

THE BLACKWELL GUIDE TO

PLATO'S  
*Republic*

EDITED BY GERASIMOS SANTAS

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# Contents

Notes on Contributors	vii
Editor's Introduction	1
1 The Literary and Philosophical Style of the <i>Republic</i> <i>Christopher Rowe</i>	7
2 Allegory and Myth in Plato's <i>Republic</i> <i>Jonathan Lear</i>	25
3 Socrates' Refutation of Thrasymachus <i>Rachel Barney</i>	44
4 Plato's Challenge: the Case against Justice in <i>Republic II</i> <i>Christopher Shields</i>	63
5 The Gods and Piety of Plato's <i>Republic</i> <i>Mark L. McPherran</i>	84
6 Plato on Learning to Love Beauty <i>Gabriel Richardson Lear</i>	104
7 Methods of Reasoning about Justice in Plato's <i>Republic</i> <i>Gerasimos Santas</i>	125
8 The Analysis of the Soul in Plato's <i>Republic</i> <i>Henrik Lorenz</i>	146

9	The Divided Soul and the Desire for Good in Plato's <i>Republic</i> <i>Marianna Anagnostopoulou</i>	166
10	Plato and the Ship of State <i>David Keyt</i>	189
11	Knowledge, Recollection, and the Forms in <i>Republic</i> VII <i>Michael T. Ferejohn</i>	214
12	The Forms in the <i>Republic</i> <i>Terry Penner</i>	234
13	Plato's Defense of Justice in the <i>Republic</i> <i>Rachel G. K. Singpurwalla</i>	263
	General Bibliography	283
	Index	285

They are able to pose a stunning challenge to justice, and yet are not convinced by their own arguments. Socrates suggests that there is something divine about their characters that leaves them open to conduct a genuine investigation with him. We shall investigate what this openness could be, but for the moment, it is Ademantus who makes clear what a remarkable achievement this is. Glaucon has already challenged Socrates with an argument that what matters for happiness is only *appearing* to be just, not really being just. But it is Ademantus who shows how this outlook is already built into normal ethical education. Fathers encourage their sons to be just because of all the societal benefits they will acquire by being known to be moral (II.363a-b). But these rewards are compatible with simply appearing to be just. And the poets suggest that the gods do not themselves behave justly. Indeed, according to the poets, rich people can buy off the gods with sacrifices (II.363e-366d). In short, the ethical outlook being instilled in contemporary Athens is unknowingly hypocritical: on the surface justice is being praised, while just under the surface is the cynical message that all that really matters is appearance.

Note what a challenge this is for the idea of reflective equilibrium as a test for one's ethical beliefs. If in raising the question of how to live, we reach out to the "wisdom" of our parents, indeed to the "wisdom" of the most highly respected cultural sources, we may simply be reaching out to the accumulated prejudice of our age. And if we test it against our own sense of right and wrong, we will unwittingly be "testing" it against the same outlook — albeit one that has been instilled in us when we were young. It will *seem* to us that we will be asking and answering reflective questions, but we will simply be reinforcing the prejudices of the day.

Even philosophical debate — at least, of a familiar sort — isn't going to help. So, to take a salient example, if we want to test our ethical commitments against an imaginary opponent, whom we might call "the skeptic," can we think of a better example than Thrasymachus? As we debate with "the skeptic," we *think* we are confronting a radical alternative. This encourages the illusion that we are investigating all the possibilities there are. It becomes hard to see that these positions are of a piece. Thus once an ethical outlook has been instilled, it is difficult to induce reflective discomfort. For all the debates that have occurred, Ademantus tells us that no one has *ever* questioned justice and injustice except in terms of the reputation, prestige, and rewards they bring (II.366e).

## II

For Plato, the human psyche is itself a psychological achievement. The infant does not have a fully formed psyche; at most he or she has the capacity to acquire and develop psychological structures. And this formation is crucially shaped by the social environment. Cultural messages penetrate and mould the psyche in

ways that are often not well understood (II.377b; III.401c-e). So we need to understand what these meanings are and how this process works.

There is no need to dwell on Socrates' well-known critique of content: we are to eliminate tales of the gods fighting amongst themselves, especially inter-generational conflicts; tales which suggest that the gods are responsible for anything but the good; tales which suggest that gods change form or deceive; we are also to eliminate tales of heroes fearing death or lamenting the loss of loved ones. Socrates says that these tales turn children into cowards as well as loosen the bonds of family and citizenship (III.387). But how? That is, what is the process by which these objectionable contents take hold? Socrates gives this reason for banishing these objectionable stories: "The young cannot distinguish what is an allegory (*hypnōia*) from what is not, and the opinions they form at that age tend to be intractable and unchangeable" (II.378d-e). That is, youth lacks the capacity to recognize allegory as such.

But what is this capacity which youth lacks? The Greek word *hypnōia* is correctly translated as "allegory," but it also means the deeper or real meaning which lies at the bottom (of a thing). It is the deeper sense or hidden meaning: it is that which lies at the bottom of a myth or allegory.<sup>1</sup> *Hypnōia* is quite literally the under-thought. Indeed, it is an "under-thought" in another sense: it enters the psyche beneath the radar of critical thought. (Think of the way a *hypnotist* influences another by encouraging her to suspend critical judgment.) Precisely because the child lacks the capacity to recognize allegory as such, he cannot grasp the deeper meaning of the story that is entering his soul, and thus he cannot subject it to critical scrutiny. And so, it would seem that the young can take in the surface story, but they cannot recognize it *as* a surface. That is because they cannot recognize the deeper meaning nor can they recognize that the allegory is allegorical of this deeper meaning. Thus they are unaware of the place of allegory in the larger structure of things. I shall therefore call this lack of capacity, which is constitutive of youth, *lack of orientation*.

This lack of orientation lends extraordinary power to the stories one hears. Once one has acquired the capacity to recognize allegory as such, one can recognize a story as a surface-story, and then go on to inquire into its deeper meaning. But before one acquires the capacity, it is not merely that one cannot recognize the surface-story as such, the very idea of surface is unavailable. For one has no idea of depth with which to contrast it. It is precisely this capacity to distinguish surface from depth that one acquires as one acquires the capacity to recognize allegory as such. Thus without this capacity, the surface-story takes on a weird "reality" of its own. It is too quick to say that the young treat allegories as though they were true. For we are trying to capture a state of mind in which the concept of truth itself is not yet firmly established. Part of what it is to have the concept of truth is to have acquired the capacity to discriminate reality from appearance — and in certain crucial dimensions, this is what young people lack. But precisely because they lack this capacity, the experience of

## Allegory and Myth in Plato's *Republic*

Jonathan Lear

### I

It is by now a terrifying commonplace – agreed to by people across the political spectrum, indeed across the divide of civilizations – that our future well-being, and that of future generations, depends on shaping the hearts and minds of the young. Why do we think this? And do we have any idea how to do it well? Plato is the first person in the western tradition to think seriously about these questions and it is worth going back to him; not only as a return to origins, but because there are aspects of his thought which are still not well understood.

Plato's famous account of how to educate youth comes in the immediate aftermath of a spectacular breakdown of rational argument between two adults. In *Republic* I, Socrates and Thrasymachus argue over whether it is best to be just, even if one could get away with being unjust – and by the end Thrasymachus is reduced to sarcastic silence, while Socrates “wins” what he himself recognizes as a hollow victory. It has often been suggested that Plato is here dramatizing a failure of the Socratic method, the elenchus. And, no doubt, Socrates does adapt his method in the remaining books of the *Republic*. But looking at the breakdown, it seems clear that what is at stake is not some *particular* form of argument – as though if we made a few adjustments, it would come out all right. Rather, the problem seems to be that rational argument itself is coming too late. Thrasymachus already has an outlook on the world, and he will tend to recognize good and bad arguments in terms of that outlook. The problem then is not just the limitations of elenchus: there is a question of how any good argument could properly influence someone whose outlook is distorted and distorting.

So the pressing questions become: How are outlooks formed? What is it to have a good outlook? How might one go about shaping one? To address these questions, Socrates not only changes his method, he changes his interlocutors. Glaucon and Adeimantus are young, and they are exceptional (11.367e–368b).

allegories has a kind of power which we (loosely) associate with the experience of reality.

It is difficult to capture this childhood state of mind with precision. In part, this is due to the fact that once we acquire the capacity to recognize allegory as such it becomes difficult for us to remember the subjective quality of earlier states of mind when we lacked this capacity. Thus it is difficult for us to say retrospectively what it was like. In part, it is because the childhood state of mind itself lacks a certain definiteness. Clearly, children do have a symbolic capacity, they can distinguish symbol from thing symbolized. And they can recognize a difference between a story told and the report of a real-life event. But what difference do they recognize? Obviously, Plato was not as interested as we are in capturing the precise nature of childhood subjectivity. But he is, I think, pointing to an important characteristic of childhood experience: that even if children can *in some sense* recognize that they are being told a story, part of its thrill, part of the thrall in which it holds them, derives from the fact that they can't quite locate the story as such.

Precisely because childhood stories float in a sea of imaginative life that they exercise a certain power, a power which inclines us to describe stories as "having a reality of their own." Now if a particular story terrifies a child, parents might try to calm her by saying, "It's only a story." However, if the child lacks the capacity to recognize an allegory as such, then these words cannot be understood by the child in the way that the parents mean them. The child may be calmed by her parents' words, not because she understands the words, but because she trusts and loves her parents – and accepts that they are providing some sort of explanation why she shouldn't be scared. Indeed, the child may learn to repeat to herself, "it's only a story," and she may thereby develop a capacity to calm herself. Still, the mere repetition of the words does not *on its own* instill the capacity to recognize allegory as such. These words can make the right kind of difference, but only when they are embedded in the process of acquiring the capacity to recognize allegory as such. At that point the words can be used to utter a judgment, and thereby locate the story as such.

And what is shocking is that even though people eventually acquire the capacity to recognize allegory, the fact that there was a youthful period in which they lacked this capacity casts a shadow over an entire life. The *Republic* begins with a fascinating conversation between Socrates and Cephalus, a wealthy merchant of ripe age, who has the wisdom and moderation that would exemplify the best kind of a life that was nevertheless organized around accumulating wealth. Socrates asks him directly what he thinks is the greatest benefit of having great wealth. Cephalus answers:

What I have to say probably wouldn't persuade most people. But you know, Socrates, that when someone thinks his end is near, he becomes frightened and concerned about things he didn't fear before. It's *then* that the stories we're told about

Hades, about how people who've been unjust here must pay the penalty there – stories he used to make fun of – twist his soul this way and that for fear they're true. And whether because of the weakness of old age or because he is now closer to what happens in Hades and has a clearer view of it, or whatever it is, he is filled with foreboding and fear, and he examines himself to see whether he has been unjust to anyone. If he finds many injustices in his life, he awakes from sleep in terror, as children do, and lives in anticipation of bad things to come. But someone who knows that he hasn't been unjust has sweet good hope as his constant companion – a nurse to his old age, as Pindar says . . . Wealth can do a lot to save us from having to depart for that other place in fear because we owe a sacrifice to a god or money to a person. It has many other uses, but, benefit for benefit, I'd say that this is how it is most useful to a man of any understanding. (I. 330d–331b)<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the stories he heard in youth were absorbed and retained by Cephalus throughout his life. They were taken in as allegories-not-recognized-as-such, and even after Cephalus acquired the capacity to recognize allegory, these stories remained for most of his life dormant within him, with little significance for him. Indeed, for much of his life, he makes fun of them. However, as he enters old age and starts to face the prospect of death, these old stories come back to haunt him with uncanny power. Here is a man who has organized his entire life around acquiring wealth, but when asked in old age what has been the value of it all, his answer is that its greatest benefit is to ward off the fears that are only now arising around stories he heard in childhood.

Cephalus is describing the structure of a traumatic cocktail.<sup>3</sup> The childhood stories were taken in before he had the capacity to recognize their allegorical status – and thus before he had the capacity to grasp their deeper meanings. They may provoke childhood fears but, in childhood at least, they have nothing to latch onto. However, in old age it seems that Cephalus' emerging anxiety over death needs the childhood stories to give it form and content. The elderly anxiety combines with the early childhood stories, and together they disrupt any previous self-understandings and give a new, anxious meaning to Cephalus' life. Note that Cephalus is unable to remain with Socrates and inquire into what justice really is: he has to go off to make a sacrifice (I.331d).

One would like to think that as one gets older one matures and, in particular, one leaves childhood stories behind. Plato's picture, as described by Cephalus, is darker. There seem to be three developmental stages: a childhood stage where the stories are taken in but not recognized as such; young adulthood, when the stories are both recognized as such and ridiculed; old age, when the stories come to inform an otherwise amorphous anxiety over death. And so, retrospectively, we can see that childhood is a time when the seeds are planted for a terror that will explode only in old age.

Socrates is also clear that the un-oriented tales we hear in youth are actually *disorienting*. The heroic tales provide paradigms for imitation which, through the imitation, shape the psyche (III.395c–d, 401c–e; II.377b, 378b). For they

facilitate the establishment of structures of repetition: habits and dispositions whose full meaning cannot be understood at the time they are being formed. So, for instance, a little boy hears heroic tales of Achilles at a time when he lacks the capacity to recognize allegory as such. When he goes out to play his version of *hoi agathoi kai hoi kakoi* (good guys and bad guys), he assigns himself the role of Achilles. He acts out a certain image of courage before he is able to understand what courage is. This image is enacted over and over again in play, and in this way his psyche gets "Achillized." He becomes accustomed to see the world and act in it from an "Achillized" perspective. And so, by the time he does acquire the capacity to recognize allegory as such, it is in an important sense too late. He can now recognize the Achilles tale as a story, but the tale has already done its psychic work. And by the time he tries in adulthood to think about what courage is, he is already looking out from Achilles' perspective.

### III

It is important to recognize that lack of orientation has the same formal structure as dreaming. In dreams, we experience images without recognizing them as images and without understanding their deeper meanings. It is not quite correct to say that in dreams we think we are awake. Part of what it is to think we are awake is to exercise the capacity to distinguish between waking and dream states, and it is this capacity that goes to sleep when we sleep. Thus dream states do have a reality and power for us, *not* because we think we are awake, but because the capacity to distinguish between waking and sleeping has temporarily shut down. So again there is disorientation: we lose the capacity to recognize our dream as a dream and thus to determine what it is about.

Socrates assigns exactly this structure to dreaming. He is talking about the lovers of sights and sounds: those who recognize many beautiful things but are ignorant of the beautiful itself. And, he asks, isn't such a person — whether asleep or awake — really living in a dream? For isn't dreaming this: "thinking that the similar thing is not similar but that it is the thing to which it is similar" (V.476c, my translation)? Here the "dreamer" lacks orientation: he cannot recognize the place of the many beautiful things in the larger structure of the world. He cannot recognize a beautiful thing as an imitation of the Form nor does he know what it is an imitation of. Thus he cannot understand its deeper meaning. This condition is thus structurally analogous to lacking the capacity for recognizing allegory as such. In this lack of orientation, it is as though these sights and sounds are reality. This is the nature of dream experience.

It follows from these reflections that, for Socrates, entering conscious wakeful life is tantamount to entering a dream. Even if we leave aside Plato's metaphysics for the moment, it is his view that it is constitutive of youth to lack the capacity to recognize allegory as such. Entering conscious life is entering into an

awareness that lacks the capacity to recognize the similar thing (the allegory) as similar. But without this capacity life has the character of a dream. And now if we do take Platonic metaphysics into account, it turns out that as young men and women acquire the capacity to recognize allegory as such, they "wake up" from one dreamlike state only to enter another. Ironically, the newly acquired sense of reality — "that was only a story!" — is precisely that which disorients us all over again. For we now plunge into the adult world of cultural artifacts, social practices, and physical objects — and we take it to be the real thing. As we acquire one version of the capacity to recognize the similar as similar, we enter a new level of experience where there is another version of the capacity that we lack.

### IV

It is time to take another look at the Noble Falsehood. Socrates thinks that the inability to recognize allegory as such is constitutive of childhood. Thus for him the task cannot be to avoid all allegories — that is impossible — but to find the right kind of allegory that will not be recognized as such.<sup>4</sup> That is, in choosing which stories to tell children, we ought to make use of our knowledge that, in the first instance, they will not be able to recognize the allegory for what it is. Obviously, there may be various grounds for criticizing Socrates' candidate, but by now it should be clear that, given the overall outlook, there is one position that is not available: simply speak the truth to our children. This is not due to lack of fortitude on our part, nor to dishonesty. It is *constitutive of the adult-child* situation: children cannot possibly understand our words as we mean them. Either we remain unaware of this ourselves, or we try to take it somehow into account. Our children lack orientation, so can we tell them things that at least won't disorient them? Even better, can we orient them in the right sort of way?

Socrates distinguishes a verbal falsehood (*to en tois logois psudōs*) from "true falsehood" (*alēthos psudōs*), and it is clear that a verbal falsehood has essentially the same structure of an allegory-not-recognized-as-such. For a verbal falsehood is basically a form of words that comes to rest in the soul *without* being connected to its "deeper meaning." Plato calls it an imitation or image of a "true falsehood." Now a true falsehood is like that "deeper meaning": it is actually a condition of a person's soul when she is living in falsity. And it is a condition everyone wants to avoid. A verbal falsehood, like an allegory-not-recognized-as-such points to — or imitates — this deeper meaning *without* actually being connected to it. That *lack* of connection is what keeps the falsehood in its verbal form. And as such, Socrates thinks it can be used as a medicine (*pharmakon*). Clearly, this is a potentially dangerous drug; how can we use it for medicinal purposes? To answer this question, perhaps it is useful to ask, what is the "disease" from which children need to be "cured"?

The aim is to implant an allegory not recognized as such which will help children with the fact that they live in a condition of not being able to recognize allegories as such.

I have to try to persuade first the rulers themselves and the soldiers, and then the rest of the city, that the entire upbringing and education we gave them was after all merely a dream" (III.414d).

In other words, we are to implant an allegory not recognized as such which in effect "says" that the entire content of our experience up until now has been in a condition where we cannot recognize allegories as such. It is a dream about dreaming and waking up. And unlike standard myths about the gods or ancient heroes, this myth is explicitly about the people to whom it is being told. As such it serves as a dreamlike wake-up call *for them*.

It is important to recognize that this Noble Falsehood is proto-philosophical in two ways. First, it attempts to give an account of the totality of our experience (up until now). It claims that *all* experience (up till now) can be understood under the concept "dream." Insofar as philosophy attempts to comprehend the whole, this myth is an imitation of that aspiration. Compare that to the familiar Homeric myths from which this aspiration is absent: There is thus reason to think it would have a very different effect on the young psyche from the standard fare of the day. Second, the myth inherently sows the seeds of discontent. It opens us to the idea that all our experience until now is somehow inadequate. And although we do not yet know precisely what this allegory means, we do know that it is classifying all our experience (until now) as somehow second-rate with regard to being well-oriented to reality. Thus it is a myth which introduces the philosophical distinction between appearance and reality — and it tells us firmly that up until now we have been living in appearance. In this way, the myth prepares us for philosophy.

It has often been remarked that the Noble Falsehood is a politically conservative myth: it claims in essence that people are born with innate and distinctive natures, suited for different social and political roles.<sup>5</sup> It also reinforces the idea that citizens are indebted to the existing political order, the beautiful city or Kallipolis. However, what is less well understood is that while the Noble Falsehood may be *politically* conservative, it is *epistemically* revolutionary. It is meant to instill discontent with one's entire current epistemic condition. Moreover, the allegory is authored by someone who explicitly understands that children lack the capacity to recognize allegory as such. Thus one should expect the myth to be tailored to play to this lack of capacity. At the end of the Noble Falsehood, Socrates asks Glaucon "Is there any way of persuading them of this myth?" And Glaucon responds, "No way with those people you tell it to; but with their sons and with future generations" (III.415.c-d; my translation). Glaucon recognizes that the proper way to "believe" a myth is to hear it before one acquires the capacity to recognize allegory as such. For once one acquires that ability, alle-

gories lose their "quasi-realistic" power. Thus there is no way you can get an adult to "believe" your myth.

At first one might think that from the perspective of living within the truth, the original adults who hear this myth are the best placed. For they can immediately recognize the allegory as an allegory — and, after all, that is what it is. The succeeding generations will all in some sense be misled: for they will all take in the allegory before they can recognize it as such. And the power that the myth will have for them will depend essentially on having heard it before they were in a position to understand its true nature.

But, for Socrates, the situation is the reverse of what it seems. For while the original adult generation will immediately be able to recognize the allegory as such, that recognition will occur in a life that is fundamentally disoriented. For this is a generation that assumes that the physical objects and artifacts in its midst are the real thing. They lack the capacity to recognize the familiar couch on which they lie as an imitation of the Form (X.596-8). Thus they are in a position structurally analogous to the child who cannot recognize allegory as such. They cannot recognize the "deeper meaning" of the familiar couch, they cannot even recognize that it has a deeper meaning. Thus the physical couch will inevitably seem more real to them than it in fact is. As we have seen, Socrates says that such people are in effect dreaming. And the Noble Falsehood cannot, for them, function as a wake-up call precisely because they immediately recognize it as an allegory. Ironically, the allegory gets located as such, but in a sea of disorientation.

But for the children, grandchildren, and subsequent generations, we should expect the myth to have the kind of two-stage effect we saw in the case of Cephalus. In childhood, the myth is laid down as an allegory-not-recognized-as-such. But even as a surface-story, the myth begins to teach the child to be hermeneutically suspicious of the other myths he has heard in childhood. After all, it's all been just a dream up till now. Thus one can think of the Noble Falsehood (told in childhood) as itself beginning to inculcate the capacity to recognize allegory as such. For it is an allegory told to us when we cannot recognize allegory as such but which *right on its surface* tells us that the other allegories we've already heard (and by hypothesis have not yet recognized as such) are really only dreams. In that way, the Noble Falsehood embeds an anti-fundamentalist message about all other myths: none of them should be taken literally.

Now we have reason to think that the Noble Falsehood will be told to *all* the children in the polis: for it is told to the rulers, soldiers, and *the rest of the city*. But we can imagine it having a special belated effect on the future rulers of the city. The Noble Falsehood sets them up for a later *aha!*-experience. Just as the stories Cephalus heard in childhood set him up for a later explosion in old age of terrible fears about death, so the Noble Falsehood one hears in childhood sets one up in adulthood to be open to the reality of the Forms. Think of young men and women who have the same outstranding character as Glaucon

and Adeimantus, but who have been brought up since childhood in the right sort of way. In particular, they were exposed in childhood to the Noble Falsehood. As they grow up, the finest young men and women amongst them will be exposed in their education to the reality of the Forms. Because earlier, in childhood, they had been told the Noble Falsehood, they are now also in a position to feel "Aha! So *that's* what the myth was really about." In their education, they are being exposed to the true nature of reality for the first time, but their souls have already been set up to embrace it with gusto. It's like getting a joke many years after you've heard the punch line. Only in this case the joke is the idea that ordinary physical objects constitute reality. From a certain Platonic perspective, that is very funny. And if you've heard the Noble Falsehood in childhood, you're in a position to let out a real belly-laugh as an adult. (If that seems implausible to you, you can reflect on the fact that you didn't hear the Noble Falsehood as a child.)

Thus it is superficial to think of the Noble Falsehood *simply* as a myth that is designed to make children loyal to the established political order in the kalipolis. It may in fact do this, but it is also concerned with orienting children towards the truth. Socrates is trying to take explicit account of the fact that we are born into a culture, and that by the time we can reflect on it that culture has already shaped our souls. In particular, it has shaped our souls in ways that will influence the reflection. What is striking about the Noble Falsehood, in contrast to other myths and ideologies that are meant to legitimate the status quo, is that this allegory does its work by generating dissatisfaction. It teaches us to be dissatisfied with all the myths we've heard, at least insofar as we've taken them to have more than dreamlike status. Indeed, it teaches us to be dissatisfied with all of our experience up until now insofar as we have taken it to be experience of reality. This is not how legitimating myths normally work.

## V

It is now possible to see that Socrates' account of the Cave is a repetition and re-creation of the Noble Falsehood. As is well known, this image is meant to characterize us in terms of "the effect of education – or lack of it – on our nature" (VII.514a). Again, it is essentially about those to whom it is being told: it is designed to describe their fundamental condition. And it is proto-philosophical in the same ways as is the Noble Falsehood. First, it is trying to capture the totality of our experience up until now, the moment when this story is introduced. It claims that all of our experience till now can be understood under the concepts *seeing shadows* or *hearing echoes* (and mistaking them for reality). Second, the account is designed to instill dissatisfaction with the current level of experience. It introduces in imagistic terms the philosophical distinction between appearance and reality, and it gives us "grounds" for "thinking" both

that we are living in appearance and that we should be unhappy about that. The dissatisfaction is thus not about this or that belief – this is not a process of rejecting false beliefs – it is dissatisfaction with the sum total of experience (up till now).

Both the Noble Falsehood and the Cave thus intentionally create reflective disequilibrium; they build an inherent discontent with the current level of experience. Unlike existing myths – say Homer's presentation of Achilles, which, in Plato's view, gives a fixed, false, and thus imprisoning image of courage – the Socratic allegories encourage the idea that the current state of experience, "knowledge," etc. is unsatisfactory. Life up until now has, unbeknownst to us, been a dream. Life up until now has, unbeknownst to us, been a prison in which we are mistaking shadows for the real thing. The Socratic allegories unlike the Homeric myths inherently encourage dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs. They thus motivate us to try to go on in some different way. If Socrates is right that we have been living in a dream, then these allegories serve as a wake-up call. If he is right that unbeknownst to ourselves we have been living in prison, then in becoming aware of that we begin to chafe at the chains.

Note that the problem we began with was the idea that our best attempts at achieving reflective equilibrium might be a sham. This was in effect Adeimantus's challenge: as we try to test our ethical beliefs we end up reaching out to the (disguised) prejudices of the day. But here are finally allegories that are not intended to legitimize the values of the day, but rather to instill suspicion with respect to them. It does this not by criticizing this value or that, nor by taking on the role of "moral skeptic," but by making us uncomfortable with our entire mode of acquiring beliefs and values. Whatever else might be said about these myths, they are clearly not meant to keep us locked into current images of goodness, beauty, courage. Rather, they create an inchoate sense of discomfort with those images.

After Socrates describes the Cave, Glaucon says "A strange picture. And strange prisoners." Socrates responds, "No more strange than us" (VII.515a). The Greek word for "strange" is *atopos*, which means more literally *out of place*, most literally it means *without a place, unlocated*. But "unlocated" is precisely the "position" of an allegory-not-recognized-as-such: we do not yet know its place in the scheme of things. Insofar as we, as children, lack the capacity to recognize allegory as such, *we* shall be unlocated, for we cannot orient ourselves with respect to these allegories. Now the story of the Cave is ostensibly being told to Glaucon, who does have the capacity to recognize allegory as such. But he stands in relation to ordinary experience – to physical objects, artifacts, contemporary beliefs about the good life – as children stand to allegories: he cannot yet locate them as imitating the Forms. As a young adult he lacks the capacity to recognize the allegorical nature of ordinary experience. He cannot locate his experience in relation to reality – to the Forms – and thus he remains unlocated, *atopos*. The Cave is an allegorical attempt to get him to recognize that.

As such, the Cave seeks to instill a new form of Socratic ignorance. As is well known, in the *Apology* Socrates says that he discovered he was the wisest among humans because he knew that he didn't know. But the Cave is a story that is designed to put Glaucon, and anyone else ready to hear it, into a position where they can begin to recognize that they don't know. Socrates says that education is not a matter of putting knowledge into souls, but of turning the whole soul away from the darkness towards the light (VII.518c). Certainly, what we are turning away from are images, shadows, echoes, allegories *not recognized as such*. Thus we are turning away from a dreamlike state. And what we are turning towards is a recognition that if we are to understand these images we must grasp that they are images, and we must struggle to understand what these images are images of. Indeed, the process of turning away is constituted by coming to recognize the "allegorical" nature of ordinary experience. We may not yet be able to say what the deeper meanings are — thus we remain ignorant — but we are able to glimpse that they are pointing towards deeper meanings — and thus we at least know that we are ignorant. Thus the allegory of the Cave facilitates a Socratic movement from being ignorant, yet ignorant of one's ignorance, to being ignorant but aware that one is ignorant. And insofar as ordinary life is like a dream, then as we move towards Socratic ignorance, we begin to wake up.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to keep in mind to whom the Cave allegory is addressed. Ostensibly it is addressed to Glaucon and Adeimantus, and it is addressed *directly* to them. That is, the Noble Falseness is told to Glaucon and Adeimantus, but in the context of an inquiry into what stories we should tell the members of the kallipolis. The Cave, by contrast, is told directly to Glaucon and Adeimantus and it is explicitly for them. I suspect that in this way the Cave is addressed to the ideal reader of the *Republic*. For, as we have seen, Glaucon and Adeimantus are exceptionally fine people who have had the historical bad luck to have been born into a bad society. The *Republic* is a book for such people. There are two features of such readers that command our attention. First, they have already been exposed in childhood to the misleading myths and stories of their culture — though given their fine natures they have not been as mishapen by them as other members of society. In particular, they are capable of going through a process of questioning their myths, much as Glaucon and Adeimantus do in Books II and III. Second, by the time they are told about the Cave, it is too late for them to experience the allegory in the way that a child does. They already have the capacity to recognize allegory as such. So there is reason to think that the allegory is meant in the telling to be essentially denatured: it is not meant to have on the intended recipients the kind of power it would have had if it had been told in youth. But, then, what kind of effect is it supposed to have?

Earlier in the day — or earlier in the reading of the book — Glaucon, Adeimantus and the ideal reader have been exposed to the Noble Falseness. They are in a position to recognize that it could not possibly affect them as it is meant to affect the young members of the kallipolis. At best, they are left to imagine

what effect it might have on a young soul in a good society. But now, when they hear the Cave, they are hearing basically the same story for the second time — only now they are hearing an age-appropriate version. I am going to indulge the fantasy that we are ideal readers of the *Republic*. Obviously, it is too late for the Cave — or any other story — to have the same effect on us as it would have had if told to us in youth.

Nevertheless, the fact that we are first told the Noble Falseness, then the Cave, means that we are put in a position where we can re-enact in adult life a process by which a child acquires the capacity to recognize allegory as such. Ostensibly the Noble Falseness is *for them*, the Cave is *for us*. But what is really for us is the *movement* by which we go from hearing the Noble Falseness (which is for them) to the Cave (which is for us). For the fact that we have just heard the Noble Falseness sets us up for an aha!-experience when we hear the Cave. Retrospectively we can say with emotion and conviction, "So *that's* what the Noble Falseness is about!" We are now able to locate the Noble Falseness in a way we couldn't earlier — and this is an adult surrogate to the childhood process by which we first learned to recognize allegory as such.

Prospectively, the Cave gives us an inkling of something which we recognize we can at best only glimpse. In effect, the story tells us that as we leave childhood behind and enter adulthood we are, in effect, entering a second childhood. For the Cave invites us to picture our situation as one of seeing images and shadows and mistaking them for reality. It is an imagistic story in which we are told that we lack the capacity to recognize *reality* as such. Just as the children in the kallipolis will be told the Noble Falseness *before* they have acquired the capacity to recognize allegory as such — and thus are left with an uncanny sense that they will soon be experiencing things in non-dreamlike ways (whatever that means) — so we will be told the Cave allegory before we have acquired the capacity to recognize reality as such. And thus we are left with an uncanny sense that we may soon be experiencing reality in non-dreamlike ways (whatever that means). The Cave intimates to us our own future selves. At least, it intimates our own best possible future selves.

Note also that someone in Glaucon's position who had been exposed to the allegory of the Cave would be in a better position to tell the Noble Falseness to children. If the kallipolis is ever going to be established it will have to be by someone like Glaucon, though someone who is better placed in terms of power and historical opportunity. So it is someone like Glaucon who is the projected inaugural teller of the Noble Falseness. Now the founder of the kallipolis will be the first-generation teller of the Noble Falseness, so he is not in a position where he can believe it, nor was he ever in a position where he did "believe" it. By contrast, the children who hear the Noble Falseness will be able to transmit it to their children with added verve.<sup>7</sup> Thus this original transmission will be the weakest in terms of producing the intended effect. However, if we arm the founder of the kallipolis with the picture of the Cave, we have, as it were, given him an age-appropriate allegory — and one that has the same basic structure as

the Noble Falseness he now has to tell. This puts the original teller of the Noble Falseness in a position where he himself has accepted an allegory that has the same basic structure as the one he is about to tell. And thus he can speak with a conviction which might otherwise be lacking. Although this is the first transmission of the Noble Falseness to children, the earlier transmission of the allegory of the Cave to adults secures as much efficacy as is possible within the context of this original telling.

## VI

The *Republic* is a work of astonishing depth, so there are obviously a number of ways to read it. But it certainly can be read as an occasion to work through the power of allegories and myth. At the very beginning, we the readers are exposed, through Cephalus, to the uncanny power that childhood myth can have later in adult life. Insofar as Cephalus's situation is not unusual, we have reason to feel vulnerable. What myths that we have heard in childhood are ticking away, deep inside our souls, ready to explode our happiness at some future date? The myths Cephalus heard disturbed Cephalus, but the fact that he was disturbed should disturb us.

It is in such a disturbed state that we come to the Noble Falseness — which we recognize as a cure that couldn't possibly help us. The Noble Falseness itself provides a prophylactic for children against all the other misleading myths they might have heard. For it claims that all their experience up until now has been a dream. But the myth is useless when told to adults. Many students who come to the *Republic* for the first time express pleasure that they have not been subjected to such "lies," and that response is understandable. But when we come to understand the deeper motivation of the Noble Falseness, there is also room for a certain wisdom that such lies could no longer do us any good.

But then there is the Cave, an allegory specifically designed for a young adult reader or interlocutor. At last we have an allegory that is for us, yet it is also a re-creation of the Noble Falseness to which we have already been exposed. As we have seen, even in our original encounter with the Cave we are coming to it for the second time. There is thus reason to think that the *Republic* is not merely an account of the proper mythic education of youth — an education we could never experience — it is also a form of mythic therapy for us. For we are told a story (the *Republic*) of being told a myth in childhood (the Noble Falseness), followed by being told an allegory (the Cave) of the same basic structure that is appropriate for us as adults.

It is this whole movement that for us does the therapeutic work. For although it is impossible for us to create a myth that would have the effect on us that it would have had if we had heard it in youth, there is reason to think that the allegories we do create — in particular, the Noble Falseness and the Cave — will

be prophylactic against the untoward effects of the myths we have heard in youth. For the allegories we are now hearing are essentially *reactive*. They are not myths about the creation of the universe nor are they about the gods or heroic ancestors who founded civilization as we know it. Rather, they are about our epistemic condition; and they say that all previous myths we have heard are really only a dream, a shadow, an echo. Insofar as we take the earlier myths to have more reality than that, we are deluded. The Noble Falseness and the Cave are allegories to correct for all previous myths. We first see this corrective in a version that, we imagine, we would have heard if only we had been children at the founding of the kallipolis. Later we encounter a version which is more appropriate to our age and actual historical circumstance. In short, we move from the ideal to the real, from a fantasy of what a great childhood would be like, to a more realistic appraisal of what our actual condition is. But all this is accomplished within the movement of allegory. I suspect Plato thought it would work like an antidote: the outcome of this movement is to put ourselves in the best possible position we could be in — given the realities of our early life in a flawed culture — to counteract the later effects in adult life of early childhood myths. This cannot all be accomplished at the level of reasoned arguments: we need to use imagination to counter the belated ill effects of earlier imaginative products. But with the prophylactic tales of Noble Falseness and Cave, we have done the best we can to avoid the kind of horror that, in late age, struck Cephalus.

Having accomplished this, we are in a position to re-visit a healthy version of the type of myths that came to torment Cephalus. This, in effect, is the myth of Er. Thus the *Republic* ends as it began, with a myth of justice and retribution in the afterlife. Er was supposedly a hero from a foreign land, killed in battle, who twelve days later came back to life and thus was able to report on life after death. There are two important emendations that Er makes to the myths that torment Cephalus. First, the myth confirms Cephalus' fear that he would be punished for his injustices, but it is worse than he feared (X.615a-b). For not only is a person punished ten times — indeed, punished ten life times — for each offense, there is no hope of buying off one's injustices with money. The idea that in this life Cephalus could buy his way out of punishment in the next is exposed as a merchant's fantasy. Second, the myth reveals that Cephalus' version is only partial. Cephalus can't get beyond the punishments he might suffer in the next world. But Er declares that after an extended period of punishment, there is then another chance to re-enter life. Only one must choose lots for what kind of a life one shall lead. This is the most dangerous and fraught part of the cycle, for even the shape of one's soul is at stake. For the soul is affected by the kind of life it chooses to live (X.618b).

Now what role does this myth play in the closing moments of the *Republic*? It seems to me that the myth is both therapeutic and argumentative at the same time. Therapeutically speaking, we know from the case of Cephalus that we ourselves have been implanted with childhood stories of retribution which are set

to "go off" in old age. We need to do something now that will prevent these stories from later having a deleterious effect upon us. This is just what the myth of Er is designed to do. For it takes up the stories that come to haunt Cephalus, but it points us in a different direction.

It looks, my dear Glaucon, as if that is where the whole danger lies for a man. It is why the greatest care must be directed towards having each and every one of us disregard all other branches of study, and be a follower and student of this branch of ours, in the hope that he can learn and discover who it is who will give him the ability and knowledge to distinguish the good life from the bad, and choose always and everywhere out of all those possible, the life which is better. *He must take into consideration all the things we have talked about here today . . .* (X.618b-c).<sup>8</sup>

The day began with everyone hearing of Cephalus' fears, but by the end of the day we can see that these fears led him off in the wrong direction. The late-blooming effect of childhood myth on Cephalus was to make him anxiously try to pay off debts and make (no doubt expensive) sacrifices to the gods. And this prevents him from doing the one thing he should be doing if he wants to make a genuine contribution to his future happiness: spending the day with Socrates to inquire what a good life might really consist in. Cephalus can't stick around for the discussion because "It's time I was doing something about the sacrifices" (I.331d).

By the time we hear basically the same kind of myth at the end of the day we are ready to move in a very different direction. The therapeutic action of the myth of Er runs along two dimensions, conscious and unconscious. Consciously, the myth sheds light on all the previous myths and allegories we have heard in this remarkable day. Not only does it illuminate what is going wrong in Cephalus' reception of his myth, it sends us back to the Noble Falseness and the Cave. For if the all-important task is to be able to determine what is (and what is not) a good life, these earlier myths help free us from the illusion that we already know the answer. And the myth of Er is there to show us how important that is.

But it is reasonable to assume that the myth will also have unconscious effects on us. Yet, if the effects are unconscious, how are we to investigate them? Obviously, the route needs to be indirect and can be no more than hypothetical. My hypothesis begins with a conscious phenomenon, and treats it as a symptom: I have often heard readers express disappointment that the *Republic* ends with a myth. My suggestion is that the experience of disappointment is in some sense correct, but that it has fastened on to the wrong object. For if we are ideal readers of the *Republic*, then part of the process of coming to grips with the text must be the realization that *we* are in various ways flawed. After all, if we have grown up in less-than-ideal historical and social circumstances, there is now reason to think that this has taken a toll on our souls. To give one salient

example: it is likely that in childhood we too were subject to terrifying stories of a terrifying place, just as Cephalus was. For Cephalus it was Hades, in the Christian tradition it is hell, in a secular context there will some version of going over to "the dark side." In each case the reader would be living with an unconscious "time bomb" that might "go off" in old age. The myth of Er takes up these childhood stories and diverts them down a different stream. We now have implanted within us a story which takes up previous punishment stories and amends them — locating them in a larger story of coming back to life, of personal responsibility, and of the importance of choosing well.

Thus there does seem to be some basis for the experience of disappointment — but we haven't thought through our own relation to the book if we experience it as disappointment with the book, rather than with ourselves. What is disappointing — though to dwell on it would be self-indulgent — is that by the end of this marvelous book we, even as ideal readers, still need a myth.

I have heard readers complain that, by ending the book with a myth, Plato is admitting a kind of argumentative defeat. After all, wasn't the challenge to Socrates to argue that the just life is the best one? And if his argument has succeeded, why does he need a myth to prop it up? This complaint does not take sufficient account of the role a myth might play inside an argument. It seems to me Plato could have reasoned like this: when it comes to justice, the universe of possibilities breaks up into three broad classes. Either we live in this life and when we die, that's the end of it; or, after we die we go into some kind of after-life; or, after we die we go into some kind of afterlife and somehow return to this life. Those are all the possibilities there are. The main argument of the *Republic* covers the first possibility, and the main argument plus the myths covers the other two.

And one should not be surprised that an argument that includes possibilities of life after death would make recourse to myths, for the actual conditions of life after death are not something we can know anything about. From an argumentative point of view, the recourse to myth itself is not problematic just so long as it covers all the possibilities there are. This, I suggest, is precisely what the myths of the *Republic* set out to do. *If* there is life after death, the unjust will be punished; *if* there is life after that, the just will be better off.<sup>9</sup> Thus Plato's recourse to myth at the end of the *Republic* in no way gives up argumentative rigor, and disappointment with the book on that basis is thus misplaced.

Plato has used myth not to argue for an actuality, but to cover the universe of possibilities. One way or another, these are the ways things have to be — unless, that is, there is a fourth possibility: namely, that the world is essentially a bad place, an occasion for despair. In this world there would be an afterlife in which the just would be mocked and tortured by malevolent gods. Virtually all of the rhetorical power of the *Republic* — the allegories and myths, the arguments and images — is designed to cure the reader of the temptation to think this is a real possibility. Reality and intelligibility itself are structured by the Good. Thus while

there may be grounds for *pesimism*, there can never be grounds for *despair*. How successful Plato was in eliminating this temptation is a task for each reader to decide: less as an academic exercise than as an approach to the question of how to live.

### Notes

- 1 See the entry *hymnoin* in Liddell and Scott 1977: 1890.
- 2 Plato, trans. Grube and Reeve 1999.
- 3 This is basically the structure that Freud assigns to trauma. See, e.g., Freud 1981: 347–59. See also Jacques Lacan, e.g. 1988: 34–5, 189–97, 232, 283.
- 4 This is what Jean Laplanche would call a seduction. See Laplanche 1999 and Lear 2000.
- 5 I take it that Plato thought that these claims were true. Thus the Noble Falsehood is at worst a verbal falsehood, not a true one. If one is capable of grasping the true allegorical meanings of the Noble Falsehood, one can grasp its truth: that people are “rooted” in the polis – in the sense of political obligation – that they do have different innate natures, and that their experience until now has been “dreamlike” in the sense elaborated in this paper. However, the Noble Falsehood is to be told to children who do not yet have the capacity to grasp the allegorical meaning, and insofar as it is grasped literally, the claims are false. (Obviously, this interpretation requires its own argument which is beyond the scope of this essay.)
- 6 One can now see in a new light why Socrates, at the end of the *Republic*, wants to expel imitative poets from the kallipolis. For the poets have the effect of recreating this childhood condition in adults. The imitative poet does not act as though he is narrating a story about Achilles, he speaks as though it is Achilles himself who is speaking. Thus the literary form induces a dreamlike state: instead of our thinking that A (Homer) is similar to B (Achilles), it is as though A is B. Thus the imitative form collapses spatial, temporal, and narrative distances. Every time someone re-enacts Homer’s poem, he will not only be saying the same words as Homer, it will again be as though Achilles is speaking. Thus the imitative form again pulls us in the direction of taking in an allegory not recognized as such. That is, it is a regressive force, pulling us back to the incapacities of childhood.
- 7 Think about the difference between adults who never believed in the Santa Claus myth versus adults who in childhood were in the myth’s thrall each telling their children about it a generation later.
- 8 Plato, trans. Griffith 2000; my emphasis.
- 9 And if after death it is neutral – neither better nor worse – for the just and the unjust, it is still better to live a just life. For, by the first argument, it is better to be just in this life. So if it is neutral in the next life, it is still better to be just overall.

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