JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH
VOLUME 28, 2003

FREE WILL, LUCK, AND HAPPINESS IN THE MYTH OF ER

KENNETH DORTER
UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

ABSTRACT: According to the Myth of Er we are responsible for our character because we chose it before birth. But any choice is determined by our present character, so there is an indefinite regress and we cannot be entirely responsible for our character. The Myth of Er can be seen as the first formulation of the problem of free will, which Aristotle demythologizes in *Nicomachean Ethics* III.5. Plato's solution is that freedom is compatible with causal determinism because it does not mean indeterminism but rationality. The myth links the individual lives to the harmony of the spheres, so our lives are determined not by blind necessity, but by rational necessity that follows from the nature of the universe. Even so, the limitations of determinism prevent rationality from being a sufficient cause of happiness (although the opposite view is usually attributed to Plato), but it remains a necessary one.

The Myth of Er has been largely neglected by Plato's interpreters, who rarely go beyond summarizing it and pointing out that it is an image of our moral responsibility for the lives we lead, but without subjecting the details to careful scrutiny.[1] The interest of the details can be glimpsed, however, from a tension between them and those of the Myth of the Metals earlier in the *Republic*, so I would like to begin by examining the discrepancy between them in order to focus our inquiry.

The Myth of the Metals is introduced at the end of the third book of the *Republic*, when Socrates proposes to tell the populace of the hypothetical city the following story: We are all brothers and sisters because we were all gestated in the earth and so have a common mother, but we do not all have the same natures because Mother Earth mixed into us different proportions of

gold, silver, iron, and bronze. Socrates refers to this myth as a "noble lie." It is noble because it expresses an important truth, that we are closely akin but not without certain innate differences that cannot entirely be overcome; but it is a lie not only because it puts forward metaphors as if they were to be taken literally, but also because it absolves us of responsibility for our individual differences by making them dependent on the proportions of metals introduced into us by Mother Earth. Seven books later, at the very end of the dialogue, Socrates tells a different story. According to the Myth of Er the different proportions of greed, hunger for power, and love of truth within us were chosen not by a god but by ourselves. Our character is for us to choose: we choose our guiding spirit, it does not choose us (617e). By choosing a certain kind of life we choose a certain kind of character: "The internal ordering of the soul," Socrates tells us, "was not [one of the variables] in the lives to be chosen, because choosing a different life necessarily meant the internal ordering would be different" (618b). In other words, our choice of actions presupposes a certain moral nature, and the actions themselves contribute to the further development of that character. In what follows I would like to explore the implications of the Myth of Er for understanding our moral responsibility. The exploration will also help us understand the connection between these two apparently irreconcilable accounts.

I

In Socrates' account, Er was a warrior who was found ten days after being killed in battle, and came back to life two days later on the funeral pyre. He recounts that after his death he came to a place where the souls of the dead were judged and sent through one of two doors: the good to heaven to be rewarded, the bad to the underworld to be punished. Through two other doors those who had already served their time—a thousand years—were returning, and they told of the beauties of heaven and the sufferings of the underworld. After seven days the souls left the plain and came to the shining spindle of Necessity, to which the orbits of the solar system were attached as an axis. A Siren sat on each orbit singing one note, all together producing a single harmony, and the three Fates sang along with them. At that point the souls were assigned lots, and in the allotted order they chose their next life from patterns on the ground in front of them that showed everything that would occur in each life. Both animal lives and the whole variety of human lives were represented, and those who had been animals similarly chose from among both kinds of lives. Each soul was assigned a guardian spirit to fulfill what was chosen, and the Fates then ratified the choices of the lives and made them irreversible. Finally all the souls except Er drank a measure of the waters of forgetfulness and went to sleep. At midnight they all were carried up in different ways to their births, like shooting stars.

To choose to live a particular life means to choose the kind of desires by which we will be driven, that is, whether the eros that motivates us will be for appetitive money making, for spirited competition, or for wisdom. As Diotima says in the *Symposium*, although we tend to reserve the term eros for the love between people, the desire for anything we consider good, such as money, athletic competition, or philosophy—in other words appetite, spiritedness, and wisdom—is a kind of eros as well (205b–d). Since the Myth of Er (Ἠρός) is an account of the basis of this eros (ἔρως), we may wonder whether Plato intended his audience to hear echoes of the word *erōs* in the name *Ēros*, and chose *Ēros* as his protagonist as a way of encouraging us to use the accounts of eros and Er to complete each other.[2] The *Republic* is otherwise virtually silent about the doctrine of eros as it appears in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.[3]

Our choice of a particular life entails the choice of a particular character (618b), but any choice we make is already determined by our present character, so if we choose our character we must do so on the basis of the character we already have, and there seems to be an infinite regress. At any moment the character on the basis of which we make our choices is already given, so we are never in a position to start over from scratch. In that case the Noble Lie seems to be the truth after all: we cannot be entirely responsible for our character. Socrates is often tentative and hesitant when putting claims forward, and emphasizes his ignorance and lack of certainty, but on the matter of the conclusiveness with which our past determines our present course he is anything but tentative (at least on Er's behalf). After the soul has chosen its future life, one of the three Fates, Lachesis, assigns to it the guardian spirit of that life "to fulfil the choice." The guardian spirit then takes the soul under the hand of Lachesis's sister-Fate, Clotho, as she turns the spindle of Necessity, in order to ratify the fate it had chosen. Next the soul is brought to the third Fate, Atropos, who makes the weave of its destiny irreversible. As if all this were not enough, the soul must then pass beneath the throne of Necessity (620d–e). Our future is conclusively and irrevocably determined by our previous choice of our present life. Moreover, for most of us the prenatal choice of our present life is determined by our previous life (620a), so the predetermination of our choices regresses indefinitely. The rewards and punishments that we are assigned in the afterlife also influence our choice of the next life, but they too were determined by our previous life, so the nature of our responsibility for our lives remains problematic.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that since our moral choices follow from our character, then if we can be held morally responsible for the kind of person we are, we must somehow be the cause of our own character. Otherwise virtue and vice are involuntary, merely the necessary consequences of the accident of our birth, and in that case we cannot be held responsible for our behavior:

> Suppose someone were to say that all people seek what appears good to them, and have no control over the appearance; but rather, the sort of person one is determines how the end appears to him. In that case, if each person is somehow responsible for his own character, he will also be responsible for how things appear to him. If not, no one is responsible for his own evildoing but he does these things through ignorance of the proper end, thinking that by these actions the greatest good will come to him. And the way we aim at the end is not voluntary but we have to be born with something like an eye by which we can judge well and choose what is truly good, and someone has a good nature in whom this is well developed by nature. For he will have the greatest and finest possession, which cannot be acquired or learned from anyone else; and to be well and finely possessed of this by nature would be the most perfect and true good nature. But if this is true, how will virtue be any more voluntary than vice?[4]

Aristotle's remarks can be taken as a demythologization of the Myth of Er. If the Myth of Er is the first formulation of the problem of freedom of will generally, Aristotle here has produced the first conceptualized statement of the problem (not until the eighth tractate of Plotinus's sixth Ennead does the issue receive anything like the kind of thorough analysis that we have since come to expect). Aristotle does not resolve the problem any more than Plato does. Like Plato, he seems to believe that one of the alternatives—that "no one is responsible for his own evildoing"—is a *reductio ad absurdum*, and so the other alternative must somehow be true, even if we cannot explain how it is true.

The Myth of Er functions with respect to morality as the myth of Recollection (which may be alluded to at the end[5]) functions with respect to knowledge. Recollection is meant to account for the non-empirical element in knowledge: absolutes like perfect equality are never given in experience, so why does the mind even form such concepts? If they are not given through the senses then they must be given to the mind independently of the senses; that is, they are given to the mind prior to the mind's union with the body, and this logical priority is illustrated by the temporal priority of a soul that is between incarnations. The soul is depicted as "seeing" the forms before its present incarnation, and then forgetting them when it enters a body, but becoming at least partially aware of them again when instances of them "remind" us of the forms.[6] Accordingly our knowledge of the forms is similar to our knowledge of something that we have forgotten but not completely forgotten. That is, we can be guided by that knowledge even though we are not able to articulate it[7] (as when we know that a name we have forgotten starts with the letter A).

Just as this myth provides us with an image of how we can have knowledge of absolutes even though we perceive only particulars, the Myth of Er provides us with an image of how we can have responsibility even though all of our choices follow from our pre-existing character. If our choices are determined by our character we have no ability to choose otherwise, and consequently the

idea of praising good behavior and censuring bad behavior becomes indefensible except on utilitarian grounds. Reward and punishment can still be justified for the sake of positive reinforcement and deterrence, but this is a matter of social manipulation, not morality—we simply reward someone for doing what we like, and punish others for doing what we dislike. If goodness or badness of character are no longer at issue, however, then it is the power-relation models of Thrasymachus and Protagoras rather than the morality models of Socrates and Plato that win out. Plato must obviously swim against that current. If we are morally responsible only for what we choose, and we are somehow responsible for our character, then in some sense we must choose our character. But since in our empirical choosing our character is always already given, then we must make that choice at a pre-empirical level. Here, as in Recollection, the logically prior is represented by the temporal priority of a soul that is between incarnations (as later it would be defended by Kant in terms of a pre-empirical noumenal realm that is exempt from the paradoxes of the causal account of free will). Just as knowledge of absolutes cannot be accounted for empirically, and is a kind of *a priori* foundation for knowledge that Plato illustrates with the story of a temporally prior event, so too moral responsibility is problematic because choices seem empirically to be nothing more than results of causal determinism, and yet it is also a presupposition for our moral consciousness that Plato illustrates with the story of a temporally prior event.

II

Socrates' mythic explanation of personal responsibility in terms of a prenatal choosing of our future life is hard to reconcile with lives that seem ill starred from the beginning. If someone dies in infancy we lament the waste of potential, and would not be likely to be reconciled to the event by an assurance that it was probably their own fault for not looking carefully enough at their life before they chose it. Socrates seems to be aware of the problem, for he coyly remarks that, "The other things he said, about those who had just been born and lived only a short time, were not worth remembering" (615c). Why were they not worth remembering? Is it because they were unconvincing or because they were somehow distasteful? If they were unconvincing it would be an admission by Plato that the Myth of Er is fatally flawed in its inability to deal with the fact of infant mortality. More likely we are meant to assume that there is an explanation but one that Plato would prefer us to ferret out ourselves; and there are in fact passages in the dialogues that provide an explanation of this puzzle. Plato could have avoided the problem by making the number of lives equal to the number of souls, so the last souls to choose might have found nothing better; but in that case evil people too may simply not have had any moral lives left to choose from, and need not bear any responsibility for their present actions. Consequently he says instead that there are far

more lives than souls, and even the one who chooses last can find one that is rewarding and not bad, Er tells us (619b). In that case the explanation not worth remembering must be that some people prefer to die in infancy. The ancient Greek proverb, "Best of all is never to have been born, second best is to die early,"[8] is not without its echoes in Plato. Over and over the dialogues tell us that since the body is an impediment to the soul, the soul's fulfilment is possible only in its disembodied state, and therefore death can be considered superior to life.[9] It is not inconceivable then that some souls, if they must return to bodies, would prefer to do so for as short a time as possible before returning to heaven for another thousand years. In a dialogue that emphasizes the importance of making dangerous doctrines as inaccessible as possible (378a), it is understandable that Plato may have chosen only to hint at a doctrine that makes death superior to life, and which might therefore encourage thoughts of impious suicide.[10]

Nevertheless, why are there such lives to be chosen at all? Why are not all lives more fulfilling? An answer can be inferred from the way the harmony of the spheres functions in the myth. The harmony of the spheres passage, together with the discussion of the Idea of the Good, is the closest the *Republic* comes to the *Timaeus's* depiction of the world as created in accordance with the principles of reason and goodness. Some reference to the creativity of the good, which the dialogue represents by the sun (506d–517c), is suggested by the myth's depiction here of the solar system as appearing from a distance as "a straight light, like a pillar, resembling most of all the rainbow but brighter and purer" (616b). The harmony of the spheres is connected not only with the underlying eternal structure of the universe, but also with temporal events. On each orbit stands a Siren who sings a single note, all of which blend in harmony. The spindle to which all the orbits are attached "turned on the knees of Necessity," and around the whole sat the daughters of Necessity, the three Fates, who sing along with the harmony of the Sirens. Atropos sings of the future, Clotho of the present, and Lachesis of the past (617b–c). Thus not only the timeless metaphysical structure of the universe, but the past, present, and future are determined in accordance with the harmony of the whole as well, and in that case so must be our individual destinies. In fact the myth pointedly intertwines the destinies of the individual lives with that of the cosmos as a whole. Not only do we choose our fates at the very spot where the cosmic spheres' Spindle of Necessity begins, but the lots and patterns of lives are taken from the lap of Lachesis as she helps turn the spindle, and the individual choices of lives are ratified by the three Fates as they turn the spindle, after which the souls pass beneath the throne of Necessity on whose knees the spindle is turning. The interconnection between individual and cosmic destiny could hardly be more explicit than when we are told that the guardian daimon "first led the soul to Clotho, under her hand and her turning of the whirling spindle, which ratified the fate of its lot and choice" (620). In that case the deterministic details of our lives as individuals are a matter not just of causal

necessity, but of rational necessity. Even if our choices are always determined by an indefinite regress of previous choices, at least it seems that this chain of causality is not an empty, meaningless, blind necessity, but a necessity that follows from the rational nature of the universe. Our lives, and even the lives of those who die in infancy, somehow play a necessary part in the harmonious fabric of the whole. Like musicians who may have only one note to play in a symphony, we all nevertheless contribute something without which the whole could not be what it is.

This connection between the life of the individual and the order of the universe is presumably also the significance of the mysterious remark in the *Timaeus* that when the creator created individual souls, he created them in the same number as the stars, and assigned each one to a particular star (41d–e). The destiny of the microcosm of each individual is intimately bound up with the destiny of the macrocosm of the universe as a whole. Plotinus's view seems to be an elaboration of this:

> [The universe] completes its course periodically according to everlastingly fixed rational principles, and everlastingly returns to the same state . . . in proportionate succession of defined lives, these here being brought into harmony with those there and completed according to them, everything being ordered under one rational principle. . . . The harmonious adjustment of the souls to the order of this universe of ours witnesses to this; they . . . make one harmony with its circuit, so that their fortunes and their lives and their choices are indicated by the figures made by the heavenly bodies and they sing, as it were, with one voice and are never out of tune. . . . And the individual, which is subordinated to the universal, is sent according to law. For the universal bears heavily upon the particular, and the law does not derive from outside the strength for its accomplishment, but is given to be in those themselves who are subject to it, and they bear it about with them. And if the time comes too, then what it wills to happen is also brought about by beings themselves in whom it is present, so that they accomplish it themselves because they bear it about; . . . it makes itself a sort of weight in them and implants a longing, a birth pang of desire to come there where the law within them as it were calls them to come.[11]

Plato would not go quite so far, however. Because there are many more lives than souls who choose, there is an element of indeterminacy in Plato's model that is absent from Plotinus's. Plato is a dualist rather than a monist, and unlike Plotinus he sees the universe as shot through with a certain degree of contingency. When the creator makes the cosmos out of "discordant and disorderly" material (*Timaeus* 30b), he is able to persuade the irrational necessity of the errant cause to accept the governance of reason and lead things to the good, only "for the most part" (τὰ πλεῖστα) (47e–48a). The *Republic's* firm distinction between the stable intelligible realm of forms, about which we can have knowledge, and the ever changing perceptual realm of individuals,

about which we can only have opinion (509d–517c, 533e–534a), is a reflection of this ultimate incommensurability between being and becoming. Perhaps this is also the implication behind the incommensurability of the Myth of Er's description of the heavens at 616b, and the subsequent details that include the human element at 616c–e.[12] Plato does not subscribe to rational determinism as completely as Plotinus; his views coincide with Plotinus's only "for the most part."

III

Plato's recognition of the regress of responsibility is apparent when Socrates says that "most people chose [their future lives] according to the habit of their previous lives" (620a). Orpheus, for example, who had been killed by women, chose to become a swan rather than be born to a woman. Telemonian Ajax, transferring his anger at Achilles to humanity in general, chose the life of a lion instead of a human. Odysseus, tired of a life of spirited struggle, chose a simple life. Moreover, those whose previous lives did not call down punishment afterward tended to choose carelessly, while those who suffered punishment for their past lives tended to take great care over the next one, "so that there was an interchange of good and bad for most of the souls" (619d).

Both of these passages—the description of choices made from past habits and the description of choices made as a result of reward or punishment—speak only of "most people," or "most of the souls." Who were the others, the exceptions? Were they souls that were influenced by one of these two—our habits, and the rewards and punishments to which they lead—but not the other? Or were they souls that were somehow able to overcome the influence both of past habit and of the consequent reward and punishment, and achieve some sort of absolute liberty of choice? Evidently both. If the punishments that we suffer (and to a lesser extent the rewards we enjoy) succeed in breaking our old habits of behavior, then we will be exceptions to those whose future is determined by past habits. Conversely if our old habits are so strong as to withstand the normal influence of reward and punishment, we will be exceptions to those whose future is determined by the influence of reward and punishment. Since there are two variables rather than one, no straightforward prediction is possible.

But there is also a third factor beside our habits and the rewards and punishments that they lead to, so there may be people whose choices are determined by something other than either their past habits or the consequences of their actions. At the end of the myth the souls returning to earth drink a measure of water from the River of Unheeding (*Ameleta*) on the Plain of Forgetfulness (*Lethe*), "but those not saved by wisdom (*phronesis*) drink more than the measure, and the one drinking forgot everything" (621a). What is this wisdom, and what is the "everything" that the others forget? What they forget is more than just the events of the afterlife, for those are already wiped from

memory by the normal measure of the water—that was its purpose. Since the complete forgetfulness is determined not by chance but by the presence or absence of wisdom, it must have something to do with wisdom itself.

Our habits, and the desires and fears produced by the prospect of punishment and reward, belong to the irrational parts of our soul—appetite and spiritedness. Wisdom belongs to the third and most important part of our soul, reason, which enters into the myth in three places. First we must choose our life with reason (*nous*) so that we choose wisely (619b). Next, in the course of our life we must philosophize soundly (619e). Third, we must be saved by wisdom (*phronesis*) from drinking too much oblivion and forgetting everything (621a)—perhaps a suggestion that a lack of wisdom is equivalent to the lack of a capacity for "recollection."[13]

If the meaning of our lives is connected with the meaning of the whole, that connection is only extrinsic in the case of the two factors in our decisions that have been discussed so far. Our habits, and the influence of rewards and punishments, do not form a link in any essential way between our personal goals and the good of the whole. The most that can be said of them is that lives based on habit and obedience are related to the good of the cosmos as parts to a whole, where the nature of the whole is not directly perceivable in that of the individual parts. It is the third factor in our choices, reason, that is our bridge from partiality to the rationality of the whole; there alone is the nature of the whole visible in the individual part. When we base our decisions on our habits, we uncritically follow pathways whose origins we do not know and our choices are determined by factors that are not subject to present evaluation. In the myth, "those who in the previous life lived in a well-ordered society, and partook of virtue by habit without philosophy," are most likely to choose the illusory rewards of injustice when the opportunity presents itself (619c–d). Their choices are not made rationally, but on the basis of an uncritical response to what has happened to them in the past, and they are not so much acting as reacting. Their choices are at the mercy of other people's actions and treatment of them. The same is true when we uncritically respond to the lure of reward and the threat of punishment—which are after all intended to produce new habits—without first determining in the light of reason whether the rewards and punishments lead us toward what is good, or are only arbitrary devices of societal manipulation.

Habits represent the determination of our choices by the retained past, while reward and punishment are the determination of our choices by the expected future. Only reason has its source in the present, that is, in a present examination of the situation. And only reason is free from external constraints, for even though reason may constrain us to choose a particular alternative, the constraint is not an external one because reason is in fact our truest self (611b–e). We may still be determined to make a particular choice by what reason tells us is right, and if we think rationally perhaps it is because we were determined to do so by prior causal factors. But once we have begun to

choose rationally, the choice itself is free in the sense that matters: it is chosen in the present and by our truest self, reason.[14]

Rational choice is the one freedom that is compatible with causal determinism, as the Stoics were the first to point out, followed more recently by compatibilists like Spinoza, Leibniz (and perhaps Descartes), and their philosophical descendants. Our empirical selves are not free from the law of cause and effect, but our truest self, reason, is free from the domination of the irrational, and from the unconscious domination of habit and manipulation.

IV

But while reason and philosophy may be sufficient causes of our freedom, they turn out to be insufficient to guarantee our happiness. At first it seems otherwise. We were told that even the one who chooses last can find a life that is rewarding and not bad (ἀγαπητός, οὐ κακός, 619b), so it sounds as though the souls who choose rationally and wisely can always be authors of their own happiness. The account apparently confirms what Socrates seems to have been insisting on in the first nine books, that if we live our life in the right way, in accordance with philosophy, we can find complete happiness regardless of any external factors; our happiness depends entirely on ourselves and our intellectual virtue. But now he tells us that "if someone philosophizes soundly, *and the lot of his choice does not fall out among the last*, we may assume . . . that not only will he be happy here, but that also the passage from here to there and from there back will not be through the earth and rough, but smooth and through heaven" (619e, emphasis added). Why does it matter whether the lot of our choice falls out among the last, since we can still find a life that is "rewarding and not bad," and we can still "philosophize soundly"? The implication is that even philosophers can become overwhelmed by the events of their lives and prevented from achieving perfect happiness—their lives may be "rewarding" but without achieving complete consummation and true happiness. Is it possible that Plato has been exaggerating the apparent optimism of the earlier books in order to give as much courage as possible to Glaucon, Adeimantus, and the rest of us in the face of the adverse circumstances of our lives, and that the tempering of that optimism is buried deep in the concluding myth?

The main argument of the *Republic* begins at the start of Book 2, when Glaucon rebukes Socrates for his sophistical refutation of Thrasymachus, and he and Adeimantus challenge Socrates to argue in good faith for the superiority of justice over injustice. It is not enough to show that a just person is happier than an unjust one, they insist, for just people receive many advantages because their behavior is approved of by others, whereas the reverse is the case for unjust people, and in that case it is not *being* just that provides the advantages, but only *appearing* to be just. Socrates must prove that justice is good for its own sake and not merely for the sake of its consequences. At that

point we expect the two brothers to require Socrates to compare the happiness of the just and unjust person by putting them on the same footing—either when both are believed to be just or when both are believed to be unjust. Instead the brothers argue that since an unjust person can successfully pose as a just one, while a just one may be thought to be unjust (Plato's Socrates can hardly quarrel with that), Socrates must show that the just person is happier than the unjust person even when the just person is believed to be most unjust and the unjust person is believed to be most just. In other words, the unjust person must be granted every possible social reward that life has to offer, and the just person must suffer every possible social affliction, even if that means "being whipped, stretched on the rack, bound in chains, having his eyes burned out, and finally, after suffering every evil, being run through with nails" (361e). Not even Job had to endure this much before he cried out in protest, and Epictetus's ability to achieve happiness in the life of a slave does not seem like much of an accomplishment by comparison.

Because the terms of the challenge are so extreme, it is easy to believe that Socrates defends the position that a just person will be happy no matter what—that absolutely nothing life can do to us can prevent us from being happy if only we are just. When Aristotle says that the just and good person needs a certain modicum of external goods in order to be happy,[15] he is usually taken to be departing from a Socratic-Platonic claim that the just person requires nothing but justice in order to be happy. But Socrates never makes that claim here, and is not required to by Glaucon and Adeimantus. He is only required to show that the just person, in no matter what condition, will be happier than the unjust person, in no matter what condition. This he does by arguing that injustice so perverts our inner self that no extrinsic benefits can possibly compensate for that damage. Compared with this condition, the just person's life turns out to be clearly preferable—729 times more pleasant (587e)! This does not necessarily mean, however, that just people will be *truly* happy in the most horrible circumstances, but only that they will be *more* happy than unjust people even in the most favorable circumstances. Socrates never claims in the first nine books that justice by itself is sufficient to guarantee happiness, and now, tucked into an unobtrusive sentence of the myth, he tells us that, by itself, philosophy—that is, complete justice—results in happiness only if a certain amount of luck is present as well. We do not need a lot of luck, but we do need some.

Immediately before the myth Socrates reminds Glaucon that they now have agreed it is better to be just than unjust regardless of any superiority in extrinsic advantages that the unjust person might enjoy, and he gets Glaucon to acknowledge in addition that in fact the just person will get most of the extrinsic advantages as well as the intrinsic ones, for it is the just person who will ultimately be rewarded by gods and humans (612b–e). "This is the position we must take on the just man. If he falls into poverty or disease or any other of the apparent evils, for him these things will eventually be something

good, both when he is alive and also when he has died" (613a). Suffering ennobles, but it only ennobles a good nature; otherwise it embitters. While this does not mean that the ability of just people to make the best of misfortune will enable them to achieve true happiness even in face of the greatest misfortunes, it does mean that it is always in our power to achieve a *relative* happiness in which "these [bad] things will eventually be something good."

How does that happen? We saw that the souls coming up from Hades generally make better choices than those who have just come down from heaven. The reason they are able to do so is that suffering forces us to think, it makes us consider how to bring the suffering to an end. Comfort and pleasure, on the other hand, anesthetize us from thinking; they give us no incentive to make an effort. The souls who are in heaven because they had "lived in an orderly society, partaking in virtue by habit, without philosophy" (619c), and who now have spent a thousand years enjoying the glories of heaven, had no more occasion to make an effort at reflective thinking than Adam and Eve before the fall. As Sartre says somewhere, "We learn nothing from success, only from failure." In the case of the souls in Hades the nature of their thinking may be shallow and instrumental, just an effort to replace suffering with pleasures. But for people who have what Plato calls rational natures rather than appetitive ones—people who care more about what is right and true than about what is pleasant—the thinking that their suffering impels them to will be of another kind. It will help them to see the fragility of a satisfaction that is built on external goods, and will turn them inward to apprehend the deeper and stable happiness that results from a goodness in character. Being perfectly happy may not always be in our power, but being more or less happy always is.

In the final analysis the Myth of the Metals and the Myth of Er complement rather than contradict each other. The Myth of Metals emphasizes the limitations of our freedom to choose our character, and the Myth of Er emphasizes the freedom that remains to us in spite of those limitations. Even if we are appetitive by nature it is open to us to discover the transitory, illusory character of the rewards of appetite that is documented in Book 9, and to base our future choices on reason.

ENDNOTES

1. Commentaries on the Republic, if they discuss the Myth of Er at all (as Craig [1994] for example does not), accord it only a few pages at most, ranging from less than a paragraph in Cross and Woozley (1964), to six pages in Bosanquet (1906) and Howland (1993). In between are Nettleship (1901) (5), Bloom (1968) (1), White (1979) (3), Annas (1981) (4), Reeve (1988) (2), Benardete (1989) (4). Even J. A. Stewart (1960), who devotes a thirty-five-page chapter to it spends only the last three pages on its philosophical implications; the remainder comprises summary, translation, comparisons of details with corresponding passages in Vergil and especially Dante, and comparisons of the topology of myth with the topological descriptions of the afterlife in the myths of the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*.

2. In the original myth the name may have been Ara. Arthur Platt 1911 writes: "the modern commentators are as much in the dark about Er as were the ancients. Illumination may be shed upon him by [the Armenian History] of Moses of Chorene. . . . Ara was son of Aram, who succeeded his father as King of Armenia. . . . It certainly looks as if this Ara was the original of Plato's Er; each of them is a valiant Armenian killed in battle, and each is said to be restored to life. For I think that τοῦ Ἀρμενίου originally meant 'the Armenian'; but Plato, having somehow got hold of him under that title, then added in his playful manner τὸ γένος Παμφύλου, because Er in this myth is a type of 'all nations and kindreds and tongues.' . . . But it is also possible to suppose that Ἤρος τοῦ Ἀρμενίου means 'Ara the son of Aram,' and so the scholiast, who did not see what Παμφύλου meant, explains it as 'son of a man named Armenius'" (13–14).

3. See Leo Strauss (1964, 111) and Stanley Rosen (1965).

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.5.1114a31–b8. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

5. Bosanquet (1906, 415) writes: " 'Those who are not reserved by prudence' [621a] [is] [a]pparently a suggestion of the doctrine of anamnesis or pre-natal recollection."

6. *Phaedo* 74a–75c, *Phaedrus* 247c–250d.

7. Meno 81d–86c.

8. E.g. Theognis, I.425, repeated by others such as Sophocles and Herodotus.

9. *Apology* 40b–41a, *Cratylus* 403a–404a, *Phaedo* 64a–68b, *Laws* 838d.

10. Notice the caution and indirection with which this doctrine is presented at *Phaedo* 61e–63b. In that passage it is also suggested that by our life here we perform some service to the gods, so conceivably even someone who shared the view that death is superior to life might, in terms of the Myth of Er, choose a lengthy life for unselfish reasons.

11. Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.3.12–13, Armstrong translation (substituting "universe" for "All").

12. See Adam (1963, vol. 2, 441 and 447).

13. Cf. *Phaedrus* 248c–250a, and note 5 above.

14. In the *Sophist*, the Eleatic stranger calls philosophy "the *episteme* of free people" (253c). By contrast, those who are governed by irrational passions are the least free (*Republic* 576a).

15. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.8.1099a31–b2, 10.7.1177a28–30.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adam, James. 1963. *The Republic of Plato.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Annas, Julia. 1981. *An Introduction to Plato's* Republic. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Benardete, Seth. 1989. *Socrates' Second Sailing: On Plato's* Republic. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bloom, Allan. 1968. *The* Republic *of Plato* (translation and commentary). New York: Basic Books.

Bosanquet, Bernard. 1906. *A Companion to Plato's Republic.* London: Rivingtons.

Craig, Leon. 1994. *The War Lover: A Study of Plato's* Republic. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Cross, R. C. and A. D. Woozley. 1964. *Plato's* Republic: *A Philosophical Commentary*. London: Macmillan.

Howland, Jacob. 1993. *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy*. New York: Twayne.

Nettleship, Richard Lewis. 1964. *Lectures on the Republic of Plato*, second edition. London: Macmillan.

Platt, Arthur. 1911. "Plato, *Republic*, 614B." *Classical Review.*

Reeve, C. D. C. 1988. *Philosopher Kings: The Argument of Plato's* Republic. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Rosen, Stanley. 1965. "The Role of Eros in Plato's *Republic*." *Review of Metaphysics* 18: 452–475.

Stewart, J. A. 1960 (originally 1904). *The Myths of Plato*. London: Centaur Press.

Strauss, Leo. 1964. *The City and Man*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

White, Nicholas. 1979. *A Companion to Plato's* Republic. Indianapolis: Hackett.