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A Noble Risk: Plato's Eschatological Myths as a Defense for his Political Philosophy

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*This paper examines the correlation between Plato's political philosophy and his spiritual teachings. In describing the ideal state ruled by philosopher "guardians," in contrast to lesser governmental constitutions, Plato demonstrates a moral hierarchy of souls, each soul corresponding to a type of state constitution, by emphasizing the philosopher as superior to the Spartan-like timocrat, the greedy oligarch, the Athenian-like democrat, and finally the wretched tyrant. Plato maps this political hierarchy onto his spiritual beliefs through his eschatological myths in the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*, dialogues written throughout the early and mid-fourth century B.C.E., in which he anticipates an ultimate reward for the philosopher and eternal punishment for the tyrant in the afterlife. For souls in between, Plato outlines a mixture of temporary reward and punishment followed by reincarnation into different types of humans and animals, based as well upon a hierarchy of character. In this way, Plato projects his political philosophy, which contrasts an ideal philosopher-ruled aristocracy with tyranny and intermediate constitutions, onto a posthumous system of reward and retribution favoring those who, like himself, practice philosophy. Due to this correlation, Plato's eschatological myths complement and justify his political teachings.*

The writings of Plato have influenced countless philosophers and political thinkers for centuries. For example, one of his most famous dialogues, the *Republic*, has been extensively studied and debated due to its unique conception of an ideal state ruled by philosopher "guardians." Conversely, many of Plato's writings that emphasize the existence of an afterlife following posthumous judgment—his eschatological myths—have often been ignored by scholars in favor of his political philosophy. However, these two major aspects of Plato's philosophy are not mutually exclusive; further comparison reveals a consistent correlation between Plato's political arguments and spiritual beliefs. Due to the parallels between Plato's conception of the afterlife and his political philosophy, his eschatological myths complement and justify his political teachings.

This paper's examination of the correlation between Plato's spiritual and political beliefs fits within a broader historical context in which religious doctrines served to validate political authority. One

notable example is the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which describes an afterlife for the virtuous that reflects the socially stratified caste system maintained in the New Kingdom of Egypt (c. 1550-1077 B.C.E.). According to this text, while the pharaoh traditionally becomes the god Osiris, the souls of the working poor who pass the scene of judgment are simply resurrected in the Field of Reeds, where they work to produce crops in an existence similar to their lives on earth.¹ This depiction of the afterlife consequently supports the pharaoh's divinely inspired authority over his subjects. Even in the Roman Empire, the widespread worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis, who was thought to possess absolute power and to demand acquiescence from her followers, was used to legitimize the authoritarian rule of the Roman emperors. Rather than repress this unorthodox cult, veteran soldiers stationed on the frontiers of the empire were allowed and even encouraged to spread this religion, since it was compatible with the Roman political status quo.² Similar to these historical figures and institutions, Plato's spiritual convictions inform his political beliefs.

Of his discussions of a variety of philosophical subjects, Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) is most renowned for his focus on ethics and politics. Throughout his youth, the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.E.) raged between the powerful Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta, a calamitous war that greatly influenced Plato's future political beliefs.³ After the execution of his ascetic mentor Socrates in Athens in 399 B.C.E., Plato began writing his philosophic dialogues.⁴ In his early writings, the Socratic dialogues, Plato's depiction of Socrates and his famous method of introspective questioning appeared relatively close to the historical Socrates and his methods. In his middle dialogues and late dialogues, however, Plato

¹ John H. Taylor, *Death and Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 27-38, 115.

² R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971), 233-39; Panayotis Pachis, *Religion and Politics in the Graeco-Roman World: Redescribing the Isis-Sarapis Cult* (Thessaloniki, Greece: Barbounakis Publications, 2010), 205-22.

³ Andrew S. Mason, *Plato* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2010), 4-6; Jean-François Pradeau, *Plato and the City: A New Introduction to Plato's Political Thought*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Exeter, U.K.: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 1-2; Greg Rocco, *Athens Victorious: Democracy in Plato's Republic* (Plymouth, U.K.: Lexington Books, 2007), 97.

⁴ Mason, *Plato*, 5-7.

became more assertive and dogmatic, tending to giving answers rather than questions.⁵ Using the character Socrates as his mouthpiece,⁶ he espoused a political and philosophical framework in stark contrast to that of Athenian democracy, Spartan timocracy (a term used by Plato to characterize Spartans' militaristic and honor-based lifestyle), and tyranny, all of which he regarded as flawed constitutional forms.⁷ In these later dialogues, Plato also began presenting his views on the afterlife, encapsulated in his eschatological myths.

Although theological and spiritual reflections abound in Plato's dialogues, the four myths in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus* stand out due to their cohesiveness, use of vivid imagery, and length. Despite differences in how the afterlife is specifically described, these stories all share the common theme of eschatological reversal, in which one's virtue and wisdom grants him or her entrance into heaven, while hell is reserved for those who, despite their power and wealth on earth, nevertheless led their lives unjustly and impiously. The *Gorgias* features, historically, Plato's earliest eschatological myth and paints a simplistic divide between the Isles of the Blessed for the virtuous and the chasm of Tartarus for the unjust (*Gorg.* 523a-527a).⁸ An interesting side story, however, recounts the replacement of Cronus's flawed system for posthumous judgment with Zeus's improved system. Under Cronus, judges mistakenly admitted evil souls who hid their wickedness behind "fine bodies and lineage and wealth" into paradise; under Zeus's reforms, naked judges examined naked souls so that their verdicts were based upon virtue alone, not appearances (*Gorg.* 523b-e).⁹ In this story, Cronus's system resembles the Athenian justice system of Plato's time, which was swayed by the external appearances

⁵ Mason, 9, 17-19.

⁶ Alex Long, "Plato's Dialogues and a Common Rationale for Dialogue Form," in *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 45-59.

⁷ Mason, 4-6, 9-12; Pradeau, 1-7; Rocco, 97, 104-05.

⁸ David Sedley, "Myth, Punishment and Politics in the *Gorgias*," in *Plato's Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 51.

⁹ Michael Inwood, "Plato's Eschatological Myths," in *Plato's Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 28.

and reputations of the wealthy and powerful, while Zeus's impartial system reflects Plato's ideal conception of justice.¹⁰

In contrast to the simpler conceptions of the afterlife presented in the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedo* presents the fullest descriptions of paradise and the underworld, describing the fate of the philosopher as more ideal than that of other virtuous men as well as differentiating the fates of neutral souls from the wicked in the underworld (*Phaedo* 108e-114c). This dialogue also briefly illustrates how one's character influences the type of animal they will reincarnate into (*Phaedo* 81e-82c), though Socrates' narrative of the Myth of Er at the end of Book X of the *Republic* describes the process of reincarnation, or *metempsychosis*, most fully among Plato's dialogues. In this story, Er, a Pamphylian warrior, visits the underworld in a near-death experience and witnesses the process in which souls choose their next life from a selection of choices (*Rep. X*, 614b-621c).¹¹ Likewise, in the *Phaedrus* Plato offers an interesting account of reincarnation but, in addition, contributes an allegory for how souls sometimes possess the privilege to access an ultimate heavenly realm but risk losing this privilege, which will force them to undergo reincarnation in a variety of human or animal forms depending on their character (*Phaedrus* 246a-250d). Although the myths of these four dialogues differ in terms of specific details, they share much in common in how they depict Plato's essential beliefs of the afterlife, which emphasize eternal torment for incurable tyrants and ideal prospects for philosophers.

The fates of souls in Plato's eschatological myths parallel his comparison of the ideal political constitution, led by philosopher-rulers, with lesser constitutions, the worst being tyranny. In Book IX of the *Republic*, Socrates further asserts that the various constitutions correspond to a particular type of soul embodying the virtue of the constitution. Thus, his descriptions of the five primary constitutional forms correspond to five types of men, ranked from best to worst in terms of their virtue: the wisdom-

¹⁰ Sedley, 56-58.

¹¹ I. P. Couliano, *Out of this World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 1991), 140.

loving philosopher, the honor-loving timocrat, the money-loving oligarch, the freedom-loving democrat, and worst of all, the self-loving tyrant (*Rep.* IX, 578a-587e). By comparing the ideal philosophic constitution with the worst government of tyranny, Plato creates an analogy that contrasts the happiness and virtue of the superlatively just man with the most unjust man.¹²

As is clear in Plato's core political philosophy, the tyrant is regarded as the most contemptible of all men. In the *Republic*, Socrates claims that "a man becomes tyrannical...when he has become even as the drunken, the erotic, the maniacal" (*Rep.* IX, 573c). Due to his immense greed and insatiable passions, the tyrannical man is considered without question the most unhappy of all men (*Rep.* IX, 573b). Thus, according to Plato, the tyrant's life is not only selfish and unjust, but also inherently unattractive, since he is enslaved to his desires. Plato contrasts this unflattering description of the tyrant to that of the just philosopher, who directs all his actions by self-restraint and reason.¹³ Due to his extreme unjustness and impiety, the tyrannical man is considered to be a threat not only to other men but entire cities; to Plato, a tyrant's reign is the worst fate a city can suffer.¹⁴

Not only are tyrants the most wretched men on earth, as maintained by Plato, but they also suffer the greatest punishment in his eschatology. In the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*, those responsible for the worst offenses are thrown into Tartarus, a deep, dark chasm within the earth (*Gorg.* 523b; *Phaedo* 113e; *Rep.* X, 615c-616a). Considered irredeemable due to their atrocious and impious crimes, these souls suffer "throughout eternity the greatest and most excruciating and terrifying tortures" (*Gorg.* 525c). Most of the men sentenced to be punished this way are tyrants, kings, and corrupt politicians, because the evilness of their deeds is amplified by their luxury and pomposity (*Gorg.* 525c-d).¹⁵ Their eternal punishment is not simply punitive; it also serves to deter other souls from

¹² Mason, 152-53.

¹³ Zdravko Planinc, *Plato's Political Philosophy: Prudence in the Republic and the Laws* (Columbia, Miss.: University of Missouri Press, 1991), 187-89; Mason, 153-54.

¹⁴ Planinc, *Plato's Political Philosophy*, 193-94.

¹⁵ Inwood, 28-29.

pursuing a similar life. In the Myth of Er, Socrates mentions Ardiaeus the Great among other tyrants who were tortured in front of onlooking souls due to their heinous crimes (*Rep. X*, 615c-616a).¹⁶ Socrates also claims that, even in Homer's conception of the afterlife, eternal punishment was reserved for kings and princes such as Tantalus, Sisyphus, and Tityus because "it is among the most powerful that you find the superlatively wicked" (*Gorg.* 525e). From these myths, Plato indicates that the punishment of tyrants and evil kings, the most despicable of all souls, is the worst form of retribution due to its permanence and use as a deterrent for other souls in Hades.

In describing his eschatology, Plato references real-life historical figures who he believes will suffer in hell, thus blurring the divide between his political views and his spiritual convictions. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates explains that as the judge Radamanthus examines souls from Asia to determine their fate in the afterlife, he will encounter "the Great King" among other despots whose souls are "full of scars due to perjuries and crime," and he will sentence them to be punished in Tartarus (*Gorg.* 524a-525a). Plato's mentioning of the "Great King" in Asia, without mentioning any specific rulers, seems to imply that not even the Persian kings, who were some of the wealthiest and most powerful leaders in Plato's time, could escape judgment and punishment for their abuse of power.¹⁷ Additionally, in describing tyrants who will suffer eternal punishment, Socrates mentions Archelaus, the king of Macedonia in the early fourth century B.C.E., whom Plato sternly criticized for killing his own relatives in a power struggle (*Gorg.* 470d-471d, 525d).¹⁸ Conversely, Socrates praises Aristides who, unlike many other politicians, actually used his power justly, though Socrates maintains that "most of those in power...prove evil" (*Gorg.* 526a-b).¹⁹ These passages indicate that Plato's myths were intended to be

¹⁶ Couliano, 140.

¹⁷ Rocco, 166.

¹⁸ Rebecca Bensen Cain, "Shame and Ambiguity in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41, no. 3 (2008): 215, doi: 10.1353/par.0.0008; Sedley, 66.

¹⁹ Sedley, 60.

interpreted as more than just allegories; they also were premonitions of the fate of certain men from Plato's own time.

In contrast to the tyrant, Plato lavishes abundant praise upon the philosopher as the ideal citizen. Since Plato's ideal philosopher disregards corporeal and material desires in favor of the pursuit of truth and wisdom, he is considered not only to be the most just of all men, but even to have the closest connection humanly possible to divinity.²⁰ Due to these merits, Plato also considers the philosopher to be the ideal statesman. When Socrates outlines the ideal state in the *Republic*, philosopher-rulers are justified due to their exclusive knowledge of the Forms—ideal, abstract, timeless properties by which earthly objects serve as imperfect instantiations, like the Form of the Good²¹—which was considered a valuable skill that corresponds to the skill of ruling.²² Since the philosopher also derives the most genuine pleasure from the pursuit of true knowledge, he is also the happiest of men, unlike others who are ruled only by corporeal or material desires.²³ Therefore, it will come as no surprise that Plato's writings regard his own lifestyle as a philosopher as the best, both during life and after death.

Plato's suspiciously favorable view of the philosopher as the superlatively just man is reflected in the ultimate paradise he believes the philosopher will enjoy in the afterlife. In the *Gorgias*, the fates of good private citizens and philosophers are not differentiated; since they similarly "lived in piety and truth," they are all sent to the Isles of the Blessed (*Gorg.* 527c). A greater realm for the philosopher, however, is emphasized in the *Phaedo*. In this dialogue, those who ascetically adhered to the philosophic life are freed from their bodies and are allowed to ascend to a realm "even more beautiful"

²⁰ G. R. F. Ferrari, "Glaucón's Reward, Philosophy's Debt: the Myth of Er," in *Plato's Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 121; Mason, 139, 144; Planinc, 270-71.

²¹ Couliano, 138; Mason, 1-3, 28-30, 166.

²² Mason, 125-126; Pradeau, 55.

²³ Mason, 153-54.

than can be described, while all lesser souls must continue the cycle of reincarnation (*Phaedo* 114b-c).²⁴ By reiterating this point several times in the *Phaedo*, Socrates promises to philosophers an escape from *metempsychosis* altogether, claiming that if a soul “has pursued philosophy in the right way...it departs to that place which is, like itself, invisible, divine, immortal, and wise...it really spends the rest of time with God” (*Phaedo* 81a).²⁵ Socrates maintains that this ultimate realm is exclusive only to philosophers, asserting that “no soul which has not practiced philosophy...may attain to the divine nature” (*Phaedo* 82b-c).

Similar to the *Phaedo*, in the *Phaedrus* Plato presents an elaborate picture of an ultimate paradise for philosophers, which he calls the “plain of Truth” (*Phaedrus* 248b). Plato’s character of Socrates vividly explains how only worthy souls may enter this realm: the plain of Truth exists literally “beyond the heavens,” even above the paradisiacal home of the gods, and can only be accessed by reaching the “summit of the arch that supports the heavens,” where the soul will then “stand upon the back of the world” as “the revolving heaven carries them round” to the other side (*Phaedrus* 247a-c). As in the *Phaedo*, however, Socrates admits that he is unable to fully describe the nature of this mysterious plain. Nonetheless, he explains that “it is there that true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul’s pilot, can behold it” (*Phaedrus* 247c). This stipulation, in Plato’s mind, justifies why only the soul of a philosopher who seeks true knowledge and beauty is allowed to follow the gods into this realm. Residing here, the philosophic soul is nourished by pure reason due to unobstructed access to the Forms, contentedly “contemplating truth” (*Phaedrus* 247c-e). Eventually, after enough time “the heaven’s revolution brings [the soul] back full circle” into the realm of the gods, but this most wise and virtuous soul, having fully experienced the plain of Truth, will always be able to return (*Phaedrus* 247d). Lesser souls, however, may only catch at best a few glimpses of the

²⁴ Couliano, 138-39.

²⁵ Ferrari, 129.

plain of Truth due to their lack of philosophic virtue, and their limitations will eventually prevent them from being able to see this realm at all, thus forcing them to undergo the process of reincarnation.

Although a special, eternal paradise for philosophers is emphasized in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*, Plato's myth at the end of the *Republic* sets forth a different, yet still fortunate, fate for the philosopher. In the Myth of Er, there is no mention of a special heavenly realm for philosophers since it is implied that all men, even philosophers, must go through the cycle of reincarnation. However, Socrates assures that he who "loved wisdom sanely...not only will he be happy here but that the path of his journey thither and the return to this world will not be underground and rough but smooth and through the heavens" (*Rep. X*, 619e). While most souls in their ignorance of the positive or negative lots of future lives end up alternating between reward and punishment in the afterlife, the lover of wisdom will carefully choose the lot of a virtuous "life seated in the mean," following the path of truth and moderation, thus ensuring the soul's celestial well-being (*Rep. X*, 618c-619e).²⁶ Even under this interpretation, Plato still allots a privileged position for the philosopher, who will safely navigate through his future lives with the help of wisdom and reason.

Between the extremes of the just philosopher and the unjust tyrant, Plato claims that most people embody the three intermediate constitutions of timocratic, oligarchic, and democratic souls. Out of these three the timocratic constitution, which is most influenced by the Spartan and Cretan constitutions,²⁷ is admired by Plato due to its reverence toward virtue.²⁸ Nevertheless, he criticizes the way in which the Spartan-like timocrat admires only military virtue and honor while disregarding other virtues like wisdom and philosophy.²⁹ Due to the timocrats' lack of gentleness and education, they are

²⁶ Ferrari, 129-32.

²⁷ Rocco, 107.

²⁸ Mason, 133.

²⁹ Malcolm Schofield, "Fraternité, Inégalité, la Parole de Dieu: Plato's Authoritarian Myth of Political Legitimation," in *Plato's Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 112; Mason, 133, 153-154.

believed by Plato to eventually devolve into greedy oligarchs, who are criticized for their “illiberality.”³⁰ In describing this type of soul, Plato compares the oligarch to the Great King of Persia, who covets wealth at the expense of other nations as well as his own subjects.³¹ Worse yet, the democrat is further criticized for pursuing unnecessary desires and foolishly adhering to the “false and boastful speeches” of demagogues.³² Due to his ignorance, the democrat is prone to enslavement by an ambitious tyrant.³³ It is clear that Plato’s criticism of the democrat is directed against the Athenian democracy. Furthermore, even his ideal society reflects the stark rejection of democratic rule in favor of a philosopher-based aristocracy.³⁴ Indeed, Plato lambasts Athens’ democratic government not only in the *Republic* but elsewhere in his writings; in the *Menexenus*, *Timaeus*, and *Critias*, Plato challenges Athens’ belligerent naval imperialism, which he believed arose in part due to the city-state’s democratic system, which often granted authority to opportunistic, warmongering politicians and generals.³⁵ Overall, Plato considers the Spartan timocratic constitution and Athenian democratic constitution as both deeply flawed, possibly due to both states’ roles in the disastrous Peloponnesian War of the late fourth century B.C.E.³⁶

In contrast to the philosopher and the tyrant, Plato does not outline any specific correspondences of the timocratic, oligarchic, and democratic souls to their respective eschatological fates. Nevertheless, the common theme he emphasizes is a system of temporary rewards and punishments, paid “tenfold” respectively for good deeds and crimes on earth (*Rep.* X, 614d-615b) and intermediated by the reincarnation cycle.³⁷ In the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*, a soul judged to be wicked has a seal set upon them indicating whether they are curable or incurable. While both types are

³⁰ Rocco, 110-11, 113-14, 163.

³¹ Rocco, 166.

³² Rocco, 116-17.

³³ Rocco, 138.

³⁴ Mason, 128, 133; Pradeau, *Plato and the City*, 59; Schofield, 111.

³⁵ Pradeau, 11-15, 119-23.

³⁶ In the *Phaedo*, Socrates even laments that there is “so little time for philosophy” due to “wars and revolutions and battles...undertaken for the acquisition of wealth we are slaves in its service,” (*Phd.* 66c-d); Rocco, 97.

³⁷ Inwood, 36-37.

sent to Tartarus, the curable souls are punished only temporarily for the purpose of purification and repentance, unlike the incurable tyrants who suffer eternal torment in order to deter the former (*Gorg.* 525b-526b; *Phaedo* 112e-114b; *Rep.* X, 614c-d).³⁸ As stated in the *Phaedo*, curable sinners are given a single chance once per year to beg forgiveness from those they have wronged. Amongst these souls, Socrates even specifies that, en route to and from Tartarus, "manslayers" are sent down the leaden-gray Cocytus River and offenders against their parents down the fiery stream of Pyriphlegethon, where they are forced to suffer while waiting for the rare opportunity for absolution (*Phaedo* 112e-114b).

Unlike the souls of wrongdoers, the souls of virtuous men have access to a pleasant afterlife in some form of paradise. In the *Gorgias*, the soul of a good "private citizen" is sent to the Isles of the Blessed, a conception of paradise which evolves later in Plato's writings (*Gorg.* 526c). According to Socrates in the *Phaedo*, "those who are judged to have lived a life of surpassing holiness" move upward to earth's "true" surface, while philosophers ascend to an even higher realm (*Phaedo* 114b-c). The true earth is more ideal and beautiful in every respect compared to the hollow depths which humans regard as earth's surface. Socrates explains that the humans who dwell upon this aether have long-lasting health due to the true earth's ideal temperate climate, and further, since the gods inhabit this realm alongside these humans, they meet and converse in person (*Phaedo* 109b-111c). Plato's imaginative description of the true earth, reserved for souls that led good lives, is consistent with his belief that higher realms are more ideal.³⁹

Plato presents an entirely different story in the *Phaedrus* than in the *Phaedo*, though he is consistent in maintaining that virtuous souls have access to some heavenly realm. In this dialogue, Socrates claims that while only the souls of the most virtuous philosophers may forever visit the magnificent plain of Truth, some virtuous yet unphilosophic souls may have at least partial access to this celestial plane. To explain this concept, Socrates offers an extended metaphor describing the soul as a

³⁸ Sedley, 60-63.

³⁹ Couliano, 139.

tripartite chariot, with the winged charioteer of reason driving both a “noble and good” horse and an obstinate horse of “the opposite character” at the same time (*Phaedrus* 246a-b). A philosophic soul, by virtue of his superior reason, can easily control his chariot and ascend to the plain of Truth without much difficulty. Virtuous yet unphilosophic souls, however, struggle to control their “unruly steeds” (*Phaedrus* 248a). As a result, the chariot tumultuously rises and sinks near the summit so that the charioteer’s head is only briefly able to see inside the plain of Truth, unable to fully enter this higher realm. Soon enough, these souls, like all other lesser souls, will be unable to access this realm at all due to the impurities of their souls and, completely losing control of their chariots, will lose their wings and fall to the earth (*Phaedrus* 248a-c). No soul that has fallen this way may regain their wings until ten thousand years have passed (*Phaedrus* 248e). In the meantime, they must all undergo reincarnation interspersed with posthumous judgment, with wicked souls being “taken to be punished in places of chastisement beneath the earth” for a thousand years and virtuous souls conversely being “borne aloft by Justice to a certain region of the heavens, there to live in such manner as is merited by their past life in the flesh,” alike for a thousand years (*Phaedrus* 249a-b). Thus, in both the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, Plato allows imperfect yet virtuous souls access to some type of heavenly realm, while the souls of philosophers reside in a place even higher and more blissful than the rest.

Far from the paradises of earth’s true surface and the plain of Truth as well as the depths of Tartarus, the majority of deceased souls go to a gloomy realm between these extremes. These souls which have lived “neutral lives” are sent through the River of Acheron to the Acherusian Lake, where they are “absolved by punishment for any sins...and rewarded for their good deeds” (*Phaedo* 113d-e). After each soul respectively experiences temporary paradise or punishment, he or she returns and converses together with the others in a meadow in preparation for reincarnation. According to the Myth of Er, “those from heaven related their delights and visions of a beauty beyond words,” while others “recalled how many and how dreadful things they had suffered and seen in their journey beneath the

earth" (*Rep.* X, 614d-615b). Regardless of one's good or bad deeds, however, everyone but the philosophers, who will be eternally rewarded, and the incurable tyrants, who will undergo eternal punishment, is sent to be reincarnated once more, though each soul's fate in the next life is influenced by their character from their previous life.⁴⁰

Although Plato's accounts of reincarnation differ between dialogues, the crucial role that virtue plays in determining one's future life remains consistent. In the *Phaedo*, reincarnation is directly based upon character; Socrates states that greedy, selfish, and alcoholic men "are likely to assume the form of donkeys and other perverse animals," while violent criminals "become wolves and hawks and kites" (*Phaedo.* 81e-82a). Conversely, those who "cultivated the goodness of an ordinary citizen...by habit and practice, without the help of philosophy...will probably pass into some other kind of social and disciplined creature like bees, wasps, and ants, or even back into the human race again, becoming decent citizens" (*Phaedo* 82a-b). Through these descriptions, Plato organizes reincarnated lives into a hierarchy, where reincarnation as some animals, like human beings, is considered a reward for good character, whereas reincarnation into other animals is regarded as a punishment.⁴¹

In contrast to the *Phaedo*, the Myth of Er in the *Republic* depicts souls choosing their next life from a number of lots. However, since the choices are ambiguous, whether the souls choose a seemingly good or bad life is heavily influenced by their character and ignorance.⁴² For example, one of the men who had gone to heaven due to his "virtue by habit and not by philosophy," similar to the definition of an upright timocrat, who abides by law not due to wisdom but due to incentives and the fear of penalty,⁴³ returned now "unexercised in suffering," and excitedly chose the life of a wealthy

⁴⁰ Couliano, 138-39.

⁴¹ In the *Timaeus*, Plato provides an etiology that establishes mankind as the top of an evolutionary hierarchy by explaining how humans gradually degenerated into lesser animals due to the lack of wisdom, piety, and virtue, cascading from female humans, to mammals, and even to fish, which were descended from the most ignorant fools (*Ti.* 90e-92c); Inwood, 36-37.

⁴² Inwood, 42.

⁴³ Ferrari, 126-28; Rocco, 153-58.

tyrant “in his folly and greed...without sufficient examinations, and failed to observe that it involved the fate of eating his own children” (*Rep. X*, 619b-c). Through this story, Plato warns that without philosophy, even good men are destined to fall into the traps of greed and desire. Interestingly, those who had “themselves suffered and seen the sufferings of others” in Hades were more careful in choosing a future life of virtue (*Rep. X*, 619d). The result, according to Socrates, is “an interchange of good and evil for most of the souls” as the soft, inexperienced souls from heaven carelessly select lives of vice, while the hardened souls from the underworld prudently choose better lives (*Rep. X*, 619c-d).⁴⁴ This inevitable, cyclical mixing of good and bad lives underpins Plato’s belief in the futility of unphilosophical souls vying for true paradise and happiness, either on earth or beyond.

As described in the Myth of Er, even the souls of animals draw lots to change places with humans and vice versa. Socrates explains the pattern in which “the unjust [transformed] into wild creatures, the just transformed to tame [ones], and there was every kind of mixture and combination” as each soul took their preferred spot in the animal kingdom (*Rep. X*, 620d). Despite the plurality of available selections, Socrates emphasizes that “the choice was determined for the most part by the habits of their former lives” (*Rep. X*, 619e). For example, the soul of Orpheus, “unwilling to be conceived and born of a woman,” chose to become a swan; the soul of Ajax, son of Telamon, chose a lion; the soul of Agamemnon chose an eagle due to his “hatred of the human race because of its sufferings”; the soul of the “buffoon Thersites” chose to become an ape. The experienced and knowledgeable soul of Odysseus, however, examined his choices carefully and ultimately chose the “life of an ordinary citizen who minded his own business,” similar to Socrates’ admiration of a “life seated in the mean” (*Rep. X*, 618c-620d).⁴⁵ By referencing a number of illustrious characters from Homer’s epic poetry and Greek mythology, Plato paints a clear picture of how the virtues, fears, and aspirations of mankind bear close kinship to the nature of all animals. The souls of the most wise and pious philosophers, presumed to be

⁴⁴ Couliano, 139; Inwood, 46.

⁴⁵ Ferrari, 133.

absent from the selection of future lives, transcend beyond the animal domain and enter the realm of true wisdom.⁴⁶

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato offers a slightly different depiction of reincarnation, though his underlying argument regarding the differentiated fates of souls in-between the extremes of good and evil corresponds with that of the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. Similar to the Myth of Er, after a thousand years of either reward or punishment, souls draw lots for their future lives, and “he who lives righteously has a better lot for his portion, and he who lives unrighteously a worse” (*Phaedrus* 248e). However, only souls who, in a previous time, had at least partially accessed the plain of Truth—that is, virtuous yet unphilosophic souls—may become human, since “man must needs understand the language of [the Forms]...and such understanding is a recollection of those things which our souls beheld aforetime as they journeyed [to the plain of Truth]...gazing up to that which truly is” (*Phaedrus* 249b-c). Conversely, the souls who were never able to ascend to this realm are relegated to lesser animals due to their deficiency of wisdom, again reflecting a stratified hierarchy of the animal kingdom, at the peak of which Plato places mankind (*Phaedrus* 248d, 249b-c).⁴⁷ However, even the souls that are allowed to choose human lives must adhere to a sub-hierarchy of humankind based upon each soul’s wisdom and character, reflecting the prejudices that inform Plato’s political philosophy in addition to his spiritual beliefs. As Socrates explains:

The soul that hath seen the most of being shall enter into the human babe that shall grow into a seeker after wisdom or beauty, a follower of the Muses and a lover; the next, having seen less [of the plain of Truth], shall dwell in a king that abides by law, or a warrior and ruler; the third in a statesman, a man of business, or a trader; the fourth in an athlete, or physical trainer, or physician; the fifth shall have the life of a prophet or a Mystery priest; to the sixth that of a poet

⁴⁶ Ferrari, 131-32.

⁴⁷ Similar to the *Republic*, Socrates describes in the *Phaedrus* how the souls of men and animals will eventually intermingle with one another due to the multiplicity of available lots, with the “soul of a man [entering] into the life of a beast, and the beast’s soul that was aforetime in a man [going] back to a man again” (*Phaedrus* 249b). Again, Plato emphasizes how the souls of animals typically possess inferior virtue to those of men. Socrates explains, for instance, how a soul that cannot even remember its experiences in the plain of Truth will, “surrendering to pleasure...go after the fashion of a four-footed beast....consorting with wantonness he has no fear nor shame in running after unnatural pleasure” (*Phaedrus* 250e-251a).

or other imitative artists shall be fittingly given; the seventh shall live in an artisan or farmer; the eighth in a Sophist or demagogue; the ninth of a tyrant (*Phaedrus* 248d-e).

In this passage, Plato presents an outline of reincarnation that nearly exactly corresponds to his comparative ranking of philosophical, timocratic, oligarchic, democratic, and tyrannical souls discussed in the *Republic*. The obvious contrast, for instance, between the most ideal lot of a “seeker after wisdom” and the loathsome lot of a tyrant reflects the diametric opposition between philosophers and tyrants emphasized in numerous other dialogues.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the second-best lot, that of “a king who abides by law, or a warrior and ruler”—similar to Plato’s definition of a timocrat—is compared favorably to the lesser lots of an oligarchic businessman or, worse yet, a democratic demagogue. Through this hierarchy, Plato draws even deeper parallels between his political and spiritual convictions.

Although in the *Phaedrus* most reincarnated souls do not regain the wings that would grant them another chance to reach the plain of Truth until ten millennia after losing them, Plato allows philosophers a shortcut to regaining their wings and escaping the cycle of reincarnation. As Socrates explains, if a soul has earnestly followed philosophy and, “with three revolutions of a thousand years...has thrice chosen this philosophical life [the most ideal lot among all humankind],” the soul may earn his or her wings back (*Phaedrus* 248e-249a).⁴⁹ In this way, Plato sets forth a fortunate path to the highest heavens, reserved only for philosophers like his mentor Socrates and himself, and thus promises great rewards for the genuine pursuit of philosophy and wisdom.

Plato’s eschatological myths are crucial for justifying his political beliefs by projecting his description of the ideal and degenerative political states into differing realms of the afterlife. It seems that Plato has a vested interest in promoting these myths as true, although he acknowledges that his beliefs are based merely upon faith. While the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues supports most of his philosophical arguments with deductive reasoning, the character offers no such logic or proof to justify

⁴⁸ Couliano, 138.

⁴⁹ Couliano, 138.

his nonetheless firm belief in the afterlife myths presented in the *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*.⁵⁰ For instance, Socrates claims he believes in the *Gorgias* myth simply because of a lack of a viable alternative story (*Gorg.* 527a-b). In the *Phaedo*, Socrates admits that “no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them” (*Phaedo* 114d), although on numerous occasions he asserts that he firmly believes in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus* myths, as well as the Myth of Er (*Phaedrus* 246b, 250b-d; *Rep.* X, 521b-d).⁵¹

Why would Plato believe in these myths without proof, if he went through great pains to prove, for instance, that the just philosopher is 729 times happier than the unjust tyrant (*Rep.* IX, 587e)?⁵² One explanation is that, since his comparison of the different political constitutions and their corresponding souls closely parallels his description of the afterlife, Plato's eschatological myths serve to theologially justify his political manifesto. Accordingly, both of these spheres of thought not only emphasize the best life for philosophical souls and the worst life for tyrannical souls, but also serve as a practical lesson for conventional morality.⁵³ Although in the *Phaedo* Socrates recognizes that he cannot prove his eschatology, he maintains that it “is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking, for the risk is a noble one,” since it espouses “self-control, and goodness, and courage, and liberality, and truth,” all of which are valuable political as well as spiritual virtues (*Phaedo* 114d-e).⁵⁴ Furthermore, his concept of eschatological reversal ensures “something much better for the good than for the wicked,” and through

⁵⁰ Gábor Betegh, “Tale, Theology, and Teleology in the *Phaedo*,” in *Plato's Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 84; Ferrari, 128; Inwood, 48.

⁵¹ Indeed, even Plato's proofs for the soul's immortality and the superiority of the philosopher over the tyrant rely upon his assumption of the existence of the Forms, a crucial yet unproven component of his political and ethical philosophy. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates admits, “I am assuming the existence of absolute beauty and goodness and magnitude and all the rest of [the Forms],” even though the rest of the dialogue is devoted to using these same Forms to prove the soul's existence before birth and after death (*Phd.* 100b). For the purposes of this essay I am focusing specifically on Plato's eschatological myths, but there also exists a strong connection between the Forms and the justification of his political philosophy; Mason, 26-30, 45, 50-52, 59; Pradeau, 55.

⁵² Rocco, 97.

⁵³ Sarah Iles Johnston, “Working Overtime in the Afterlife; or, No Rest for the Virtuous,” in *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, ed. Ra'anan S. Boustan and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 97-98; Ferrari, 128; Planinc, 269-70.

⁵⁴ Inwood, 48.

this concept Plato stresses his conviction that injustice on earth will be meted out by long-lasting justice in the afterlife (*Phaedo* 63c).⁵⁵ In this way, Plato's political and spiritual convictions are equally complementary, for he asserts in the *Timaeus* that "he who has been earnest in the love of knowledge and of true wisdom...must have thoughts immortal and divine" and that he "will be singularly happy" in this world and the next (*Tim.* 90b-c).

Another explanation for this parallel is that, as a philosopher, Plato's character Socrates wishes to demonstrate the best afterlife for himself by projecting the benefits of a philosophic lifestyle into the otherworld. Socrates often indicates this confidence in his own fate, remarking on his deathbed that he will "depart to a state of heavenly happiness" and "find myself among good men...I shall find there divine masters who are supremely good" (*Phaedo* 63c, 115d). Indeed, even after describing the Myth of Er, Socrates adds that the story "will save us if we believe it...so we shall hold ever to the upward way and pursue righteousness with wisdom...and thus both here and in that journey of a thousand years...we shall fare well" (*Rep.* X, 621c-d). With this in mind, it is not surprising that Plato's ideal afterlife, whether in the form of reincarnation into successively better lives or the escape from the cycle of death and rebirth altogether, is reserved only for those who practice philosophy like himself.

Additionally, Plato even uses his eschatological myth in the *Phaedrus* as a way to deflect potential criticisms of the philosophical lifestyle. After describing at length the wondrous plain of Truth and his elaborate system of judgment and reincarnation, he claims that philosophers, despite their apparent eccentricity in day-to-day life, are in fact divinely inspired:

Therefore is it meet and right that the soul of the philosopher alone should recover her wings [in order to reenter the blissful plain of Truth], for she, so far as may be, is ever near in memory to those things a god's nearness whereunto makes him truly god. Wherefore if a man makes right use of such means of remembrance [of the plain of Truth], and ever approaches to the full vision of the perfect mysteries, he and he alone becomes truly perfect. Standing aside from the busy doings of mankind, and drawing nigh to the divine, he is rebuked by the multitude as being out of his wits, for they know not that he is possessed by a deity (*Phaedrus* 249c-d).

⁵⁵ Sedley, 67.

By framing the life of a philosopher as the most noble of all men not simply in terms of the accrument of virtue and wisdom, but even in terms of remembrance of the divine, Plato boldly places himself and other philosophers like his mentor Socrates above and beyond would-be detractors as well as the rest of mankind, all regarded as inherently inferior to philosophers according to Plato's stratified, comparative ranking of souls outlined in both his spiritual and political teachings.⁵⁶

Plato's eschatological beliefs, which parallel and supplement his political philosophy, serve to extend his praises of the ideal philosophic society and his criticisms of contemporaneous Greek politics into a spiritual and theological divide between posthumous reward and retribution. Eternal punishment is reserved for the souls of evil kings and tyrants, whom Plato regards as the most miserable and unjust men on earth. Far above the depths of Tartarus, the souls of philosophers find everlasting happiness through successive reincarnation into good, virtuous lives and eventually entering an ultimate, indescribable paradise. In between these extremes, Plato outlines a fate of cyclical pleasure, pain, and reincarnation for the majority of the human race, which comprises flawed timocratic, oligarchic, and democratic souls. While many political philosophers have intensively studied Plato's political writings and many theological scholars have closely examined his spiritual beliefs, the strong overlap between both of these fields sheds light on how Plato's dialogues present an evolving narrative of his convictions and aspirations.

⁵⁶ Couliano, 138.

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