

MISREPRESENTATION AND THE MYTH OF ER: A REASSESSMENT OF BOOK X OF PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

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ABSTRACT

Plato's Republic is a classic text in literature that discusses various issues of social, political and literary importance. The work's relevance supersedes spatial and temporal boundaries and it continues to foster discussions on an array of issues. However, like many other important men of words, Plato has often been misread and thus, his ideas have been variously misrepresented. Or in the least, Plato's ideas have frequently been only partially presented, with a limited scope. Plato's banishment of the poets from the ideal state, for example, has been one bone of contention among scholars. Various representations, misrepresentations have been made in this connection. Likewise, the final section of the Republic, has often found itself amidst interpretive controversies. The concluding section of the Book X of Republic introduces the myth of Er. Now, the myth of Er is a story about the afterlife experience which does not easily assimilate with the main argument of the other nine books of the Republic. As such, there has been a longstanding debate as to why Plato abruptly introduced the section, since the myth basically sounds out of place. This paper seeks to discuss the relevance of the myth of Er vis-à-vis the main arguments of the Republic.

Keywords: Reality, Imitation, Afterlife, Myth, Ideal State.

Introduction

Plato, the great master of the ancient times proposed important theories on the art of statesmanship. From primitive to modern, almost all philosophers and thinkers have, at some point, referred to Plato's epoch-making text, *Republic*. The Greek philosopher, Plato, is credited to have opened up West's first institute of higher learning. He also founded the Platonist school of thought, the ideology of which prevailed for ages to come. Authored around 375 BC, *Republic* was written in the form of Socratic dialogues. The principal concerns of this legendary treatise include features of a rightful state, justice and fair play, social order, and the just man. The text serves the dual purpose of being one of the most important books on philosophy as well as political theory. The book's take on the role of poetry in society, and the role of the philosopher created a stir and continues to remain controversial till date.

In my personal opinion, Plato's *Republic* is also one of the most misused books when it comes to using the book as a reference for the purpose of argument. There are various quotes from the book that are either misquoted or partially quoted—depending on the purpose of those quoting.

To give one example of misrepresentation, vis-à-vis *Republic*, it is often argued that Plato banished poets from his ideal state (the utopia assumed in *Republic*) in the *Republic*. It is further argued that Plato did so since he believed that poets deviate men from the path of duty simply because they deal in fanciful imagination, and have little to do with real life and real world. However, such an argument is only a complete misrepresentation of facts. As a matter fact, Plato proposed to banish poets from the

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'ideal state' because, as he maintains, the nation/state, of which he is laying down the ideological foundations, is in its embryonic stage and the citizens inhabiting it are also only beginning to understand the concept of a civil society, of justice, of righteousness. Under such a condition, at the primary stage, it will be difficult for common citizens to understand the high and lofty imaginative plight of poetry; the metaphysical concerns of the poets are sure to be out of a common man's reach. The idea was to protect the naïve citizens of Plato's supposed ideal state from getting complicated by the intricate craft of poetry. Simple as that. But we are well versed with the enormous amount of scholarship that exists on the controversy of why Plato banished poets from the ideal state, which I believe was completely baseless in the very first place, and I am only surprised by the interesting propositions and oppositions that are on display in any debate on this subject. Perhaps we could not understand the essential spirit of Plato's epoch making text, or perhaps we took it far too seriously. In any case, the *Republic* continues to inspire the scholarship on the classical antiquity.

The main discussion of the *Republic* centres around character of man. Virtuosity, so to say, is the focal point. Plato, through the character of Socrates and Glaucon, is trying to figure out a model for a just and virtuous life. After all, for the ancients, life of virtue was the only meaningful existence, something supreme. Throughout the first nine books of the *Republic*, Plato posits appropriate behaviour ahead of the many other things in life. In Plato's scheme of things, a man's life is shaped by his own choices. Therefore, men of appropriate behaviour tend to live a life of contentment and meaning. However, the author does admit that as humans, it is in our basic nature to be influenced by life around us. Literature (poetry in this case), and all the other forms of art, that primarily seek to study and represent life, has a lasting influence on the readers and listeners (in case of poetry). Likewise, paintings/fine arts also have influence on the observers. It is imperative, therefore, that only such art, and such artists, be given space and importance that portray a faithful picture of real life. All such arts that misrepresent life must be discouraged. And since, for Plato, the plight of the poets is beyond the comprehension of ordinary men, poetry should either be ignored or be very cautiously consumed. There are several other rather prescriptive measures that the Greek master offers in this long series of books. However, for the most part of the ten books of the *Republic*, Plato remained more didactic. As a matter of fact, his very approach to realising the ideal man, and the state, was itself far removed from what could be really achieved. Somehow, and this is also the main of argument of this paper, I believe that Plato had realised the unrealizability of his own specimen, prescribed in the first nine books of the *Republic*. To set the records straight, therefore, he tones down the initial tempo of the moral imperatives in the ultimate section of the ultimate book of the *Republic*, i.e., Book X. The myth of Er, on my view, is a justification of the peremptory argument on the subject of morality proposed till this point in the *Republic*.

In the context of the myth of Er, it must be clearly understood that through this Plato seeks to make sense of the necessity of a virtuous life, its eminence. And as for the debate on the timing and placement of this tale, we need to understand that Plato finally seeks to address the issue with a rather more practical approach. The story of afterlife is only told to warn us of what lies beyond this mundane reality. However, it is ironical that despite Plato's distrust with the meta physicality of poetry, he himself takes recourse to a myth that about the reality that lies beyond our immediate existence, a subject purely metaphysical. Now that I have made my case on the relevance, placement and timing of the myth of Er, it is only appropriate to talk at some length about the actual myth. And through a discussion of the myth itself, the paper should be able to make more sense of the significance of the myth.

Significance of the Myth of Er

Before we draw any conclusion on the significance of the myth, it is important to have a brief discussion of the basic storyline of Er's case. And even before that, it is necessary to note that the word 'myth' here means story (in Greek terms), and not what it stands for in the modern day parlance. So, the story of Er is such that he was a man who was cursed to narrate the story of his afterlife (since he dies, and is revived back to life) to the livings on the Earth.

Er was a man who died during a battle, and along with the souls of the other combatants, he was led to a magnificent place that had four doors; two into and out of the sky, and two into and out of the earth. There were judges who decided which path each soul should follow depending on the life they had led on Earth. The good ones were told to go to the sky, while the bad ones were led into the earth. From the sky exit, souls that appeared clean came out, telling of a place that filled them with incredible feelings. The souls that emerged from the earth exit were dirty and were talking about the misery and the difficulties they faced for punishment of what they had done while alive. Some souls however, those of murderers and other criminals, were not allowed to exit the earth and remained trapped forever.

Er was told that he would not be judged and that he should remain there in order to see the whole procedure and report it back to mankind. Seven days later, they were all led to another place where there was the Spindle of Necessity. Necessity or Ananke was a primordial goddess and personification of fate. There, the souls were given a lottery number, and based on that, each of them was told to ask what their next life should be. The first soul, having travelled through the sky in the previous area, decided to become a dictator; when that happened, though, he didn't realise that he was destined to eat his own children because of his actions. Er realised that the souls that had travelled through the sky and had not lived the punishment of the other path, often chose bad things for their next lives, while the opposite happened for the souls that had been punished.

Once the souls chose their next life, they were led under the throne of Necessity to the River Lethe (Forgetfulness), where they were told to drink in order to forget their previous lives. That night, when each soul fell asleep, they were sent to new bodies to lead their new lives. Er's soul did not go through all of this and did not drink from the River Lethe, thus remembering everything he had experienced. When he woke up, he returned to his old body which had not decomposed during that period, but he found himself on the funeral pyre that his fellow soldiers had started. They saved him from the flames and he managed to recount his experience in the afterlife.

The myth was used by Socrates to show that the choices people make have an impact on the afterlife, and that those who pretend to be pious but are false in their souls will be eventually punished in the next life.

Despite its canonical status and familiarity, the *Republic* is not always a straightforward text. Plato was, on top of being a philosopher, a master prose stylist who paid great attention to the literary construction of his dialogues. Nowhere in the *Republic* is this tension more pronounced, and the effect more jarring, than in its famously enigmatic conclusion, the Myth of Er.

Taken simply, as discussed above, the Myth of Er is a myth about the afterlife, and it describes in great detail the journeys that await souls there. It is also one of the great longstanding puzzles in the interpretation of the *Republic*: there is no scholarly consensus as to why Plato chose to end his most important work of political theory in this strange way. In her seminal study of the work, the philosopher Julia Annas infamously called it a "lame and messy ending" to a "powerful and otherwise impressively unified book." (She has since withdrawn these remarks, but the reasons she gave for her verdict continue to resonate with Plato's frustrated readers.)

The myth is most intelligible when it is read together with two iconic narratives that appear earlier in the text. These are the so-called Myth of Metals and the famous Allegory of the Cave, with which the Myth of Er shares a striking literary feature. Common to the way Plato frames all three of these stories is a recurring plot, in which a protagonist – or protagonists – is delivered from an underground slumber to wake up into a new reality above ground.

As it happens, both the Myth of Metals and the Allegory of the Cave appear at crucial junctures in the educational curriculum at the centre of the *Republic*: the former when the citizens have been sorted after a preliminary education in music and gymnastics, the latter when the potential guardians of Plato's ideal city have undergone a more sophisticated training in dialectic. In both narratives, the motifs of slumber and waking are a metaphor for the transformative effect that education can have on the natures of its subjects.

The reappearance of this plot in the Myth of Er, I believe, helps us see that it is also about these same themes. The Myth of Er, in other words, builds on the ideas developed in the Myth of Metals and the Allegory of the Cave to give an account of how the nature of an individual can be a direct product of one's education. Crucially, the myth suggests that the way we go about defining the very concept of nature has to be revised to reflect this dynamic process.

How does this reading change our understanding of the *Republic*? For a start, it helps us to make better sense of the pages that have the final word of the book, and in turn, to gain a better appreciation for its overall coherence.

Readers of the *Republic* often have a difficult time with the central analogy that structures the work – an analogy between the city and the soul – because they often feel pressured to choose which of the two embodiments of justice the book is really about. Justice writ large and small, in the city and in the individual soul, can often seem like two parallel manifestations that do not quite converge. But to ask, as the Myth of Er does, whether a philosophical education can leave a lasting effect on the nature of its subjects is to raise the question of whether the just city can in fact help make the soul more just.

Moreover, the reading also suggests a somewhat different portrait of Plato than the one often invoked in extant interpretations of the Myth of Er. Scholars have sometimes tried to account for the strangeness of the myth by presuming a certain, often elitist, distance between what Plato wrote and what he actually meant – by insisting the myth contained a hidden message for his true, philosophical audience, or conversely, by dismissing the myth as a crude form of rhetoric reserved for the unphilosophical masses.

Conclusion

The significance of the myth of Er lies in the fact that it gives the major discussions in the *Republic*, especially, in connection with righteousness and virtuosity, a touch of finality. It settles the case for the unthinkability of Plato's initial approach to the facts of life. For example, Plato's initial stance on the good and the bad life. While making prescriptive notes on what should and what should not be done by a man who seeks to live a meaningful life, Plato tends to overlook a very important nuance that men cannot be absolutely good or the opposite. A man is, by his very nature, a curious mix of multiple realities, traits. In Plato's scheme, men are either absolute wonders or absolute nuisance. The story narrated by Er, makes room for such men who are a mixture of good and evil—humans, in the true sense of the term. Also, when we commit to taking the details of the Myth of Er seriously and at face value, it allows us to picture a Plato who assumed a more earnest stance toward his readers, and who was not so quick to draw a natural distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers. For the author of the Myth of Er, philosophers were not born, but made. And what sets apart a philosophical nature from an unphilosophical one was not a fact of life, but an open question.

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