



The Myth of Er as a Rationalizing Recording Device

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Abstract: This essay introduces the idea of a rationalizing recording device, a mechanism by which the thoughts and actions of one or more persons are both preserved and made more accessible to reason. Plato's Myth of Er is depicted as being such a device, since its story is cinematic in the contemporary sense. Just as films can affect viewers by making one aware of thoughts that cannot be carried in the medium of the moving image itself, so too does Plato express his thoughts about the telos of the cosmos and the moral judgment one must make when confronted with choosing how to live through the external medium of a moving image.

Keywords: Plato; Er; myth; dialectic; poetry; narrative; film-philosophy; representation.

Poetry, Myth, and Philosophy

Plato's Myth of Er is best understood as a rationalizing recording device, by which I mean a form of recording technology that both preserves some person, place, or activity and does so in such a way that makes that person, place, or activity accessible to reason.¹ The essential character of this kind of recording technology resembles cinematic imagery in the contemporary sense; which does not mean that its formal features are like film but that the experience of the myth is like the experience of film. I understand Er both as one of a series of closing muthoi that famously and controversially permeate the corpus, and as the one that comes at the end of Plato's *Republic*.² The opening

moments of Er's tale show how a soul's salvation can be achieved through the recording and reproduction of lives and show what makes this experience cinematic in a contemporary sense of the term that is not anachronistic and not metaphorical. The argument here rests on an understanding of the cinematic as an affection of the soul that is integral to understanding Er's story as expressive of Plato's commitment to the independent resourcefulness of myth as a form of poetic, productive discourse that is irreducible to logical expression, and for this reason carries the distinctive feature of experiencing recognizably cinematic objects in the contemporary sense.

Being a cinematic object in a recognizable sense, the Myth of Er is an integral part of Plato's philosophical project, contrary to what might appear from the *Republic's* infamous putative hostility to so-called irrational discourse in its poetic, figurative, imagistic form, tout court and most of all in *Book Ten*.

[Henceforth cited as *PR*]

¹ An earlier version of this essay is posted at www.academia.edu/20760681/The_myth_of_Er_as_a_rationalizing_recording_device

² Passages of the Republic are taken from, Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 1991.

Andreas Avgousti provides a helpful overview of scholarly interpretations of Plato's dialogues when he discusses the link between "poetry literature" and "myth literature."³ Avgousti laments "the way these literatures are divided" (*BUS* 22n6), especially in the attention he gives to the fact that the division is often in the service of insisting that the myths have a primarily positive, specifically rhetorical, purpose—perhaps, to ease the presentation of philosophical content, perhaps to ease a polemic against poetry—while poetry as practiced by the poets he knew, or even as such, is wholly and essentially objectionable. He arrives at the forceful conclusions that Platonic "dialogue disparages neither poetry nor myth" (*BUS* 22), and that, put positively, in Plato's dialogues in general and in the *Republic* in particular, "there is in fact room for imitation of a particular kind" (*BUS* 25). I present my reading of Er as a rationalizing recording device, as an explication of how, at least in this one instance, Plato embraces *muthos* as an end in itself, as a mode of discourse that has its own independent means and ends with which the philosophical *erôs* must come to terms in a positive, productive fashion.

Having said this much about the overarching interpretive concern of the role of myth in Plato's philosophical dialogues at large, it is necessary to say something about the presence of Er as a concluding myth in the *Republic* in particular. Francisco Gonzalez argues forcefully that the encounter with Er at the very end of the *Republic* must present a genuine enigma that is not to be resolved by simply flattening the dramatic tension to suggest that Er either is a "lame and messy ending,"⁴ *pace* the writings by Julia Annas and H. S. Thayer.⁵ Instead, Gonzalez states that the myth shows the choice of lives by the characters in the Myth of Er, perhaps most noticeably Odysseus, to be "a pitiful,

funny, and surpassingly strange sight" (*CO* 269) that challenges—essentially, not accidentally—many of the agreements about choice and justice that Socrates had extracted earlier from Glaucon and Adeimantus. Here I follow Claudia Baracchi, who, in what she calls an "unending" conclusion, is centrally concerned with why it is that insofar as the "saving of a *muthos* concludes the dialogue," the work of *Republic* "both is and is not concluded"; it is concluded, she writes, in that "thanks to [Er's] contemplation of the whole, the dialogue would find rest," but it is not insofar as "the final discourse, precisely as myth, tends obliquely to evade the demands that only the logic of a system would have fulfilled."⁶ In other words, even as the dialogue expressly aims—in the re-articulation of the prohibition on imitative poetry in *Book Ten*—to bring human discourse wholly in line with *nomos* and *logos*, it recognizes the ultimate impossibility of this project.

Facing this, many of the standard interpretations of Plato's dialogues, especially in English-language philosophy of the twentieth century, have either suppressed or tried to rationalize both this myth and *muthos* altogether; in short they have endeavored to understand Plato as arguing that the conflict between *muthos* and *logos* can be resolved by subordinating the former to the latter. This is a manifestation of the incoherent overall attitude toward Plato's response to myth and to poetry that we saw Avgousti bemoan above. Responding to one of the more influential instantiations of this tradition of interpretation, that of Annas (*IPR* 349-53), Baracchi also calls attention to how Annas (as with any other reader who seeks to rationalize *muthos* in this way) displays "a quite remarkable reluctance to acknowledge the irreducible opacity, questionability, and manifoldness of language" (*MLW* 6) to which Plato himself expressly calls attention by offering myths at critical junctures of his philosophical dialogues. On the contrary, Baracchi understands that for Plato "far from having an arbitrary, accessory or even unnecessary character," myths actually "disclose language as intrinsically and essentially imaginal" (*MLW* 6). In particular, I shall argue, it is the fantastic moving image of the cosmos as a realm of ceaseless judgment, as encountered through the mediation of Er's power of vision, that leaves one with a final reminder of the limits of *logos*, and not its triumph.

³ Andreas Avgousti, "By Uniting It Stands: Poetry and Myth in Plato's *Republic*," *Polis* 29/1 (2012), 21-41, here pp. 22-6. [Henceforth cited as *BUS*]

⁴ Francisco J. Gonzalez, "Combating Oblivion: The Myth of Er as both Philosophy's Challenge and Inspiration," in *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, eds. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzalez, pp. 259-77, here p. 259. [Henceforth cited as *CO*]

⁵ Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1981, p. 353. [Henceforth cited as *IPR*], Horace S. Thayer, "The Myth of Er," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 5/4 (October 1988), 369-384, here p. 380.

⁶ Claudia Baracchi, *Of Myth, Life and War in Plato's Republic*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2002, p. 219. [Henceforth cited as *MLW*]

Muthos and Logos in the Republic

It is necessary to consider the placement of the Myth of Er as the concluding myth in the Republic. Four central elements can be shown to make sense of this myth as a fitting conclusion to the book and to the dialogue as a whole. First, the initial version of the three kinds of *skeuē* analysis (597b-e) with its "three kinds of couches" passage. Next, the refinement of this analysis in the second version of the three kinds of *skeuē* analysis (601d-602b). Third, the statement concerning the "old quarrel between poetry and philosophy" at 607b-c. Finally, we have to look at the passage where Socrates insists on the justice of demanding back from the two brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus the opening assumption he allowed them to make regarding injustice escaping the notice of gods and men (612c-e). Read together, this string of passages shows that there is a single dialectic movement that holds not only all of *Book Ten* together, but also weaves that whole cloth of *Book Ten* into the more comprehensive unity of the dialogue as a whole. Given these elements, the myth of Er can be seen as an instance of philosophical poetry that has the power to settle the old quarrel between the two competitors precisely because it channels the productive possibilities of poetry into the rationalizing power of dialectic.

The "three kinds of couches" analysis is likely the closing element of the book that is best known and most discussed, and it introduces a pair of triads that correspond with one another. There is the triad of makers with its corresponding triad of things made by art (*skeuē*). On the one hand, there is the divine demiurge, the human demiurge, and the imitator; on the other hand, there is the form of the couch, the couch, and the image of the couch. The correspondence is assured by the activity of imitation: beginning from the least real of the three couches, the idea is that the imitator produces the image of a couch by imitating the actual couch that was produced by a human demiurge (a carpenter) by means of imitating the form of the couch that was produced by a divine demiurge. This is well known and not especially surprising. However, striking and telling about this moment is the fact that this "three kinds of couches" analysis is not the definitive version of the "three kinds of *skeuē*" analysis that Plato's Socrates provide in *Book Ten*. For, while this first version helps us to see how the same signifier, such as "couch," of course, but also "soul" or "human being" functions in multiple ways, it has a crucial flaw: it gives

the false impression that being is a copy. Insofar as the "imitation of an imitation" analysis implies that the actual artifact (the human being as well as the couch) is itself a mere copy, in the service of the argument that the image of the couch is just a copy of a copy, the "three kinds of couches" version actually points away from the presence of the ideal in physical reality. To correct this, Plato has Socrates offer a second and improved analysis at 601d-602b.

In this second analysis, Socrates corrects what is misleading in the first version by showing that the diminishing return of truth rests not in the manner of production, that is in whether the *skeuos* in question is the form (made by the divine demiurge), the actual artifact (made by a human artisan), or an image (made by an imitative painter or poet). This time, the emphasis is rather placed on the relationship between production and consumption. So, while the three-tiered analysis remains, as does the underlying condemnation of imitation as having little or no being, the difference between the tiers of reality does not rest in the object itself as a product of one or another kind of production, but rather in the epistemic relationship that the producer or user of the artifact bears to the artifact.

Socrates describes this with reference to a different *skeuos*, namely, a flute. With respect to a flute, it is possible to have the epistemic relation of the imitator, who—having neither produced a flute nor used a flute, but merely having made an image of a flute—has neither knowledge nor a right opinion about the flute, and thus can only charm or deceive when it comes to the flute and its use (602a-b). The same bottom tier assignment to imitation is now on very different grounds: the problem is not that the imitator's flute itself is an imitation of an imitation, it is rather that the imitator's relationship to the flute he produces is predicated on ignorance, on the absence of either truth or right opinion. In the second version of the three kinds of *skeuē* analysis, this is compared with the condition of the user and the maker of a real flute, where the former—whose orientation is based on trust (the epistemic condition of the second part of the so-called "divided line" in *Book Six* [509d-511b])—possesses a right opinion of the flute, while the flute-player, because of his actual use of the flute has knowledge (601e-602a). We are left with a clear hierarchy of three terms, with the imitator as the third and worst, and then two increasingly preferred terms. But notice that, this time while the imitator remains in the worst position, and the human *tekton* remains second, the best term has shifted from

the divine demiurge to the human who uses rather than produces the *skeuos*. While the image based on imitation of an artifact remains the least real (or true) of the three kinds of *skeuos*, and the actual artifact as an object of production remains second, these two are now not contrasted not with the divine-created idea of the artifact, but rather with the actual artifact as an object of use. The most real now is not the ideal form created by the demiurge, but rather the flute that is known to the flute player who actually makes use of it by actualizing its function purposively.

A second pair of passages that is relevant from the first two thirds of *Book Ten* is the passage about the "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (607b-c), along with the intimately connected passage in which Socrates demands from the two brothers, "return to justice what justice is owed" (612c-e).

In the old quarrel passage, Socrates reiterates the rejection of imitative poetry in *Book Three* on grounds that are ultimately ethical, epistemological, and ontological, and unlike in the earlier discussion, also states the condition under which imitative poetry can pass ethical muster. For this reason, Baracchi notes, the "Myth of Er should be viewed in the context of the Socratic pronouncements [397b-e, 507b-c] against... the logic of mimetic absorption," for the myth as a form of Socratic narration would "be the locus within which the exposure to and emergence of strange voices becomes perspicuous, manifests itself as such, instead of disappearing into the lie" (*MLW* 121) of poets such as Homer, who pretend to identify exactly with those who speak through them. It is precisely in not lying in this way, while still practicing *mimēsis* that the Myth of Er, as a piece of Socratic poetry could disclose the way that, as Socrates says (607c), "poetry directed to pleasure and imitation" could "have any argument to give...showing that they should be in a city with good laws." More pointedly, Socrates demands (607d) that imitative poetry should be prepared to present an apologia that "it's not only pleasant but also beneficial to regimes and human life," regarding which Baracchi argues, it means that "properly speaking, the problem was never the lie of *mimēsis*, but the comportment to it—the *ēthos*" (*MLW* 124). If it is right to understand the accusation against poetry in *Book Ten* as an *apologia* for the earlier, less genuine and ultimately incomplete accusation in *Book Three*, this means for Baracchi that Er needs to be understood as "the enactment of a further apology—the apology enacted by the Socratic *legein* itself and not merely prescribed to poetry" (*MLW* 125).

Somewhat less poetically, the composition of the Myth of Er and its placement at the conclusion of the *Republic* can be understood as Plato's gesture on the part of speech itself to reconcile, through the lexis of *mimēsis*, the two dominant modes of linguistic expression alive in dialogue, its author and its reader, *muthos* and *logos*.

Socrates refers to Er's tale as the apology (614b) that "should be heard so that in hearing them each of these men will have gotten back the full measure of what the argument owed" (614a). This apology of philosophy to poetry ends with the conviction that, "it isn't holy to betray what seems to us to be the truth" (607c). In the passage immediately preceding the presentation of Er's tale, Socrates demands that the two brothers "give back to me what you borrowed in the argument," namely, "the just man's seeming to be unjust and the unjust man just" (612c-e). Responding to this request, Socrates invokes Cephalus's definition of justice offered at the very outset of the dialogue in order to see where the main argument of the dialogue went wrong; namely, at the beginning of *Book Two* when Socrates agreed that, "even if it weren't possible for this to escape gods and human beings, all the same, it had to be granted for the argument's sake so that justice itself could be judged as compared with injustice itself." It is no accident that we have to return to that moment where Glaucon first troubled the seeming truce between Thrasymachus and Socrates with which *Book One* concluded; for it was there, in a gesture not corrected throughout the entirety of the discussion through *Book Nine*, that the argument deprived the just of their deserts and at the same time wronged justice itself. Socrates implies:

On justice's behalf I ask back again the reputation it in fact has among gods and among human beings; and I ask us to agree that it does enjoy such a reputation, so that justice may also carry off the prizes that it gains from seeming and bestows on its possessors. [612d]

Just at this moment, *logos*, which provided the basic shape for the dialogue from the end of *Book One* until this moment near end of *Book Ten* now gives way to an apology given in mythic form. Baracchi describes this situation, "it is in such a striving to say justice and do justice that the *logos* will have become an *apologos*" (*MLW* 95). I maintain that the *apologos* is the Myth of Er.

Resolving the Quarrel between Poetry and Philosophy

Plato's *Republic* ends with the Myth of Er, which surely

looks like imitative poetry in the relevant sense of *Book Ten*, even though the main point of much of *Book Ten* is to call for an end to imitative poetry. It is thus necessary to ask why is the Myth of Er acceptable to Socrates, notwithstanding the thoroughgoing critique of the class of imitative poetry to which this Myth surely belongs? The Myth of Er appears to be guilty of the "greatest accusation" against poetry (605c). One could argue that this myth is not really imitative poetry in the relevant sense, in which case the myth can be seen as evidence that Plato hopes to have Socrates ends therewith the "old quarrel" in favor of philosophy and against poetry. Another response would be that the myth itself is imitative poetry conjoined with *logos* that according to Socrates (607c) can be admitted into the realm of *logos* and *nomos*, the space of justice that is oriented toward the form of the good. This second response, according to which *Book Ten*, with its concluding Myth of Er, actually decides the old quarrel for philosophy as poetry, and not against poetry, is the one I advocate. The following close reading of the myth intends to vindicate my position.

Just before Socrates begins recounting Er's story (614a), he provides this prelude to the song of Er:

I will not however tell you a story of Alcinous, but rather of a strong man [alkimous], Er, son of Armenius, by race a Pamphylian. Once upon a time he died in a war; and on the tenth day, when the corpses, already decayed, were picked up, he was picked up in a good state of preservation. Having been brought home, he was about to be buried on the twelfth day; as he was lying on the pyre, he came back to life, and come back to life, he told what he saw in the other place.

There are numerous noteworthy details in this way of framing Er's narrative—such as the following: (i) the playful, yet deadly serious reference to Odysseus' apology in describing the protagonist of this story as alkimou and not Alkinou; (ii) the naming of Er, whose name itself simultaneously elongates the e and contracts the *ô* of *erôs*, expressly link the myth with dialectic and "the philosophical *erôs*"; (iii) Er's patronym, which identifies him as deriving from a "middle space" that is also a no man's land; (iv) his nationality being identified as "that of every kind or sort"; (v) the decaying corpses that echo the story of Leontius (*Resp.*, 4.439e-440a); (vi) the numerology, which follows throughout the myth, with 7, 8, 10, and 12 consistently being stressed and given certain significations. I only mention these at this juncture, and I shall focus now instead on how this introduction points toward Er and his story. It does

so, by representing Er as lying on the pyre, between life and death, suddenly awaking from a death-like state speaking of a vision, Plato has Socrates introduce a theme that can be recognized as the "flashback scene." That is, Er's vision—whose cinematic effect on the reader will be the focus of the upcoming analysis—is encountered through a framing device that focuses the reader's conscious attention (the inner eye) through the lens of Er's own eyes as he awakes in a lying position, looking up, into a space that defies all orientation in terms of our ordinary perceptual experience on earth.

This means that the reader joins Er's vision of "the other place" through the mediation of Er's eyes. Socrates speaks of "the journey in the company of many" (614b) that Er says his soul made "to a certain demonic place, where there were two openings in the earth next to one another, and again, two in the heaven, above and opposite the others" (614c). The connection between this vision of the cosmic architecture and the ethical question, mirroring the shift from the ontological to the epistemological foci of the first and second versions of the "three kinds of *skeuē*" analyses earlier in *Book Ten*, is immediately evident as Socrates has Er continue his account:

Between them sat judges who, when they had passed judgment, told the just to continue their journey to the right and upward, through the heaven; and they attached signs of the judgments in front of them. The unjust they told to continue their journey to the left and down, and they had behind them signs of everything they had done. [614c-d]

As a result of having read this connection between the cosmos' construction and the judgment of the souls together with the two versions of *skeuē* analysis, I point out the following two observations:

Firstly, similar to the story of Timaeus, also the Myth of Er is profoundly concerned with what James Adam refers to as "a picture of the harmonies and revolutions of the Universe [that it is our] highest duty and privilege to live."⁷ The first version of the "three kinds of *skeuē*" analysis would relate to the divine demiurge, the second version was needed in order to make plausible the suggestion that the accounting of the cosmic architecture could be legitimated by its usefulness for responding to the two brothers' question concerning justice and not the need of knowing the

⁷ James Adam, *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press 1963, p. 441.

cosmos as only a god could. It was necessary to base the greater reality of the type-1 *skeuos* on its use by humans and not on its manner of production by some god, which is just what the second version does in contrast to the first. Secondly, Er's vision of cosmic justice differs from the Timaeus' account of the goodness of created beings as the purpose of their souls' emanation and the divine demiurge's role in producing the cosmos. While Timaeus in *Timaeus* is happy to endorse an ontology such as the one at work in the first version of the *skeuē* analysis, Socrates in the myth of Er does not. The reason for this is that Socrates' immediate audience—Glaucon—does not need an account of what is, since it is accessible to the divine mind who is the producer of the world in its rational order, but instead rather favors an account of how a narrative can be useful.

Both of these critical differences are at work in understanding what makes the experience of the myth a cinematic experience in the relevant sense, and both point exactly to the importance of the first person perspective that predominates the Myth of Er and which crucially distinguishes the discussion of its cosmic choreography from the related presentation of the same in *Timaeus*, and is in turn the ground of the uniquely cinematic experience to which the reader is introduced by the encounter and unfolding of Er's story. In the words of Socrates:

And when he himself came forward, they said that he had to become a messenger to human beings of the things there, and they told him to listen and to look at everything in the place. He saw there, at one of the openings of both heaven and earth, the souls going away when judgment had been passed on them. [614d-e]

Two central features of the myth of Er—what can be called its representation of the "scene of judgment" and the "cosmic choreography"—are here expressly linked to one another. The above and below, the conduits or openings from above and below to the world as we know it, and of course, the cosmic turmoil, all this is to be seen with reference to the great judgment of souls and the choosing of a pattern of life by the souls that follows chronologically as well as ontologically from this judgment. This explicit tethering of these two features must be understood together with the second version of the "three kinds of *skeuē*" argument. Specifically, the readers must recognize what they are supposed to learn from experiencing Er's experience. His message is not primarily about the rewards of a just or unjust life, and even less so a message about the way the cosmos

is ordered, since most of all it is a message about how to receive messages. The Myth of Er primarily shows that a human who uses an implement or artifact is the one who knows it. This holds for the cosmos itself. In this case, Socrates uses cosmos for the sake of saving the souls of the two brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, and of whoever else might hear the tale who was saved and it might save the reader as well (see 621c). For it is a work of imitation that nonetheless understands how the imitated *skeuos* might best be used, as the maker in this case is trained in the use of this particular *skeuos*.

This becomes clearer still, as Socrates has Er speak of the actual experiences of the numerous just and unjust souls with whom he has travelled in the demonic place, the space between death and life. Being mindful of Er's experience related to the just and unjust souls, a comparison can be made between this version of the relative estimation of a soul's happiness or unhappiness when it lives justly or unjustly, with the two earlier versions in the *Republic*: Glaucon's version in *Book Two* (360b-361d), following from his use of the Ring of Gyges myth, and Socrates' account of a wrestling bout between two souls in *Book Nine* (580a-588b). Of particular interest here is the difference in the representation of the just and unjust souls in their character as moving images within Glaucon's version of these souls, which Socrates implicitly criticizes (361d) as fundamentally static, "just like two statues" that have been polished, when compared with the procession of souls that are summoned for judgment in *Book Nine* (580a), which are modeled, as Allan Bloom claims (*PR* 470n5), in the mode of award ceremonies in tragic and comic competitions.

Er's eyes function here in a manner that is phenomenologically equivalent to the camera lens, at the site of a judgment that is always in motion and beyond the conventions and artifices of human creation:

As to the other two openings, souls out of the earth, full of dirt and dust, came up from one of them; and down from the other came other souls, pure from heaven. And the souls that were ever arriving looked as though they had come from a long journey...[The unjust souls] told their stories to one another, the ones lamenting and crying, remembering how much and what sort of things they had suffered and seen in the journey under the earth—the journey lasts a thousand years—and those from heaven, in their turn, told of the inconceivable beauty of the experiences and the sights there. [614e-615a]

In this passage of the myth, Er is inaugurated as the

messenger who communicates how the myth can account for itself, and gives details of the myth that the reader can use in the right way: to persuade oneself of the cosmic orientation toward the form of the good.

Socrates then concludes this opening movement of the myth with this summary of its relevance for the central theme of the dialogue as a whole, namely, the defense of justice as the path to a happy life:

For all the unjust deeds they had done anyone and all the men whom they had done injustice, they had paid the penalty for everyone in turn, ten times over for each. That is, they were punished for each injustice once every hundred years; taking this as the length of a human life, in this way they could pay off the penalty for the injustice ten times over. [615a-b]

It seems clear that this judgment scene of the Myth that ends with a ten-times-worse-argument is just as artificial as Glaucon's "statuary of the just and unjust souls" (360-361); what is different here is that in the place of souls that are presented as static objects for leisurely evaluation, souls are now presented that are ever in motion, carried along with and also serving as an efficient cause of the cosmic choreography—the spinning of the great whirl of whirls that makes up the visible universe.

As with the judgment scene, the cosmic choreography is introduced with an orienting description that informs the reader how to understand what is about to be told, which is to say, what directs the inner eye in such a way that one's imagination takes up the visual and auditory data—mediated through Er's experience—that will make up the account of the cosmic architecture. Socrates recounts Er's vision:

When each group has spent seven days on the plain, on the eighth they were made to depart from there and continue their journey. In four days, they arrived at a place from which they could see a straight light, like a column, stretched from above through all the heaven and earth, most of all resembling the rainbow but brighter and purer. [616b]

Here again, this trope of the numbers 7, 8, and 12 being especially noteworthy, resonates in interesting ways with the place of these numbers in *Timaeus*. What is worth attending to here, however, in terms of the emphasis that we are placing on considering the contrast between *Timaeus* and the *Republic* concerning the question of cosmic architecture and especially regarding the point of how one is to experience this architecture, the reader's first encounter with the cosmic

whirl is different from the "likely story" in *Timaeus*, inasmuch as it is partial and the result of an imaginary arduous journey undertaken together with Er as he joins other souls in the realm of judgment.

From here, facing the All, the very boundary between life and death is encountered. Socrates tells us that Er relates the encounter with the spine of the cosmos (the stem of the spindle of necessity) around which the cosmic whirl turns:

And there, at the middle of the light, they saw the extremities of its bonds stretched from heaven; for this light is that which binds heaven, like the undergirders of triremes, thus holding the entire revolution together. From the extremities stretched the spindle of Necessity, by which all revolutions are turned. [616c-d]

What is remarkable about this passage, read in critical comparison with *Timaeus*' demiurge construction of the cosmos, is how light binds the heaven. This is in striking contrast with *Timaeus* where we get two different pictures of "the binding mechanism" of the cosmos, in the course of *Timaeus*' similar story.

The two accounts of the binding mechanism in *Timaeus* are as follows. First, in the "first founding" (29e ff., especially relevant for the comparison is the discussion of the motion of the heavens at 39a-40d), the circular construction of the cosmos and all the moving gods and souls and heavenly bodies within it is the work of "true adornment, cunningly embroidered over the cosmos" by the divine intellect, that are "joined together by force" (35b). Later, in the "second founding" (48a ff.), *Timaeus* finds it necessary to add a third element to the two that were given in the first founding, so that there is again being and becoming, and in addition the new element of the mysterious chore (receptacle). Whereas in the divine nous in the first founding of the cosmos the whole cosmos can be propagated from the work of likenesses to the forms, here there is a need for the receptacle to serve as "the wet nurse of becoming, being liquefied and ignited and receiving the shapes of earth and air, and suffering all the other affections that follow along with these" (52d). It is clearly *Timaeus*' intention (though perhaps not Plato's) to show that these two stories can actually work together. Relying on the interpretive principle that it is productive to read together the "cosmological passages" of the *Republic* and *Timaeus*, especially when they specifically revolve around the way in which harmony can mediate between discrete and continuous quantities, that is between geometry and number, I want to call attention

to the following facts: (1) in Er's tale, light itself suffices to hold the cosmos together; (2) in *Timaeus*, only force or else the receptacle holds the cosmos together; (3) taken together, (1) and (2) suggest that the explanation in Er is so different – in kind as well as in detail – from either of the versions of the binding mechanism in *Timaeus* that the difference demands some kind of justification.

The justification will need to show how it can be the case that light-as-a-binding-mechanism is acceptable in the *Republic*, when careful scrutiny of *Timaeus* gives reason to believe that as a true opinion about the nature of the cosmos, it is surely untenable for Plato. This untenability can be seen from the following argument. (1) The fact that the two suggestions of a possible "binding mechanism" offered by Timaeus—either force or a perfectly-plastic-but-nevertheless-materially-determined-space or place called "the receptacle"—each indicate a manner of physical yoking, which surely the "cosmic axis" ("spindle of Necessity") requires in order to come into being and then produce the cosmic circular motion. (2) Light—the candidate named in Er's tale—cannot possibly meet this test. (3) By (1) and (2), we can see that light-as-a-binding-mechanism cannot meet the condition of "being a candidate for the binding mechanism of the cosmos," at least as that condition is understood by Timaeus in *Timaeus*.

It is necessary to ask why light-as-binding-mechanism would be deemed satisfactory within the discursive space between Socrates and Glaucon, and between their discussion and the reader. Throughout the retelling of his tale, and so unlike in *Timaeus*, or the concluding myth of *Gorgias*, one only ever sees the cosmos through Er's eyes, from his liminal and even marginal position in the daimonic place. And, from this vantage point, light itself does—for all he (and the readers who have epistemic access through him) could possibly know—bind the cosmos together. This is a shining example (literally) of how some sort of right opinion can be enough truth, perhaps, for our use of the relevant *skeuos*, and how mythic discourse can disclose truth of the relevant kind—in this case, the kind of truth that can save one's soul, which is not after all the truth of how the world-soul was constructed or how it preserves itself in motion.

This understanding of the difference between the conditions placed on a possible likely story about the binding mechanism of the cosmos by the Myth of Er, on the one hand, and the two foundations of Timaeus, on the other hand, gains credence when we turn to what Er describes next: the three daughters of Necessity, seated

on their thrones, surrounding the "lap of Necessity," which is utterly static, again in fruitful distinction from the Necessity presented as a "wondering cause" in *Timaeus* (48a-b). This raises a question which resonates with our deeper question regarding the relation of *muthos* and *logos* and how the *Republic* acquired what we heard Annas call its "lame and messy ending" (*IPR* 353). Following Baracchi, one can ask why it becomes

necessary or unavoidable to present necessity allegorically, literally to allude to necessity while speaking of something else (*allo agoreuō*), indeed of someone else—whose proper name is Necessity. [*MLW* 191]

Both Er in the *Republic* and Timaeus in *Timaeus* come around to talk about necessity, but in each case, they do so indirectly through another name—Necessity in Er, *chora* in *Timaeus*. Why should this be, why is necessity both at the center of the analysis concerning being and yet it is also always named with reference to another metaphysical category, in this case, that of becoming.

Reading 617b-c, Baracchi believes this is so because necessity is nothing other than the ceaseless cycle of coming-forth and receding, birth and death, motion of the same and motion of the other (*MLW* 192). Necessity's nature as nothing more than procession and recession would then explain the presence of the Fates as daughters of Necessity, their spatio-temporal position, and their characteristic activity of weaving, which is responsible for the heavenly motions and hence for the cosmological principle of time, with its irreversible course of thereby creating past, present, future. This, in any case, would be how the cosmos appears to a soul, such as Er's, which participates in the ceaseless cycle of heavenly motions and earthly judgments, even if that soul is, for a moment, suspended in the demonic place between heaven and earth. For this reason, light would be sufficient for the likeness to be understood as truth, as this light binds the cosmos precisely (and only) as that in which justice, "as the order of the living, should be understood," (617b) for justice is nothing other than "the vision of the cosmos in its glowing and resonant unfolding" (617c). The light binds the cosmos here, because the light is literally the unfolding of justice, ever proceeding and receding, and thus for a soul that can see in the right way—a soul that has suffered the proper, cinematic, experience—this is what holds the world together.

Sadly, however, the narrative does not close with the identification of light and justice and the presentation of this light-justice as the "binding mechanism" of

the cosmos. Rather the vision of the fates seated surrounding their silent mother Necessity, endlessly turning the spindle that moves the world issues related in the famous speech of Lachesis' spokesman, that introduces the "choice of a life" in which "the whole danger for a human being" rests and which seems to be the point of Socrates' retelling Er's tale for Glaucon and thus—at least at first glance—for the presence of Er at the conclusion of *Republic*. This moment that follows and then concludes the narrative is the one in which we encounter the display of paradeigmata, patterns, of lives, from which the souls are to choose and thus take up a new "death-bearing" cycle. While the surface lesson of this scene is or at least seems to be the stirring conclusion that "virtue is without a master," while "the god is blameless" (617e), we ought to be careful in drawing such a conclusion. First of all, as Baracchi (*MLW* 195-7) notes, this is after all the words of the spokesman encased within the prophetic disclosure of Er to which Socrates both is and is not giving himself up, as he retells the tale. It is precisely in this rhetorical tension concerning who exactly is speaking that a series of choices of lives is encountered, made by souls with a history more or less well known to the descendants of Hesiod, Homer, and Orpheus that the myth presumes humans to be. One thinks here especially of the account of those who lead virtuous lives out of habit, without philosophy, and then on grounds of that back story often come to choose the life of a tyrant (619d4 f.), forever condemning themselves to a life of unceasing horror. Reflecting on this terrible yet also majestic scene, Andy German writes, "*The Republic* closes with an emphasis on the precarious," which shows that "the myth is not about choice at all but about the significance of history."⁸

In his rather somber, yet also (following Nietzsche) cheerful and goodhearted conclusion concerning Er's depiction of the irreversibility of the past and the way how that past invariably brings about circumstances that in retrospect cannot but strike us as tragic, German suggests that the *Republic* closes with Er in the service of "a peculiar expression of philosophical detachment" (*TP* 61). It is precisely this moment of philosophical detachment that I am arguing here to be the affect (not the effect) of a cinematic experience that the specific modality of the retelling of the tale of Er brings about—with Er acting thereby as a site of an ideal identified

vision. This affection of the soul, this adoption of Er's field of vision, is the reason why Plato has Socrates taking the reader to the demonic place, where one can meet justice as the binding light of the cosmos and also encounter the souls in their encounter with the patterns of lives that Er encounters in his journey. All this is done, not to illustrate the dialogue's main argument concerning justice as its own reward, but rather to correct the experienced error, when—at the conclusion of *Book Nine* (592b)—the readers were grounded on earth looking up to the ideal form in heaven.

My reading of Er, fading out here on this image of the position of perspective within the retelling of Er's tale, hopes to have shown that Er appears in the *Republic* as a messenger not of Socrates' conclusion concerning justice and happiness, but of the only-ever-partial way in which any story about the nature and the qualities of human souls can be told. If I have succeeded then we can now see that it is precisely by yoking one's position of vision and its corresponding epistemological horizon to that of Er that Socrates has saved a tale that might save the reader as well. In so doing, in offering the Myth of Er as a rationalizing recording device, that the myth compels one to encounter the cosmos as it appears to a soul in the daimonic place. This is the best way, I suggest, of understanding the cosmic choreography at the heart of the myth, which often puzzles commentators who try to make it fit with the rest of the myth and the dialogue as a whole. Read properly, both the unity of the myth as a whole—as a comment on the impossibility of immediate knowledge and the resulting justice to be found in embracing the mediation—and its place within the drama of the *Republic* come into focus. This focus, a term used here in the literal sense, is the object of the lens that Er's status as an ideal viewer of the binding mechanism of the cosmos established, and it is the result of our cinematic experience of the Myth of Er in the contemporary sense of the word. Only such a cinematic experience of Er, one that refuses to understand his tale as a rhetorical strategy or a simplification of the arguments offered earlier in the *Republic*, and obviously least of all as a lame and messy ending, can bring us closer to a resolution of the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry. At least, along the lines that Plato himself might, after all, have wished to resolve that quarrel.

⁸ Andy German, "Tyrant and Philosopher: Two Fundamental Lives in Plato's Myth of Er," *Polis* 29/1 (2012), 42-61, here p. 59. [Henceforth cited as *TP*]