

The Importance of Being Er

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About the myth of Er, with which the *Republic* concludes, Socrates says “it would save us” (*sōseien*; 621b). Scholars often note the importance of this myth. Voegelin says that Er is Socrates himself (2000: 59) or, because Socrates narrates it in a dialogue written by Plato, Er’s journey represents Plato’s own philosophical experience. Rather than on Er, recent scholarship focuses on the literary and philosophical aspects of the myth. Halliwell, for example, claims that “the narrative raises more questions than it can answer” (2007: 445), while Albinus suggests that in the myth “all discussion comes to an end” with Plato seemingly indulging in an imitation similar to that of the poets (1998: 93). From a philosophical angle, Annas argues that this myth represents a regression to a consequentialist understanding of justice, as seen in Cephalos’ initial speeches (1981: 349). This paper argues that focusing on Er’s persona and perspective, rather than exclusively on the form and content of his narration, provides a richer interpretation of the myth and its relation to the dialogue as a whole.

The activity of the soul can be distinguished into two functions: (a) the soul’s transacting activity, which governs exchanges and other forms of civic justice, and (b) the soul’s transcending activity, or the philosophical ascent (*epanodos*; 521c, 532b). This distinction is clearer in the *Phaedrus*, where the erotic activity of the soul is distinguished by Socrates’ two speeches: (a) one about the transactions of love (Socrates’ first speech; 237b - 241d), and (b) another about the soul’s transcending ascent (Socrates’ second speech; 244a - 257b, especially 246a - 249d). Annas’ criticism, which focuses on rewards and punishments in the afterlife, applies only to (a), whereas the myth of Er also thematizes (b). The soul transcends the body in the description of the journeys of the soul that Er witnesses, but Er himself represents a further transcending activity of the soul here. Er is told that he is to look at (*theāsthai*; 614d) everything, but is forbidden from participating in any way (cf. 617e, 621b). Er’s theoretical perspective transcends the soul by making the soul itself an object for theoretical viewing.

This analysis of the soul’s activity allows us to defend Plato against Annas’ criticism, because she neglects to take (b) into account. Cephalos transacts, even in an afterlife scenario, but he does not transcend. He leaves the philosophical discussion to engage in further sacrifices, i.e. transactions. Also, while Halliwell rightly notes that the myth pictures “souls as embodied, spatiotemporally enduring entities” (2007: 59), this is only true of the souls at the transactional level: Er’s

perspective represents an overcoming of the disincarnate soul, and thus represents the pure transcendence of the intellect.

References:

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