

A DEFENSE OF THE GODS: Interpreting Plato's Myth of Er

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The Myth of Er begins with a soldier named Er, who dies in battle but comes back to life twelve days later to tell of what he saw in the afterlife.¹ Er says that those who lived just lives were rewarded by the gods, and that those who lived unjust lives were punished, each for a thousand years.² After undergoing these rewards or punishments, the souls select the next lives that they will live, and are thus reborn.³ Some scholars, such as Julia Annas and Ronald R. Johnson, believe that the primary purpose of the myth is to summarize the main argument of the *Republic*. It seems, however, that the Myth does not serve exclusively as summary; in fact, Socrates' main purpose in relating the myth is to restore the reputation of the gods as totally good after assuming the opposite throughout most of the *Republic*.

At the beginning of her article, "Plato's Myths of Judgement," Annas asserts that most philosophers have failed to demonstrate how the myths in Plato's dialogues are relevant to the primary philosophical arguments of those dialogues.⁴ In addition to discussing the eschatological myths in the *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*, Annas describes how the Myth of Er relates to the primary argument made by Socrates in the *Republic*.

1 Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, ed. C. D. C. Reeve, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 614b.

2 Ibid., 614c-616b.

3 Ibid., 617d-621b.

4 Julia Annas, "Plato's Myths of Judgement," *Phronesis* 27, no. 2 (1982): 119.

⁵Although, in Book II, Socrates identifies justice as “one of the greatest goods, the ones that are worth getting for the sake of what comes from them, but much more so for their own sake,” Glaucon wants Socrates to explain how justice is a good only in “its very self”, leaving out any consideration of “wages and reputations” accorded to those who are just.⁶ To explain that justice is a good “in its very self” becomes the aim of the main argument of the *Republic*.⁷ But, according to Annas, if the Myth of Er is understood as suggesting that one should be just because of the rewards that he will receive in the afterlife, then its message directly conflicts with this main argument. ⁸To resolve this apparent conflict, Annas advances a radically different interpretation of the myth. She asserts that since, according to Plato, our souls select our next lives (after undergoing their temporal rewards or punishments), our actions have been determined by our past selves.⁹ But we do not remember our past selves after drinking from the waters of the River of Unheeding¹⁰ and therefore, we are, in a sense, not the same people as our past selves.¹¹ This, she says, “must tend to paralyze any sense of being truly responsible for being the kind of person one is.”¹² Under this conviction, one will realize that any punishments and rewards accorded to them in the afterlife become meaningless.¹³ Annas, therefore, inverts the message that the Myth conveys. But this, she says, shows that the myth in fact supports what she identifies as the main argument of the *Republic*: that justice is to be sought for itself, rather than for its consequences.¹⁴

There are a number of problems with Annas’ analysis. Some objections are posed by Ronald R. Johnson in his article “Does Plato’s Myth of Er Contribute to the Argument of the *Republic*?” Johnson disagrees with Annas’ view that if the myth demonstrates that meaningful rewards and punishments await the just and unjust in the afterlife, then it must subvert the *Republic*’s main argument.¹⁵ Rather, Johnson asserts that, by the time Socrates relates the myth, the philosopher has already sufficiently demonstrated that justice is a good worth pursuing in itself regardless of its consequences.¹⁶ Johnson believes that by including the myth, Plato “now wants to say that [...] the just life is not actually subject to such gross misunderstanding on the part of humans and gods.”¹⁷ In doing so, Johnson says, Plato does not intend to show that the rewards awaiting the just person in the afterlife are the real reason to be just—

5 Ibid., 129-39.

6 Plato, *Republic*, 367d.

7 Annas, “Plato’s Myths of Judgement,” 130.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 132.

10 Plato, *Republic*, 621a.

11 Annas, “Plato’s Myths of Judgement,” 132.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 137.

15 Ronald R. Johnson, “Does Plato’s ‘Myth of Er’ Contribute to the Argument of the ‘Republic?’” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 32, no. 1 (1999): 4.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

“he is merely saying that these extra benefits are part of the just life as well.”¹⁸ Johnson also points out that Annas’ interpretation “flatly contradicts what Plato has Socrates give as his reason for relating the myth,” which can be found in the introductory passage prior to the myth, from 612b to 614b. Indeed, an examination of this passage serves to support Johnson’s view of the myth, which stands in opposition to Annas’.

First, it is clear from this passage that Socrates believes that he has successfully completed the main argument of the *Republic* and wants now to point out that the gods and men do reward justice and punish injustice. At 612b, for example, Socrates inquires of Glaucon: “And haven’t we found that justice itself is the best thing for the soul itself, and that the soul—whether it has the ring of Gyges or even it together with the cap of Hades—should do just things?”¹⁹ Glaucon agrees, and so Socrates proposes to return to a discussion of the additional rewards accorded to the just:

Then can there now be any objection, Glaucon, if in addition we return to justice and the rest of virtue both the kind and quantity of wages that they obtain for the soul from human beings and gods, whether in this life or the next?²⁰

To this, Glaucon replies, “none whatever.”²¹ It is clear from this part of the introduction that Socrates seeks to discuss the consequences of being just versus unjust “in addition” to the main argument of the text, and not as a conclusion meant to supplant the main argument and totally nullify his progress thus far. Further, Socrates makes clear that “the prizes, wages and gifts that a just person receives from gods and humans while he is alive [...] are *added* to the good things that justice itself provides,”²² but are not to be viewed as the primary goods of justice (those that come from possessing justice itself), for they are simply “added” to those goods. Thus, Socrates himself does not seem to believe a discussion of these goods would undercut his previous argument.

This introductory passage reveals that Socrates believes that not only the gods reward justice and punish injustice, but that these rewards and punishments are significant. At 612c, Socrates says that he wants to “return to justice and the rest of virtue both the kind and quantity of wages that they obtain for the soul.”²³ The word “return” in this statement is key—Socrates clearly believes that men and gods will reward those who are just. On top of this, Socrates believes that, although the argument borrows these rewards from justice “for the sake of the argument” (as per Glaucon’s request at 367d), these rewards must now be rightfully “returned” to justice.²⁴ Here we see that Socrates is so certain of the idea (that the just are ultimately rewarded

18 Ibid.

19 Plato, *Republic*, 612b.

20 Ibid. [Emphasis added]

21 Ibid., 612c.

22 Ibid., 613c. [Emphasis added]

23 Ibid., 612c.

24 Ibid., 612c.

and that the unjust are punished) that even as he makes his argument throughout the *Republic*, there is never any question in his mind that this is the case. Throughout the introduction, Socrates continues to reinforce this idea. Of the rewards accorded by men, Socrates says that “toward the end of each course of action, association, or life,” the just “enjoy a good reputation and collect the prizes from other human beings,”²⁵ while the unjust, “even if they escape detection when they’re young, are caught by the end of the race and are ridiculed.”²⁶ Of rewards from the gods, Socrates says that, because the gods are good,²⁷ they “never neglect anyone who eagerly wishes to become just and who makes himself as much like a god as a human can by adopting a virtuous way of life.”²⁸ Furthermore, Socrates not only clearly asserts that ultimately the just man will be rewarded and the unjust man punished by gods and men, but, in opposition to Annas’ claim, he also believes that these rewards and punishments are actually meaningful and significant to human beings. At 614a, Glaucon remarks that the rewards for the just man that Socrates has just described are “very fine and secure ones too.”²⁹ Socrates implicitly agrees with this when he further states, “yet they’re nothing in either number or size compared to those that await just and unjust people after death.”³⁰ It is this statement that leads into the elaboration of these rewards in the Myth of Er. So, throughout his introduction to the Myth of Er, Socrates is clearly trying to demonstrate that being just or unjust comes with due rewards or punishments both here and in the next life, and that these rewards and punishments matter. Annas’ view that Socrates should then attempt to demonstrate that these rewards or punishments are “arbitrary” and “pointless” in the Myth of Er³¹ is thus inconsistent with the philosopher’s introduction. Supporters of Annas’ view might counter that Socrates’ remarks could be somehow ironic; perhaps Socrates is making these remarks even though, according to Annas’ interpretation, he must know that he is about to demonstrate that they are wrong through the myth that follows. However, this seems far-fetched. Barring this interpretation, Johnson points out that Annas’ interpretation of the myth remains in conflict with Socrates’ introduction to it.³² Annas does, in fact, acknowledge this problem herself in her article, but responds with the statement that the construction of book 10 is “scrappy and unsatisfactory as a whole.”³³ Johnson finds this claim to be unfounded.³⁴ Indeed, it seems that Annas wants to ignore this issue, while Johnson remarks that perhaps the myth should be interpreted differently.³⁵

25 Ibid., 613c.

26 Ibid., 613d.

27 Ibid., 379b.

28 Ibid., 613b.

29 Ibid., 614a.

30 Ibid.

31 Annas, “Plato’s Myths of Judgement,” 132.

32 Johnson, “Plato’s ‘Myth of Er,’” 4.

33 Annas, “Plato’s Myths of Judgement,” quoted in Johnson, “Plato’s ‘Myth of Er,’” 4.

34 Johnson, “Plato’s ‘Myth of Er,’” 4.

35 Ibid.

Johnson also argues that Annas misinterprets Plato's view of reincarnation.³⁶ As mentioned above, Annas believes that if humans' lives are determined by their past selves in the afterlife, then they cannot really feel responsible for their present actions since it was not really they who chose their lives. If humans are not really responsible for their actions, then any punishments and rewards that they face in the afterlife mean nothing.³⁷ To this, Johnson responds that "it is not clear why Annas separates the soul and the 'I,' and it is not at all evident that Plato separates them."³⁸ Indeed, Plato probably would not have thought about this issue in such a logically rigorous way, which seems characteristic of modern philosophy, in his relating of the myth. It is likely that Plato did not include the depiction of the souls drinking from the River of Unheeding at 621a to demonstrate that humans should feel no responsibility for their actions, but, rather, as Michael Inwood notes, to provide an explanation for why—if reincarnation does exist—humans cannot remember their past lives.³⁹ However, Inwood writes:

The absence of memory might still be invoked either to argue that reincarnation does not occur or to suggest that, even if it does occur, no one has good reason to care about their past and future reincarnations.⁴⁰

Though Annas would agree, Inwood states that it is possible, upon returning to the afterlife, that souls might be capable of remembering all of their previous lives (at least, presumably, before drinking of the waters of the River of Unheeding once again).⁴¹ This is speculation, but Plato does not explicitly preclude this possibility of remembrance. For example, at 619b, Socrates states, regarding the process of choosing one's next life, that "we must always know how to choose the mean in such lives and how to avoid either of the extremes, as far as possible, both in this life and in all those beyond it. This is the way that a human being becomes happiest."⁴² Here, Socrates seems to believe that the human being who becomes happy is the one who must "avoid [...] extremes," while choosing "all those" lives "beyond" this one. This would imply that Socrates thinks that in each successive life, our souls still remain "us," and "we" will have some kind of memory in the afterlife in order to recognize this. Thus, Annas' position that Socrates means to show that we retain no sense of the "I" in lives after our current one⁴³ may not be correct. If this is the case, the rewards and punishments for leading a just, versus an unjust life, might not be pointless, after all—as Annas claims⁴⁴—because in the afterlife we might remember that we, in fact, were the ones who chose the lives we lived.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Annas, "Plato's Myths of Judgement," 131-32.

³⁸ Johnson, "Plato's 'Myth of Er,'" 4.

³⁹ Michael Inwood, "Plato's Eschatological Myths," in *Plato's Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 33.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Plato, *Republic*, 619b.

⁴³ Annas, "Plato's Myths of Judgement," 131.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 132.

Johnson also criticizes Annas for “claim[ing] against Plato’s repeated assertion that reincarnation leaves individuals no significant choice over the lives they will live.”⁴⁵ Annas notes that, at 620a, Plato wants to show that souls in the afterlife choose the next lives they will live on the basis of how they lived their most recent lives and the temporal rewards or punishments that they have just undergone.⁴⁶ But these former lives, Annas says, were themselves determined by the soul’s prior life choices in the afterlife, such that no soul has free choice when it comes to selecting its next life.⁴⁷ However, it seems that Socrates clearly supports the idea that souls do have freedom to choose their next lives: “the responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none.”⁴⁸ In fact, Annas acknowledges this very evidence, but says that “Plato [...] gives no reason for” this assertion.⁴⁹ Johnson, however, remarks that Plato does not need to: “Whether he is able to persuade anyone may be another matter, but there is no confusion over what he is saying.”⁵⁰ But Annas says that even if this is so, what a soul in the afterlife is selecting is “a fully worked-out blueprint” of the next life that it will live, so during this next life, it cannot possibly feel responsible for its actions because those actions were predetermined.⁵¹ As Inwood points out, though, one problem with this determinist interpretation is that it contradicts “those passages in which Socrates exhorts us to take precautionary steps in this life, to study for example the effects of a life on the soul.”⁵² Socrates makes such a recommendation to Glaucon at 618c, saying that in this life, “each of us must [...] be most concerned to seek out and learn those [subjects] that will enable him to distinguish the good life from the bad” to prepare for choosing our next lives.⁵³ If Socrates is saying that free choice is an illusion, then there is no purpose in heeding his advice in such passages as these.⁵⁴ Furthermore, if individuals have no free choice, then Socrates reiterates the main argument of the *Republic* (that individuals should choose to be just regardless of consequences) in vain. In light of these conflicts, perhaps Socrates does not include the account of souls choosing their next lives (617d-618b) in order to demonstrate that we wholly determine our future lives while in the afterlife. Rather, perhaps his message is that it is we—and not the gods—who control our fate. Therefore, we should not blame the gods for misfortune that we have brought upon ourselves through our actions. If this is true, then this would undermine Annas’ claim that we should feel no responsibility for our actions.

It is clear, then, from Johnson’s critique, that there are some problems with Annas’ interpretation of the Myth of Er. Having posed these objections, Johnson goes on

45 Johnson, “Plato’s ‘Myth of Er,’” 5.

46 Annas, “Plato’s Myths of Judgement,” 132.

47 Ibid.

48 Plato, *Republic*, 617e.

49 Annas, “Plato’s Myths of Judgement,” 133.

50 Johnson, “Plato’s ‘Myth of Er,’” 5.

51 Annas, “Plato’s Myths of Judgement,” 134.

52 Inwood, “Plato’s Eschatological Myths,” 45.

53 Plato, *Republic*, 618c.

54 Inwood, “Plato’s Eschatological Myths,” 46.

to attempt to show “how the myth does the philosophical work required of it as the conclusion of the overall argument of the *Republic*.”⁵⁵ In accordance with his first objection to Annas’ argument, Johnson acknowledges that one purpose of the Myth of Er is, in fact, to support what he calls the “Addendum”⁵⁶—the idea that the just will be ultimately rewarded and that the unjust will be punished for their actions.⁵⁷ However, Johnson asserts that providing support for the ‘Addendum’ is not the primary goal of the myth; rather, like Annas, he claims that the myth’s chief purpose must be to support the work’s main argument in order to serve as a proper conclusion to the *Republic*.⁵⁸ Johnson says that the main argument of the *Republic* can be divided into two parts: Part A and Part B. In Part A, Socrates shows that one “necessary condition” in order to live the just (and therefore happiest) life is “psychological well-being” (i.e., when the reasoning part of the soul rules the appetitive and spirited parts). In Part B, Socrates shows that another such condition is to be “living in harmony with the Good” and to be understanding reality for what it really is.⁵⁹ The primary evidence that Johnson cites from the Myth to support Part B is Socrates’ description of the Spindle of Necessity (616c-617d), which Johnson says is a representation of the “order and rationality behind all that is”: ‘the Good’ with which Socrates says the soul must live harmoniously in order to be just and happy.⁶⁰ The primary evidence that Johnson cites in support of Part A of the argument is 620d-621b, where it is stated that the souls preparing for their next earthly lives are told to drink from the River of Forgetfulness, and that they must not drink too much of the river’s water.⁶¹ The “reason” in their souls must not give in to the “appetitive beast within them that is goading them to drink freely.”⁶² Johnson also notes that Odysseus, who has subjugated the spirited part of his soul to the rational, and who chooses a life that will allow him to seek ‘the Good,’ is therefore representative of both parts A and B of the argument.⁶³

It is certainly plausible that the evidence that Johnson selects was included by Socrates in order to point to what Johnson identifies as the two parts of the *Republic*’s main argument. Some might disagree with Johnson’s claim that the myth’s purpose is to communicate the idea that “the work’s main argument [...] should be taken more seriously than the Addendum.”⁶⁴ Viewing the myth as a whole, Socrates’ descriptions of the Spindle of Necessity, the River of Forgetfulness, and the soul of Odysseus appear to stand as tangential asides to the bulk of the myth, which is the overarching story of the soul’s journey through reward or punishment and

55 Johnson, “Plato’s ‘Myth of Er,’” 5.

56 *Ibid.*, 6.

57 *Ibid.*, 7.

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*, 6.

60 *Ibid.*, 8.

61 *Ibid.*, 10.

62 *Ibid.*, 11.

63 *Ibid.*, 10.

64 *Ibid.*, 12.

then rebirth in the afterlife. Additionally, Johnson's interpretation poses one of the same problems as Annas': it is contradicted by Socrates' own introduction to the myth in 612b-614b.⁶⁵ Though Johnson acknowledges that one purpose of the myth is to support the 'Addendum,'⁶⁶ Socrates' lengthy discussion—of the rewards and punishments accorded to the just and unjust by gods and men—in this passage clearly, as aforementioned, serves to introduce the chief purpose of the myth as a description of the rewards and punishments that will be accorded in the afterlife.

In addition to this introductory passage, the passage with which Socrates concludes the Myth (621c-d) also serves to illuminate the Myth's chief purpose. Johnson calls attention to this passage in support of his argument.⁶⁷ However, Socrates seems to acknowledge in this passage that the myth is basically unrelated to the main argument. He says that if we are "persuaded" only by the myth, then "we would then make a good crossing of the River of Forgetfulness, and our souls wouldn't be defiled."⁶⁸ Implicit in the statement that we will make a "good crossing" of the river is the idea that we will collect our rewards (for being just) from the gods as part of the entire reincarnation process. Therefore, Socrates suggests that being persuaded by the myth will lead one to live a just life because of the after-life rewards promised to the just man.⁶⁹ However, Socrates then moves beyond this discussion of the myth:

But if we are persuaded by me, [...] we'll always hold to the upward path, practicing justice with reason in every way. [...] Hence, both in this life and on the thousand-year journey we've described, we'll do well and be happy.⁷⁰

In this passage, when Socrates says "if we are persuaded by me," he means to say that, as Johnson understands it, "if we believe the whole of the *Republic*."⁷¹ In other words, Socrates means that his argument is capable of persuading us that justice is a good in itself, and so it will bring us happiness in this life. Thus, Socrates seems here to draw a distinction between the persuasive power of the Myth of Er and that of the argument he makes throughout the entirety of the rest of the *Republic*. Indeed, Johnson says that "this last-minute comparison seems to suggest that the Myth of Er, in itself, is an insufficient guide to the happiest life."⁷² In the same paragraph, though, Johnson states that "the Myth of Er is a powerful conclusion to the *Republic*, so long as we recognize the story as an illustration of the whole argument."⁷³ This seems contradictory: one wonders why Socrates would draw such a comparison, and thus, why he would demonstrate the inadequacy of the Myth (if, in fact, it did serve

65 Ibid., 4.

66 Ibid., 11.

67 Ibid.

68 Plato, *Republic*, 621c.

69 Johnson, "Plato's 'Myth of Er,'" 11.

70 Plato, *Republic*, 621c-d.

71 Johnson, "Plato's 'Myth of Er,'" 11.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

as a summary of the work's main argument). For these reasons, Johnson's view that the myth is meant to summarize the main argument of the *Republic*, like Annas' view, may be flawed.

With Johnson and Annas' shared view (that the Myth of Er must conclude the *Republic* by not only summarizing, but also by asserting the primacy of its main argument) challenged, then what could be Plato's reason for including the myth in the work? On this point, the view of the myth that Paul Friedlander provides in his book *Plato: An Introduction* is instructive. Friedlander calls attention to a myth about the afterlife related by Cephalus in Book I of the *Republic*.⁷⁴ Here, Friedlander is referring to 330d-331c, in which Cephalus briefly describes after-life punishments and rewards:

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 [...] twist his soul this way and that for fear that they're true. [...] But someone who knows that he hasn't been unjust has sweet good hope as his constant companion.⁷⁵

Friedlander sees this myth as belonging to his "first level" of classification of myths in Plato, which are those related by Socrates' interlocutors prematurely, prior to the completion of philosophical discourse.⁷⁶ But Friedlander sees the Myth of Er, conveyed by Socrates himself, as belonging to the "second level"⁷⁷ of those myths that are related by Socrates once the discourse is complete.⁷⁸ Indeed, Friedlander makes the following important point:

Since [the *Republic*] has also absorbed the older 'Thrasymachus' [Book I], with its myth at the beginning, beginning and end are seen in reciprocal correlation. The perfect construction at the end answers the unsatisfactory attempt at the beginning.⁷⁹

In support of the idea that the myth stands in "reciprocal correlation" to Book I is John Sallis' view that the structure of the *Republic* as a whole is symmetrical.⁸⁰ It is not only Book I that stands in symmetry to Book X, but also Books II through IV, which represent the construction of the "City in Word," and which stand in symmetric opposition to the "destruction" of the City in Books VIII and IX.⁸¹ The allegory of the cave, in Book VII, is then the "center," across which the other books are

⁷⁴ Paul Friedlander, *Plato: An Introduction*, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 177.

⁷⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 330d-331a.

⁷⁶ Friedlander, *Plato: An Introduction*, 178-79.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸⁰ John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 455.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

symmetric.⁸² According to this understanding of the work, perhaps the Myth of Er no longer needs to function as summary, but instead as a response to the myth in the opening book, and as a return to the discussion, begun and temporarily abandoned in Book I (330d-331b), of whether justice truly is rewarded and injustice punished by the gods. Indeed, this understanding of the myth is equivalent to Johnson's initial remark that one purpose of the myth is to show that the just life is not "subject to such gross misunderstanding" by the gods.⁸³ But where Johnson ultimately identified this purpose as nothing more than an "addendum," a tangential aim subordinate to what he believes is the myth's greater aim to summarize the main argument of the *Republic*, it seems that if, as Friedlander says, the Myth of Er lies in structural opposition to Book I, then perhaps the myth need not serve as a conclusion for the entire work. Then, vindication of the gods and affirmation that they do punish the unjust and reward the just can be understood as the myth's primary aim.

But why does Socrates feel such a need to return to Cephalus' myth in Book I and vindicate the gods? The answer lies in Book II, in which Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus begin to discuss what kind of poetry should be admitted into the city. At 379c, Socrates maintains that "since a god is good, he is not—as most people claim—the cause of everything that happens to human beings but of only a few things, for good things are fewer than bad ones in our lives."⁸⁴ Socrates goes on to state that "poets must look for the kind of account of [the gods] that we are now seeking, and say that the actions of the gods are good and just, and that those they punish are benefited thereby."⁸⁵ Here, Socrates' two main points about the gods are 1) that they are truly good and therefore reward justice and punish injustice, and 2), that, since they are good, they should not be held accountable for the bad that befalls humans. Naturally, Socrates must uphold these principles in his own dialogue, especially since he maintains that the poets should uphold them, since in a way his dialogue is poetic. This is why, after playing "devil's advocate," and assuming that the gods will not reward justice and punish injustice, Socrates corrects this view through the Myth of Er. Indeed, in the Myth of Er itself, Socrates demonstrates his adherence to the two main points about the gods that he makes in this discussion of poetry in Book II. To the first point—that the gods reward justice and punish injustice—evidence abounds. The overall sentiment of the myth is that, with Annas' objections countered, the punishments and rewards doled out by the gods do, in fact, have meaning for the dead:

For each in turn of the unjust things they had done and for each in turn of the people they had wronged, they paid the penalty ten times over, once in every century of their journey. [...] But if they had done good deeds

82 Ibid.

83 Johnson, "Plato's 'Myth of Er,'" 4.

84 Plato, *Republic*, 379c.

85 Ibid., 380b-c.

and had become just and pious, they were rewarded according to the same scale.⁸⁶

The totally incorrigible receive their just punishment as well, and are “thrown into Tartarus” for eternity.⁸⁷ Socrates also upholds the second point—that the gods should not be blamed for the bad that befalls humans. This is demonstrated by the souls who select their next lives. “A Speaker,” Socrates says, relates the clear message that “the responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none.”⁸⁸ Again, with Annas’ objection (that we retain no control over which lives we choose to live) refuted, Socrates’ message seems clear: the gods must not be blamed for the bad that befalls one (at least not as a result of his or her own choices). It is clear, then, that as the Myth of Er stands in symmetrical opposition to Book I,⁸⁹ its primary aim is not to conclude the dialogue, but is, rather, to restore to it the truth, introduced in Book I, that the gods really are good and just, thus vindicating the gods from what they were accused of for the sake of the dialogue’s argument. This is done in accordance with Socrates’ principles that articulate how poets should represent the gods.

Giving further support to the idea that Socrates really wants to convey this fundamental truth about the gods through the myth is Josef Pieper’s analysis in *The Platonic Myths*. Pieper first defines truly mythical stories as having three characteristics: 1) they must deal with action taking place between humans and the gods, 2) they must be not totally expressible through speech, and, 3) they must be authored by someone other than their narrator.⁹⁰ Pieper quotes a passage from the *Timaeus*: “we have to believe” the tellers of myths, those who “have certain knowledge handed down to them from their ancestors.”⁹¹ Pieper notes that though myth sometimes uses “symbolic speech”⁹² to convey the truth of things that humans cannot grasp in their entirety, such myths can still be “accepted by man as valid beyond all doubt—as truth which, while not the absolute truth, is the ultimate attainable truth.”⁹³ In other words, myths are always, in a sense, false. They, however, reveal underlying truths about reality. At the same time, a “critique of myth” is to be found in Plato because Socrates never subscribes to “undiscriminating, uncritically naive acceptance of what is handed down” through myth.⁹⁴ Indeed, Pieper says that “defend[ing] the truth about the gods as it is revealed in legitimate sacred tradition [...] defines Plato’s most genuine aim. This becomes completely clear in the second book of the *Republic*,”⁹⁵ as was discussed above. Pieper thus analyzes the Myth of Er:

86 *Ibid.*, 615a-b.

87 *Ibid.*, 616a.

88 *Ibid.*, 617d-e.

89 Friedlander, *Plato: An Introduction*, 184.

90 Josef Pieper, *The Platonic Myths*, trans. Dan Farrelly (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2011), 9-11.

91 Plato, *Timaeus*, 40d, quoted in Pieper, *The Platonic Myths*, 44.

92 Pieper, *The Platonic Myths*, 47.

93 *Ibid.*, 48.

94 *Ibid.*, 50.

95 *Ibid.*, 51-52.

When faced, for example, with the hopelessness of Homeric expectations for the afterlife which we sense in the despairing cry of Achilles, Plato does not counter with a philosophical argument but expressly with the inviolable truth of the eschatological myth.⁹⁶

In other words, Socrates' aim in the Myth of Er is to demonstrate that the gods are good. According to Pieper, the myths have not been authored by their narrators (they have been handed down). Thus, the final question is of where the myths and the universal truths they convey ultimately originated. Ultimately, Pieper, a Christian, points to God's own revelation.⁹⁷

It is clear, then, that the purpose of the Myth of Er in Plato's *Republic* is not chiefly to summarize the main argument of the *Republic*, but is, rather, to convey the ultimate truth that, contrary to the poets, and to the assumption made at the beginning of the dialogue, the gods do reward justice and punish injustice because they are fundamentally good. ♦

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⁹⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 60-61.