it has certainly never yet been attempted), would have also to include the zone of speculative thought inhabited by such things as the “likely story” of the *Timaeus*, or the sort of quasi-Hesiodic plausibility (making fictions or falsehoods that “resemble the truth”) that is invoked as valuable at the end of *Republic* Book 2 and put hypothetically into practice in the case of the noble lie.²⁰

Interpreting Platonic myths, then, is an exercise in tracing the relationships among shifting layers of meaning, both literal and non-literal. With the story of Er, the most obvious illustration of both the possibilities and difficulties of decoding allegorical modes of discourse is the spindle suspended in the lap of Necessity (616c–617c). The methodically itemized list of the spindle’s immediate properties – the order and size of its rims, their varying luminosity – makes it coherently intelligible as a mathematical model of celestial bodies in a spherical, geocentric cosmos, whether or not we posit the specific impact of Eudoxus’ contemporary astronomy of concentric spheres (though, in fact, Parmenidean rings may be at least

¹⁸ Lear 2006 pursues this point in relation to the work as a whole. Brisson 1998, pp. 122–27, unwarrantedly maintains that Plato repudiates allegorical interpretation per se.

¹⁹ See *Phd.* 60b–c, 69c (cf. the metaphor at *Rep.* 533d), *Grg.* 493a–d. The early development of Greek ideas of allegory, including the Derveni papyrus, is discussed in Ford 2002, pp. 67–89.

²⁰ “Likely story”: *Ti.* 29d, 59c, 68d. Falsehoods that “resemble the truth”: *Rep.* 2.382d (cf. Hesiod *Theogony* 27), with the noble lie at 3.415a–c.

as important an inspiration).²¹ It is also easy to construe a connection between the spindle and the *Republic's* own ideal of astronomy, adumbrated at 528d–530c (with the parallel template for harmonics, 530d–531c), as dealing not with the visible cosmos in its own right but with the perfect patterns of reality and beauty that inform and underlie it. Nor, given the defined instrumentality of a (real) spindle, can we doubt the status of its holder, Ananke herself (an inheritance, in part, from the systems of Parmenides and Empedocles), as the personification of a principle of cosmic purposiveness, rather than a materialist, Anaxagorean conception of necessity of the kind deprecated in the *Phaedo*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*. Yet the larger apparatus of symbols associated with the spindle (its partly “adamantine” material, Necessity’s knees, the singing Sirens and Fates) involves a density of figuration that defeats secure interpretation. It is not so much that there are problems of “visualization,” such as the spindle’s position vis-à-vis the column of light at 616b–c (or, indeed, the position of Ananke vis-à-vis the world): disputed details of this kind belong to a visionary mode that deliberately thwarts transparent exegesis. More substantively recalcitrant is the synthesis or fusion of cosmology and morality, with the interplay of order and disorder it entails. In narrative terms, Ananke’s spindle provides a quasi-mystical experience for the souls soon to be reincarnated; the necessity she represents has consequences for those souls, as later references to the necessity of their own destinies confirm.²² But how do we get from an astronomy that is under Ananke’s total supervision, via her daughters, the Fates, who participate in a choreographed cosmic design yet place (through Lachesis) on individual souls the burden of choosing their destinies, to the internal inescapability of those choices themselves? What is the relationship between the seemingly “adamantine” (616c) machinery of cosmic governance and the free choices made by souls in transition from one life to the next? Moreover, taken with the rest of its context, the spindle exploits but also refashions imagery from several sources: traditional-cum-Homeric mythology (including the Sirens and Lachesis), mathematical astronomy,

²¹ On Eudoxus’s system see Dicks 1970, pp. 151–89, with pp. 109–14 on the myth of Er. Parmenides’ cosmic wreaths/rings (*stephanai*) fit “on/against one another,” *epallēlous* (A37 DK): Morrison 1955 offers one reconstruction.

²² 617e, 618b, cf. 621a.

Pythagorean motifs (the harmony of the spheres), and the esotericism of Bacchic-Orphic mystery religion (as affinities with funerary gold lamellae confirm).²³ This sheer multiplicity of resonances, but accompanied by the myth's lack of a consistent alignment with any of those sources, makes the scope of allegory fraught with uncertainty.

That uncertainty bears heaviest on the myth's controlling themes of soul immortality, eschatological judgment, and reincarnation. These daunting ideas, all of which lie in the outer reaches of what can be thought or imagined, throw up a central hermeneutic challenge. With them, no ready-made alternative to literalism, no correspondence of the spindle-cosmos variety, is available. Yet literalism itself, so I shall suggest, seems to threaten the myth with incoherence. The crux is the understanding of immortality (survival of the soul), which is in turn presupposed by postmortem judgment and transmigration.²⁴ Plato had reason to expect that some otherwise sympathetic readers of the *Republic* would find immortality hard to believe. He mirrors that expectation in the text, just as he does, to poignant effect, in the *Phaedo*. When, earlier in Book 10 (608d), Socrates asked Glaucon, "Haven't you realised that our soul is immortal?" Glaucon looked him in the eye and exclaimed with amazement, "I most certainly haven't!" Socrates' ensuing attempt to establish the immortality of the soul by deductive reasoning does not lay claim to impregnability; it carries a touch of provisionality at 610a–b. The myth itself could count as an "argument" for belief in immortality, but only if Er's testimony is treated as authoritative, which, on the face of it, Socrates takes for granted but can do nothing to validate. But there is, in any case, a deeper level of difficulty here. Socrates' preceding argument for immortality, like those in *Phaedo*, posits a rigorous dualism of body and soul, allowing precisely for the separability of the latter, in its "pure" state, from the former (611b–612a). The myth itself sets out from the supposition of the soul's

²³ See Edmonds 2004, pp. 29–110, for a recent reappraisal of the gold lamellae, with 51–52, 88–91 for affinities with the myth of Er; cf. note 40 below. The attachment of "signs" of judgment round the necks of the just at *Rep.* 614c may evoke the placing of gold leaves on the chests of the dead.

²⁴ The myth of Er never contemplates the technical possibility, registered at *Phd.* 87d–8b, that a soul might survive more than one body yet eventually cease to exist and therefore not be unconditionally immortal (*athanatos*, immune to death).

survival of bodily death. But in keeping with the traditions of poetic and artistic mythology, and like Plato's other eschatological myths, Er's report proceeds to picture souls as embodied, spatiotemporally enduring entities (indeed *persons*, as we shall see). Literal acceptance of this aspect of the myth would be self-contradictory, collapsing the nonmaterial into the material. Yet the narrative seems to go out of its way to accentuate the quasi-personal continuity of souls on their trajectory from this world to (and through) the afterlife. How, then, are we to discern a stable significance in the representation of the disembodied as, so to speak, phantoms of embodiment?

As a preliminary move, this interpretative challenge can usefully be contextualized in relation to the work's earlier citations of prevailing attitudes to the afterlife. The following is a necessarily summary catalogue of the most pertinent passages. In Book 1 (330d–e), Cephalus remarked that inherited myths of Hades are ridiculed by most adults but arouse anxieties in the minds of those close to death. In Book 2, appealing for a defense of justice's nonconsequentialist value, Adeimantus mocked Orphic and kindred images of an afterlife in which the just enjoy a perpetual symposium, while the unjust are mired in mud (363c–d); later on, he described widespread skepticism about the idea of postmortem punishment for injustice (366a). In the censorship of poetry at the start of Book 3, Socrates himself objected to depictions of Hades as a place of terrors: how could future guardians develop courage, he asked, if they believed things that inculcate fear of death (386b)? In Book 4, Socrates referred all the ideal city's religious regulations, including the treatment of the dead, to the Delphic oracle, with the categorical statement that "about such matters we ourselves possess no knowledge" (427b). Differently, but equally pertinently, in Book 7 Socrates at one point equated arrival in Hades, for the soul that lacks philosophical knowledge, with "falling perfectly asleep" (534c–d): the language of this brief passage may be tinged with irony, but the conception of death as eternal sleep was a historical option and is in fact one of the two possibilities considered by Socrates, noncommittally, at the end of the *Apology* (40c–e). By contrast, at several junctures in the *Republic* Socrates permits himself to anticipate a positive afterlife for deceased guardians or philosophers. In Book 5 he borrowed from Hesiod to suggest that some guardians might become earth-roaming spirits (*daimones*) after death (468e–9a); in Book 6, he spoke of the fine "hope" with which

the uncorrupted philosopher will depart from this life (496e, echoing some of Cephalus' language at 1.330e–331a; cf. 498c); while in Book 7 he posited an afterlife in the "isles of the blest" for deceased guardians (540b–c), adding that they might be worshipped by their former communities as *daimones* if the Delphic oracle approved, but, if it did not, then as "happy and godlike." Finally, as I mentioned earlier, Socrates' critique of mimetic art in the first part of Book 10 cited the unfounded pretensions of poets and painters in depicting the domain of Hades (596c).

No integrated structure of beliefs emerges from these passages. On the contrary, uncertainty about an afterlife – uncertainty tempered by hope – is the predominant impression, even where Socrates is concerned. Nor does Book 10's formal argument for the immortality of the soul bridge the gap between that cumulative impression and the myth itself, since it provides no source of insight into what a discarnate soul is capable of experiencing, a point Socrates himself highlights by his contrast between the "impaired" soul of earthly existence (for which the barnacle-encrusted seagod Glaucus stands as analogue) and the "pure" soul whose nature could only be contemplated on a more elevated plane of thought (611b–612a). Given the *Republic's* wavering images of the afterlife, Er's story appears out of nowhere, professing to carry an eschatological authority that the *Republic* had not previously envisaged. Moreover, despite its putatively non-Greek origin, the story unmistakably assimilates certain traditional motifs of Greek underworld mythology, not least the gruesome torture of the exceptionally evil. No wonder, then, that Epicurus's disciple Colotes accused Plato of hypocrisy in this respect, complaining that the myth peddled the same pernicious and "tragic" mythology that the *Republic* attacks the poets for propounding.²⁵ But the matter is less straightforward than Colotes may have been disposed to recognize. In Book 3, it is the evaluation of death as an intrinsic evil, therefore as something terrible even for good people, that Socrates repudiates; in that same context (386b–387c), it is only certain components of traditional underworld topography (and their generalized prospects for the fate of souls) that he censors, components that happen *not* to reappear in Er's account. Some of the work's other eschatological references, too, such as the "isles of the

²⁵ Colotes' view is recorded by Proclus, in Kroll 1901, pp. 105–6.

blest,"²⁶ are compatible with the myth, especially if we keep in mind Socrates' indication that he offers a selective summary of Er's report (615a). Even so, a discrepancy remains between Er's story and some of Socrates' own earlier conjectures about the afterlife. There seems a world of difference, for example, and not only at the level of the literal but also in metaphorical or symbolic import, between eternal "sleep" for unphilosophical souls (534c–d) and the traumatic destiny of the figure in the myth, already considered, who had lived justly but "without philosophy." Most fundamental of all, how can an idea as far-reaching as reincarnation be held back till so late a stage of the inquiry into what it means for humans to lead just, good lives?²⁷ Is this a glaring flaw in the design of the *Republic* or an inducement to return to the start (the process of "cyclical" reading that I posited earlier) and rethink everything afresh?

The myth of Er was written for readers who might have held an allegiance to any one of several conceptions of the afterlife (Homeric, Eleusinian, Orphic, and others) or, like the skeptical Glaucon, no allegiance at all. What does the myth invite those readers to make of the nature and experiences of disembodied souls? Er's account begins with a statement of how his soul "left him" and "journeyed" to an "awesome" (*daimonios*) location (614b–c). In what follows Er's soul continues to behave entirely like an incarnate person, listening to and watching everything that confronts it. So, rather vividly, do all the souls in the myth: among other things, they enter and leave the place of judgment, wear their verdicts round their necks, convene in encampments like festival crowds, and make use of language. *Prima facie*, then, the souls possess bodies: Ardiaeus and the other tyrants even have their hands, feet, and heads shackled before being flayed (615e–616a). Matters are complicated by the fact that Er's account oscillates between talk of "souls," *psuchai* (with corresponding feminine pronouns and gender-inflected participles/adjectives), and talk of persons (masculine grammatical forms, plus references to named individuals), switching between, and even merging, the two idioms

²⁶ The isles of the blest appear in the *Gorgias* myth (523b, 524a, 526c); cf., less determinately, Socrates' anticipation at *Phd.* 115d, with *Smp.* 179e, 180b for the traditional motif.

²⁷ For one problematic hint of reincarnation prior to the myth, see note 32 below. At 498e, to Glaucon's ironic amusement, Socrates had envisaged reincarnation for Thrasymachus and others.

without qualm. At 617d–e, for example, the priest of Lachesis starts with the language of souls, then moves to that of persons. Likewise at 620d–e, the Greek shifts in quick succession from souls to persons, back to souls, then finally back to persons, where we stay for the final sentences of the account (621a ff.).²⁸ The interest of this observation is more than linguistic. It reflects the way in which the myth juxtaposes, or rather superimposes, two models of the soul: that of a notionally disembodied set of capacities for ethical reasoning, desire, and emotion and that of the self-conscious identity of a person, built around memory of, and continuity with, a personal history. More radically, we might say that it seems to fuse together immortal and mortal, a paradox not lost on the priest of Lachesis, who solemnly addresses those preparing for reincarnation with the oxymoron, “souls that last only a day” (*psuchai ephēmeroi*, 617d).

Just before embarking on the myth, Socrates spoke of the things that “await each person after death” (614a), and the myth bears him out. The souls persist in being, or at any rate remembering, the persons that they were. This is so until at least the point at which, having chosen new identities (which they assume in a manner somewhat like actors donning masks and costumes), they pass beneath the throne of Necessity – perhaps even till they drink from the river Heedless (621a–b). That last moment, when some souls drink more than required (and therefore forget more deeply), evidently insinuates the possibility of subsequent *anamnēsis*, recollection, by embodied souls of their preexistence, even though that notion has played no prior part in the *Republic* and, what is more, is conspicuously absent from Socrates’ comments on the myth. It is worth reflecting, however, that drinking from the river also serves to obliterate the new person’s *advance* knowledge of what its life holds in store, the concealment from the soul itself, as it were, of its own “destiny.” Despite that break in the thread of consciousness, Er’s narrative offers no explicit clue to whether or how souls might cease to be the souls of (successive) persons, or at any rate of animals (620a–d). It concentrates on the sequential experiences of the soul as, at every significant stage, the repository of a personal identity and the locus of ethical agency. If Socrates’ remarks at 611b–612a might have created

²⁸ At 620e–21a, moreover, there is a sort of merging of *daimones* into persons: the subject of the sentence passes, silently as it were, from the former to the latter.

an expectation that the myth would project an image of the “pure” soul, disentangled from the body (Glaucus without the barnacles), it leaves us after all with souls that apparently have much the same features as those posited elsewhere in the dialogue, whether or not we think of them as tripartite.²⁹ But that psychological continuity with the rest of the work brings us up against an awkward question. What is to stop us from circumventing all those old doubts about Hades by treating the myth not as making claims about a literal “beyond” but as an allegory of embodied life itself?

We can best pursue that question by turning to the two main comments (and, in due course, also the third) that Socrates adjoins to his telling of Er’s story.³⁰ The first and longest, at 618b–619a, is given dramatic emphasis by interrupting the speech of Lachesis’s priest to the souls (619b follows on from 617e). It is also given a stylistically marked emotional intensity, with one of the longest sentences anywhere in Plato and a vocative phrase, “O dear Glaucon,” which Socrates also uses to lend feeling to a number of major pronouncements elsewhere in the *Republic*, including the introduction of philosopher-rulers (473d) and a warning in Book 7 about the ineffable nature of ultimate truth (533a). But what is most striking about the passage is how Socrates translates the gravity of the soul’s choice in Hades (his term, 619a) into an imperative for “each of us” to seek ceaselessly for knowledge – indeed, strictly, for a *teacher* – of the difference between good and bad lives, and “to choose the better life, within our range of possibilities, always and everywhere” (618c). His prefatory statement that at the moment of prenatal choice lies “the whole danger for a human being [*anthrōpos*]” (618b) is at first sight incongruous, since the choosing souls in the story are not strictly people at all, though we have seen Er’s account picturing them extensively as persons. Part of Socrates’ point, it is tempting to say, is that we must practice or “rehearse” in life for the choice that, in the myth’s own dramatic terms, we will face *between* lives: he says as much at 619a, though there too he talks, climactically,

²⁹ Nowhere in the myth do the terms *logistikon*, *thumoeides*, *epithumētikon*, or their close cognates, occur. More loosely *thumos*-related words are found at 613a, 619b; on the verbs *analogizesthai*, *sullogizesthai*, see note 17 above.

³⁰ There are also brief interventions in Socrates’ own voice at 615a, 615c–d. In the *Gorgias* myth too we find comment (524b–d etc.) mixed with narrative (523a–4a etc.), but in that dialogue *both* are delivered in Socrates’ voice.

of what is at stake as the happiness of a human being (*anthrōpos*) not a discarnate soul. But in the very act of stressing the ubiquitous importance of moral learning and choice (“always and everywhere”), and thereby extrapolating back from the myth to incarnate existence, Socrates brings into play an instability between the mythic narrative and his commentary on it. In Er’s own account, the choice of a new identity involves an antenatal fixing of what one’s life will hold in store, in terms not just of physical endowment and social status but also of ethical character. That is implied by the words of the priest of Lachesis, and Er himself reports that a soul’s “order” or “orderliness” (*taxis*) followed of necessity (*Ananke internalized* in the soul) from the choice of externally defined life type.³¹ This sense of sealing one’s fate, morally as well as socially, is further corroborated by subsequent episodes of the myth, especially by the description of the future tyrant’s “fate” or “destiny” (*heimarmenē*, 619c) to eat his own children and by the language of fulfillment and irreversibility at 620d–e. Yet Socrates’ comment, in keeping with the *Republic* as a whole, clearly presupposes that life is not ethically predestined from the outset. It uses the language of practicing strenuously, learning, seeking, discerning, and choosing, in order to reinforce its message that moral agency must be exercised at every moment to maintain the commitment of a life.

Socrates’ first and fullest comment on the myth, then, gives rise to a conundrum. It interprets an image of definitive, once-for-all choice (productive of a “destiny”) as communicating a vitally recurrent imperative (“always and everywhere”) to be a moral “seeker and learner.” What is more, within the myth prenatal choices are themselves formed partly on the basis of *previous* existences, so that, on this scenario, the individual may be paying the price (or reaping the rewards) of the life of, in a sense, someone else, as a passage earlier in Book 10 seemed, anomalously, to hint.³² Far from simply

³¹ I.e., the same life type could be chosen for morally different reasons (as the examples at 620a–d tend to suggest); if that were not so, it would make no sense to say that the lives did not contain an “order” of soul. I take 618c–d, where Socrates speaks in terms of complex interplay (or “mixing”) of external and ethical features of life, to bear out that reading. For *taxis* of soul, see 577d and *Grg.* 504b–d; cf. *taxis* of life at 561d (587a is also pertinent).

³² 613a implies reincarnation, but also the possibility (contrary to the later myth) of punishment in life for the mistakes of previous lives.

illuminating the myth by extending its significance back from the other world to the present, Socrates' comment deepens the difficulties that face Plato's readers, especially since in this regard the myth threatens the *Republic's* entire vision of how individuals can be morally formed in the course of their passage through the educational, social, and political settings of their lives. But Socrates himself betrays no sign of difficulty or incongruity, aligning the idea of choice "in this life" and "in the whole of the hereafter" with eloquent assurance.

Socrates' second, much shorter comment (619d–e), unlike the first, is interposed unobtrusively into the flow of Er's account, with the change of syntax from indirect to direct speech conveying a confident change of voice from reporter to exegete of the myth. However, the ease with which Socrates makes that adjustment belies a further strain between exegesis and narrative. The second comment extrapolates from the scenario in Hades to the conduct of an embodied life, and, like the first, purports to configure the two things – the worlds of "here" and "there" – in a pattern of matching results for those (Socrates here speaks the language of persons, not souls) who journey between them. But not only does this duplicate the earlier tension between an all-determining life selection and the aggregative choices that determine the unfolding of a life from within. Now there is an additional puzzle. Er's account has just described the fate of the figure who had lived a life of some virtue but "without philosophy" and who, despite the reward of a millennium in the sky, was then driven by blind greed (*laimargia*, 619c: the only occurrence of this term in the *Republic*) to choose the greatest tyranny. But this was not a unique case; many of those returning from the sky, and therefore deemed just by the underworld judges, made similarly bad choices of their next life. Er's narrative intimates three possible reasons for their regression: first, as exemplified by the future tyrant, a lack of philosophical knowledge of good and evil; second, a lack of sufficient exposure to suffering and toil, *ponoi* (619d, a tacit admission that their "rewards" have actually weakened their judgment); and third, the "luck of the draw" in the order of choosing (619d).

That last factor has caused disquiet, even doubts about the text, on the part of some interpreters. But it is picked up directly by Socrates, who says: "if each time someone arrives in this earthly life, he philosophizes soundly and his place in the lot does not fall among the

last, he would be likely not only to be happy here," but also to enjoy a "smooth, heavenly journey," in both directions, between this world and that (619e). Yet the disquiet is not wholly misplaced. The priest of Lachesis had told the souls choosing their next lives that even the one who drew last place in the order of choice need not despair: "even for the last to come forward there is a desirable, not a bad, life, if he chooses wisely and lives strenuously" (619b). It is not enough to try to harmonize Socrates' comment (and Er's general report) with the priest's pronouncement by saying that the "lot," symbolizing all the external circumstances over which a person has no control, can have some effect on, but need not destroy, the goodness of a life. The priest stresses that even for the last to choose (and choice there will always be, 618a), there is a good life still available and, by implication, a good destiny for the immortal soul that leads such a life. Socrates himself, for sure, wishes to affirm that true happiness, and a "smooth, heavenly journey" between this world and the next, will belong to one who philosophizes soundly. But not only does he qualify the affirmation, in contrast to the priest's hieratic confidence, with a degree of eschatological tentativeness (using the language of likelihood: the verb *kinduneuein*, 619e).³³ He also hints that the very possibility of a philosophical life might be blocked by sheer contingency (a late place in the lot). In other words, while the priest implies that (ethical) understanding (*nous*, 619b) can always prevail over the external or material conditions of a life (because "virtue has no master," 617e), Socrates implies that even philosophical wisdom cannot sustain itself independently of external circumstances. In the course of his positive construal of the myth's moral meaning, a subtle note of reservation creeps almost inadvertently into Socrates' tone of voice.

The two comments with which Socrates interrupts the report of Er's experiences intensify the challenge of the myth, turning it into an exercise in which narrative and reasoning become entwined in a dialectic of their own. At the heart of this challenge lies the

³³ The conditional sentence as a whole at 619d–e, if taken *au pied de la lettre*, would entail that even *possession* of philosophic wisdom could not guarantee the "heavenly road," i.e., a verdict of justice, in the other world. To avoid that devastatingly extreme consequence, one should (as John Ferrari points out to me) treat the second part of the conditional (relating to the lot) as modifying the first (i.e., the possibility of a life of sound philosophy).

paradoxical idea of self-chosen destiny. That paradox lurks, on closer inspection, in the very words of the priest who, on behalf of Lachesis ("Allotter"), tells the souls that they will choose their own *daimōn*, (life) spirit, and will *not* have one "allotted" to them (*lēxetai*, 617e, from the verb *lankhanein*, origin of Lachesis's own name). The myth here positions itself, in a manner hard to decode, in relation to a variety of earlier Greek ideas about souls and *daimones*. It seems to fall somewhere in between three different versions of a *daimōn*: the agent of an individual's fortune (in traditional/popular thought), an entity underlying successive incarnations (Empedocles), and that which is self-constituted by an individual's life (Heraclitus, Democritus).³⁴ Given the strongly antitragic thrust of the myth to which I previously drew attention, it is remarkable that the motif of self-chosen destiny has some kinship with the psychologically dark and troubled world of Greek tragedy itself, where the extent and workings of human responsibility are always, at best, incompletely intelligible, and sometimes opaque. The chorus and protagonist of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, share the mysterious sense that in blinding himself Oedipus was both doing the work of a *daimōn* and acting on a terrible impulse of his own (1327–33). The correlate of such intractable uncertainty in the myth of Er is the triangular relationship between the priest's emphatic assertion of a doctrine of absolute moral agency ("responsibility belongs to the chooser; god is without responsibility," 617e), the demonstration, in Er's report, that even moderate virtue (virtue "without philosophy") and its post-mortem rewards are no protection against a lapse into the greatest evil, and, finally, the hint in Socrates' commentary that even the very possibility of philosophy might be undone by a drastic impairment of the external conditions of a life (drawing a lot "among the last"). Plato's text provides no explicit resolution of the problems raised by this sequence of ideas. But we can at least attempt some

³⁴ See, e.g., Hesiod *Works and Days* 314 (cf. 122–23), Theognis 161–64, pseudo-Lysias 2.78 (with the verb *lankhanein*), Empedocles fr. 115 DK (also with *lankhanein*), Heraclitus fr. 119 DK, Democritus fr. 171 DK. At *Phd.* 107d–e (cf. 113d), unlike the *Republic*, the *daimōn* is allotted to the soul (*lankhanein* once more); at *Ti.* 90a–c it is a metaphor or symbol for (part of) the soul itself. The relationship between *daimones* and souls in the Derveni papyrus is uncertain: see discussion in Betegh 2004, pp. 85–9. On later Platonist "demonology," see Dillon 1996, pp. 31–32, 317–20.

clarification by placing them in relation to the tension between literal and allegorical interpretations of the myth's fundamental theme of reincarnation.³⁵

If we take that concept literally, then at the moment of prenatal choice each soul has an opportunity to discern and evaluate in advance the externals of the life it selects, applying the kind of moral calculus that Socrates outlined in his first comment (618c–d). Whatever its place in the lot, the soul has a chance to commit itself to the ethically best life open to it; in that sense, there are no constraints on the exercise of virtue (“virtue has no master,” as we have been told, 617e), even though the element of chance (*tuchē*) in the range of lives available may mean that a choice made for the best reasons will still unavoidably lead to morally imperfect action. Equally, however, the very fact of a prenatal choice appears to determine the entire course of a life, as the future tyrant so grievously discovers. It turns that life into the playing out of an unalterable role: ironically, given the ethical momentum of the *Republic* as a whole, the sheer weight of responsibility placed on the soul prior to incarnation cancels the scope for active responsibility in the individual decisions and episodes of life. Moreover, the cycle of reincarnation brings with it further layers of complexity in the psychological causation of a life choice, since each soul, at the moment of choice, is still potentially influenced by its memories both of its previous existence and of the rewards/punishments subsequently assigned to it. The workings of such causation, as reported by Er, are too convoluted to be reduced to either optimism or pessimism. The narrative illustrates that, over a series of lives, a degree of justice can nevertheless be followed by severe regression, while some cases of injustice can be counteracted by a fresh impulse toward virtue: as each cohort of souls choose their next lives, most experience “a reversal [*metabolē*] between bad and good” (619d). On the most thoroughgoing literalism, the fluctuating outcomes of metempsychosis lead into impenetrable obscurity. What, for example, are the future prospects of just souls that choose reincarnation as tame animals (620d)? Will the circumstances of their animal lives enhance or impede their possibilities of moral progress

³⁵ Positions on this issue are polarized: Annas 1982, pp. 129–38, unpicks the myth in almost entirely literal terms (despite “symbolic,” p. 137); Thayer 1988, esp. pp. 377–79, explicitly discards literalism. Cf. note 12 above.

when the next cycle of existence comes round? If Er's own reactions to the mass spectacle of reincarnation are any guide, no overall inference can be drawn from the process; its mixed results encompass the pitiful, the ridiculous, and the amazing (620a), lending a tragicomic aura to the cosmic scene. One thing alone seems clear. Er's observations and Socrates' comments converge on the idea that, whatever the partial impact of other factors, the exclusive hope of happiness lies in the choice of justice for its own sake. Thus *belief* in this model of reincarnation, while it may theoretically limit the ethical autonomy of the embodied soul, can orientate the aspirations of that soul in only one direction: acting as though nothing other than justice matters (618e).

But how different is that upshot from a reading of reincarnation as an allegory of the life of the soul in *this* world? If, with some prompting from Socrates' comments at both 618b–19a and 619d, we focus on a this-worldly reading of the myth, the motif of a prenatal life choice can be interpreted as a stark emblem of the inescapably self-forming consequences of ethical agency, a magnified image of how at every moment ("always and everywhere") the individual soul/person is intrinsically responsible for what matters most about its existence.³⁶ Every action, we might thus say, brings with it its own "afterlife." Every choice makes us what we are; when we choose, we activate (and become) something, and therefore cannot simply pull back from *ourselves*, as the greedy soul would like to do – a graphic exemplification of Book 9's idea of the tyrant as peculiarly enslaved by, and imprisoned in, his own desires (577d–e, 579b). The emphasis placed by such an interpretation on this-worldly moral agency can help, among other things, to underscore a major difference between the myth and the premises of Greek mystery religion, some of whose symbolism undoubtedly colors Er's story. While mystery religion offers an essentially ritualized route (i.e., initiation) to postmortem happiness (and the same was probably true for the practices we call Orphism, belittled by Adeimantus in Book 2), Plato's myth, as reinforced by Socrates' exegesis, suggests that the soul's salvation – at any and every point of its existence – is to be found nowhere else than inside its capacity to determine its own ethical

³⁶ *Rep.* 519c mentions the idea of unifying an entire life by a single "aim" or vision (*skopos*); but such unity is something only certain lives possess.

self by choosing between good and evil. Insofar as this capacity is fulfilled most authentically in “philosophy,” we can call philosophy itself the true form of initiation, but initiation from within, as the *Phaedrus* intimates (249c–d). In broader terms, a this-worldly reading of the myth of Er supports the cumulative moral case made by the entire *Republic* for the identification of a good and happy life with a just life, even though, as I earlier stressed, such a reading must still acknowledge, in line with Socrates’ second comment, an element of “chance” or circumstantial contingency that can in extreme cases occlude the possibility of philosophy itself.³⁷

But a dilemma remains, a dilemma that the myth creates but cannot by itself resolve. An exclusively this-worldly reading of the myth would discard precisely what occasioned its telling in the first place, the tenet of the soul’s immortality. As such, it would dislocate the myth from its structural position in the work, as well as rendering opaque Socrates’ own repeatedly *dual* perspective on the here-and-now and the hereafter in his comments on Er’s story. On the other hand, the more strictly we press the notion of a defining, preincarnational life choice, the more we are confronted with a determinism that imperils the psychological, ethical, and political coherence of the rest of the *Republic*, which presupposes at almost every turn (including, ironically, Socrates’ first comment on the myth) the aptitude of souls to be educated, to learn and practice the difference between justice and injustice, and to shape the goodness of their embodied lives by an incremental series of chosen actions. The dilemma remains right to the end. When, in his final remarks on the myth, Socrates speaks of how “it could save us, if we are persuaded by it” (621c), the verb *peithesthai*, with *muthō* as its indirect object, might suggest belief, trust, or reliance of more than one kind, as too, for comparison, might the similar wording of Socrates’ hope that the inhabitants, and even the rulers, of the ideal city might come to “be persuaded” by the *muthos* of the noble lie (415c). In such cases, acceptance of a story’s literal veracity (cf. *Phaedrus* 229c) is not the only option; confidence in its normative authority must also be reckoned with.³⁸ If we look for illumination outside the *Republic*, we find

³⁷ *Tuchē* is glimpsed only in the margins of the *Republic*: see esp. 492a–c, 579c, 592a, 603e.

³⁸ Note here the traditional poetic phraseology of *peithesthai muthōi*, which involves taking advice, not assimilating information: see, e.g., Homer *Iliad* 4.412 (quoted at *Rep.* 389e; cf. note 15 above), Theognis 437 (quoted at *Meno* 96a).

that the myth that underwrites the soul's immortality in the *Phaedo* needs to be "repeated as incantation" (*epaidein*): that is, employed as a nonepistemic, partly self-persuasive device, used by Orphics, among others, for dealing with recurrent fears or problems.³⁹ On that analogy, the mythic epilogue to the *Republic* invites a trust that might be as much *affective* as rational. In view of my earlier contention that Er's story is presented with a diegetic ambiguity that leaves it strangely suspended between truth and fiction, it is apt (and, one might add, in keeping with the rich tradition of ancient interpretations of the passage) to conclude that the myth does not permit its readers to settle on a definitive either-or adjudication between literalism and allegory. Appropriately, in a work whose fabric is threaded with many metaphors of journeying (through life, dialectic, and the quest for justice), each reader is left with the prospect of a continuing, upward journey (621c), which is also a choice of how far to follow Socrates in the moral imagination along the cyclic path between this world and the other (619e).⁴⁰

But if one test of the myth's persuasiveness can be only affective, we are bound, on a dramatic level, to wonder about the person to whom it was directly addressed: Glaucon. He, we recall, was originally amazed that Socrates should expect him to believe in the soul's immortality, though he was nonetheless eager to hear a story of the afterlife (614b). Has *he* been "persuaded"? The work fades out, as it were, without telling us. That makes it a specimen of one kind of ending cultivated by Plato.⁴¹ *Gorgias* provides the most direct comparandum, but there is also an oblique affinity of atmosphere with the finale of *Phaedo* and with Socrates' (and Plato's) rehearsals, as it were, for that finale in the *Apology* and *Crito*. In keeping with the life-and-death focus of all those works, the absence of a response from

³⁹ *Phd.* 114d7; cf. 77e–8a. Orphic incantations: Euripides, *Cyclops* 646, and perhaps the Derveni papyrus col. 6.2 (Betegh 2004, p. 14).

⁴⁰ Other metaphors of journeying: e.g., 328e (with my final paragraph), 364d–5b, 420b, 435d, 445c, 452c, 504c, 515e, 532b–e. The idea of the soul's journey after death was older than Plato: see, e.g., Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 2.70; it is also found on some funerary gold leaves (cf. note 23 above). On the myth's own interpretative "afterlife" in antiquity, Untersteiner 1966, pp. 210–17, 236–38 (notes), provides an overview. Note the general idea of the myth of Er (with others) as symbolic/allegorical at Clement, *Stromata* 5.9.58.

⁴¹ *Parmenides*, *Politicus*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws* also finish without signaling what happens "next." Some dialogues stage the breakup of the gathering: *Cratylus*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Meno*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and, most portentously, *Theaetetus*. Sometimes, as in *Philebus*, the possibility of continuation is mooted.

Glaucón to the visionary perspective of the myth, together with the lack of any gesture of mundane or veristic closure of the kind some dialogues allow themselves, forms a subtle piece of counterpoint to the trope (or, if one prefers, the hope) of the soul's onward, unfinished journey. We have been asked to contemplate a prospect beyond the horizon of death, yet the destination of the "upward journey" of which Socrates speaks (621c), echoing the imagery of the cave, is not and cannot be in sight. The unfinished journey recalls, and is an extension of, the journey of life at 1.328e, a further indication of the difficulty of disentangling this-worldly and other-worldly readings of the myth. Despite the almost vatic tone in which Socrates anticipates the soul's eternal well-being, the work's denial of a final reaction to Glaucón functions as a signal of its own philosophically incomplete status. The end of the *Republic*, I submit, enacts a silence that is both dramatic and metaphysical.⁴²

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⁴² I am grateful to my fellow participants in the *Republic* conference held at Berkeley, and above all to John Ferrari, for helpful comments on this chapter.

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