

Shaping Imaginations: Plato's *Republic* on Stories and Storytelling

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Abstract:

Plato's *Republic* is widely considered the founding text of political thought, yet in it he spends a great deal of time discussing poetry and Homer. This counterintuitive fact drives my inquiry.

Poetry is ultimately a creative force that contributes to shaping the imaginations of individuals, and in ancient Greece, it facilitated the creation of the religious-social world. Plato both discusses and engages in storytelling to arrive at a conception of justice. I hope that by focusing on how he engages with stories and storytelling I can gain a greater understanding of how politics takes place on the creative, imaginative level of life.

### Shaping Imaginations: Plato's *Republic* on Stories and Storytelling

For a text ostensibly about political philosophy, Plato's *Republic* spends a great deal of time concerned with poetry, especially Homer. Thoughts on poetry, philosophy, and politics weave in and out with one another across the length of Socrates' conversation. While we may look back and see in the *Republic* a text of philosophy or politics, we would not consider it one of poetry, its repeated interest which it, indeed, ends on. The perceptions of what the *Republic* is primarily concerned with would seem to tell us more about the interpreter than the text. Neither philosophy, politics, nor poetry can be isolated or eliminated from the overarching imaginative process of constructing a "city in speech," each contributing to the polis in one way or another.<sup>1</sup> Building a city in speech by imagining how it comes into being, what institutions will be needed, how people will live, etc. is a form of telling a story. The bulk of the *Republic* is dominated by Socrates, with some input by Glaucon and Adeimantus, and what they are doing to achieve their inquiry into the just is to tell a story of a polis. Therefore, to think about politics, to think about the just, Plato is using the poetic form of storytelling. To better imagine politics he must tell a story about them, and this new story of Plato's must inevitably clash with the work of Homer, the poet whose stories gave the Greeks their history, religion, and society at large.

*The Republic* is not just a single story, or perhaps it is better to say that the greater story of *The Republic* is composed of contained stories and dialogues woven together by Socrates' narration. The smaller stories in *The Republic* are not merely points to illustrate philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> The term "city in speech" is how Socrates first describes the process of reasoning and imagining how a city comes into being. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 45-46. All citations are in footnotes. Plato's *Republic* is the only text referenced, predominantly Bloom's translation, though Reeve's is also occasionally used.

ideas or pose moral dilemmas (though they certainly do these things), but they also interact with one another, forming a type of imaginative dialogue not carried out by characters. The story of the Ring of Gyges poses the problem which, to solve, leads Socrates to suggest forming a city in speech, so it functions as the instigating event of *The Republic*. The final poetic answer to the Ring of Gyges comes at the end of the text, with the Myth of Er, how Plato ultimately decides to solve the problem of the story of the ring. The contained stories of the *Republic* also deal with the issues of myth and education, and their relationship. This first manifests in the Myth of the Metals where Socrates suggests telling a myth about the origins of the citizens to foster a close-knit populace with loyalties to one another. It also enforces the valuing of each class of citizen, whether bronze, silver, or gold. However, Plato later seems to deconstruct this story when Socrates tells the Allegory of the Cave, introducing it by saying, “make an image of our nature in its education and want of education.”<sup>2</sup> In the hypothetical cave, the shadows casted onto the wall are analogous to myths such as the Myth of the Metals, though certainly not limited to such myths. These stories form a dialogue which resonates in the imagination in a way impossible to the dialogue of Socrates and company.

The first words of the *Republic* are Socrates’ narration, “I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, son of Ariston, to pray to the goddess.”<sup>3</sup> Plato frames the *Republic* as a story. It retains Socrates’ narration throughout and it is composed of smaller stories which contribute to the overarching narrative. Poetry thus provides inspiration, structure, and power for *The Republic*. Yet, at the same time, Plato seems to make an enemy of poetry, infamously

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Bloom, 193.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

admitting, “there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry.”<sup>4</sup> This comes in the middle of Book Ten, which Socrates begins by reflecting that they had been “entirely right” in not admitting poetry into their imagined city.<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, the main contradiction of *Republic*; poetry is derided and deemed inappropriate as detrimental to well-functioning politics, yet Plato employs poetic modes to work through the problems of politics and draw conclusions about politics. Even more, I would argue that Plato *is* a poet in the *Republic*. As they begin constructing their city in speech, Socrates says to Adeimantus, “you and I aren’t poets right now but founders of a city. It’s appropriate for founders to know the models according to which the poets must tell their tales. . . . they [founders] must not themselves make up tales.”<sup>6</sup> Plato, as the author of the text, telling a tale which, according to the above distinction, makes him a poet. This also suggests another complication for Socrates’ character. The *Republic* is told through the narration of Socrates, so he is actually the teller of the tale and the founder in the story, something the above quote suggests is not desirable. For now, it is enough to note this contradiction and that the text is not nearly as clear about its stance on poets as the decision to expel them leads on.

It will take some extended work to attempt to untangle the conflicting attitudes towards poetry and storytelling in *The Republic*, and to do this, it makes sense to follow one of the most important threads in *The Republic*, Homer. By attempting to unpack Plato’s engagement with Homer, I can take a look at how he engages with the dominant influence on the imagination in ancient Athens, Homer’s epic poetry. The attitude towards Homer, perhaps unsurprisingly, is a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 290.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 277.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 56.

conflicted one throughout *The Republic*. Socrates vocalizes this conflict at the beginning of Book Ten, “a certain friendship for Homer, and shame before him, which has possessed me since childhood, prevents me from speaking. For he seems to have been the first teacher and leader of all these fine tragic things. Still and all, a man must not be honored before the truth, but as I say, it must be told.”<sup>7</sup> Socrates is trying to reconcile a reverential love of Homer that he has had since childhood with his mature opinion that Homer is a bad influence for political life. He deems that the “truth” comes before any man, including Homer, and that truth is that imitative poetry separates its subjects by an extra degree from things such as virtue. Since Homeric poetry imitates and represents historic and religious events relating to war, justice, statecraft, etc., it cannot present them as close to the truth as the events actually were.

Socrates continues to follow through on his criticism by explicating the idea of imitative poetry. In Book Ten, after reflecting on the good judgement of banning poets from their polis and admitting his conflicting feelings towards Homer, he discusses couches with Glaucon. He posits that there is a hierarchy of couch makers: a god who makes a true couch, a carpenter who attempts to make a true couch in physical matter (the couches we sit on), and then there is the painter who represents the representations made by the carpenter.<sup>8</sup> Socrates’ idea is that any artist who seeks to realize anything in their storytelling must represent something physical or in the *material* world, the world already trying to represent the true forms of the gods. However, artists, in imitating what is in the real world, are always presenting a thing removed by an extra

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 277.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 278-280.

degree from what is true.<sup>9</sup> This reasoning ultimately works towards Socrates addressing Homer directly:

‘Dear Homer, if you are not third from the truth about virtue, a craftsman of a phantom, just the one we defined as an imitator, but are also second and able to recognize what sorts of practices make human beings better or worse in private and in public, tell us which of the cities was better governed thanks to you, as Lacedaemon was thanks to Lycurgus, and many others, both great and small, were thanks to many others? What city gives you credit for having proved a good lawgiver and benefited them? Italy and Sicily do so for Charondas, and we for Solon; now who does it for you?’ Will he have any to mention?<sup>10</sup>

Socrates proposes that Homer is third removed from concerns about the things he sings of.

Neither lawgiver nor general, Socrates judges Homer as only a mere imitator. Yet a level of irony exists in Socrates’ accusation, because he and his company are not great statesmen either. The point, instead, seems to be that no one anywhere credits Homer with political success. His poetry is never said to be responsible for good laws and victory in wars. Here, the suggestion seems to be that the lack of such honors bestowed upon Homer is a type of sign that his poetry, ostensibly about war and the state, is politically ineffective. And since it is politically ineffective, Socrates and company are justified in banning it from their city, or at least justified in heavily modifying it.

Despite this accusation brought against Homer, Plato’s Socrates uses stories to promote his own ideas on statecraft and war. Perhaps Socrates is justified in doing so because he has assigned himself as a founder of their city in speech, a philosophical project. Regardless, veneration does not seem a satisfactory measurement by which Plato would measure the value of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 278-282 contains the bulk of this reasoning.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 282.

Homer's poetry. Instead, we should look at the myths that Socrates examines in relation to the warrior class', the guardians', education. At the end of Book Two, when Adeimantus and Socrates are finishing their discussion of models (patterns) of how to tell stories about gods and best educate the guardians, Socrates raises examples of gods lying and practicing deceptive magic from Homer and Aeschylus. Of these, he says, "When someone says such things about gods, we'll be harsh and not provide a chorus; and we'll not let the teachers use them for the education of the young, if our guardians are going to be god-revering and divine insofar as a human being can possibly be."<sup>11</sup> Important in Plato's conception here is that the young guardians are both to revere and *aspire to be* like the gods.<sup>12</sup> That people should be able to identify with the gods to the level they can be like them suggests that Plato sees the stories of the poets and the gods as tangible. The gods are not just mystical entities, but aspirational models to be *imitated*.

When Socrates' narration continues into Book Three, Plato provides some of the richest examples of how he finds Homer's stories problematic for a warrior class. Socrates reasons that if the guardians are to become courageous, "Mustn't they also be told things that will make them fear death the least?"<sup>13</sup> Homer, according to Socrates, by establishing a worldview in which death and afterlife are fearful and worse than slavery, had detrimental effects on a city's ability to conduct war. Socrates explains why this is problem, "Do you suppose anyone who believes Hades; domain exists and is full of terror will be fearless in the face of death and choose death in battles above defeat and slavery?"<sup>14</sup> If stories are told that make people fear death itself, they will

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 61.

<sup>12</sup> Helpful in this analysis is Reeve's translation, "and godlike as human beings can be." Plato, *Republic*, trans. C.D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Bloom, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



be less courageous when facing it, so such tails diminish the safety of the city. This example draws a direct line between stories of the afterlife and the corporeal existence of the city, which is how Plato will end *The Republic* as well. If stories invoke fear of the afterlife, then the city is more likely to be burned to the ground. These stories are vital to the existence of the city and its justness.

However, even with differing poetic conceptions of the afterlife, the question still does not feel settled as to why, despite the affection shown to Homer by Socrates (as well as seemingly by Plato), Homer is still considered to need replacement. A significant portion of the answer may come from the issue of education, and particularly childhood education. In Book Two, Socrates and company decide they must address how children will be “reared and educated” in their city, with Socrates declaring that the idea “mustn’t be given up even if it turns out to be quite long.”<sup>15</sup> However, this merely tells us that they deem education and childrearing important to discerning how a city is just. What is important to the inquiry about the role poetry and storytelling play is in the exchange that follows:

“Come, then, like men telling tales in a tale and at their leisure, let’s educate the men in speech.”

“We must.”

“What is the education? Isn’t it difficult to find a better one than that discovered over a great expanse of time? It is, of course, gymnastic for bodies and music for the soul.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Won’t we begin educating in music before gymnastic?”

“Of course.”

“You include speeches in music, don’t you?” I said.

“I do.”

“Do speeches have a double form, the one true, the other false?”

“Yes.”

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 54.

“Must they be educated in both, but first the false?”

“I don’t understand how you mean that,” he said.

“Don’t you understand,” I said, “that first we tell tales to children? And surely they are, as a whole, false, though there are true things in them too. We make use of tales with children before exercises.”<sup>16</sup>

“Tales,” or stories, the works of poets, are the *first* phase of children’s education, and if education is important enough to the characters to take as much time as they think it needs to take, then stories initially set the individual down a just or unjust track. So, the question of Homer has moved a bit, and it now seems to be one of how his stories are conducive, or not, to setting the young on the right track towards the just.

The power of Homer and stories more generally, why they can be dangerous to a just city, is in their imaginative power. When their power is applied to the mind of a child, lasting models for behavior and honor become entrenched. Socrates argues, “Don’t you know that the beginning is the most important part of every work and that this is especially so with anything young and tender? For at that stage it’s most plastic, and each thing assimilates itself to the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give to it.”<sup>17</sup> Emphasis is placed on the malleable nature of the young, with an emphasis on the fact that a young child can be influenced by anyone, Homer included, as long as there is enough access. He goes on, “Then shall we so easily let the children hear just any tales fashioned by just anyone and take into their souls opinions for the most part opposite to those we’ll suppose they must have when they are grown up?”<sup>18</sup> He is connecting the earliest stages of childhood of those in their imagined city to the adults they will become. In doing this, he posits that the stories people hear in their childhood influence who those

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 54-55.

individuals will become. Stories like the Ring of Gyges and Homeric Epics are thus incredibly dangerous in Plato's thought, as their telling is inherently political, because they orient the souls of citizens from the earliest stages. These stories can greatly influence according to Plato.

The souls of children are influenced by the stories they hear, and since whether or not the souls of the children become just or not when they mature will reflect whether or not the city is just, then Socrates naturally concludes "we must supervise the makers of tales."<sup>19</sup> The state has a necessary interest in how just it is itself, which relies on how just its citizens are. It is therefore justified that its reach should extend to education. Since stories contribute to the earliest stage of education, when children are most impressionable, their makers are thus complicit in a type of public education, which makes them ultimately responsible to the state. This reasoning allows Plato to justify extending the state's control over the poets. It is why both poets and their stories can be "thrown out." Plato's argument is less about the state having a right to absolute control over poets and their stories and is more about what is just for a city taking precedence over all. Socrates posits, "both the grater and the smaller [tales] must be taken from the same model and have the same power."<sup>20</sup> There is power in the stories told and in those who tell them and without taking that power and using it to shape a just polis, then there does not seem to be a way to create and ensure the polis is just. Now, whether or not it is smart to hand over a monopoly on imaginative expression in a polity to a ruling class is a question perhaps too far outside the scope of this paper. However, such control over all the stories in a polity seems less possible than finding philosopher-kings to rule.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Although banning imitative poets, poetry and storytelling seems to remain within the purview of the proposed city in speech. New stories of the gods will need to replace those of Homer. Plato, through Socrates' narration, provides a comprehensive account of what he refers to as "patterns" for these stories. Much like what they sound, these patterns are guidelines for how stories should be told and what they should say of heroes and gods. They are suggested to function like a loose aesthetic system for telling stories. When discussing the shortcomings of Homer's representations of the gods, Socrates demands, "if of a god, he must find a speech for them pretty much like the one we're now seeking; and he must say the god's works were just and good, and that these people profited by being punished."<sup>21</sup> So we get what is perhaps the baseline pattern for how stories should be told and what they should contain: anything a god *does* must result in a good outcome. This pattern ensures that reverence for the gods and admiration of them are maintained across all stories. Now, most of Homer's poetry breaks this rule, as gods appear as characters, expressing a wide array of very human traits. To Socrates, this is impious and importantly does not produce justice, because the gods are supposed to be "really good."<sup>22</sup> The relationship thus appears as such, in a just city the stories of the gods must present them as good to secure reverence for them and to first educate children's souls. Worship, education, and good political life are all connected in this pattern, as well as those that follow from it.

Socrates has the observance of laws in mind as well as an audience of the entire city, children and adults. He emphasizes his point about the necessity of maintaining the goodness of the gods, "great exertions must be made against anyone's saying these things in his own city, if

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 56-57.

its laws are going to be well observed, or anyone's hearing them, whether he is younger or older, whether the tale is told in meter or without meter."<sup>23</sup> Plato draws a direct line, here, from the stories people tell in a city to the well-being of its political life. The provided storytelling patterns are close to laws but entirely imaginary. They are general principles and guidelines to restrain creative imaginations of poets and storytellers and put them in service to the political ambition of the state. Note that stories are meant to follow such patterns so "laws are going to be well observed." Socrates then concludes that bad tales "are neither holy, nor advantageous for us, nor in harmony with one another."<sup>24</sup> The initial subject matter for these patterns, the gods, also suggests an inherently religious role for the use of stories and poetry.

Above, the gods are suggested to be aspirational entities when considering the guardians' education.<sup>25</sup> Plato gives patterns of how to tell stories of the behaviors of the gods while knowing that these behaviors will be imitated by citizens of the polis. He is thus controlling the form to be imitated by people by controlling the stories from which people come to knowledge of the gods. Likewise, we might think of the quality of education in the polis, how well the imaginations of children and adults can be shaped, as an education in the craft of living. In his example of couches and the carpenter, a good carpenter is close in their imitation to the form of the couch made by the god.<sup>26</sup> If we understand the religious role of storytelling and religion as Plato provides, then the good person is close in their imitation of the gods. A good education could

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 61.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 278-280.

then loosely be defined as a schooling in the imitation of the gods (assuming the gods are told in the way Plato demands).

If we are going to further try to get at the connection between poetry, gods, and religion, it will be useful to look at the internal relationship of two stories in *The Republic*, of the Ring of Gyges and the Myth of Er. The relationship between these two stories is a type of question and response. Even though the Ring of Gyges story comes out of Thrasymachus' line of argument, which catalyzes the *Republic*, these two stories interact with one another uniquely as stories.

The Ring of Gyges functions as a story that exemplifies Thrasymachus' line of thinking: it is only better to *appear* just but, in truth, *being* just is not advantageous. Glaucon summarizes the line of thinking and the main idea of the Ring of Gyges, "Men do not take it to be a good of them in private, since wherever each supposes he can do injustice, he does it. Indeed, all men suppose injustice is far more to their private profit than justice."<sup>27</sup> This way of thinking draws a line between reputation and reality, appearance and reality, causing the idea of justice to fall apart. The Ring of Gyges lets the individual disappear, separating them from the experience of any social setting. Justice is inherently political, and thus possesses a necessarily social element. When it is thought of in terms of the private and then in terms of the public, as the differentiation between appearance and reality in the story allows, justice loses its meaning. When the appearance of the individual is discordant with their soul, then the issue is problematic.

We can see in the Myth of Er not only an ultimate rebuttal to the story of the Ring of Gyges, but also that its existence and placement in the structure of the text ensures that poetry

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 38.

and the poet always have a role in Plato's thought. The Myth of Er begins by Socrates convincing Glaucon that they must also *tell a story* of what happens after death.<sup>28</sup> Socrates' introduction to the story is noteworthy. He begins, "I will not, however, tell you a story of Alcinous . . . but rather of a strong man, Er, son of Armenius, by race a Pamphylian."<sup>29</sup> Reeve in his translation of the *Republic* gives a note at this point which calls our attention to a pun Plato may be playing with in the Greek (Allan Bloom notes the instance as well). I want to raise a possible interpretation which Reeve seems partial to. Because of the wordplay, Reeve suggests, "Socrates would then be saying something like: it isn't a tale that shows strength of understanding that I'm going to tell but one that shows the strength of the Muse of storytelling."<sup>30</sup> This possible interpretation seems worth raising because it, at the very least, provides a good thematic introduction to the story. After all, Er is not sent back with a philosophy or even as an enlightened individual. He is merely meant to relay the *story* given to him.

The story itself follows the journey of Er, a soldier killed in battle, and his experience shows how a reincarnation cycle works. Socrates tells us that, after Er had ascended to an otherworldly place of judgement, he approached judges and "they said that he [Er] had to become a messenger to human beings of the things there, and they told him to listen and to look at everything in the place."<sup>31</sup> Er is to be someone to relay to his fellow humans the realm of the gods, making sure he takes account of the sounds and sights of the senses. This suggests that Er

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 297.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Reeve, note 25, in Plato, *Republic*, trans. Reeve, 319.

<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Bloom, 298.

is to return as a type of poet, or perhaps prophet—the line need not be hard between the two, as we have already seen the intimate tie between religion and storytelling. This also adds another meaning to the interpretation provided above, a tale “that shows the strength of the Muse of storytelling.” The tale is not just about a powerful story, but also about poetic inspiration. The judges who serve the fates tell him to relay the sights and sounds of this unearthly plane, as well as the mechanics of reincarnation and the afterlife. Since Plato puts this story into the mouth of Socrates, we can deduce that Er has *told* his story, and thus Er is a *storyteller*.

Plato seemed to put a great amount of thought and imaginative power into the way the reincarnation cycle functions and the images of the afterlife. He establishes a system of rewards and punishments, “they [who were unjust in life] received for each of these things tenfold sufferings; and again, if they had done good deeds and had proved just and holy, in the same measure did they receive reward.”<sup>32</sup> We see an actual system of justice functioning, and it is notably a divine court knowing justice and rewarding it as well as punishing injustice. Justice is also presented hand-in-hand with holiness, a tie which suggests a further relationship between storytelling, religion, and justice. Stories of the poets, and especially Homer’s stories, set how people viewed their gods and heroes, obviously affecting religious opinion. If we recall Socrates’ patterns for telling stories of the gods, then we also have models of religious ideals. That Plato also presents the gods as the dispensers of justice means that the poets who sing of the gods also seem to be singing of what is just or are engaged in its construction.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



However, there is more to Plato's reincarnation cycle which sounds much more like what a philosopher might envision. Souls, after having been punished or rewarded, are given lots, and one-by-one choose from an array of lives. When choosing, they can see things such as the wealth or the poverty of the life, virtues, and health.<sup>33</sup> Yet in these previews, "An ordering of the soul was not in them, due to the necessity that a soul become different according to the life it chooses."<sup>34</sup> The souls can foresee all they will experience in the life, but not what explicit effects it will have on their soul. To put this as simply as possible: it is up to the soul of a person when they die to make the best choice they can as to which life they will have when they are reincarnated. They must use their wisdom to do this. So the wiser someone is when they die, the better off their soul is in choosing their next life. And since they forget everything when they die, their aim in choosing a new life will be to pick one that best nurtures their soul. Since when they go through the same process the next time, they will then choose another life well.

This system also suggests something about justice perhaps separate from the religious, holy connection. Wisdom to pick a life well would include wisdom of the just. The preview of a potential life will not include how just it will make the soul. The souls picking are commanded, "Virtue is without a master; as he honors or dishonors her, each will have more or less of her. The blame belongs to him who chooses; god is blameless."<sup>35</sup> The souls are given the freedom to choose well or poorly. Socrates tells Glaucon, "From all this he will be able to draw a conclusion and choose—in looking off toward the nature of the soul—between the worse and the better life, calling worse the one that leads it toward becoming more unjust, and better the one that leads it

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 300-301.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 301.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 300.

to becoming juster.”<sup>36</sup> To learn how to think with perspective of the nature of the soul seems the ultimate answer to the question of justice. Of the choice of reincarnation, Socrates says, “this is the most important choice for him in life and death.”<sup>37</sup> This choice in the story exemplifies the kind of reasoning needed to make decisions throughout life. In this, we see another power of storytelling. Plato constructs a wonderfully elaborate story that funnels the reader into this dramatic moment of choice that is the most important thing we will do in life or death. The story of the Myth of Er provides a dramatic approach to making choices, be them in life or death, and asks us to consider what is important from the perspective of an immortal soul.

The Myth of Er all but concludes *The Republic*, but there is a small section of text at the end where Socrates addresses Glaucon. He tells, “And thus, Glaucon, a tale was saved and not lost; and it could save us, if we were persuaded by it, and we shall make a good crossing of the river of Lethe and not defile our soul.”<sup>38</sup> The mention of Lethe is a reference to having the ability to pick a good life when they eventually go through the reincarnation cycle mention in the myth. Socrates suggests that the tale can save them by persuasion, which is another example of the sheer power of storytelling in *The Republic*. Not only is it used in the Myth of Er to show how one might come to a just choice, but it can be relayed in a persuasive manner is due to storytelling. *The Republic* ends, like it begins, with a story, not with a dialogue.

Because Socrates holds to “that the soul is immortal and capable of bearing all evils and all goods,”<sup>39</sup> the Myth of Er has the perspective on justice an example like the Ring of Gyges

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 301

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 303.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

does not achieve. In that story, only appearance changes, disappears. However, the Myth of Er takes the setting out of the mundane world of the mortals and situates us within an otherworldly realm, where the immortal soul accounts for its deeds. There is no ring that can make the soul invisible to the gods. Unlike the story of the Ring of Gyges, Plato's myth of Er is clearly constructed with the intention of moral education and is guided by philosophical inquiry. It adheres to the storytelling patterns established earlier in *The Republic*. If we think back to the painter of couches, we will remember that the painter is removed by several degrees from the truth of a couch.<sup>40</sup> This, per Socrates, is why imitative art must be banished, as it constantly obscures what is true. It makes appearance itself irrelevant by putting more layers of illusion on top of a thing. But, the Myth of Er is told from a process of reincarnation. It only bothers to imitate that process and deliver its moral, philosophical message. After all, Socrates and Er are Plato's poetic creations. If the painter is limited by their perspective of an illusion, then Plato is only limited by his philosophical inquiry into the just and his ability to turn it into a resonant story.

Not only does the craft of poetry, of storytelling, seem to always have a place in the polis, it plays a valuable role. Through storytelling the imaginations of the young and old alike are provided images of gods and heroes. These gods and heroes function as aspirational models to which people aspire to be like. Similar to the carpenter imitating the form of a couch, people imitate the form of the gods. Plato understands the gods in philosophical terms but finds it necessary to also provide aesthetic patterns for the creation of their images. Plato himself finds it

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 278-280.

necessary to engage in such a practice in writing *The Republic* in the first place. The Myth of Er is the culmination of the text, where the philosophical, poetic, political, and religious intersect because Plato casts them in a story. Er, Socrates, and Plato are each storytellers and poets—counterexamples to Homer. In covering what I have in this paper, there is still much uncovered.

There is a particular question that begs me to research it further, past this essay. In the Myth of Er, there is a point where various famous heroes from Homeric legend are shown choosing new lives. Of these examples, Odysseus' is the most fascinating. He draws the final lot, so he is the last to pick his new life. His soul chooses “the life of a private man who minds his own business” and we are told “it would have done the same even if had drawn the first lot, and was delighted to choose it.”<sup>41</sup> Plato works Homer's tale into his reincarnation cycle and it provides a hint at how Plato reads the tale of Odysseus.

For now, this inquiry seems complete. *The Republic's* strong focus on poetry foregrounds the imaginative thinking of Plato. He is concerned with how storytelling influences the people of a polis and wants to use it to make the polis more just. The quarrel between philosophy and poetry is overstated to a degree. While Plato does impose his political philosophy onto poetry, it is one informed and inspired by poetry. Even Homer, who Plato deconstructs throughout the text, provides Plato with inspiration and imprints a lingering fondness. A story itself, *The Republic* lingers as well, iterating on Homer and inspiring countless more works of the imagination.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 303.