

Cephalus, the Myth of Er, and Remaining Virtuous in Unvirtuous Times

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ABSTRACT

Through a reading of the Myth of Er and Socrates' conversation with Cephalus, I will argue that merely conventional virtue is highly unstable and unreliable. Virtue acquired by convention proves foundationless outside the confines of the political regime that establishes those conventions, and a tendency toward an unreflective moral complacency on the part of the conventionally virtuous leaves them in particular danger of committing unjust actions. Socrates recommends the study of philosophy because it can ground conventionally acquired virtue and, even more importantly, because it is capable of shaking the moral complacency that afflicts the conventionally virtuous.

Keywords: *Republic*, conventional virtue, Cephalus, Myth of Er, ancient political philosophy, relation between convention and philosophy

Though Cephalus first introduces the topic of justice in the *Republic*, he departs from the conversation before he can hear the fruits of his initial conversation with Socrates.¹ His absence raises the question of the value of philosophical study for those who are virtuous by convention without philosophy. Let us assume that Plato holds that Cephalus' departure from the conversation is an error, and that he would have benefited from taking part in a philosophical analysis of justice. Depending on how the reader interprets Plato's presentation of Cephalus, he is either a habitually just person who has a good character or a civically just person who at least acts externally in accordance with conventional standards. It is not immediately obvious how a philosophical consideration of the nature of justice would benefit a person virtuous in either of these two ways. The difficulty reemerges in the context of the Myth of Er. In that mythic context, Socrates argues that those who live in accordance with virtue unsupported by philosophy are in the greatest danger with respect to choosing their next life, and that careful attention to philosophical study is a helpful way of avoiding the dark fate of choosing an unjust future life. In this context, it again fails to become immediately obvious why a soul will be benefited from the study of philosophy, particularly outside of the immediate mythic context of the story. The puzzle becomes even more perplexing in reference to other comments that Socrates makes throughout the dialogue about the difficulty and danger of philosophical study outside of the *kallipolis*.

In this paper, I will argue that Plato proposes that undergoing the Socratic elenchus is beneficial for all citizens, even for those who are already conventionally virtuous and despite its many dangers. After a careful study of Socrates' conversation with Cephalus and his

presentation of the Myth of Er, it will become clear that Plato holds that virtue acquired without the practice of philosophy is highly unstable and unreliable. Rooted fundamentally in *nomos* (custom or law), both habitual and civic virtue remain at the mercy of the regime in which individuals find themselves. Outside the confines of that regime and the *nomos* that governs it, such as in the afterlife in the Myth of Er or in the very concrete circumstance of political upheaval and tyranny like the reign of the Thirty, conventional virtue will prove foundationless, and the individual will have no framework to orient decision making. Even worse, a tendency toward a certain sort of moral complacency or laziness on the part of the conventionally virtuous actually leave them worse off with respect to these extra-conventional situations than others within the regime. In the myth, Plato ultimately advocates the study of philosophy because it can ground conventionally rooted virtue in something more secure than convention and, even more importantly, because it is capable of shaking the moral complacency that afflicts the merely conventionally virtuous.

1: CEPHALUS' RELATIONSHIP TO PHILOSOPHY AND TO CONVENTION

I will begin by considering the conversation between Socrates and Cephalus concerning the nature of old age and the importance of virtue—particularly justice—for withstanding old age well. In this conversation, Cephalus shows himself to possess a kind of conventional virtue that is rooted in obeying various sorts of conventional norms. However this virtue should be understood—and as I will argue below, the text admits of at least two plausible

interpretations of Cephalus' virtuousness—it is apparent that philosophy plays little to no role in the acquisition of virtue for Cephalus. Convention—including both the laws of the city and religious authority—tells human beings which actions are virtuous, and which actions are not. Insofar as Cephalus' primary concern is to act justly, he seems to see effectively no use for a philosophical discussion of what the virtues themselves are, or of what the justice is. Nowhere is this orientation more evident than at the end of his appearance in *Republic*, where Cephalus returns to his conventionally mandated sacrifices to the gods rather than stay to hear an extended discussion of what justice is. In this section, I will discuss two ways of interpreting Cephalus' character on the basis of his speech, and show how on either interpretation Cephalus fundamentally relies upon a conventional understanding of the virtues that is resistant to elenctic questioning. In the next section, I will then discuss the specifics of Cephalus' speech in greater detail.

Cephalus' speech has three main stages. First, he argues that old age is, in itself, a blessing insofar as it lessens the tyrannical desires of youth. Those who find it odious, he contends, do so because they possess poorly formed and disorderly characters and so are unwilling to let go of desires that a virtuous person would be happy to be abandoned. Second, Cephalus argues against the thesis that it is his wealth, and not his virtuous character, that allows him to withstand the loss of his youthful desires as well as he has. Finally, Cephalus argues that wealth is still valuable to the virtuous person insofar as it promotes justice by allowing the virtuous to pay off old debts and to avoid unintentionally lying or cheating anyone on account of poverty. In this way, he argues, the virtuous person who possesses some means can avoid going to the afterlife in fear. Socrates then attempts to con-

sider the nature of justice with Cephalus—in particular, he wants to know whether or not justice fundamentally consists in paying off debts—at which point Cephalus departs from the conversation.

Though there are a number of different ways Cephalus' speech gets interpreted by commentators, most take one of two general approaches. Some hold that Cephalus is what I will call habitually virtuous—that he is a person who has habitually internalized the norms of his society concerning what is just and unjust and so generally behaves in accordance with those norms because of the way this internalization of the norms has shaped his desires. On this interpretation, Cephalus' self-presentation is basically correct: he is a man of good character who withstands his old age relatively easily on account of his virtue. Examples of this reading are found, for instance, in Beversluis and McKee, who both argue that Cephalus is unfairly treated by the roughness of Socrates' questioning.² Though neither read Cephalus as positively as McKee, weaker versions of this general approach are also found in Taylor and Reeve.³

Others hold that Cephalus is a person who is at best a latecomer to virtuous behavior. Cephalus is newly attempting to reform his life on account of newfound fears about what awaits him in the afterlife as a result of a lifetime of wrongdoing.⁴ On this interpretation, Cephalus would only display what I will call civic or external virtue—he acts justly not by desire but on the basis of external compulsion, and his publically virtuous deeds and speeches are only an appearance that hides a corrupt character that really desires to do unjust things. He would therefore be a person of the sort described by Glaucon and Adeimantus in Book 2, who only acts virtuously on account of external compulsion—in Cephalus' case, fear

of the afterlife—and who is only concerned with the appearance of justice. Many—perhaps even most—commentators read Cephalus in this more dismissive light. Such commentators tend to read Plato's portrayal of Cephalus as indicating someone who is generally shallow and someone who is far less concerned with virtue than he presents himself as being to Socrates. Variations of this sort of interpretation are found, for example, in Schleiermacher, White, and Annas.⁵

I will not here attempt to decide between these two interpretation of Cephalus. Both readings can appeal to textual support, as I will discuss in the following, and Socrates himself raises and leaves open the question of whether or not Cephalus' self-assessment is accurate. Indeed, it is possible that Plato intended whether Cephalus is describing his own character honestly to be ambiguous so that he could introduce both habitual and civic virtue into the dialogue with one character. My focus will be on how either interpretation of Cephalus' speech and character reveals a tension between conventionally acquired virtue and philosophical virtue. Both habitual and civic virtue remain unphilosophical and are instances of what I will call conventional virtue. In either case, what is responsible for the virtuous behaviors demonstrated by the individual is the *nomos* of the regime and society in which the individual finds him or herself. The habitually virtuous person internalizes this *nomos*, and does not want to violate it, whereas the civically virtuous person only outwardly manifests virtuous behavior as established by *nomos* while secretly desiring to be unjust. In both cases, however, *nomos* determines what seems just to the individual, and not philosophy or ethical knowledge. What benefit a philosophical analysis of virtue has to offer to both the habitually and the civically virtuous person, whichever Cephalus himself

is taken to represent, is made problematic by his departure from the conversation. How does the philosophical analysis of virtue benefit the individual who does in fact behave virtuously conventionally?⁶

2: CEPHALUS' SPEECH: ON WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO BE ABLE TO RECOGNIZE JUSTICE

In his speech, Cephalus both introduces the idea of justice and, implicitly, argues that one of the most important skills a human being can possess is the ability to recognize just and unjust actions. As a result, his utter disinterest in the Socratic project of interrogating the nature of justice itself becomes all the more urgent and problematic. Three basic issues lead Cephalus to argue for the importance of justice in his speech: (1) the way in which old age modifies the desires of the elderly, (2) the role of money in a virtuous life, and (3) a consideration of what a person should anticipate following his or her own death. Cephalus argues that old age has brought him a sort of peace that he was incapable of finding while under tyrannical rule of certain violent passions, but it has also brought profound fears about what awaits him in death. To mitigate these fears, Cephalus finds the just use of money invaluable—by paying off any preexisting debts to men or gods, Cephalus can assure himself of tranquility in any afterlife and so enjoy his remaining years in peace. Justice is therefore invaluable for a happy life: the just person will be able to calculate how to avoid actions that will lead to punishment and how to make restitution for any injustices that are committed. Cephalus' basic intuitions about justice come from conventions pertaining to economics and business. Cephalus' model of a just person is a businessperson, someone well

-respected in the community for not cheating, lying, or failing to pay off debts. Even if he is merely acting just to avoid future punishment, Cephalus nevertheless acts justly by imitating the conventionally regulated standards governing what a good businessperson should do. His disinterest in philosophy stems from a confidence that these conventional standards of justice have taught him all he needs to know concerning the just and the unjust.

Cephalus' financial orientation shows itself in the way that Cephalus thinks of old age as supplying him with a net profit: the cost of old age—the diminishment of certain pleasures—does not offset the benefits of old age—freedom from certain desires and freedom for cultivating new kinds of pleasure. He begins his speech by volunteering that “I want you to know that as the other pleasures, those connected with the body, wither away in me, the desires and pleasures that have to do with *logos* grow the more” (*Rep.* I 328 d 2-4).⁷ While old age is responsible for the loss of certain pleasures, it also brings about the gain of new ones, such as the pleasures of *logos*. Conversely, it also frees the old person from the desire for those bodily pleasures that are so compulsive in youth. Cephalus' describes his friends as finding the waning of bodily pleasures a great hardship and something that makes old age practically inhuman, a living death. In contrast, Cephalus finds himself agreeing with Sophocles, who once was asked:

“Sophocles, how are you in sex? Can you still have intercourse with a woman?” “Silence man,” he said. “Most joyfully did I escape it, as though I had run away from a sort of frenzied and savage master.” I thought at the time that he had spoken well and I still do. For, in every way old

age brings great peace and freedom from such things (*Rep.* I 329 b 10-c 7).

Sophocles characterizes the bodily desire as fundamentally painful, and thus as something blissful to escape, and Cephalus agrees. These sorts of desire are bad in themselves, and a blessing in disguise of old age is that these passions no longer make a claim to rule. Thus, old age brings freedom *from* the slavery of this despotic ruler's demands. It is, as he first presents it, net profitable.

Old age is only profitable in this way, however, if one possesses a good character. Cephalus' friends do not experience old age as profitable on account of their poor character.

But of these things [the sufferings of old age] [...] there is just one cause: not old age, Socrates, but the character of the human beings. If they are orderly and content with themselves, even old age is only moderately troublesome; if they are not, then both age [...] and youth alike turn out to be hard for that sort (*Rep.* I 329 d 2-6).

In contrast with his friends, Cephalus presents himself as someone with a good character. Unlike them, he is not so immoderate as to think being deprived of certain bodily pleasures is a great loss. He recognizes the tyrannical nature of the desire for such pleasures and is capable of enjoying other pleasures, like those of *logos*. At this point, the reader might wonder whether Cephalus' self-assessment concerning this matter can be trusted—indeed, Socrates' response to this speech is to wonder whether Cephalus is being disingenuous. Someone who thinks Cephalus is only civically virtuous could argue that a truly moderate person wouldn't have such overwhelming and tyrannical bodily

desires in the first place, and would not require old age as a curative. Conversely, someone who thinks Cephalus is habitually virtuous could argue that he at least seems to have some longstanding sense that despotic bodily desires are intrinsically unprofitable, and that he presently seems to want to be free from them, unlike his cohorts for whom the diminution of these pleasures makes old age painful. On either reading, however, Cephalus' goal remains the same. He wants his old age to be profitable in the way that he describes.

Old age, however, has another hidden cost that complicates the effort to make it profitable for a person. Cephalus indicates that a new fear emerges for the old and threatens the peaceful serenity that old age could otherwise bring.

When a man comes near to the realization that he will be making an end, fear and care enter him for things to which he gave no thought before. The tales told about what is in Hades—that one who has done unjust deeds here must pay the penalty there—at which he laughed up to then, now make his soul twist and turn because he fears that they might be true (*Rep.* I 330 d 5-e 2).

This passage marks the first instances of both justice, *dikaiosynē*, and of an afterlife myth in the *Republic*. The particular myths to which Cephalus refers all say that the unjust in life are punished in death. Cephalus says that the old turn back to such stories, and fears about injustice threaten to make old age unbearable.

Now, the man who finds unjust deeds in his life often even wakes from his sleep in a fright as children do, and lives in anticipation of evil. To the man who is

conscious in himself of no unjust deed, sweet and good hope is ever beside him (*Rep.* I 330 e 6-331 a 2).

Precisely which of these two figures Cephalus himself is supposed to represent once again hinges upon the overall interpretive strategy the reader adopts. Cephalus presents himself as the second sort, a person who is conscious of no (or at least few) unjust deeds. A more cynical reader, however, could interpret him as the first sort, someone living in constant fear of what awaits him in the afterlife and who in his last few years remaining is desperately trying to make up for past injustices. Cephalus certainly acts as if he were at peace with himself and his old age during his appearance within the dialogue, but there is no definitive way for the reader to know for sure that this appearance is not either deliberately or unconsciously deceptive. On both interpretations, however, acting justly is revealed to be of crucial importance to Cephalus. Either Cephalus must continue to act justly in order to preserve his clean conscience, or he must begin to act justly in order to make up for a lifetime of wrongdoing. Only then will his old age—and indeed his death—be truly profitable.

According to Cephalus, acting justly requires some measure of wealth. Despite the fact that Cephalus is fairly wealthy, however, he is not presented by Plato as possessing a particularly oligarchic soul.⁸ He is not presented as someone who is fanatical about hoarding money or excessively resistant to spending his wealth, though he also does not spend frivolously (*Rep.* I 330 b1-10). As a result, Cephalus' orientation toward his wealth is quite properly instrumental. Wealth is valuable, according to Cephalus, insofar as it ensures that a person is able to both avoid injustices—for instance, to always be capable of paying off the debts

one has accumulated—and to make amends for any injustice that a person discovers has been committed. Money, he says, is therefore of some value to the just person who seeks to be free of fears concerning injustice, but is of no use at all to unjust people, who will most likely use their wealth to commit further injustices: “the decent man would not bear old age with poverty very easily, nor would the one who is not a decent sort ever be content with himself even if he were wealthy” (*Rep.* I 330 a 3-6).

Thus, according to Cephalus' speech one of the central requirements of the just elderly person is the ability to distinguish between those actions which are just, and those which are unjust. To discover whether or not he has committed any unjust deeds, the virtuous person “reckons up [*analogizetai*] his accounts and considers whether he has done anything unjust to anyone” (*Rep.* I 330 e 5). *Analogizesthai* appears very rarely in the *Republic*. One such usage, as we shall see, is in a crucial juncture in the Myth of Er.⁹ Cephalus claims that, because of this newfound importance of afterlife myths, an old man must look back through his life for injustices. The model here is plainly the conventionally well-respected businessperson. Such people are well-respected precisely because they successfully keep tabs on their wealth—and so avoid promising money they do not possess—and because they are adept at accurately gauging their debts and paying them off in a timely manner. Money is valuable, Cephalus holds, precisely because it aids the just man in coming out ahead in his balance sheet.

For this I count the possession of money most worth-while, not for any man, but for the decent and orderly one. The possession of money contributes a great deal to not cheating or lying to any man against one's will, and, moreover, to not

departing for that other place frightened because one owes some sacrifices to a god or money to a human being (*Rep.* I 331 a 10-b 4).

If the well-ordered man has money, he will be able to avoid being forced into situations that would require cheating or lying.¹⁰ Moreover, decent people with money use their wealth to pay off their debts, both to the gods through sacrifices, and to men through more mundane means. The ability to reckon up one's accounts is thus revealed to be of central importance to Cephalus. Whether he has lived a moral life in the past or not, his task now is to evaluate his past and present actions with respect to their justice or injustice—to continue to act justly (if he has in the past), and to make amends for any discovered injustices.¹¹

Given his speech, the reader should expect Cephalus to be quite concerned with the standards by which he gauges a particular action just or unjust. If his criteria for distinguishing just deeds from unjust ones are mistaken or poorly understood, then he will be incapable of “reckoning up” his accounts with any accuracy and in great danger of leaving behind unpaid debts. His condition would be analogous to that of the businessperson who does not know enough mathematics to accurately keep the books no matter how earnestly he or she attempts to do so. Socrates' seemingly abrupt transition from what old age is like to what makes a just action just is not as unprovoked as many commentators have previously argued.¹² The purpose of Socrates' response is, on my account, to get Cephalus (and the reader) to recognize that Cephalus is relying upon unexamined conventional standards for determining whether or not an action is just or unjust, and that it is not immediately apparent how these

various conventional standards are supposed to cohere with one another.

Socrates: Take this case as an example of what I mean: everyone would surely say that if a man takes weapons from a friend when the latter is of sound mind, and the friend demands them back when he is mad, one shouldn't give back such things, and the man who gave them back would not be just, and moreover, one should not be willing to tell someone in this state the whole truth.

Cephalus: What you say is right (*Rep.* I 331 c 5-d 1).

Socrates here argues that it is better to lie and withhold the weapon from the insane friend, even if normally a just person keeps his or her word and pays debts swiftly. The model of the good businessperson that Cephalus has relied upon in discussing just action is potentially misleading if applied outside of a financial context.¹³ The convention appropriate in that arena—that one must always pay off his or her debts—is not appropriate in the different arena of friendship, where one “owes” the friend more, and in a different way, than one owes a business associate.

However, Socrates does not take himself to be telling Cephalus something that he does not already know. Everyone, Socrates says, already agrees that the just friend or family-member would withhold the sword and the truth in this sort of circumstance, and Cephalus readily agrees. When considering justice with respect to friendship, Cephalus does not take as his conventional standard the one appropriate to the businessperson, but rather the one appropriate to the friend who should sometimes violate the normal requirements of fair treatment that one citizen owes to another.¹⁴ Using

this different conventional standard, Cephalus is able to again correctly determine what the just behavior is in this new context. Indeed, everything that we see of Cephalus indicates that he is capable of shifting back and forth between these different conventional contexts as needed, and that he is generally confident in his ability to recognize the virtuous action in a given situation in this general manner. Rather than directly refuting Cephalus, I take it that Socrates is attempting to provoke him into recognizing the complexities and various inconsistencies underlying the different conventional standards of justice held to be applicable in different contexts. So provoked, Cephalus would hopefully want to discover philosophically what justice in itself entails in a way that will explain why it looks different in different contexts.¹⁵

However, Cephalus does not respond to this Socratic challenge in the way that Socrates would have hoped. Instead, Cephalus politely leaves the conversation in the hands of his son Polemarchus. He then departs to tend to the sacrifices he had made before Socrates' arrival. Plato does not present this departure as a mere accident, or as a minor dramatic incident. At *Rep.* I 328 c, Cephalus began his speech by declaring his desire to converse with Socrates, and he was perfectly content to do so until the conversation began to seek non-conventional justification for why a particular act is just. The contrast between his initial desire to converse with Socrates and his abrupt departure once the conversation turned to philosophical questions is striking and deliberate.¹⁶ Cephalus is presented by Plato as departing because the conversation turned philosophical. He evidently attaches no special value to acquiring philosophical accounts of the virtues separate from the conventional standards by which they are grasped in different contexts.¹⁷

Instead, Cephalus prefers to carry out sacrifices to the gods, one form of actively paying off one's debts and thus being just toward the gods in accordance with conventional standards.¹⁸ Everything that Plato writes about Cephalus suggests that he is already either habitually virtuous—certainly, this is how Cephalus presents himself—or at least now in his old age striving to act externally virtuous in order to avoid punishments in the afterlife. In either case, what value would the philosophical study of virtue offer to a person such as Cephalus? Or, to make the question even more urgent, is Cephalus in some way harmed as a result of his relying upon conventional standards of justice—standards that admittedly give him correct instructions concerning how to behave in normal circumstances—and turning away from philosophical accounts of these same matters?

3: THE DANGERS OF CONVENTIONAL VIRTUE AND THE MYTH OF ER

The answer to the preceding question suggested by the rest of the *Republic*, especially in Book X, is that those who are virtuous by merely obeying conventional standards (whether habitually or merely externally) are, despite their virtuous behavior, in great ethical risk in certain contexts. Indeed, I will argue that in some contexts such people are at even greater risk of damaging their souls than those who fall short of conventional standards of virtue without becoming completely vicious. The (basically correct) moral intuitions of the conventionally virtuous person only hold insofar as these conventional intuitions and standards are consistently reinforced and re-asserted within the city that promotes them. They are acquired by the conventionally virtuous person through

his or her adherence to *nomos*. The *Republic* suggests, however, that such ethical standards can never be fully internalized without also being accompanied by “true speeches” and “philosophizing in a healthy way” (*Rep.* VIII 560 a 6 and *Rep.* X 619 d 10, respectively). They can therefore be lost if not constantly reinforced, particularly in those who are constantly fighting unnecessary and potentially lawless immoderate desires. When the conventionally virtuous person is removed from this reinforcement—either through a regime change, relocation to a new city, or, in the mythic context, after 1000 years of walking the easy road of heaven—the conventional standards cease to guide that person’s judgment, and are either replaced by whatever new standards have become conventional, or by whatever appetites were being suppressed by the old conventions. All that remains of the conventionally virtuous person’s virtue is the self-confidence and self-assurance that he or she is a virtuous person who knows in what virtue consists. Such a person is described by Socrates as morally lazy, “unpracticed in labors”, and he says that such a person tends to impulsively assume that however a situation superficially appears morally to him or her is correct (*Rep.* X 619 d 3). While this attitude was justified insofar as the person was fortunate enough to be raised up in a city with virtuous conventional standards, outside of that good fortune such an individual is susceptible to committing acts of extreme injustice that a more corrupt individuals would approach with hesitancy.

The context in which Plato most directly argues to this effect is in the Myth of Er, though it will be helpful to appeal to earlier passages in the *Republic* in order to help interpret and demythologize the myth.¹⁹ I will first indicate the basic interconnections between the myth and Cephalus’ speech. Next, I will present some

reasons why Socrates might choose to present his response to the problems raised by Cephalus in the form of a myth, and why he does not directly respond earlier in the dialogue. Finally, I will turn to a direct analysis of how a particular incident within the myth directly indicates the harmfulness of merely conventional virtue in certain contexts.

Plato’s presentation of the Myth of Er at the end of the dialogue harkens back to the opening conversation between Socrates and Cephalus in multiple ways. Cephalus is the first figure in the dialogue to discuss afterlife myths at all—it is in the context of such myths, he indicates, that the elderly fear the coming of death. Afterlife myths then play a minimal role in the remainder of dialogue until Socrates presents the Myth of Er. Additionally, the language Socrates uses to frame his introduction of the myth directly refers back to Cephalus’ main concern—the repaying of debts. Socrates presents this myth, he says, to repay a debt:

Well [...] they [the rewards earned in life for justice] are nothing in multitude or magnitude compared to those that awaits each when dead. And these things should be heard so that in hearing them each of these men will have gotten back the full measure of what the argument owed him (*Rep.* X 614 a 5-8).

Cephalus understands justice as having an instrumental value in the afterlife—the person who possesses it will be able to avoid displeasing the gods through unjust acts in life and thus will not face punishment in the afterlife. Socrates agrees with Cephalus that justice does in fact have a role to play in determining what a person faces in the afterlife—or at the very least, he believes that it is good for people to believe that their fate in the afterlife will hinge

on the just or unjust actions they committed in life. The argument will not be complete, then, and Socrates will not have paid off his debts to the listeners, until he comments about the relative merits of these myths, particularly since Cephalus indicates that these sorts of myths played an important role in inspiring his love of justice.

It is in response to this context, I argue, that Socrates frames his response to the challenge raised by Cephalus in the form of a myth, though to be sure a myth that can only properly be understood in light of the rest of the dialogue. Part of Cephalus' problem is that the myths to which he is beholden do not completely articulate the advantages of caring about justice, thus leaving Cephalus with an incomplete view of precisely how he should live with respect to justice in order to avoid the outcome that he fears. The central problem of the myths that Cephalus mentions is that they do not attribute any value to being capable of discerning just from unjust actions once a person has died. While Cephalus does not indicate precisely to what myths he is referring, it is apparent from his description that the sentencing of the gods is absolute: if a man is judged unjust, he will suffer for his crimes for presumably an eternity in the afterlife. Cephalus' focus is correspondingly entirely on this other world—he wishes to avoid this eternal punishment in the afterlife, and so only cultivates a love of justice insofar as it leads to being judged worthy by the gods. From such a perspective, all that would matter would be to satisfy the demands of the gods, and the ability to discriminate just from unjust actions is only relevant insofar as it helps a person live in conformity with the laws of the gods—which presumably correspond to the laws of the city.²⁰ The myths that have influenced Cephalus give him no reason for thinking that conventional standards are anything other than completely

adequate for fulfilling the expectations of the gods and avoiding their punishment.

If conventional standards are not adequate for avoiding all moral danger, however, then these sorts of myths are poorly structured and do not instill the proper attitude toward the study of justice. Given that this is Socrates' considered position, a different sort of myth is required. Such a myth will have to highlight the moral dangers that would result from failing to study virtue philosophically while still preserving the sense in which the gods really do reward just deeds (whether supported by philosophy or not) and punish injustice. The Myth of Er is structured in such a way that it perfectly accomplishes both tasks. While the unjust are still sentenced to punishment in this myth—judges decree that the just walk a blissful upper realm and the unjust walk a lower realm of punishment—these sentences are not eternal outside the extreme case of the irredeemably vicious. Each journey lasts 1000 years, after which time both those who travel the upper road and those who are cursed to the lower road come to the Spindle of Necessity. Each soul must then pick from a multitude of possible lives, with the order determined by lot. After making a choice, each person is then reincarnated after drinking from the river of Carelessness and forgetting what has transpired. Given this mythic framing, the punishments undergone by the unjust souls compelled to walk the lower road are fundamentally educative, and not fundamentally vindictive or retributive. This myth therefore inverts Cephalus' initial understanding—justice is not for the sake of avoiding punishment, but punishment is itself for the sake of becoming better at judging what is just and what is unjust. The ability to distinguish justice from injustice remains invaluable even outside the context of civic religious life, particularly insofar as the

mythic choice of lives that awaits all those who die falls far outside the conventional context of the *polis*.

Now that I have shown the narrative connections between the Myth of Er and Cephalus' speech and presented an argument for why Socrates might want to respond to the challenge posed by Cephalus' departure in the form of a myth, I will now turn to Socrates' claim within the myth that those who are conventionally virtuous are in a sort of moral peril. I will first indicate Socrates' argument within this mythic context, and then attempt to demythologize the argument. Within the myth, Socrates argues that those who gauge what is virtuous only by relying upon the conventions of their society—those who walked the blissful upper road without studying philosophy—are more likely to choose their next lives poorly compared with those whose virtue was supported by philosophy. While this result might not be particularly surprising, his second contention is genuinely startling and has troubled many commentators.²¹ He argues that the conventionally just are prone to do an even worse job of choosing than those who fell short of the conventional standards of their society—those who were forced to walk the painful lower road.

Within the context of the myth, the reason that the conventionally virtuous are worse at choosing their next life is because they are “unpracticed in labors.” While presumably the upper road of heaven does not require extensive labor of any sort, in the context of the myth the most relevant sort of “labor” involved in the choice of lives is making concrete moral determination about which lives are better, and which are worse. The first person that Socrates describes as choosing a life picks a horrific tyranny.

He was one of those who had come from heaven, having lived in an orderly regime in his former life, participating in virtue by habit, without philosophy. And, it may be said, not the least number of those who were caught in such circumstances came from heaven, because they were unpracticed in labors (*Rep.* X 619 c 6-d 3).

Within the context of the myth, those who walk the easy upper road quite literally are freed from certain kinds of toil and work during their walk.²² As a result, they are described as unpracticed, poorly prepared for the difficult labors involved in choosing an entire life. The conventionally virtuous have been long separated from contexts in which they were able to exercise their virtue—there are presumably no sticky moral difficulties on the upper path, and so no cause to call upon the conventional standards of virtue in decision making. It would be entirely natural, then, for such people to have a diminished capacity to remember what those conventional standards actually are and to be out of practice in actually employing them in moral decision-making.

Yet it must still be explained why the conventionally virtuous—those who have lost their conventional intuitions about virtue due to time and the ease of the upper road—do a worse job with the choice of lives than those who did not behave virtuously in the first place. Socrates' answer to this question is that the journey along the lower path has taught the non-virtuous souls that avoided complete wickedness to approach moral decisions with more caution than the conventionally virtuous do.²³ “But most of those who came from the earth, because they themselves had labored and had seen the labor of others, weren't in a rush to make their choices” (*Rep.* X 619 d 2-5). Hard experience and punishment has taught those

who walked the path of the earth to approach moral matters with care. They were constantly confronted with the consequences of poor moral decision making and so are prone to act more cautiously and with less confidence in their immediate moral inclinations because such inclinations served them so poorly in life. In contrast, those who were conventionally virtuous have been taught by life and by their reward in the afterlife that they are good judges of what is right and what is wrong, and that their determinations of what is just and what is unjust will conform with the virtuous standards of the *polis*. Nothing they experience on the upper road will challenge their basic tendency to be self-confident and self-assured in moral matters—indeed, these tendencies will have been reinforced, because there is no need to take great care in considering anything on the upper road.

This tendency toward quick self-confidence will have disastrous consequences, however, now that the moral intuitions that were instilled through convention in life have atrophied through disuse. All that will remain is the tendency to rely on an immediate impression of which life looks best, and such a quick look will—at the very least—miss all sorts of relevant details.

The man who had drawn the first lot came forth and immediately chose the greatest tyranny, and, due to folly and gluttony, chose without having considered everything adequately; and it escaped his notice that eating his children and other evils were fated to be a part of that life (*Rep.* X 619 b 8-c 2).

Outside of the context of cultivated conventional virtues, all the immoderate desires that were suppressed by those habits are able

to reassert themselves. Now what immediately seems best to this particular out-of-practice ex-conventionally virtuous person is the life of hedonism, and in making this choice the man elides the full consequences of the life that he has chosen. In this regard, those who came from the upper road without the study of philosophy are at greater risk for damaging themselves through injustice than the conventionally unjust, who have become cautious as a result of punishment for past injustices.

Let us now begin demythologizing the myth and connecting it to the earlier conversation with Cephalus and other books of the *Republic*.²⁴ The easy-goingness of the conventionally virtuous person can be understood as operative even outside the context of the myth. Conventionally virtuous people only behave virtuously by a sort of luck—they happen to be living in a regime whose conventions more or less reflect virtue.²⁵ That is not to say that there is nothing praiseworthy in their virtue—a great many people live in the same regime and nevertheless fail to live in external accordance with the conventional standards that such societies hold up for virtuous behavior. Insofar as the conventionally virtuous rely on pre-given criteria (conventional standards of virtue) in determining what behaviors are virtuous, however, they do require the good fortune to live in a society that sets forward correct standards. In a tyrannical regime, as an example, one might well expect to find very different conventions, perhaps emphasizing slavish subservience to the tyrant as an example of courageous or moderate behavior. Examples of such regimes would include the Greek understanding of the Persians, the reign of the Thirty Tyrants, and even the reign of a “tyrannical” democratic majority that insists that virtue is gratifying the desires of the majority.²⁶

Cephalus is lucky in this manner—the Athens in which he lives contains enough diversity that it does praise behaviors that are genuinely virtuous, and he has internalized these standards, particularly those relating to just businesspersons and Sophoclean moderation, to distinguish just from unjust actions.²⁷ He is additionally lucky because old age has silenced many of the despotic immoderate desires that would strain against the cultivation of these civic virtues, and indeed did strain against them in his youth.²⁸ This waning of desire is a bodily accident, not the result of deliberate decision or habituation. Thus, he is fortunate to have undergone this accident—at the very least, it has made his situation easier than it otherwise might have been for him.

Both sorts of luck are fundamentally unreliable, however. Just as in the Myth of Er the dead are tasked with the novel and unprecedented project of choosing an entire life for themselves, in non-mythic contexts the conventionally just may well be faced with many novel circumstances that do not have any obvious conventional standard, or circumstances in which the obvious standards are actually misleading in a given context and will lead to unjust actions.²⁹ Even worse, political instability is entirely capable of upsetting what is praised and blamed within a city for the worse. Indeed, the historical fates of Cephalus and his sons directly invoke political instability and the decline of a regime into tyranny and legal injustice. Everything that Cephalus has built in his life will soon be destroyed after his death by the reign of the Thirty Tyrants—his son Polemarchus will be killed along with countless others, and the estate he hoped to leave behind will be seized by the tyranny.³⁰ Given that the virtue of the conventionally virtuous relies entirely upon their conformity to certain conventional stan-

dards of virtue advanced within a city, once such a tyrannical regime seizes power and institutes new conventions, the conventionally virtuous person will begin to internalize these new, non-virtuous standards of in what virtue consists.³¹ Indeed, based on the argument found in the Myth of Er, they will do so quiet swiftly and self-confidently, mistakenly assured that they possess the ability to distinguish just actions from unjust actions in some reliable way outside of convention. Such a person will go along with unjust actions just as readily as just actions in a different context, and the tyrannical regime has every motivation to reorient its virtuous citizens to vicious or slavish habits.³² My central contention in this paper is that those who are only conventionally virtuous are in grave moral danger in this sort of circumstance—indeed, as per the Myth of Er, their conventional virtuousness makes them at an even greater moral risk of being persuaded to go along with the crimes of the new regime or of reacting horrifically in the face of a novel situation.

Plato alludes to this phenomenon in the *Apology* when Socrates describes the reign of the Thirty in Athens following the Peloponnesian War.

When the oligarchy was established, the Thirty summoned me to the Hall, along with four others, and ordered us to bring Leon from Salamis, that he might be executed. They gave many such orders to many people, in order to implicate as many as possible in their guilt (*Apol.* 32 c 3-d 2).³³

While Socrates violated the new *nomos*, most citizens, including many of whom presumably behaved justly under the old regime, went along with the new regime's crimes as

a matter of course. Some of the conventionally just citizens were likely motivated on account of a fear of death, and were willing to abandon their old standards of just and unjust behavior to avoid it now that their old habits no longer found conventional approval. Others, those who only obeyed the old conventions as a result of an external fear of punishment, were perhaps motivated on account of the promise of the tyrant to satisfy immoderate desires that were suppressed by the conventions found in the old regime but which are now free to rule the soul unopposed. Even more disturbingly, there were probably many who simply were used to doing what they were told and what won them praise, and put no thought into the difference between the virtuous conventions of the old regime and the vicious conventions of the new.

What is apparent in all such cases is that the conventional acquisition of virtue does little to prepare those just by convention for actually having to choose to live virtuously rather than viciously once conventional standards are no longer applicable. Indeed, the confidence and easygoingness with which the conventionally virtuous distinguish virtuous from vicious actions makes them especially susceptible to mistaken and hasty judgments about such matters. If this analysis holds, we can see that Cephalus' merely conventional acquisition of virtue is not morally adequate in those situations in which conventions are either undergoing change (as in a regime change) or unhelpful (as in a novel circumstance). What remains is to demonstrate why Plato thinks that the study of philosophy can serve as a corrective and helpful supplement to conventional virtue with respect to those cases where it is necessary to actually choose how to live virtuously outside of a conventional framework.

4: PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY

An immediate difficulty confronts any interpreter of the *Republic* who wants to argue that everyone, and not just the rare natures suitable for becoming philosopher-kings, would potentially be benefited by undergoing the Socratic elenchus. Plato's Socrates spends a great deal of the middle books of the *Republic* arguing that the study of philosophy is dangerous and corruptive outside of the confines of the *kallipolis*, and even within the ideal city its study should be reserved for those exceptional natures capable of mastering the dialectical study of the Forms, especially the Form of the Good.³⁴ I do not want to minimize these arguments, or the concerns of commentators who struggle to reconcile them with the broader Socratic elenctic practice found in dialogues like the *Apology*. However, I want to argue that Books I and X of the *Republic* at the very least complicate the position in the middle of the dialogue that the Socratic elenchus should not be practiced on most people. In this last section, I will attempt to show that Plato's Socrates holds that philosophy is the only way of training oneself to respond morally in contexts in which conventional virtue is of no use, or even actively harmful.

I will first return to the mythic context of the Myth of Er. With respect to the choice of lives, Socrates says:

Now here, my dear Glaucon, is the whole risk for a human being, as it seems. And on this account each of us must, to the neglect of other studies, above all see to it that he is a seeker and student of the study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the capacity and knowledge to distinguish the

good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always choose the better from among those that are possible. He will take into account [*analogizomenon*] all the things we have just mentioned and how in combination and separately they affect the virtue of life [...] From all this he will be able to draw a conclusion and choose—in looking off toward the nature of the soul—between the worse and the better life, calling worse the one that leads it toward becoming more unjust, and better the one that leads it to becoming juster (*Rep.* X 618 b 6-e 2).

The first thing to note in this passage is how strongly it invokes Cephalus' initial speech about the importance of justice. "Taking into account" here is *analogizomenon*, the same word Cephalus uses to describe the way the old man looks back upon his life for injustices and unpaid debts. Only whereas Cephalus was fundamentally concerned with taking stock of the justice or injustice of various actions, Socrates here advocates taking stock of whole ways of life and determining which lives, if any, contribute to virtue and thus happiness. To accomplish this reckoning, Socrates says that we must pay careful attention to "all the things we have just mentioned" in the course of the *Republic*, especially including the accounts of the soul, its virtues, and the effects of vice upon it. Indeed, we must neglect all other studies and activities for the sake of pursuing the ability to discern virtuous lives from lives that lack virtue. Conventionally acquired virtue, as we have already seen, is not enough for this task. It must therefore be supplemented with philosophical explorations of virtue and vice.

The purpose of the study of philosophy in this context is twofold. First, it is at least in principle capable of providing the conven-

tionally virtuous person with a stronger and more permanent foundation for his or her moral intuitions. The dialectical philosopher will genuinely understand what the virtues are and the reasons why certain just conventions are held up as desirable within the city. However, even those who are incapable of attaining the full heights of dialectic can be benefited by discovering true accounts about virtue.³⁵ For instance, at *Rep.* VII 532 e-533 a, Socrates describes Glaucon and Adeimantus as being currently incapable of the dialectical science of the philosopher-kings, but they are still benefited by the non-dialectical philosophical methods found in the *Republic* that provide a rational account of what the virtues are and correct justifications of why the life of justice is superior to the life of injustice.³⁶ Such accounts can provide a foundation for virtuous behavior that is capable of surviving political instability and adapting to circumstances that lack obvious conventional standards. Elenchic practice is therefore potentially beneficial insofar as it is capable (though by no means assured) of providing a more secure foundation for virtuous beliefs than mere convention and habit alone.³⁷

However, the study of philosophy is presented in the myth as providing an even more important function. The difficulty that those who are conventionally virtuous face in choosing their next life is not fundamentally that they have wrong beliefs about what is virtuous and what is not, though they well might. Rather, the central problem is that they are morally lazy: self-confident in their virtuousness despite the fact that their virtue is the result of luck instead of deliberate effort. If their luck changes, by the rise of a tyranny for instance, such individuals will lose the entire foundation that supported their virtuousness and so be cast adrift with nothing but confidence in their own rectitude. They thus choose to act in accordance

with their basic moral intuitions too quickly. Usually, this haste doesn't harm them insofar as the conventional standards they rely upon are correct. In contexts where those standards do not apply or have actively been replaced by new, vicious standards, however, this haste can become morally ruinous. Yet the sudden onset of bad luck that overturns virtuous conventions does not excuse injustice or ward off the harms of unjust actions. In the Myth of Er, the spokesman of the goddess Lachesis says:

Let him who gets the first lot make the first choice of a life to which he will be bound by necessity. Virtue is without a master, as he honors or dishonors her, each will have more or less of her. The blame belongs to him who chooses; god is blameless (*Rep.* X 617 e 2-5).

In the context of the myth, though there is a lottery and thus some chance is involved in the procedure of choosing lives, there are enough virtuous lives available to souls that everyone has the potential to choose a virtuous life whenever their lot falls. Outside the mythic context, it is clear that Plato holds that virtuous action remains possible even in the worst—the most unlucky—circumstances. Socrates personally demonstrates this fact by his conduct during the reign of the Thirty. It is possible to disobey the corrupt commands of the tyrant, or to remain cautious in the face of novel circumstances. Because the conventionally virtuous are so convinced of their own virtuousness by habit, however, these sorts of people are not described by Plato as acknowledging their personal agency in these cases—they instead blame luck and the gods for their unjust deeds: “For he [the man who chose the tyranny] didn't blame himself for the evils but chance, demons, and anything rather than himself” (*Rep.* X 619

c 4-6). It is quite true that many people who commit terrible crimes would not do so if they had not found themselves in certain bad situations.³⁸ Plato's argument in the *Republic* is that the unjust actions of such people are not thereby excused.

Philosophy therefore has an even more important task than reinforcing correct beliefs about virtue and vice. It must also awaken a sense of responsibility and personal care for virtue within the souls of its practitioners. By encouraging individuals to care about what the virtues are, philosophy encourages them to care about the virtues *as such*: to honor virtue, as the goddess commands, rather than merely practicing virtuous actions. In this context, even the potentially destabilizing consequences of the Socratic elenchus has positive as well as negative value. Even if all the elenchus leaves behind is some small measure of *aporia* and knowledge of one's own ignorance, a person in such a condition might at the very least slow down and approach difficult moral considerations with care rather than haughty self-assurance. Such an achievement, as Plato presents it, is no small advance. Cephalus will not be able to attain this achievement no matter how many sacrifices he attends to or how many debts he repays. All such actions will only reinforce his feeling of moral achievement. It is therefore correct to hold his departure in error and to assert the value of philosophy even amongst those virtuous by convention.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 I would like to thanks Dr. Michael Wiitala, Dr. Eric Sanday, and several anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments and feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.
- 2 Beversluis 2000, 198 writes: "But although Socrates' counterexample refutes *that* definition, it does not refute Cephalus who advanced *no* definition. Indeed, in view of the striking contrast between the casual and slow-paced nature of the foregoing conversation and the formal and abrupt nature of Socrates' attack, it seems that the unsuspecting Cephalus has been pounced on quite unfairly." Building off of Beversluis, McKee 2008, 70 writes: "Cephalus' departure is an appropriate, urbane response to Socrates' gross misrepresentation that he had attempted a definition of justice", and that it does not indicate a moral failing on Cephalus' part. McKee 2008, 78 then argues that Plato presents Cephalus as an exemplar for philosophical education. "The judgments Cephalus makes in Book I identify him as a teacher of the kind envisaged in Book X." The Myth of Er ends with the demand that we measure the justice found in life as a whole. In this way, when we are confronted with the choice of what our next life will consist in, we will be able to choose correctly. The myth insists that we must find a teacher to teach us how to carry out such a reckoning of lives, and McKee believes that Plato wants Cephalus to serve as this exemplar.
- 3 Taylor 1966, 266-267 reads Cephalus as a conventional representative of the decent person, and thinks that Socrates uses his speech as an excuse to raise the question of justice: "From the simple observations of old Cephalus... Socrates takes the opportunity to raise the question of what *dikaionē*, taken in the sense of the supreme rule of right—"morality" as we might say—is". Though he doesn't mention Cephalus' departure from the conversation in any detail, he seems to find Socrates' interjection valid insofar as he thinks Cephalus implicitly holds a financial understanding of justice in his speech that cannot be taken as a "supreme principle of morality". See n6 for an extended discussion of Reeve's reading of Cephalus.

4 I am indebted to an anonymous referee of this paper, who forcefully and persuasively argued on behalf of this kind of reading of Cephalus.

5 Schleiermacher 1836, 353 writes that Cephalus “is already too far advanced in years” for serious philosophical dialogue and that Socrates “tacks the question as to the nature of justice” onto the end of Cephalus’ speech. White 1979, 62-3 reads Cephalus as thoughtlessly parroting back conventional notions of various ethical concepts. On his reading, it is Socrates, and not Cephalus, that really focuses the conversation on the justice and its importance. Annas 1981, 20 reads Cephalus as fundamentally shallow—“His notion of doing right consists in observing a few simple rules or maxims like ‘don’t lie’ and ‘give back what isn’t yours’. He thinks of them in a very external fashion: what matters is whether or not you perform certain actions, like sacrificing to the gods, and not the spirit in which this done.”

6 Other commentators have also thought that this was the central difficulty raised by Cephalus’ departure from the conversation. Reeve 1988, 6-7, for instance, who generally reads Cephalus as what I am calling habitually virtuous, argues “The problem Cephalus poses to Socrates... is that he is to some degree moderate, just, pious, and wise without having studied philosophy or knowing what the virtues are.” However, Reeve concludes from this difficulty “that Cephalus is an inappropriate subject for the elenchus. He is already of good character and disposed to virtue. That is why Plato has him depart before he can be examined.” Reeve holds that the Cephalus has already attained a kind of conventionally acquired virtue that does not entail a worse life than philosophical virtue: “the elenctically examined life is not guaranteed to be any better or more virtuous than the life of a traditionally brought up gentleman of means.” While on Reeve’s reading philosophical virtue is complete in a way that conventional virtue is not, he does not think that Cephalus’ incomplete virtue would be benefited by further dialectical analysis. Bloom 1968, 313 also closely connects Cephalus’ virtue with convention: “Cephalus typifies the ancestral which cannot, but must, be questioned. Although his appearance is brief, by means of a few circumspect inquiries Socrates manages to reveal his character and his principles and, hence, those of the tradition he represents. Then the old man is delicately set aside.” Bloom argues that Socrates deliberately antagonizes Cephalus into leaving the conversation so that convention can be overcome by philosophy. Socrates does this by misconstruing the aim of Cephalus’ speech as an attempt to define justice, which it in no way was, and by ignoring the importance of the gods. The reading found in Steinberger 1996 also identifies Cephalus as representing conventional virtue, and argues that he is in moral danger because of his profoundly un-philosophical fear of death, something that leaves his soul vulnerable to injustice. Like me, Steinberger reads the fate of the conventionally virtuous in Myth of Er as indicating this moral danger, though I think his fear of death is only a sign of a deeper moral issue revealed in the myth.

7 Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the *Republic* are those of Allan Bloom in: *The Republic*, 2nd ed., Basic Books 1968. References to the Greek text are from: *Politeia*. in *Platonis Opera Vol 4*, Oxford University Press 1902 <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0167>>.

8 Socrates himself provides a witness to this effect when he says, with no recognizable irony that I can detect, that “you didn’t seem overly fond of money” (*Rep.* I 330 b 8-c 1). Socrates argues that Cephalus does not value wealth for its own sake, and that he does not hold the accumulation of wealth intrinsically valuable. Cephalus did not have to work excessively to earn his wealth. Those who did, Socrates says, love money doubly: both because it is useful and as the product of their labor, as the artist loves his or her painting. Socrates thus agrees with Cephalus’ self-assessment as not being a money-lover.

9 Besides *Rep.* I 330 e, it used three other times. At *Rep.* IV 441 c 1, using Homer, Socrates argues that the thing that reckons is the rational part of the soul (in contrast with the spirited part), demonstrating that the reckoning of one’s accounts that Cephalus describes here would conventionally be considered a kind of calculation: “Here, you see, Homer clearly presents that which has calculated [*to analogisamenon*] about better and worse and rebukes that which is irrationally spirited as though it were a different part.” The verb has a similar usage at *Rep.* VII 524 d 9: “Figure it out [*analogizou*] on the basis of what was said before.” Its final usage occurs at a key juncture in the Myth of Er, *Rep.* X 618 c 6: “He will take into account [*analogizomenon*] all the things we have just mentioned and how in combination and separately they affect the virtue of a life.” I will return to this passage in Section 4.

10 While Cephalus does not explicitly clarify what he means in suggesting that a person can be forced to lie and cheat another person “against one’s will [*akonta*],” on a charitable interpretation there is no reason to interpret him as meaning anything terribly sophisticated or controversial. One sort of unintentional injustice, particularly common in the business world, would be when a person borrowed money in the past with every intention of paying off the debt at some future time, but then finds him or herself unable to do so in the future because of poverty. Annas 1981, 20 reads this passage in the same way.

11 I do not find anything that Cephalus says in his speech to be particularly shocking or un-Socratic, at least with respect to his discussion of why justice and wealth are important. Socrates certainly does not object to the substance of Cephalus’ speech in his response: “What you say is very fine indeed, Cephalus” (*Rep.* I 331 c 1). To be sure, Cephalus’ account of justice predominantly is concerned with its consequences, and not with its intrinsic value, but Cephalus neither was asked about nor intended to speak about the value of justice in itself. He is certainly correct to say that a just person, elderly or otherwise, would have to possess a calculative capacity that aids that person in “reckoning up” which actions are just

and which unjust. And Cephalus' discussion of the value of money for the just person closely matches the account offered by Socrates at *Euthydemus* 278 e-282 b, as Cashen 2011 argued in a paper delivered at the 2011 meeting of the Ancient Philosophy Society. In that passage, Socrates says wealth really is valuable, but only insofar as it is employed rightly.

12 Even amongst readers who otherwise greatly differ in their reading of Cephalus, there is a widespread sense that Socrates is misconstruing Cephalus' speech, deliberately or otherwise, as an account of justice in a way unfair to what Cephalus himself intended. See for instance Schleiermacher 1836, 353, Bloom 1968, 314, Beversluis 2000, 198, and McKee 2008, 70.

13 While Cephalus has not presented a 'definition' of justice in his speech that is restricted to only financial matters, later comments from Polemarchus (his son) give some support to the claim that there is a danger in overlooking non-financial instances of injustice. Polemarchus is presented as the "heir of the argument" (*Rep.* I 331 e 1), and as carrying on the conversation in the departed Cephalus' stead. Polemarchus explicitly presents justice as a matter of finances, saying that justice is primarily useful "in money matters" (*Rep.* I 333 b 10).

14 As an example, think of Amphitryon's treatment of his son, the insane Heracles, in Euripides' *Heracles*. Amphitryon refuses to tell his son what has happened—that in a fit of madness, Heracles murdered his family—and leaves him bound up against his will until he is sure that Heracles has returned to sanity.

15 There is nothing unusual in the way that Socrates approaches Cephalus in this regard. For instance, Euthyphro first gives examples of pious actions (*Euthyphro* 5 d), and then is called by Socrates to give a definition (*Euthyphro* 6 d). Laches and Socrates do the same concerning courage (*Laches* 190d-192 b), and Theaetetus and Socrates do the same concerning knowledge (*Theaetetus* 146 c-d and 148 d). This common Socratic challenge does not necessarily indicate that there is any problem with the examples his interlocutors employed in first attempting to understand a given concept—Laches, at the very least, is quite correct to say that soldiers who hold their ground on the battlefield in the face of danger are courageous. The fact that courage does not reduce to this one example does not make it a bad example or does not imply that Laches' moral intuitions about courage are incorrect, it only means that his example is not philosophical.

16 The contention in Beversluis 2000 that Cephalus is ambushed by this unexpected Socratic shift in the conversation would indicate that Cephalus is not familiar with Socrates and his style of argumentation. This reading seems at odds with the familiarity between the two that the text seems to suggest.

17 Beversluis 2000, 200-201 defends Cephalus' departure on the grounds that acting justly is a practical and not theoretical concern: "his fundamental decency and resultant contentment and tranquility of mind are the hard-earned fruits of a lifetime, and Plato does not

allow Socrates to deprive him of them. Cephalus' inability to defend his views does not call his life into question.

It reveals that his practical ability to be just outstrips his theoretical ability to explain justice. Theoretical inability does not entail moral bankruptcy." The problem with Beversluis' reading is that Cephalus' own account indicates that just behavior requires a kind of calculation concerning which actions are just and which unjust.

Cephalus is content to rely upon conventional standards for justice in this calculation. Plato, however, ultimately argues in the *Republic* that this approach puts a person in a kind of moral danger.

18 McKee 2008, 79 defends Cephalus' departure because modern gerontological studies have determined that the elderly "typically have an increased interest in ritual. Seen in this light, Cephalus' preference for participation in religious rites over philosophical dialectic is natural for his advanced age, not a personal failing." Even if this is true, and even if the results of modern empirical social sciences can fairly be applied to the ancient Greeks, just because something is the case does not mean that it ought to be the case. Even if the elderly generally prefer religious ritual to philosophy, that does not mean that they must, or that they ought. The actions of a rather old Socrates in the *Phaedo* and the *Crito* clearly demonstrate an example of an elderly person who at the very least makes room for philosophy along with ritual practices. For McKee to be correct, Cephalus ought to prefer religious ritual to philosophy, if not in general then at least in this case. And the Myth of Er strongly indicates that he is not correct to prefer ritual to philosophy, either as a young man or an old one. Indeed, interpreting Cephalus as some sort of paragon of Greek religious life has itself been challenged. Dobbs 1994, 672, for instance, has quite compellingly argued that Cephalus represents a rather shallow and inadequate understanding of pious religious life, in comparison with both Socrates and even his own son, Polemarchus.

19 That there seems to be a connection between the myth and Cephalus' speech has been remarked elsewhere in the scholarship. For instance, see instance McKee 2008, 73-75, who argues that Cephalus is the exemplar that the hearer of the myth is supposed to emulate, and Bloom 1968, 436 and Steinberger 1996, 194, both of whom argue that Cephalus' condition is like that of the man who chooses the worst tyranny within the myth.

20 Describing Cephalus, Bloom 1968, 315 writes: "For Cephalus the just is identical to the law of the city, and the law is protected by the gods. The problem of justice is simply expressed in his view: if there are no gods, there is no reason to be just or to worry; if there are, we must simply obey their laws, for that is what they wish." While Cephalus himself never expresses any real skeptical doubts about the existence of the gods, Bloom's reading here seems basically correct, if the "law" in question is not interpreted strictly as the written laws of the city but rather as the broad *nomos*, both written and unwritten, that governs the intuitions of the citizens. This qualification is necessary, as Cephalus is more than will-

ing to agree with Socrates that the written laws governing economic exchanges might be unjust under certain circumstances, like if you promised your insane friend a sword. Still, what motivates Cephalus in agreeing that the return of the sword under these conditions is unjust is the conventional attitudes of the Athenians, and so can still be characterized as *nomos*.

21 See for instance Halliwell 2007, 451-452, 465-466.

22 Socrates spends little time talking about precisely in what this journey consists, other than that it involves witnessing beautiful sights, at *Rep.* X 615 a. That the path is free of toil, however, is implied by his comments in this passage.

23 Souls that fall prey to extreme, irredeemable viciousness and wickedness are trapped in the lower realm and doomed to eternal torment, as it says at *Rep.* X 615 c-616 a. The myth does not directly address how such people would do in choosing their next lives, insofar as they are not allowed to make the choice either way. One presumes, though, that they would do far worse than the conventionally virtuous, who are described as making bad choices by carelessness rather than deliberately.

24 See also Thayer 1988, 370, who similarly reads the myth as illustrating what occurs in concrete moral deliberation. "I believe that one purpose of Plato's myth is to illuminate these two aspects of choice in any and every instance where moral choice occurs. But, of course, the examples presented to us in the myth are exceptional and the most dramatic that can be imagined: one's choosing to live a certain kind of life. The drama simplifies the otherwise complex contingent and incidental factors involved in real choices; the essential features are clarified and vivified in the idealized setting."

25 By referring to "luck" in this context, I am attempting to make sense of a passage that I will discuss in greater detail in the last section of the paper: "For he [the man who chose the tyranny] didn't blame himself for the evils but chance, demons, and anything rather than himself" (*Rep.* X 619 c 4-6). As I am reading this passage, the conventionally virtuous person has it backwards—it is not luck that caused him to choose poorly in this specific context, but rather luck that allowed him to choose well in his earlier life and in other contexts—the conventions in those contexts that he was raised accidentally happened to guide him correctly.

26 See for instance *Rep.* VIII 558 b 8-c 2: "How magnificently [such a city] tramples all this underfoot and doesn't care at all from what kind of practices a man goes to political action, but honors him if only he says he's well disposed toward the multitude." For other dialogues where Socrates raises similar points, see also *Gorg.* 513 a-c and *Apol.* 32 b-c.

27 To be sure, however, Athens holds incorrect standards of virtuous behavior as well. Democratic regimes are described in *Republic* VIII as containing a plurality of different regimes within themselves on account of their diversity and freedom, as said at *Rep.* VIII 557 d. It therefore would contain contradictory

standards of virtuous behavior—for instance, parts of the city would praise and part would condemn the example of the tyrant. Indeed, the same person in such a city could plausibly both envy and condemn a tyrant at different times and in different contexts.

28 In terms of descriptions of the various kinds of souls in Book VIII, Cephalus therefore most resembles the fortunate democratic-souled person. "Then, I suppose that afterward such a man [the democratic souled person in whom unnecessary and useless pleasures have emerged] lives spending no more money, effort, and time on the necessary than on the unnecessary pleasures. However, if he has good luck and if his frenzy does not go beyond bounds—and if, also, as a result of getting somewhat older and the great disturbances having passed by, he readmits a part of the exiles [oligarchic desires for moderation and financial justice] and doesn't give himself wholly over to the invaders [immoderate unnecessary pleasures]" (*Rep.* VIII 561 a 4-b 2). This sort of democratic-souled person is described as fundamentally flighty, and drifts back and forth between imitating whatever exemplary figures strike his or her fancy: "... and if he ever admires soldiers, he turns in that direction [i.e. toward cultivating courage]; and if its money-makers, in that one [i.e. toward cultivating moderation and justice understood in terms of financial standards]" (*Rep.* VIII 561 d 5-6). It is this last figure that Cephalus most fully resembles—he is one who admires businesspeople and so is concerned with making himself like the conventionally just businessperson in accordance with the conventional standards of the Athenian society in which he currently lives.

29 McCoy 2012, 136 similarly sees the myth as contrasting the habitual life of virtue with the philosophical, and praises the philosophical life as better able to deal with novel circumstances in which tradition applies only ambiguously. "Habit proves to be insufficient for virtue insofar as the future presents us continually with novel situations... Socrates himself navigates these novel situations remarkably well. In the *Apology*, he offers the jurors examples of two different situations in which he chose a just act rather than an unjust one." Her account agrees with the one I am advancing insofar as it emphasizes that philosophical virtue is the only secure foundation for moral life. Habitual attitudes toward justice and injustice will always encounter some circumstances in which it will not be immediately obvious what action is best.

30 See Nails 2002, 84-85, 190-194, 251 for a discussion of the life of Cephalus and his family.

31 Plato advances a similar argument in the *Laws*. The Athenian argues that a tyrannical regime will be able to change the habits of its citizens far more easily than in any other owing to its unique capacity to provide an exemplar for the citizens to follow in the person of the tyrant and the ability to mix persuasion with unrestrained violence. "Athenian: You'd see that if a tyrant wishes to change a city's habitual ways, he doesn't need to exert great effort or spend an enormous amount of time... He need only first trace out a model in his own conduct of

all that is to be done, praising and honoring some things while assigning blame to others, and casting dishonor on anyone who disobeys in each of the activities. Kleinias: And why do we suppose that the other citizens will swiftly follow someone who has adopted such a combination of persuasion and violence? Ath: Let no one persuade us, friends, that there will ever be a quicker or easier way for a city to change its laws than through the hegemony of all-powerful rulers" (*Laws* IV 711 b 2-c 3). Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the *Laws* are from Pangle 1988.

32 In discussing *Republic* VI, White 1979, 168 sees Plato making an argument similar to mine. Philosophical natures are corrupted outside of the *kallipolis*, on White's reading, because "The potential philosopher is misled into following the multitude in its view of the good, and in expending his energies in an attempt to please it." As White argues here, conventional attitudes compel those not liberated by philosophy into going along with whatever the conventional understanding of justice and injustice is operative in the city.

33 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Apology* are from the G.M.A. Grube translation in Cooper 1997.

34 For a particularly strong recent interpretation of the *Republic* along these lines, see Lublink 2011, who argues that Plato has joined Socrates' accusers from the *Apology* and asserted that Socratic questioning really does harm the young. In response to Lublink, I would point to the already discussed passages from X and the Myth of Er. While Plato does view the elenchic method as dangerous, it is clear from these later passages that the conventional life of virtue is not safer, at least in certain contexts.

35 The distinction between properly dialectical philosophy and the sort of philosophy practiced in the main text of the is best explicated in Miller 2007, 310-311. Dialectical philosophy is characterized by the way in which it attempts to move beyond imagistic ways of thinking about the Forms and the method of combining and dividing Forms found in dialogues like the , , and .

36 See for instance VIII 560 b, which describes the corruption of the democratic soul. "I suppose they took the acropolis of the young man's soul, perceiving that I was empty of fair studies and practices and true speeches, and it's these that are the best watchmen and guardians in the thought of men whom the gods love." The conventionally just person engages in (at least some of) the practices that are conducive to preserving virtue, but lacks the fair studies and true speeches that could truly secure their virtue in the face of all challenges.

37 To be sure, Socrates also argues that this kind of philosophy, particularly when practiced by the young, is also capable of having the opposite effect and actually destabilizing conventionally acquired virtuous habits (see especially VII 538 c-539 a). See Lublink 2011, 4-9 for a discussion of this and other relevant passages. It is this passage that leads many commentators to argue that Plato holds in the that philosophy should not be practiced by

most people. There is a real tension between the discussion of the usefulness of philosophy in Book VII and in Book X that cannot be easily swept aside. All I am arguing here is that Book X does have a use for philosophy that would benefit the conventionally virtuous person in some circumstances, even if it could also be dangerous to such a person in other contexts.

38 Ogihara 2011, 10 also emphasizes the way in which the myth is intended to inspire personal responsibility in its listeners. "However, some individuals strike us as being victims of bad luck, such as a very ill person, and someone who is given the chance to be a tyrant and who takes the chance and becomes miserable in the end. Such cases might lead us to think that luck exercises decisive power over human destiny... The implication of the myth that at least some of our misfortunes, which may look to happen by bad luck, are really a result of our choice has the effect of preventing us from being impressed too much by the power of luck."