ὁμοίους ἡμῖν: PROVOCATIVE CONTRADICTIONS IN PLATO'S MYTH OF ER

> "'You speak of a strange image,' he said, 'and strange prisoners.' 'They're just like us,' I said."[1] (*Rep*. 7.515a)

One of the most striking aspects of Plato's dialogues is their sense of familiarity. His colloquial ease has been famous since antiquity. Quintilian praises the "divine ease" of Plato's prose (*eloquendi facultate divina quadam*, *Inst*. 10.1.81); even the sentence that the biographical tradition latched onto to demonstrate Plato's fastidiousness (φιλοπονίας)[2] as a writer is, as Harvey Yunis (2007: 14) describes, "utterly innocent, shockingly offhand." Not only is the style familiar, the world and the characters that constitute it are too. Many of the dialogues are narrated as if told to an intimate and presuppose familiarity with interlocutors and with other dialogues. But it is one of Plato's greatest ironies that through stylistic familiarity he aims at epistemic *defamiliarisation*. This disorientation, this questioning of cultural norms is, after all, the central project of the Socratic method (*Apol*. 23b)[3] and the system of education outlined in the *Republic* (414d).[4] Socrates unsettles his interlocutors by deconstructing and defamiliarizing their deepest convictions. So too, the Noble Falsehood, the mythic cornerstone of the *kallipolis*, creates a "reflective disequilibrium," as Jonathan Lear (2006: 32) puts it, that "is meant to instill discontent with one's entire epistemic condition." Plato's subtlety as a writer is such that the

[1] All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
[2] That is, the first sentence of the *Republic*. Dionysius of Halicarnassus tells us that "Plato did not cease, when he was eighty years old, to comb and curl his dialogues and reshape them in every way. Surely every scholar is acquainted with the stories of Plato's passion for taking pains (φιλοπονίας), especially that of the tablet which they say was found after his death, with the beginning of the Republic ('I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon son of Ariston') arranged in elaborately varying orders" (*De Compositione Verborum* 25, trans. Roberts).
[3] ταῦτ᾽ οὖν ἐγὼ μὲν ἔτι καὶ νῦν περιιὼν ζητῶ καὶ ἐρευνῶ κατὰ τὸν θεὸν καὶ τῶν ἀστῶν καὶ ξένων ἄν τινα οἴωμαι σοφὸν εἶναι: καὶ ἐπειδάν μοι μὴ δοκῇ, τῷ θεῷ βοηθῶν ἐνδείκνυμαι ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι σοφός.
[4] See Lear (2006: 25-43).

most unsettling moments – these moments of defamiliarisation – are unsettling precisely because of their familiarity.

My focus here is the sense of the familiar in the myth of Er in *Republic* X. I argue that this myth, like Plato's other eschatological myths, is contaminated with a sense of the familiar, and that it is the pervasive sense of this-worldliness that unsettles us as readers. While purporting to provide an account of ineffable blessedness in the afterlife, the myth instead presents an image of disembodied existence that cannot but remind us of our own very corporeal life on Earth. Through *mise en abyme* the myth holds up a mirror to the reader, and dramatises the experience of reading a text like the *Republic*. The effect is to point us to the dialogue's relevance to the here-and-now and to remind us of our role as readers.

The interpretative challenges of the myth of Er are well known.[5] Stephen Halliwell (2007: 450-457) has demonstrated the difficulty of deriving an irreducible meaning from a myth that is "deliberately puzzling" and seeks to "thwart transparent exegesis." He points out how the myth contradicts arguments about mimesis made earlier in the *Republic*, how the presentation of the afterlife in the myth of Er is inconsistent with an understanding of the afterlife that was up to this point vague at best, and how the myth paradoxically describes *dis*embodied souls that nevertheless have hands, feet, names, and identities. While Halliwell focuses on the general indeterminacy of the myth, I would emphasise that the myth is so "astonishingly bizarre," as he puts it, in part because it is so very familiar; it is a depiction of another world that reminds us of our own.

[5] In addition to Halliwell 2007 (outlined below), see Annas (1982: 119-143) and Inwood (2009: 28-50) for a survey of the difficulties presented by Plato's eschatological myths in general and with the myth of Er in particular.

The frame of the myth sets our sights on the sublime.[6] In the introduction to the story, Socrates announces that the rewards that come to the just man during life are "nothing in multitude or size in comparison with those that await him upon his death" (614a). The myth of Er, then, is framed as a story about the rewards of the just in the afterlife. What we get instead is a far more earthly account of the corporal punishment of souls after death.[7] Though we have been led to expect an image of disembodied blessedness for the just and a description of retribution of the unjust that does not simply "bury them in mud" (εἰς πηλόν τινα κατορύττουσιν ἐν Ἅιδου, 363d), as traditional underworld mythology tends to do, the 'marvelous place' (τόπον δαιμόνιον 614d) that Er describes is strikingly this-worldly. The topography is described spatially and physically. Though apparently disembodied, judges sit (καθῆσθαι, 614c) in clearly defined spaces and attach onto the souls signs (σημεῖα, 614c), inscribed with their deeds during life, to the front of the just souls (ἐν τῷ πρόσθεν) and to the back (ἐν τῷ ὄπισθεν) of the unjust. They even get dusty and dirty (ἐκ τῆς γῆς μεστὰς αὐχμοῦ τε καὶ κόνεως) as they rise from an underground chasm that cannot but resemble the traditional pit of mud Adeimantus ridiculed in Book II. Halliwell sums up the paradox:

> 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: […] 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). (Halliwell 2007: 461)

[6] See Ferrari (2009: 126-129) for a discussion of the myth's omissions and misdirections.
[7] Ferrari (2009: 126) explains: "Of all Plato's eschatological myths, the myth of Er is the most rooted in the problems of mortal life. Socrates' story deals hardly at all with the rewards of justice in the afterlife."

The language of the myth is deliberately paradoxical; for it is in fact necessary for our visualisation of the scene that we violate logic and imagine these so-called disembodied souls as fully incarnate people.

The souls that inhabit Er's afterlife are not only endowed with human bodies, they also exhibit a strikingly familiar psychology to our own. They experience fear (φόβων, 616a), happiness (ἀσμενέστατα), suffering (πεπονθότες, 615d), regret (κόπτεσθαί τε καὶ ὀδύρεσθαι, 619c), gluttony (λαιμαργίας, 619b), and hatred (μίσει, ἔχθρᾳ, 620a-b). They are endowed with memories (μνήμῃ, 620c) and gender, and they have coherent identities.[8] They even engage in small talk. While the content of their conversations concerns the soul's ultimate destiny, Er's report of it emphasizes its relative banality:

> And [he said that] the souls, coming one after another, appeared to have come from a long journey (ὥσπερ ἐκ πολλῆς πορείας), and came happily to the meadow to camp, as if at a festival, and those who were friends embraced each other (ἀσπάζεσθαί τε ἀλλήλας) and the souls that came from the earth asked the others (πυνθάνεσθαι) about what it's like there and the souls from the sky asked what it's like among them. And they told stories to one another (διηγεῖσθαι δὲ ἀλλήλαις), lamenting and crying as they called to mind what they experienced (τὰς μὲν ὀδυρομένας τε καὶ κλαούσας, ἀναμιμνῃσκομένας ὅσα τε καὶ οἷα πάθοιεν) and saw in their journey (πορείᾳ) under the earth. (614e-615a)

The unusual collocation of the banal and matters of supreme philosophico-religious import may well remind us of the content and form of Plato's dialogues.

The souls in Er's story are familiar to us not only in their human bodies, psychologies, and activities (talking, sleeping, etc.); they also remind us of characters familiar from earlier in the *Republic*. In Book I Cephalus describes the social gatherings of his elderly peers:

> So most of us get together and lament (ὀλοφύρονται), longing (ποθοῦντες) for the pleasures of youth and calling to mind (ἀναμιμνῃσκόμενοι) days of sex,

[8] See Inwood (2009: 31-35) for a full explication of the difficulties involved.

> wine, festivity and other things like that, and we complain as though we've been deprived of the greatest things, saying that we lived well back then and now aren't even living. And some also complain (ὀδύρονται) about their relatives' reproaches against old age and in this vein they harp on old age, how many ills it causes them. But, Socrates, they don't seem to me to blame the real cause (οὐ τὸ αἴτιον αἰτιᾶσθαι); for if this were responsible, I too would have suffered (ἐπεπόνθη) these same ills from old age, and all the others. (329a-b)

Like the gathering of the souls in the myth, Cephalus and his friends lament their misfortunes (ὀδυρομένας τε καὶ κλαούσας, 615a; ὀλοφύρονται, ὀδύρονται, 329a-b), reminisce about the past (ἀναμιμνῃσκομένας, 615a; ἀναμιμνῃσκόμενοι, 329a), and misallocate blame (οὐ γὰρ ἑαυτὸν αἰτιᾶσθαι, 619c; οὐ τὸ αἴτιον αἰτιᾶσθαι, 329b). Just as the souls embrace one another upon meeting (ἀσπάζεσθαί, 614e), Cephalus embraces Socrates (ἠσπάζετό, 328c). Socrates converses with him (διαλεγόμενος, 328d) just as the souls converse with one another (διηγεῖσθαι, 614e). Socrates then asks Cephalus (πυνθάνεσθαι, πυθοίμην, 328e) about the journey to old age, as if Cephalus had "traveled a journey which he too will perhaps have to travel" (328e).[9] So too, the souls ask one other (πυνθάνεσθαι, 614e) what each had experienced in its journey, one which the inquiring souls are about to make for themselves.[10] The correspondences between the opening scene of the *Republic* and Er's description of the underworld are striking. Lest we have missed the allusion to Cephalus, Socrates says that since it will take too long to tell Er's story in full, he will tell only the κεφάλαιον, the summary (615a). Less than half a stephanus page later, Socrates reports:

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[9] In Greek: ὥσπερ τινὰ ὁδὸν προεληλυθότων ἣν καὶ ἡμᾶς ἴσως δεήσει πορεύεσθαι.

[10] O'Connor (2006: 76-77) recognises the consistency of imagery between the two scenes, and notes that Hesiod's metaphor of the "rough and steep" road of virtue and "short and steep" road of vice, cited by Adeimantus in Book II, is the crucial intertext for both (364d). It is important to keep in mind, I would argue, that the metaphor Plato adopts from Hesiod is an allegory of action in *this* world. The intertexts of the myth of Er consistently point us to an interpretation that concerns this life.

> ἔφη γὰρ δὴ παραγενέσθαι ἐρωτωμένῳ ἑτέρῳ ὑπὸ ἑτέρου ὅπου εἴη Ἀρδιαῖος ὁ μέγας. (615c)
>
> For he said that he stood beside one man being asked by another where Ardiaeus the great was.

The voices of Cephalus and Er seem to have blended for a moment, for directly following Cephalus' description of the gatherings with his elderly friends, he says:

> […] Σοφοκλεῖ ποτε τῷ ποιητῇ παρεγενόμην ἐρωτωμένῳ ὑπό τινος: 'πῶς,' ἔφη, 'ὦ Σοφόκλεις, ἔχεις πρὸς τἀφροδίσια;' (329b-c)
>
> […] Sophocles the poet, whom I once stood beside as he was being asked by another, "Where", he said, "Sophocles, do you stand with regard to sex?"

The Greek of the two passages is nearly identical.[11] The close intertextuality between the two passages compels us to evaluate the myth in light of the earlier discussion in Polemarchus' house.

Why are we directed here in the myth of Er back to Cephalus' speech in Book I? The souls in Er's story are in fact no closer to truth about the afterlife than Cephalus had been. Like Cephalus and his companions, the souls are mired in ignorance of their imminent fate. Even once they have arrived at the τόπος δαιμόνιος, the distinction between underworld and upper-world remains, and knowledge of one remains exclusive of the other. The souls from the upper-world wonder, like Cephalus and readers of the *Republic*, what the nature of the underworld actually is (πυνθάνεσθαι τάς τε ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἡκούσας παρὰ τῶν ἑτέρων τὰ ἐκεῖ, 614e), and the answers they receive are based on recollection at best.[12] So too, when the souls

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[11] Er's version is essentially Cephalus', retold in *oratio obliqua*. Socrates' retelling of Er's story, then, is a report of a tradition handed down from a source that overheard the conversation of two others. We seem here to have the recipe for a Platonic dialogue within a Platonic dialogue – one, in fact, that highly resembles the dialogue recorded in Book I. Lars Albinus (1998: 100) alludes to this *mise en abyme* quality of the myth: "if the myth of Er, on a micro-level, parallels the myth of the whole of the *Republic*, on a macro-level, then the *katabasis* of Er may even correspond to the whole of the dialogue as a *katabasis* itself. In fact Socrates makes his own introduction onto the scene by saying: 'I went down' (*kateben*)."

[12] Ferrari (2009: 126) puts it well: "Despite its billing, the myth does not in fact describe the rewards and punishments received in the afterlife but instead describes describings of them."

from the underworld ask what the nature of the upper-world is, the answer is an ineffable recollection of the past (615a).[13] From our point of view, Er's speech is frustratingly vague where we most desire precision; but it seems that the souls' knowledge of their own destiny is no less vague. Indeed, the inner workings of the τόπος δαιμόνιος are no clearer to the souls in the afterlife than are the roles of chance, fate, and virtue to us in the intelligible world. On this reading, the souls in Er's story are avatars of ourselves, ignorant, but still questioning.

To return to our question: why are we directed back to Cephalus? My answer is twofold. First, our recollection of Cephalus' speech places us – and the myth – squarely in the realm of the familiar; it suggests that the myth is interested in *this* world.[14] Second, it compels us to reevaluate the myth with reference to Cephalus' account of the afterlife. There, Cephalus recounts his experience of what Lear (2006: 29) describes as "a traumatic cocktail." Cephalus explains that as he approaches death's door, he begins once again to fear the stories about the underworld that he had disregarded so easily as a younger man (330d-331b). His irrational fears gain such a hold on him that they dictate his actions. As a result, "Cephalus is unable to remain with Socrates and inquire into what justice really is: he has to go off to make a sacrifice (331d)" (Lear 2006: 29). Cephalus acts as a model of misreading myths like the myth of Er. We must keep in mind, despite what traditional legends have told

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[13] To quote Ferrari (2009: 127): "The myth of Er […] makes the moment at which the purest souls get to contemplate the purest beauty literally invisible. It hides that scene behind holes in the sky; then grants it a mere two sentences of retrospective description which, unlike the descriptions offered by the souls that were sent to hell, give away practically nothing about the quality of the experience."

[14] In this, my interpretation of the myth of Er is quite close to David Sedley's (2009: 51-76) interpretation of the eschatological myth in the *Gorgias*. His comparison between the eschatological myth there with the myth of the leaky jar earlier in the dialogue is a particularly useful analogue for the *Republic*. He notes that in the *Gorgias* "Socrates has explicitly advertised the idea that myths of afterlife punishment serve as allegories for moral truths about this life" (Sedley 2009: 53).

us since youth, that we have no knowledge of what happens after death (τὰ γὰρ δὴ τοιαῦτα οὔτ᾽ ἐπιστάμεθα ἡμεῖς, 427b).

The final point of resonance between the souls in the myth of Er and ourselves is also the most poignant. In the climax of the myth, a prophet delineates the terms of choice for the souls' next life: each soul will get a lot that determines the order in which it makes its selection. There are more models of lives (βίων παραδείγματα) than there are souls, and even the soul that has received the last lot can still find a happy life provided that it chooses wisely (619b). Afterwards, the souls make their selection in turn, a spectacle which Er describes as "pitiable, ridiculous, and incredible" (620a).[15] Er reports:

> The one that had received the first lot went over straightaway and took (ἑλέσθαι) the biggest tyranny, and both because of his folly and greed he made his selection without scrutinizing it sufficiently (οὐ πάντα ἱκανῶς ἀνασκεψάμενον); he didn't realize that it contained (αὐτὸν λαθεῖν ἐνοῦσαν) the destiny of eating his own children and other misfortunes. But when he examined it at his leisure (κατὰ σχολὴν σκέψασθαι), he beat his chest and lamented (κόπτεσθαί τε καὶ ὀδύρεσθαι) his choice, since he hadn't abided by the warnings of the prophet. He did not blame himself for his misfortunes, but fate and spirits and everything except for himself. He was one of those that had come down from the sky, after he had lived in a well-ordered state during his previous life and obtained virtue by habit but without philosophy. (619b-d)

This soul's mistake is one of misreading, for the selection of lives is clearly presented as one of reading. The παραδείγματα are described in such a way that they must be texts. They are physical objects that can be grasped by the hands (ἑλέσθαι) containing (ἐνοῦσαν) discernible bits of information – information that may escape a superficial reading (αὐτὸν λαθεῖν). For this reason, they also demand careful scrutiny

[15] This description should, perhaps, prepare us for a narrative resembling dramatic literature. The only other appearance of ἐλεεινός in the *Republic* occurs earlier in Book X, describing the emotions induced by tragedy. Socrates uses γέλοιος in the same passage to describe comic performances (ἐν μιμήσει δὲ κωμῳδικῇ, 606c), and Aristotle refers to τὸ θαυμαστὸν as an essential feature of tragedy (*Poet.* 1452a).

(ἀνασκεψάμενον, σκέψασθαι), which requires leisure (κατὰ σχολήν).[16] These texts contain within them descriptions of events typical of tragedies (παίδων αὑτοῦ βρώσεις καὶ ἄλλα κακά, 619b), and the souls react to the contents of these texts in much the same way that Socrates describes the reactions of audiences to tragedies and comedies, abandoning themselves to lamentation and to identification with the texts before them (605d).[17]

For the other souls the choice of the παραδείγματα is a matter of reflection (μεμνημένην) and observation (κατιδοῦσαν), but especially for Odysseus. Er reports his selection as follows:

> And [he said that] by chance the soul of Odysseus, having obtained the last lot of all, went about to make his selection, and because of his recollection of his previous toils (πόνων), he ceased from ambition (φιλοτιμίας) and went around for a long time seeking the life of a regular man, one who refrains from political affairs (ζητεῖν περιιοῦσαν χρόνον πολὺν βίον ἀνδρὸς ἰδιώτου ἀπράγμονος). Though with some difficulty, he found it lying neglected by the others, and upon seeing it he said that he would have done the same thing even if he had gotten the first lot, and so he took it up happily. (620c-d)

Odysseus' choice is successful due to careful scrutiny of the παραδείγματα – one that is not satisfied by a superficial reading, but rather probes the texts for their deeper significance for him. Odysseus' soul is marked not only as a successful reader, but as a particular kind of reader. Er reports that he went around seeking (ζητεῖν περιιοῦσαν) the life of an ἀπράγμων ἰδιώτης. This peripatetic inquiry should remind us of Socrates. In Book I Thrasymachus offered a portrait of Socrates: "here you have the wisdom of Socrates: he himself is unwilling to teach, but he goes around (περιιόντα) learning from others" (338b). When Socrates describes his

[16] In Plato's dialogues, σχολή is often implicated with the processes of reading and writing. The phrase κατὰ σχολήν in particular is strongly associated with literary activity in Plato. It suggests scholarly activity in all of its nine other uses in the Platonic corpus, and in four of the nine it is linked explicitly with physical texts (*Leg*. 858b, *Phdr*. 228a, *Tht*. 143a, *Ti*., 24a).

[17] See also *Phileb.* 48a.

divinely-sanctioned mission in the *Apology*, he says, “even now I go around seeking and investigating (περιιὼν ζητῶ, 23b) to see if I think anyone is wise.” Throughout the Platonic corpus Socrates consistently poses himself as an ἀπράγμων ἰδιώτης, as any reader of the dialogues can attest.[18] Earlier in the *Republic* Socrates describes himself – and the model philosopher living in a corrupt state – as one who “keeps quiet and minds his own business” (ἡσυχίαν ἔχων καὶ τὰ αὑτοῦ πράττων), a virtual definition of ἀπραγμοσύνη (496d). Odysseus’ search is marked as characteristically Socratic.[19] Better yet, Odysseus’ investigation into the βίος of a non-professional and apolitical ἰδιώτης may remind us of ourselves. As readers of *Sokratikoi Logoi*, we, like Odysseus, seek and scrutinize a quasi-biographical portrait – a βίος – of Socrates, the ἀνήρ ἰδιώτης *par excellence*.[20]

Er’s report of the spectacle of souls choosing the παραδείγματα of their next lives should remind us of ourselves. It is presented as a scene of reading, and the stakes of misreading are high. Our own reading of the *Republic*, a conversation that Socrates calls a παραδείγμα, is of the highest of stakes (472e). It is, as Socrates tells Thrasymachus, “the search for justice, a thing more valuable than a vast store of gold” (336e). The *Republic* is also at its core about choosing the right model of life. In reading the dialogue’s search for the value of living with justice, we are prompted time and again to consider how the *Republic* relates to us. Plato’s aim is protreptic;

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[18] See, for example, *Phaedr.* 227e-228a; *Phaedr.* 236d; *Euthyd.* 295e.

[19] A suggestion already proposed by Planinc (2003: 18) and O’Connor (2006: 60), who writes: “It is Socrates himself who seems to be projected onto the chastened Odysseus, who retires to private life from the hurly-burly of his ‘labors.’ […] Socrates explicitly uses himself as an example of this private, retiring philosopher (496c).”

[20] It may not be unreasonable to suggest that Plato himself may have understood his own work a part of an (albeit nascent) tradition of biography. Indeed, biography was beginning to come into its own as a genre in the fourth century B.C. Arnaldo Momigliano (1993: 32) finds evidence of biographical and autobiographical works in the fifth century. He recognises Plato’s place in the biographical tradition, noting that “both Plato and Xenophon apparently created new types of biographical and autobiographical narration” (47).

he wants to change the way we live by reminding us of the impact of our choices on our own lives. Stephen Halliwell elaborates:

> If 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…the individual soul/person is intrinsically responsible for what matters most about its existence. Every action, we might thus say, brings with it its own "afterlife." (Halliwell 2007: 469)

Odysseus within the myth and Socrates as external exegete both interpret the texts before them for their personal significance to themselves. Socrates' exegesis of Er's other-worldly story focuses on the here-and-now. In the middle of his report of Er's description Socrates says:

> Here, as it seems, dear Glaucon, is the whole danger for a man. And therefore each of us must take the greatest care – to the disregard of all other lessons – to be an inquirer and student of this lesson: to see if from anywhere he is able to learn of and find someone who will make him capable and knowledgeable, able to distinguish a good life from bad…so that he can choose once he has reasoned it out well, looking to the nature of the soul, calling the life worse that makes his soul less just and calling the life better that makes his soul more just. He will disregard all other considerations; for we have discovered that this is the best choice both in life and in death (ζῶντί τε καὶ τελευτήσαντι). (618b-618e)

Socrates focuses his reading of the myth on the fledgling student of philosophy, the ideal reader of the *Republic*, and he seems to interpret the prenatal life choice as an allegorical representation of our own choices in this life. Where we expect to see a portrait of another world characterizing the ineffable blessedness of just souls in the afterlife, we get instead a depiction of embodied souls trying to discover through dialogue the nature of divine retribution in the afterlife, souls whose fate depends on their understanding of the text that lies before them.[21] Instead of another world, we find an image of ourselves, refracted through a mythic lens.

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[21] See Inwood (2009: 45), where he emphasises the this-worldly implications of the myth of Er: "the underworld choice seems to have pre-empted what we normally regard as our choice within life." He suggests, along the lines of Halliwell's interpretation, that "the lottery-choice combination in the underworld represents the mixture of chance and choice that forms a life,"

Shortly after the allegory of the cave in *Republic* VII, Socrates tells Glaucon that they should search for the study that will "naturally conduce to the awakening of thought," a study that "really does tend to draw the mind to essence and reality" (523a).[22] When Glaucon fails to understand his meaning, Socrates explains that intellectually provocative experiences (παρακαλοῦντα) are those that "make one thing clear no more than its opposite" (523c). Provocative experiences, then, are those that compel us to choose between two mutually exclusive meanings. Glaucon responds that "these communications to the soul are strange (ἄτοποι) and require further inquiry." Socrates continues: "It is in such cases that the soul first summons to its aid calculating reason and thought (λογισμός and νόησις) and tries to investigate whether each of the things reported to it is one or two" (524b). The myth of Er performs this function precisely. The contradictory nature of the myth is carefully calculated so as to lead us to the kinds of critiques so often sounded about the end of the *Republic*. In recasting traditional eschatological myths into a new, but no less problematic, form, Plato compels his readers to critique in his myth the very inconsistencies they allow to pass without criticism in the myths they have been told since youth. For Plato it is these provocative contradictions that most lead us up toward the light of critical thought.

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but is wary of concluding that the myth is "an allegory concerning the nature of our present life."

[22] *Trans.* Paul Shorey.

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