Plato's *Republic*

An Introduction

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14. Are We There Yet?

Tying up Loose Ends in Book X

Book IX ends with Socrates telling Glaucon that if the *polis* one lives in is far from ideal, even if the ideal *polis* exists only in theory but not in reality, one can still 'make himself its citizen' (9.592b), and thus learn to live justly in an unjust or a non-just world. It would be a fine place to end the *Republic,* but Plato has other ideas. Three of them, in fact.

The 'Ancient Quarrel' between Poetry and Philosophy (10.595a–608b)

The first of these is tying up a loose end regarding poetry in the ideal *polis.* Since the restrictions on poetic form and content developed in Books II and III preceded the division of the soul in Book IV, Socrates thinks it would now be fruitful to revisit the status of poetry, armed with an account (*logos*) of the soul (*psuché*)—a psychology—he lacked earlier. He argues that the three-part soul further confirms the earlier conclusion that 'imitative [...] poetry should be altogether excluded' (10.595a) from the ideal *polis.*

Readers who think they have misremembered the earlier discussion should feel free to indulge in an 'it's not me, it's you' moment, for it is *Socrates* whose memory seems faulty. Earlier, Socrates allowed imitations of 'the words or actions of a good man' (3.396c) and of 'someone engaged in peaceful, unforced, voluntary action [...] acting with moderation and self-control' (3.399ab), not to mention modes and rhythms 'that would suitably imitate the tone and rhythm of a courageous person who is

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active in battle' (3.399a). A lot has happened in the *Republic* since Book III, so perhaps we can forgive Socrates' misremembering his earlier view. It may be that Plato is poking a little fun at Socrates here, for at least half a dozen times in Book VI we are told one must possess the intellectual virtue of having a good memory to be a true philosopher.

Socrates' target is narrower than is frequently claimed. He is not arguing against poetry (or, even more broadly, art) in general but rather against imitative poetry—and indeed it is even narrower than this: he wants to exclude 'poetry that aims at pleasure and imitation' (10.607c) from the ideal *polis,* which would leave room for imitative poetry that aims not at pleasure but at moral improvement. The ideal city *can,* then, 'employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and storyteller, one who would imitate the speech of a decent person' (3.398a). In arguing that would-be guardians should not be imitative (μιμητικός [*mimêtikos*]) (3.394e), Socrates is really arguing that guardians should not be *imitatively promiscuous*: they should not be able, willing, or disposed to imitate any and every type of character, since this would prevent them from cultivating the sense of shame and disgust at dishonorable action that is the basis of good character. Since 'imitations practiced from youth become part of [one's] nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought' (3.395d), Socrates is very leery of imitative promiscuity.

That all poetry inspired by 'the pleasure-seeking Muse' (10.607a) must be excluded from the ideal *polis* is a conclusion that Socrates comes to reluctantly. He loves poetry, especially Homer, and is loath to live without it. There is no Homer or Hesiod, no Aeschylus or Sophocles or Euripides in the ideal *polis.* Instead, 'hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people are the only poetry we can admit into our city' (10.607a)—which, interestingly, is the only kind of poetry one encounters in the first, rustic city (2.372b). It is as though Socrates looks longingly at a copy of the *Iliad,* weepily confessing, 'I can't quit you'. But quit it he must, for his commitment to philosophy is a commitment to going 'whatever direction the argument blows us' (3.394d), even when we do not like the destination or find the winds too strong. We might expect Glaucon, who objected to life in the rustic first city because the food was too simple, to object to the absence of a key cultural and aesthetic staple, but he finds Socrates' arguments so compelling that he makes no objections to the restricted poetic diet Socrates prescribes.

Our task as readers is to determine if we find Socrates' arguments as compelling as he and his audience do. Since the arguments are overlapping and interrelated, separating them into distinct arguments is somewhat artificial, but doing so aids in clarity, so I will divide the arguments into three.

The Metaphysical Argument: Art Merely Makes Copies of Copies, and Thus is not Worth Taking Seriously

I have dubbed the first argument 'metaphysical' since the Forms play a significant role in it. Perhaps surprisingly for an argument meant to support a conclusion about imitative poetry, Socrates focuses on painting more than poetry in the metaphysical argument. But we will see that painting more clearly makes the point he wants to establish against poetry.

All beds, Socrates argues, have in common the Form of the bed itself: that essence that makes them beds rather than chairs or knives or sheep. Any particular bed that one might sleep in is a spatio-temporal copy of this Form, just as the shadows on the Cave wall are copies of the artifacts held before the fire, and just as those artifacts are ultimately themselves copies of the Forms that inhabit the sunlit intelligible world above. So someone who paints a bed is making a copy of something that is itself a copy. The painter is imitating the appearance of a bed, and indeed how it appears from a particular vantage point, not the reality or being of the bed: 'painting […] is an imitation of appearances […] [not] of truth' (10.598b).

Where the painter represents objects, the poet represents actions, but the argument is the same for both: paintings and poems are too metaphysically thin, too much like the shadows and reflections one sees on the wall of the Cave. 'Imitation is a kind of game', Socrates says, 'and not something to be taken seriously' (10.602b). There is no hint here of the danger lurking in the games we play, as there is elsewhere in the *Republic* (e.g., 4.424d, 7.539b, 8.558b). His point is that anyone who could construct a bed would spend his or her time on these metaphysically more substantial objects; and anyone who could philosophically understand the Form of bedness would spend their time on this metaphysically more substantial task. Only someone

insufficiently skilled in either would waste their time on something so trivial as making art.

Two recurring themes in Socrates' animadversions against imitative art are worth bringing out here. The first is that he shows little if any interest in artistic skill. On the one hand, this makes sense, given his metaphysical views. But on the other, he simply ignores the skill required to make copies of copies. Whatever one's metaphysics, *trompe l'oeil* paintings and modern photo-realism are impressive in and of themselves; they need not be written off as 'trickery' (10.602d) and bogus magic. A second, related theme is his lack of interest in the joy of artistic creation. This is perhaps a particular instance of a more general disregard for the importance of play in a well-lived and happy life. It is ironic, given the artistic care and skill with which Plato constructed the *Republic,* that its protagonist would be so uninterested in artistic creation. Earlier we criticized Socrates' narrowness in asserting that there are three primary kinds of people ('philosophic, victory-loving, and profit-loving' (9.581c)), and here we can see yet another type to add to the list: artists, who devote their lives to artistic creation. Perhaps some of this emanates from a contempt for 'those who work with their own hands' (8.565a), itself an odd thought from someone who is himself a stonemason. But this may be Plato's upper-class snobbery more than anything. Artistic readers who have made it this far in the *Republic* often get righteously—and rightfully—indignant or shake their heads in pity at this foolishness. It is not just that Socrates is not interested in and does not revere the *products* of artistic creation, but that he is not interested in the *process* of artistic creation and indeed denigrates it by likening it to walking around with a mirror (10.596d). Thus it is no surprise that he dismisses most painting and poetry as trivial wastes of time. One need not fully agree with Schiller's dictum that one is fully human only in play to think Plato is missing something important here.[1] Play's value is thoroughly instrumental for Plato, useful as a means of moral education, but in itself possessing no intrinsic value. Schiller—and many readers, I suspect—would disagree.

1 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man,* trans. by Keith Tribe, ed. by Alexander Schmidt (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 45 [Letter 15].

The Epistemological Argument: Artists Literally Do Not Know What They Are Talking and Painting about

Given the way metaphysics and epistemology are fused in the *Republic*, it should be no surprise that the next argument is intertwined with the metaphysical argument. Here, the worry is epistemological: that artists do not need knowledge of what they are imitating in order to imitate it. While it is true that the imitator needs to know how to imitate that appearance, such *know-how* is rather trivial, Socrates thinks, given the metaphysical thinness of what it results in.

To make his epistemological point, Socrates contrasts the user, the maker, and the imitator of a flute. An expert flute-player knows what a good flute should sound like and what makes it play well. (Here, Socrates uses 'know' in an ordinary sense, not the technical sense he established in Book V and developed in Books VI and VII.) The flute-maker, who has a correct belief about what a good flute is (having just had this explained to them by the expert flutist), sets about making a good flute. Socrates does not say, but presumably the flute-maker possesses knowledge about the effects of different kinds of wood, different drying times, etc. They know *how* to make a good flute; the flutist knows *what* a good flute is—and this conceptual knowledge is always superior to practical know-how, for Socrates. 'An imitator', by contrast, 'has neither knowledge nor right opinion' (10.602a) about good flutes. Knowledge and correct belief about what makes a flute good is not needed to paint a flute; what the artist has—ignorance—will suffice for their purposes, which is imitating how flutes appear, not what they are.

Given how important epistemology is to Plato, we can see why he is down on artists. But the epistemological argument is even more serious than this, as we see when we shift focus from painting to poetry. Just as one can paint a flute without knowing what a good flute is or what makes good flutes good, one can 'imitate images of virtue [...] and [yet] have no grasp of the truth' (10.600e). People look to Homer for moral guidance, but they should not, Socrates argues, since Homer does not know what courage, for example, *is;* he only knows how to create an image of it in poetic song. 'If Homer had really been able to educate people and make them better' (10.600c), Socrates reasons, 'if Homer had been able to benefit people and make them more virtuous, his

companions would [not] have allowed either him or Hesiod to wander around as rhapsodes' (10.600d). Instead, they would have insisted that Homer and Hesiod stay put and teach them about virtue, or they would have followed them in a caravan of moral education. And Homer, had he actually possessed such knowledge, would have surely obliged. But Homer and Hesiod were allowed to wander, so Socrates concludes that they did not possess genuine moral knowledge.

While poets and painters might have good ears and eyes for what a culture takes virtue and the virtues to be, one of the lessons of the First Wave back in Book V was that we should not take our culture's norms at face value: 'it is foolish to take seriously any standard of what is fine and beautiful other than the good' (5.452e). Socrates, of course, is not a relativist about norms, but neither is he a conservative, at least of the sort that gives great weight to tradition as a source of moral wisdom. That one's culture has long approved of certain values carries little or no epistemic weight for Socrates. One of philosophy's tasks is to subject these values to rational scrutiny. We saw earlier that the ridiculousness of women wrestling naked and governing 'faded way in the face of what argument (λόγος [*logos*]) showed to be the best' (5.452d). A perhaps unexpected upshot of the 'image of the soul in words' in Book IX is an objective test of one's culture's 'conventions about what is fine and what is shameful. Fine things', Socrates says, referring to things that are *kalon*, 'are those that subordinate the beastlike parts of our nature to the human [...] shameful ones are those that enslave the gentle to the savage' (9.589d).

Someone friendly to the arts might concede that many artists lack philosophical knowledge of the nature of goodness and the virtues but they might also insist that many of these artists possess true beliefs about these topics and are not ignorant, as Socrates claims. But Socrates might reply that this leaves an essential problem untouched—namely, the epistemic authority his (and our) culture accords to artists. If they lack knowledge, why care what they have to say? Distracted by their 'multicolored' (10.604e, 10.605a) productions, we think they can teach us how to live—an assumption that may seem odd in our age of entertainment—but they lack the knowledge required to do so. But if we are fools to follow them, the problem seems to be with *us* rather than *them*.

Even readers who are not persuaded by Socrates' argument might concede that it points to something important, something perhaps more important in our day than in Socrates': the supposed authority of celebrities to pronounce upon issues of the day, especially political issues. Many of us—too many of us—fall for the *argumentam ab celebritas*, as we might call it. While we can revere them as actors, why should we take seriously the political pronouncements of Meryl Streep or Robert De Niro? They can teach us a great deal about the craft of acting, but is there any reason to think that they have a great deal to teach us about public policy? They might; but if they do, it is not because they are great actors—that is, highly skilled at imitation.

Many readers will not share Socrates' expectation that artists teach us how to live; but readers of a serious, aesthetic bent will think that some novelists, poets, filmmakers, musicians, composers, etc. *do* aim for more than entertainment. Indeed, there is good reason to think of some artists as creating philosophical art: art that wrestles with some of the same moral, metaphysical, and epistemological problems that occupy philosophers. I suspect that many readers have a more expansive view of what constitutes philosophy and argument than Socrates does, and so are willing to take these artists' views seriously. But even so we would do well to maintain a healthy dose of Socratic skepticism about the moral and epistemological authority many of us see them as having. We are all prone to confirmation bias, of thinking certain bits of evidence are *good* evidence because they confirm what we already believe. Holding our favorite artists' feet to the philosophical fire and querying the views and arguments they offer is a show of respect for them as thinkers that is consistent with respecting them as creative artists.

The upshot of the epistemological argument is that, even though one might really enjoy reading (or, more likely in the Greek world, listening to a performance of) Homer, one would be foolish to 'arrange one's whole life in accordance with his teachings' (10.606e), since there is no good reason to think that poetic skill overlaps with philosophical insight. Thus we should not, as Polemarchus does in Book I, quote poets like Simonides as moral authorities on the nature of justice, for example. Instead, we should critically examine their sayings and adopt them as guides for living only if they pass rational muster.

The Moral Argument: Art Corrupts Even the Best of Us

Some readers will have noticed a pattern in the *Republic:* Plato tends to list items in increasing order of importance; the third of three items is almost always the most important. The Third Wave is 'the biggest and most difficult one' (5.472a) and the third argument that the just life is happier is 'the greatest and most decisive' (9.583b). We see that pattern again here: the moral argument against art, to which we now turn, is 'the most serious charge against imitation' (10.605c).

In the first two arguments, the key notion of imitation (μίμησις *mimêsis*]) seems roughly synonymous with representation: an object or action is re-presented by the painter or poet. But in this final argument we should keep in mind the more precise sense Socrates had in mind when he distinguished the *content* of poems and stories or *what* they say from *how* they say it—i.e., their style. Imitation is a matter of 'mak[ing] oneself like someone else in voice or appearance' (3.393c) and thus the poet or performer impersonates a character, speaking from that character's point of view, as that character would speak and act—as actors do onstage. Imitation in this sense is contrasted with pure narration, in which the author or speaker describes but not does enact actions and events, telling the audience that a character said such-and-such but not directly quoting a character's speech (or if doing so, not attempting to imitate the speaker's voice and mannerisms). Unlike the imitative poet, the purely narrative poet 'never hid[es] himself' (3.393d) behind characters: the narrative poet is always present, never impersonating another and never being anything but themself. Socrates' example is a non-poetic summary of the opening scene of the *Iliad,* a summary of events as one might find in a high school 'book report' or in Cliff or Spark Notes. But narration is also the style of the hymns to the god of wine and fertility, Dionysus, known as dithyrambs, which were typically sung in the Phrygian mode, one of the two musical modes Socrates allows in the ideal *polis* (3.399a). So presumably dithyrambs are among the 'hymns to the gods' that are allowed in the ideal city—indeed, the city's poets will 'compose appropriate hymns' (5.459e) to celebrate and consecrate the eugenic marriages discussed in Book V. A third kind of style is a mix of narration and imitation, which is the form epic poetry takes: a narrator tells the audience about certain events and

not merely quotes but enacts other events by imitating or impersonating some of the characters.

In Book III Socrates focused on the moral danger imitation in the strict poses to performers, and presumably the creators of such poetry would also face moral danger as well. The title character in J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* wrestles with something like this latter problem. Her concern is not with the perils of imitation but with the dangers that come with writing about profound evil. To do so well, one must confront evil deeply and indeed sympathetically, imaginatively entering into the consciousness of Himmler and Hitler and their ilk (which suggests a disagreement with the conclusion of Socrates' epistemological argument). And 'she is not sure that writers who venture into the darker territories of the soul always return unscathed'.[2] In Book X Socrates shifts his attention away from the moral dangers that imitative poetry poses to its performers and toward the dangers it poses to the audience, who identify with the characters the performers impersonate.

Where the epistemological argument focused on poetry's incapacity to make us better, the moral argument focuses on its power to make us worse: 'with a few rare exceptions it is able to corrupt even decent people' (10.605c). We take seriously the sufferings of the protagonist and not only enjoy watching or listening but actually 'give ourselves up to following it' (10.605d). Instead of being properly disgusted at the hero's lamentations (an earlier focus of censorship, for example at 3.387d), we enjoy and even praise them (10.605e). But, Socrates argues, enjoying other people's sufferings is 'necessarily transferred to our own' (10.606b), and thus we nurture 'the pitying part' of our soul, which, nourished by tragedy, 'destroys the rational [part]' (10.605b). The problem is not merely that in taking our own sufferings seriously we forget that 'human affairs are not worth taking very seriously' (10.604c), but rather that we dethrone reason from its rightful place and live lives guided by emotion when we 'hug the hurt part' (10.604c)—which prevents us from being just, and thus happy. Socrates' arguments against comic poetry run parallel to his arguments against tragedy: instead of being overcome by grief, we are overcome by hilarity. Both involve a dethroning of reason

2 J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Viking, 2003), p. 160.

which we think is temporary but which, Socrates thinks, is anything but. Whether we are giving ourselves over to laughter or lamentation, we are nourishing and nurturing the appetitive and spirited parts of our souls, which house the emotions, and we are unlikely to be able to contain this beast within when we leave the theater.

It is telling that Socrates is especially concerned with imitative poetry's power to make us act, feel, and think differently in private than we do in public. He seems suspicious of and often hostile to privacy, which is unsurprising given the priority of the community over the individual that animates his thought. Socrates' animus toward privacy pops up in various places. For example, that the guardians and auxiliaries have little to no privacy, living and eating communally and having no private property, fuels Adeimantus' doubts about whether they can be happy. So Socrates' concern about what we might call emotional privacy should not surprise us. A good person who has lost a child, for example, will be 'measured in his response to [his] pain [...] and put up more resistance to it when his equals can see him [than] when he is alone by himself in solitude [...] [where] he will venture to say and do lots of things that he'd be ashamed to be heard saying or seen doing' (10.603e–4a).

Socrates seems concerned that imitative poetry will encourage a kind of hypocrisy: in public, we will follow reason, which bids us to quietly bear misfortune, tempering our feelings of grief with proto-stoic thoughts that 'human affairs are not worth taking very seriously' (10.604e), that what now seems like a tragedy might ultimately be for the best, etc.; but in private we will indulge and give vent to feelings of grief. It is no accident that the English word 'hypocrite' derives from the Greek word for actor, ὑποκριτής (*hupokritês*), since hypocrisy involves *pretense* (and not mere inconsistency): hypocrites pretend to believe what in fact they do not, since *appearing* to believe certain things and acting in certain ways is in their self-interest.

Socrates' worry about the way imitative poetry works its dark magic in private is perhaps motivated more by simplicity and the unity of the soul as ideals of character than by a concern to avoid hypocrisy. 'A just man', we are told, 'is simple and noble and [...] does not want to be believed to be good but to be so' (2.361b). Although Thrasymachus thinks that Socrates' just person is a sap exhibiting 'high-minded simplicity' (1.348c), Socrates thinks of simplicity as integrity and purity,

in contrast with Thrasymachan duplicity and the specious 'multicolored' attractions of the democratic constitution and character. The person who scorns imitations of excessive grief while at the theater but who indulges their grief at home, or who keeps a stiff upper lip in front of the children or the troops and then indulges their grief while in private, will not be 'of one mind' (10.603c). Socrates insists that such a person is 'at war with himself' (10.603c), his soul beset by 'civil war' (10.603d)—which of course has been a major concern throughout the *Republic.*

But must a person whose emotional responses vary by context fail to achieve the virtue of one-mindedness? Socrates treats a person's expressing grief differently in different circumstances as cases of changing one's mind, but perhaps we should think of them instead as appropriately varying their responses to the differing demands of different situations. That Socrates wants more than a situation-specific, context-sensitive ethics was clear almost immediately in the *Republic:* since it is wrong to return the weapon to the deranged friend, returning what one has borrowed cannot be what justice is. But as we noted earlier, one may think that there are no universal ethical truths of the sort Socrates is after; perhaps the best we get are general principles or rules-of-thumb that give limited guidance and which must always be supplemented with situation-specific insight. (Something like this seems to have been Aristotle's view.)

We have already remarked on Socrates' love for poetry, but it bears repeating. He loves poetry, but he thinks that it is a love for a dangerous object, one best avoided: 'we will behave like people who have fallen in love with someone but force themselves to stay away from him because they realize that their passion is not beneficial' (10.607e). But since he lives in the actual world and not in his ideal *polis,* Socrates will keep his arguments against poetry ready to be chanted 'like an incantation' when he encounters it (10.608a), like 'a drug to counteract it' (10.595b). Up to this point, 'useful falsehoods' (2.382c, 3.389b) have been the most prominent drugs in the *Republic,* prescribed by the guardian-rulers most famously in the foundational myth of origin known as the Noble Falsehood (3.415b). Here the drug (φάρμακον [*pharmakon*], from which English words like 'pharmacy' and 'pharmaceutical' derive) is knowledge—truth, rather than falsehood—and it is self-prescribed. It is as if Socrates recognizes an addiction to something that *seems* so

attractive and benign, but which is in fact insidiously harmful. It is a kind of self-help that seems to be available only to philosopher-kings and -queens; for the rest of us, the 'drug' that the rational part of our souls can concoct is not strong enough, or, the soul's rational part has been subordinated to the appetitive part—'the part of the soul [...] that hungers for the satisfaction of weeping and wailing' (10.606a).

In his *Poetics,* Aristotle famously disagrees with Plato's assessment of tragic poetry, arguing that tragedy is actually good for us, achieving a catharsis (κάθαρσις [*katharsis*]) of pity and fear, the tragic emotions par excellence: 'A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious [...] in dramatic, not a narrative form, with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions'.[3] Pity and fear, Aristotle argues in the last chapter of his *Politics,* 'exist very strongly in some souls, and have more or less influence over all',[4] so we are benefitted when our souls are purged of pity and fear. Aristotle says surprisingly little about catharsis, given how frequently it takes center stage in discussions of his *Poetics,* and while this is not the place to explore it in any depth, a word or two is in order. 'Catharsis' means cleansing or purification. Understood medically, catharsis is purgation, a process by which we are purged of harmful substances. But Aristotle, unlike Plato, does not think that emotions are in themselves harmful states that get in the way of virtue and are thus to be purged. For Aristotle, 'moral excellence [i.e., virtue] [...] is concerned with passions and actions',[5] and while reason governs a well-ordered soul, he thinks that many emotions and desires can be brought into harmony with reason, rather than being forever recalcitrant and in need of subjugation. Thus catharsis need not be exclusively a matter of purification by purgation; it can also be clarification by education. Consider the tragic emotion of pity, which is essentially directed at another's unmerited distress. While Plato thinks that identifying with the tragic hero's distress via pity will displace reason and thus lead to an unjust (or at least non-just) soul, Aristotle seems to think that it can lead us to appreciate our own vulnerability to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and to cultivate appropriate fellow-feeling and compassion.

3 Aristotle, *Poetics,* 6 1149b24–7.
4 Aristotle, *Politics,* VIII.6 1342a6–7.
5 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* II.6 1106b16.

As the eminent contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum puts it, 'tragedy contributes to human self-understanding precisely through its exploration of the pitiable and the fearful'.[6] Far from being something to be purged from an ideal city, good tragedy should be welcomed, not because it is good entertainment or because good art enriches our lives, but because it contributes to the moral development and improvement of the citizens—much as reading good literature might make us more empathic and more sensitive to moral nuance.

It seems that Plato and Aristotle disagree about the value tragedy because they disagree about the value of our emotions, and indeed the value of our bodies. Socrates does not fear death, because his death means that his soul will at least be freed from 'the contamination of the body's folly',[7] which prevents the soul from encountering the pure reality of the Forms. Readers who share something like Aristotle's attitude toward the emotions—which shows that one need not be a full-blown romantic, giving absolute priority to emotion over reason, to value emotions positively—will have good reason to be skeptical about Plato's attitude toward imitative poetry.

A Four-Part Soul?

There is an additional problem with Socrates' treatment of poetry that we ought to deal with. It is a problem that at first might seem hardly worth noticing, but which is potentially devastating to the project of the *Republic*. In dismissing imitation as a silly waste of time, Socrates focuses on the metaphysically thin nature of its objects: they are shadows on the cave wall, not to be taken seriously. This critique requires his two-worlds metaphysics, and we have already dwelled on the inadequacy of the support Socrates provides for this distinctive and bold metaphysical theory. But after attending to the shadowy nature of the products of imitative art, Socrates briefly turns his attention to the activity of perceiving these objects. He does not, as we might expect, refer back to the Divided Line, the lowest portion of which has artistic creations

6 Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1986), p. 390.

7 *Phaedo,* in *Plato: Five Dialogues,* trans. by G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981), p. 103 [67a].

as its objects. Instead, he asks, 'on which of a person's parts does [imitation] exert its power?' (10.602c) Both *trompe l'oeil* painting and ordinary optical illusions can lead us to false judgments about reality. My canoe paddle *appears* bent or fractured when it is submerged, but it is not; the lines of the Müller-Lyer illusion, discussed earlier, *seem* not to be the same length, but they are. Only measuring them reveals this, and measuring, like calculating and weighing, are rational activities, the work of the rational part of the soul (10.602d).

So where do these potentially erroneous perceptions and perceptual beliefs come from? Since 'the part of the soul that forms a belief contrary to the measurements could not be the same as the part that believes in accord with them' (10.603a), they cannot come from the rational part of the soul, given the Opposition Principle (4.436b). Nor does the spirited part of the soul provide a plausible home for perception. Perhaps perception is a function of the appetitive part. In another dialogue, the *Theaetetus,* Plato suggests this possibility and casts the net of perception widely, counting 'desires and fears' as perceptions, along with more obvious examples like 'sight, hearing, smelling, feeling cold and feeling hot' (156b). Not only do both perception and belief work with appetite—my desire for ice cream and my seeing (and believing) that there is some in the freezer together explain my reaching in to get some—but they have the same objects: I see the ice cream, I want the ice cream, etc. Still, it is not clear how perception can be a function of the appetitive part of the soul. Perceptions, like desires, are representations, pictures of the world, if you will. But they are pictures having different *directions of fit*, as philosophers sometimes say. Beliefs and perceptions are mental representations of the world that are supposed to match the way the world is; thus they have a mind-to-world direction of fit: the mind's picture is supposed to match the world, and when they do not match, I need new beliefs and perceptions—I need a different picture. Appetites and desires, by contrast, have a world-to-mind direction of fit: they are representations not of how the world is but of how it ought to be or I would like it to be. So when the world does not fit my picture, I change the world to make it match—as if desires are skippered by Captain Picard of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, with a 'make it so' built into their very nature. Wanting more ice cream but seeing my bowl is empty, I go to the freezer and get some, so my picture of reality

(me eating ice cream) matches reality. (Of course, if one is inclined to Stoicism or Buddhism, one often tries to give up the unfulfilled desire, since it is the source of one's discontentment.)

Thus it seems that there must be another part of the soul, one that forms (potentially erroneous) perceptual beliefs—a fourth part of the soul, distinct from reason, spirit, and appetite. Okay, so there is another, fourth part of the soul. So what? What is the big deal? Well, the big deal is that the *Republic* turns on the analogy between the city and the soul: Socrates theorizes the ideal city not for its own sake but as a means to investigate the *Republic*'s two main questions. Back in Book IV all 'agreed that the same number and same kinds of classes as are in the city are also in the soul of each individual' (4.441c), but the argument against imitative art now suggests that that agreement was a bad one, and that there is an important *dis*analogy between city and soul. Thus what followed from that agreement—the answers to the *Republic*'s two main questions about the nature and value of justice—are now called into question.

Alas, neither Glaucon nor anyone else present objects to Socrates' seeming to introduce a new part of the soul and to the problems this raises for the *Republic*'s central analogy. Perhaps this is another one of those places in which Plato is hoping his readers see a philosophical problem that eludes his characters. And perhaps he is making a point about the nature of philosophical inquiry: Socrates now has two views that seem to be in conflict with each other, and he needs to do more philosophical work to determine which view is more reasonable to retain. Readers will be forgiven for thinking that Socrates should have left well enough alone and ended things in Book IX.

The Immortality of the Soul (10.608c–614b)

Having excluded almost all poetry from the ideal city, Socrates continues to tie up loose ends. Since the genuinely just but seemingly unjust life has been shown, he thinks, to be happier than the genuinely unjust but seemingly just life, we can now consider the consequences and rewards of justice. Adeimantus was especially adamant about excluding consideration of the reputational benefits of being thought of as just; too much of Athenian culture praised the rewards of being thought just,

ignoring justice itself. But now those rewards can be considered, and of course they incline in favor of the just life.

But the philosophically most interesting part of the discussion concerns the benefits of being just that extend beyond this mortal coil—and thus the claim that our souls are immortal. Earlier we emphasized that the concept of the soul at work in the *Republic* lacked the religious dimensions of the modern notion of the soul. But here is a place where they seem more similar than different. I imagine that many readers will agree with Socrates' claim that each of us has a soul that will survive our bodily death. We will see in the final section of this chapter that Socrates' account of the soul's life after the death of the body differs significantly from religious conceptions involving eternal reward or damnation, this feature of its nature—immortality—is common to both.

That the soul is immortal comes as news to Glaucon; more surprising still is Socrates' claim that arguing for it 'is not difficult' (10.608d). The argument is fairly straightforward and interestingly enough employs an inversion of the familiar Specialization Principle. Everything, Socrates argues, has a 'natural' evil or badness that is 'proper' or 'peculiar' to it. Rot is the natural evil proper to wood, as blight is for grain and rust is for iron (10.608e). While we usually think of 'proper' as a normative term with a positive valence, here it functions descriptively. If a thing is not destroyed by its proper evil, it cannot be destroyed by anything. Injustice, or vice more generally, is the soul's proper evil, just as its proper good is justice; but while the soul is worsened by injustice, it is not destroyed by it. Therefore, the soul cannot be destroyed, and so it is immortal. Here is the argument, spelled out in premise-conclusion form:

P1	Everything has a natural evil which worsens and corrupts it. (608e)
P2	If something is worsened but not destroyed by its natural evil, then nothing else will destroy it. (609a)
P3	Vice is the soul's natural evil. (609b)
P4	Vice worsens but does not destroy the soul. (609c–d)
C1	Therefore, the soul cannot be destroyed.
P5	If something cannot be destroyed then it must always exist. (610e)

P6 If something must always exist then it is immortal. (611a)

C2 Therefore, the soul must always exist.

C3 Therefore, the soul is immortal.

It is an interesting argument in many ways. The picture of the soul that emerges is of a thing that despite having parts is simple; the soul is *not* 'multicolored (ποικιλίας [*poikilias*])' (10.611b), which, we learned in the discussion of democracy, is a bad thing to be. Plato and Socrates value simplicity and unity over complexity and variety, which should come as no surprise by this point in the *Republic*. Nor, given the role reason plays in Plato's thoughts, should we be surprised at the suggestion that 'the soul [...] is maimed by its association with the body' (10.611c). A soul is what you and I most fundamentally are, for Plato; we are not primarily bodies or body-soul unities.

While the argument is logically valid, it is far from clear that it is sound, since P2 is not obviously true, and indeed seems obviously not true. Consider some of the examples Socrates employs to illustrate the idea of a proper evil: wood's proper evil is rot; iron's is rust. But clearly wood and iron can be destroyed by things other than rot and rust—fire comes quickly to mind. So even if the soul cannot be destroyed by injustice, it is possible that it can be destroyed by an evil not proper to it. We might also question P4, the claim that injustice worsens but does not destroy the soul. The tyrannical person starves his rational part and not only takes no steps to domesticate the savage elements of his inner beast, but actually cultivates them and delights in their wildness. It is not at all implausible that such a paradigmatically unjust soul can destroy itself, 'consumed with that which it was nourished by', as Shakespeare says in Sonnet 73.[8]

It is not clear how seriously Plato intends this argument, especially given its rather obvious shortcomings. Its purpose may well be more strategic in a literary sense: it gets us thinking about life after death, which is the subject of the *Republic*'s finale, the Myth of Er. Rather than wring our hands or arch our eyebrows over the argument, let us turn to the

8 *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones, The Arden Shakespeare, revised edition (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), p. 257.

Myth of Er, which is fascinating in itself, and a fascinating way for the *Republic* to end.

The Myth of Er (10.614a–21c)

Why Plato ends the *Republic* not with an argument or an exhortation to the reader but with a myth is a question well worth pondering. Plato caps off the creation of the ideal *polis* with the Noble Falsehood, which suggests how important shared myths and stories are to political unity. His ending the *Republic* with a myth, especially after the many and various analogies and metaphors that populate the *Republic*, suggests the importance of myth and narrative to human self-understanding. Although philosopher-queens and -kings can subsist on an intellectual diet of 'theoretical argument', Adeimantus and the rest of us require that this diet be supplemented with the relish that stories provide.

The myth concerns a man named Er, who recounts his after-death experiences 'as a messenger (ἄγγελον [*angelon*, whence our word 'angel']) to human beings' (10.614d). Er's tale recounts what happens to our souls after they are separated from our bodies in death—hence the importance of the argument for the soul's immortality. There are three distinct stages in the myth. In the first, Er finds himself in a beautiful meadow, near two pairs of openings, one pair to and from what lies below the earth; the other to and from the heavens. The souls of those who have acted unjustly are sent to the world below, incurring a tenfold penalty for each injustice. The souls of those who have acted justly go to the world above. The openings are busy with punished and rewarded souls ascending from the world below and descending from the world above, and souls of the recently deceased receiving their reward and punishment and thus ascending or descending.

In the myth's second stage, the returned souls travel to the place where the individuals' fates are spun. I will not replicate Plato's descriptions of the Fates, the Spindle of Necessity, and the entire scene, as I could not do them justice. The heart of this stage of the myth is a choice: each soul, whether it is returned from heavenly reward or heavenly punishment, chooses the life it will inhabit in its return to the world. Only for 'incurably wicked people' (10.615e) is punishment eternal; and presumably—though Plato is mum on the topic—there is

eternal reward for the very best. But for everyone else, life after death is a matter of having a new bodily life. Although this part of the myth concerns the spinning of one's fate, it is crucial that each soul *chooses* its fate. When one chooses is determined by lot, so there is an element of randomness in the procedure, but each person will 'choose a life to which he will then be bound by necessity' (10.617e). It is an interesting kind of necessity or determinism, very different from the causal determinism that contemporary philosophers concerned with free will tend to worry over. Rather, it is what we might call *type* determinism: a person's choices are determined by the type of person they are and will determine the type of person they will be—and thus the kind of life they will lead. Hence the importance of choosing well. And here, Socrates tells Glaucon, is 'the greatest danger' (10.618b), given that the soul's choice of a life determines to a great extent how happy or unhappy that life will be. Thus we see the importance of the *Republic*'s second question: a person's answer to this question determines the kind of life they will lead. We need to choose carefully, and not be dazzled by exteriors, which may prove to be false façades.

The first person to choose 'chose [his life] without adequate examination' (10.619b); dazzled by wealth and pomp, he chose the life of a great tyrant, not realizing until after the choice was made that he was fated to eat his own children—a fate that might well be worse than death. His reaction is instructive: 'he blamed chance […] and everything else […] but himself' (10.619c). Blaming others for the results of our own poor choices is a profoundly human reaction, it seems to me. In *Genesis*, Adam blames Eve for suggesting they eat the apple, and Eve blames the serpent. The irony here is that this chooser had returned from a life in heaven, his reward for having lived a virtuous life, though he had been virtuous 'through habit and without philosophy' (10.619d). That is, he was conventionally good but unreflective, which, Socrates argues, left him vulnerable to poor choices. His goodness, like Cephalus', was more a matter of luck and circumstance than of a firm inner state of his soul, and ironically it is the cause of his undoing.

The account of the various lives chosen is fascinating, with many people choosing to live an animal's life, and with almost everyone's 'choice depend[ing] upon the character of their former life' (10.620a). The most instructive choice is probably Odysseus'. He was among the

last to choose, though there remained many kinds of lives to choose from. He scoured the possibilities for 'the life of a private individual who did his own work' (10.620c), insisting that he would have chosen this same life had he been first to choose. What Odysseus has chosen is, of course, a just life. That it was 'lying off somewhere neglected by the others' (10.620c) is no surprise; since most of us are easily dazzled by 'multicolored' exteriors and do not have a good grasp of the essence of justice and its necessity for a happy life, it is no wonder that it is not the one most of us choose.

In the myth's last stage, the souls, whose fates are now spun irreversibly, are brought to the Plain of Forgetfulness and the River of Unheeding, where they forget their choice and then re-enter the world.

Like most myths, the Myth of Er is best not taken literally. Its point, I take it, is that while we each have a natural bent, which is then developed in various ways by the kind of nurturing we receive from our educations, our cultures, and the constitutions we live under, whether we are happy or not depends to a great extent on the choices we make. Most of our choices are not as dramatic or as momentous as the one-off choices depicted in the Myth of Er. Instead, they are daily choices, some large, some small, which shape our characters. In an anticipation of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, according to which every virtue is a mean between two vices (so courage is a mean between cowardice and recklessness, for example), Socrates suggests that a good choice is one in which we 'choose the mean [... and] avoid either of the extremes' (10.619a). We should make our choices carefully, after due deliberation. Indeed, we should make *choices,* not act on impulse like the fickle democrat discussed earlier. A wise person 'chooses [a life] rationally and lives it seriously' (10.619b).

There are fascinating issues here, which we can do no more than touch on. Given that our nature and nurture largely determine which options will seem sensible and be appealing to us, even though each individual makes life-shaping choices, it is not clear how free those choices are. And if indeed they are not free (or not sufficiently free)—as they seem not to be if *type* determinism is true—then readers may well wonder to what extent it makes sense to hold each other morally responsible for the choices we make and the actions we undertake. The

great twentieth-century philosopher Peter Strawson famously argued that holding ourselves and others accountable is so central to being human, there is little chance that we could give it up, even if we believe determinism to be true. Or, one might argue that although we are not fully responsible for the choices we make, perhaps we are responsible enough to warrant holding each other accountable. This issue, though Aristotle briefly considers it in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, seems more a modern than an ancient concern, so we should not fault Plato for not addressing it. Still, it is something that interested, philosophically inclined readers will want to explore further.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about the Myth of Er is that Plato chooses to end the *Republic* with it. Readers will notice the abruptness with which the *Republic* ends. The *Republic* begins with Socrates' narration: on his way back to town with Glaucon, he meets Polemarchus; he tells someone—whom he is speaking to is never made clear—about the long philosophical discussion that took place at the house of Polemarchus' father, Cephalus, a discussion which concludes with the Myth of Er. Plato reminds us of this by having Socrates address Glaucon directly in the *Republic*'s concluding paragraph. But conspicuous by its absence is something that would close the book, so to speak, on the book that is the *Republic.* There is no 'and then, exhausted, I went home' or 'and then we had a sumptuous meal' or anything that closes the narrative.

I suspect that this is Plato's taking his last opportunity to make a philosophical point with a literary device that is analogous to a sudden cut to black, as in the much-discussed final episode of *The Sopranos*. Earlier we observed how the opening of Book V echoes the opening of Book I; I suggested that this is Plato's way of making a substantive philosophical point—that philosophy is always returning to its beginnings, always starting over and reexamining its foundations. Here, I suspect, the point is similar, but about endings and conclusions rather than premises and beginnings. In not having a conclusive ending to the *Republic,* Plato seems to be telling us that philosophy never ends, that the conversation Socrates had at Cephalus' house does not end, but continues every time a reader engages with the *Republic,* as we have done here.

Some Suggestions for Further Reading

There is a large literature on Plato's attitude toward poetry. G. R. F. Ferrari, 'Plato and Poetry', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1, ed. by George A. Kennedy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 92–148 is especially insightful and helpful.

Readers who enjoy historical fiction may want to read Mary Renault, *The Praise Singer* (New York: Vintage, 2003), an excellent and moving novel about Simonides, the lyric poet Polemarchus quotes in Book I.

Eric Brown, 'A Defense of Plato's Argument for the Immortality of the Soul at *Republic* X 608c–611a', *Apeiron*, 30 (1997), 211–38, is a sympathetic reconstruction and defense of the argument for the soul's immortality discussed in this chapter.

Readers interested in the Myth of Er will find an extended discussion in Stephen Halliwell, 'The Life-and-Death Journey of the Soul: Interpreting the Myth of Er', in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's 'Republic'*, ed. by G. R. F. Ferrari (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521839637, pp. 444–73.

Readers interested in a contemporary discussion of free will and determinism will find Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) an excellent place to begin.

Readers interested in the idea of *direction-of-fit* might start with its source: G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 56–7 (§ 32).