

Famous Last Words: The Myth of Er

No one knows exactly what to do with the final book of Plato's *Republic*. The dialogue itself is concerned with justice – what is justice and why should one bother being just? There are some exciting asides, thoughts on politics and psychology, as well as expositions of Plato's metaphysics and epistemology, but mostly he sticks to his theme. All is as it should be, until the final book, where Plato goes completely off-piste.

Without much warning he has a solid and slightly unsettling bash at poetry, takes a single breath, and then cranks out arguments for the immortality of the soul. Before you have the chance to nurse your whiplash he throws the Myth of Er at you – details of the rewards in the afterlife for virtuous conduct here and now, in apparent contradiction to everything Socrates is at pains to prove about justice being worthwhile regardless of the consequences. Just when you have no idea what to think, it's too late to do anything because the dialogue ends.

The last book is a little clunky, and it has led some commentators to argue that Plato didn't write it. Some say that it was cobbled together from something else Plato wrote and tacked on to *Republic* by some later, clearly deranged editor.

It's the Myth of Er which seems most out of place. Socrates tells Glaucon that Er is a warrior who dies in battle, lies around for several days without rotting, and then wakes up with a report from the afterlife. Souls, he says, are judged and march up to heaven or down into the earth where they spend a thousand years in bliss or suffering as reward or punishment for the lives they just lived. Then they must pick their next lives, and if they choose wisely and live diligently, all have the chance of a better life and afterlife. Any who lack sound philosophy are bound to make a mistake. They pass beneath the throne of Fate, camp on the plain of Forgetfulness, drink from the river of Unmindfulness, forget everything, fall asleep –there's an exciting earthquake and a thunderstorm – and finally the souls speed like shooting stars to their births.

Why does Plato hand us this tosh in the end? Many see the dialogue as an extended argument for the view that justice is worth pursuing in itself rather than for some consequence or other. Isn't that the challenge of the Gyges Ring early on in *Republic* – would you bother with justice if you could slip on a magic ring, go invisible, and be certain that you could get away with anything? Socrates drags Glaucon through plenty of arguments for the view that justice is its own reward. Why soil all those shimmering premises and conclusions with a childish story

about reward and punishment in the afterlife? Anyway, philosophers are in the logic business. They're not supposed to do mythical nonsense like this.

In fact, Plato's dialogues are shot through with myths, allegories, and other bits which contemporary philosophers usually regard as the thin stuff you skip over en route to the exciting arguments. Plato, they'll tell you, lived at a time when human beings were still finding their intellectual feet, when mythical explanation and causal explanation were held on a par. Well, not so fast. Maybe Plato knew exactly what he was doing.

Plato, most of us forget, is philosophy's first and best populariser. His writings are not obscure treatises couched in technical lingo for the edification of other philosophers only. Plato usually writes in street Greek. He tells stories, uses imagery, paints portraits, sets scenes, makes jokes, and on and on. I know about the elitism in his thinking, but maybe Plato, like his mentor, is a people's philosopher at heart. His audience is not just other philosophers – it's all of us.

Plato wants to convince everyone of the importance of virtue, even those who maybe didn't quite follow the arguments. So he ends with the Myth of Er. That's the last thing we'll hear, maybe the one bit which might stick, and given what's at stake Plato pulls out all the stops – we get earthquakes and storms and Kings turning into lions. We know he'll tell a noble lie in the service of the good, and he'll tell the Myth of Er, too, if it has the right effects on us.

Perhaps the most telling line of the whole book comes near the end. Socrates says, 'And thus, Glaucon, the tale has been saved and has not perished, and will save us if we are obedient to the word spoken; and we shall pass safely over the river of Forgetfulness and our soul will not be defiled.' It's his claim that the myth '*will save us* if we are obedient to the word spoken' that gives him away. Even if you don't understand the arguments, you'll be all right if you live a life in accord with virtue. Believe whatever rubbish you like, so long as what matters most, the inner you, is safe.

He wants virtuous lives for us, and he'll trot out a myth if it helps. That's how important the matter is to him. I get the feeling Plato cares about us when I read the Myth of Er. There's something fatherly about how he has Socrates tell it to Glaucon, and by extension to us. Maybe you didn't understand the whole thing but don't worry, Plato seems to say without a trace of condescension. Just try very hard to be good.