THE ROLE OF CEPHALUS IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

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At first glance, Cephalus' role in the *Republic* is brief and superficial. In this very long dialogue, Cephalus features in only a few passages during which he initiates the *Republic*'s famous discussion of justice but then departs as it begins. This unusual and seemingly unnecessary choice by Plato to remove Cephalus from the conversation is fascinating and begs for a deeper exploration of this character. This paper explores Cephalus' role in the *Republic*'s discussion of justice and its concluding myth. The significance of Cephalus' departure and the narrative connections between Book 1 and Book 10 indicate that Plato had a greater role in mind for Cephalus than as a mere catalyst. Interpreting Cephalus' character in light of the myth of Er shows that he serves as a cautionary example of the fate awaiting those who practise justice without philosophy.

Keywords: Plato; *Republic*; Cephalus; justice; afterlife.

Introduction

In discussions of Plato's *Republic*, Cephalus is often overlooked in favour of Polemarchus and Thrasymachus, Socrates' primary interlocutors in Book 1, or of Adeimantus and Glaucon, the main interlocutors from Book 2 onwards.[1] This is understandable, as his presence initially seems incidental. After a brief but detailed conversation with Socrates on old age and wealth, Cephalus initiates the conversation on justice but then withdraws abruptly, leaving his son Polemarchus to continue in his place. Yet, Plato's decision to introduce him in such a detailed fashion and then remove him so suddenly, raises questions about how his character relates to the broader themes of the *Republic*. Furthermore, the structural and thematic links between Book 1 and Book 10 suggest that his role is more significant than that of a mere narrative catalyst.

The following discussion examines Cephalus' departure and absence in light of the *Republic*'s concluding myth. It begins with an overview of the scene between Cephalus and Socrates, before discussing Plato's portrayal of Cephalus as both a dramatic character and a historical figure. The subsequent understanding of Cephalus as a conventionally just man who practises virtue without philosophy has

[1]For in-depth discussions focused on Cephalus, see Steinberger 1996; Beversluis 2000:185–202; Gifford 2001:52–79; DiRado 2014; Pichanick 2018; and Weiss 2024:26–51.

profound implications for the fate of his soul. These implications are discussed through a reading of the myth of Er and a comparison between Cephalus and the soul who chooses first in the choice-of-lives scene (from here on referred to as the 'First Soul'). This interpretation ultimately suggests that Plato uses Cephalus' character to illustrate the danger faced by those who live justly according to convention but without philosophical understanding.

Socrates and Cephalus

In the opening lines of the *Republic*, Socrates and Glaucon are persuaded to attend a gathering at the house of Polemarchus (327c–328b). When they arrive, Socrates is greeted by Cephalus, who is described as follows:

> ἦν δ᾽ ἔνδον καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὁ τοῦ Πολεμάρχου Κέφαλος· καὶ μάλα πρεσβύτης μοι ἔδοξεν εἶναι· διὰ χρόνου γὰρ καὶ ἑωράκη αὐτόν. καθῆστο δὲ ἐστεφανωμένος ἐπί τινος προσκεφαλαίου τε καὶ δίφρου· τεθυκὼς γὰρ ἐτύγχανεν ἐν τῇ αὐλῇ...
>
> Polemarchus' father, Cephalus, was also there, and I thought he looked quite old, as I hadn't seen him for some time. He was sitting on a sort of cushioned chair with a wreath on his head, as he had been offering sacrifice in the courtyard (*Resp.* 328b8–c2).[2]

Plato's introduction of Cephalus emphasises three things: his advanced age; his piety; and his role as a dutiful patriarch. It would have been clear to Plato's audience that the reference to the sacrifice in the courtyard is to the familial deity Zeus Herkios, which means that Cephalus is calling upon Zeus' function as protector of the household.[3] However, the focus at this point is on his status as an elderly man, which is reinforced in Cephalus' greeting to Socrates when he complains that, due to his age, he can no longer walk to the city, so Socrates must visit the Piraeus more often. He expresses an eagerness to converse with Socrates because, in his old age, he has found an increased desire for conversation as the physical pleasures of life diminish (328d). Cephalus' age is further emphasised when Socrates gladly accepts this request for conversation, declaring that he enjoys talking τοῖς σφόδρα πρεσβύταις and learning from their experiences (328d7–e7).

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[2] Translations of the *Republic* are from Grube in Cooper 1997; Greek text from Burnet 1903.
[3] Cf. Gifford 2001:61. See Weiss 2024:30 for the interesting point that Cephalus performing a sacrifice in the courtyard indicates that the home belongs to Cephalus, not Polemarchus. For an opposing viewpoint, see Nails 2002:84 and the scholarship she lists.

Socrates inquires about Cephalus' experience of old age, and as they converse, Socrates brings up the topic of Cephalus' wealth (329e). When he asks Cephalus about the greatest advantage his wealth has brought him, Cephalus replies that when a man becomes old, he recalls stories about the punishment of the souls of the unjust in Hades (330d–e). Consequently, he begins to fear what might await him after death and considers whether he has led a just or unjust life (330–331a). To such a man, wealth is an advantage as it prevents the need to cheat or deceive anyone, and when he departs for the afterlife, he does not owe anything, neither sacrifice nor money, to any god or man (331b). Cephalus acknowledges this might not be the case for every wealthy man, but wealth is a valuable advantage for a decent and orderly man in ensuring a good afterlife (331a). These remarks reveal three important aspects of Cephalus' character: his fears about the afterlife are based on myths of Hades and heightened by his advanced age; his interest in living a just life is, to some extent, a direct result of this fear; and he believes that his wealth will ensure him a just life and a good afterlife.

However, Socrates' focus lies on Cephalus' account of a just man, from which he draws the following definition of justice: justice is speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred (331d). Socrates then applies this definition to a hypothetical scenario, demonstrating that justice is more complex than Cephalus' account allows (331c). Cephalus agrees with Socrates, but when Polemarchus interrupts to express his disagreement, Cephalus happily allows his son to take his place in the conversation as he has to tend to the sacrifice (331d). Cephalus then departs from the scene while Socrates and Polemarchus begin the lengthy philosophical discussion on the nature of justice that culminates in the myth of Er.

Cephalus' departure and subsequent absence is strange for the following reasons: after having his conception of just living shown to be insufficient, he does not stay to understand why; after expressing a desire to live a just life, he does not get to hear Socrates' detailed account of how this could be achieved; and, after confessing his fear of death and his faith in wealth, he misses Socrates' account of what will happen to him after he dies and why his wealth will not help him. Consequently, his absence raises two questions: why does Cephalus, as a dramatic character, choose to leave just as the discussion on justice commences, and why does Plato, as the author, write him out of the scene when he seems (at this point in the dialogue)[4] to be the character with the greatest need of hearing Socrates' account of justice and the afterlife?

[4] A strong case can be made, especially regarding the myth of Er, that the *Republic* is specifically tailored for Glaucon, who represents Plato's aristocratic Athenian audience; cf. Blondell 2002:199–228; Ferrari 2009; Destrée 2012 and 2019; Nails 2012:8–10.

The departure of Cephalus

The scene between Socrates and Cephalus becomes both awkward and problematic when one considers Cephalus' decision to leave and the manner in which he departs. The crux of the problem lies in Cephalus' eager greeting to Socrates, in which he says the following:

> ὡς εὖ ἴσθι ὅτι ἔμοιγε ὅσον αἱ ἄλλαι αἱ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα ἡδοναὶ ἀπομαραίνονται, τοσοῦτον αὔξονται αἱ περὶ τοὺς λόγους ἐπιθυμίαι τε καὶ ἡδοναί.
>
> For you should know that, as the physical pleasures wither away, my desire for conversation and its pleasures grows (*Resp.* 328d2–4).

It is interesting that Cephalus' self-professed desire for conversation and its pleasures is conditional and based on factors outside of his control. It is only now, later on in his life, when he no longer has the vitality for other pursuits, that he is interested in conversation.[5] The authenticity of this interest is then brought into question when Cephalus must suddenly leave to tend to the sacrifice. Furthermore, Cephalus' departure is shortly after declaring a vested interest in living a just life, which Socrates shows to be more complex than he previously thought. If Cephalus were truly interested in living a just life, then why leave the conversation at that point? Based on his fears of post-mortem consequences, it seems unlikely that Cephalus was dishonest about this interest. Therefore, he would not willingly choose to leave a conversation if he believed that remaining would help his chances in the afterlife. It seems, then, that there are two possibilities for such a contradictory departure. Either Cephalus really did have to leave to tend to the sacrifices, or, he did not think that remaining would benefit him.

Considering that the opening description of Cephalus emphasises that he has just performed a sacrifice, it seems that the second option is more plausible.[6] Furthermore, the conversation described in the *Republic* lasted many hours, giving Cephalus ample opportunity to return after completing his sacrificial duties. However, the idea that Cephalus does not wish to return is more difficult to reconcile because of his professed interest in conversing with Socrates. Even if one interprets this interest as superficial, it must still be explained why he chooses to leave so abruptly in the middle of a conversation. On this point, it is worth noting

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[5] Cf. Pichanick 2018:147 and Weiss 2024:33

[6] Cf. Lear 2006:29, 40, who interprets Cephalus' departure as a compulsive need to tend to his sacrifice due to his fears of the afterlife. See Steinberger 1996:191–192 for a similar view.

that, in his final speech, Cephalus offers an account of how he personally has benefitted from his wealth, and in doing so, happens to divulge his beliefs on what actions constitute a 'just life'. His focus is not on justice itself, and it is Socrates, not Cephalus, who converts these few comments into a definition of justice, projecting his own philosophical agenda onto Cephalus' remarks.[7]

Furthermore, earlier in the conversation, Cephalus demonstrates composure and good humour when Socrates first suggests that his ease in old age is due to wealth, and then later questions whether he is self-made. On both occasions, Cephalus seems not to take offence and responds gracefully and cheerfully. It seems, therefore, that his eventual withdrawal is not prompted by offence or disinterest in conversation, but because the conversation turns philosophical, moving into territory on which he has no experience. As an old man, he has insight into how different outlooks affect one's experience of old age, and as a wealthy man, he understands the benefits wealth can bring. However, having never questioned his conventional views of justice, he is unable or unwilling to do so now. Therefore, the timing of Cephalus' departure indicates that he leaves not merely out of religious duty but because the dialogue has moved beyond his comfort level (Weiss 2024:48). Additionally, based on the interpretation that he would not willingly leave a conversation that would benefit his chances in the afterlife, it is likely that Cephalus is confident in his beliefs about how to live a just life and sees no need to engage in further philosophical inquiry. Cephalus simply assumes that, because he has wealth and has committed no injustices, he will enjoy a good afterlife (Weiss 2024:38). Entering into a philosophical discussion about it would, therefore, be of little use to him. From this, one could interpret his laughter as he exits as an attempt to cover his nervousness as a man out of his depth or, conversely, as a demonstration of carefree confidence.[8] In both cases, he is portrayed as a man who dedicates his resources and attention to pursue just living but has little interest in, or aptitude for, philosophical reflection.

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[7] Cf. Annas 1981:20; Beversluis 2000:198; Futter 2025:92. See Futter 2025 for an illuminating discussion on Socrates' method of drawing out the knowledge and beliefs of his interlocutors.

[8] Cf. Beversluis 2000:201; Weiss 2024:40. There is sufficient cause to view Cephalus as a confident man content in his ways and beliefs, however, it is perhaps hasty to say that 'Cephalus describes himself as the sole virtuous man among his elderly friends…In his view, he is superior to the persons around him' (Pichanick 2018:148). On more than one occasion, Cephalus indicates that others in his social circle share his views (329a–d).

Crucially, this does not necessarily mean that Plato wishes his audience to view Cephalus as unjust.[9] The opening scene, focusing on Cephalus' advanced age and household sacrifice, establishes him as a patriarchal authority and as a representative of conventional piety grounded in ancestral ritual (Bloom 1991:312). Cephalus is thus portrayed as a conventionally virtuous man, governed by the accepted views of virtue, piety, and justice of his society (DiRado 2014:64). Furthermore, on the topic of Cephalus' character, an additional component to consider is how Plato's audience would have viewed Cephalus as a historical figure.[10] Cephalus owned the largest shield factory in Athens and as such, he and his family were towards the end of the 5th century among the wealthiest metics in Athens. Consequently, they were targeted during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants in 403 BCE. Cephalus had already passed away by this time but his family's assets were seized and Polemarchus was arrested and executed without trial. In addition to Polemarchus, Cephalus had another son, Lysias, a famous orator in Athens and the primary historical source of information on Cephalus.[11] According to Lysias' speech *Against Erastosthenes*, the latter was the member of the Thirty who caused the arrest and execution of Polemarchus. Lysias states the following:

> οὑμὸς πατὴρ Κέφαλος ἐπείσθη μὲν ὑπὸ Περικλέους εἰς ταύτην τὴν γῆν ἀφικέσθαι, ἔτη δὲ τριάκοντα ᾤκησε, καὶ οὐδενὶ πώποτε οὔτε ἡμεῖς οὔτε ἐκεῖνος δίκην οὔτε ἐδικασάμεθα οὔτε ἐφύγομεν, ἀλλ᾽ οὕτως ᾠκοῦμεν δημοκρατούμενοι ὥστε μήτε εἰς τοὺς ἄλλους ἐξαμαρτάνειν μήτε ὑπὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἀδικεῖσθαι.
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> My father Cephalus was induced by Pericles to come to this country, and dwelt in it for thirty years: never did he, any more than we, appear as either prosecutor or defendant in any case whatever, but our life under the

[9] Opinions on Plato's treatment of Cephalus and why he is removed from the dialogue differ greatly. On one end are scholars such as Annas (1981:19), who is completely disparaging about Cephalus' qualities and Plato's intentions with Cephalus. In contrast, Reeve (1988:6) believes he is removed because he is already as virtuous as Socrates and therefore cannot benefit by staying. Succinct overviews of the differing attitudes towards Cephalus in Beversluis 2000:189–190; DiRado 2014:65; and Weiss 2024:31 n.9.

[10] In-depth discussion on the assumed information known about Cephalus by Plato's contemporary audience in Gifford 2001:52–58; and Beversluis 2000:12–13, 201 for the position that the historical information is not relevant as Plato is presenting a fictionalised version of these historical figures.

[11] Historical information on Cephalus and his family in Nails 2002:84–85, 190–194, 251.

democracy was such as to avoid any offence against our fellows and any wrong at their hands (Lys. 12.4).[12]

Considering the nature of this speech, it is unlikely that Lysias would present an untruthful version of his father's character. Lysias later mentions that his family was also dutiful in their obligations as wealthy residents in Athens:

ἀλλὰ πάσας μὲν τὰς χορηγίας χορηγήσαντας, πολλὰς δ᾽ εἰσφορὰς εἰσενεγκόντας, κοσμίους δ᾽ ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς παρέχοντας καὶ πᾶν τὸ προσταττόμενον ποιοῦντας, ἐχθρὸν δ᾽ οὐδένα κεκτημένους, πολλοὺς δ᾽ Ἀθηναίων ἐκ τῶν πολεμίων λυσαμένους.

We had produced all our dramas for the festivals, and contributed to many special levies; when we showed ourselves men of orderly life, and performed every duty laid upon us; when we had made not a single enemy, but had ransomed many Athenians from the foe (Lys. 12.20).

Cephalus is not mentioned in this section of the speech, which is likely referring to the lives of Lysias and Polemarchus shortly before the reign of the Thirty, many years after the death of Cephalus. However, even if Lysias is referring to himself and Polemarchus alone, there is no reason to think that their father would not have behaved in a similar way, especially considering Lysias' earlier praise. If this is the case, then Cephalus appears to have been a dutiful member of Athenian society who fulfilled his legal and social obligations and never committed or incurred any injustices. This is not only an impressive achievement for such a prominent and successful businessman but also supports the idea that, according to Athenian conventions, Cephalus was a just man.

The economic success of Cephalus and the involvement of his family with the Thirty made them well-known figures in Athens, which adds another component to the departure of Cephalus – dramatic irony.[13] As previously mentioned, after Socrates and Cephalus agree that Cephalus' definition is lacking, Polemarchus interrupts and the following exchange occurs:

καὶ μέντοι, ἔφη ὁ Κέφαλος, καὶ παραδίδωμι ὑμῖν τὸν λόγον· δεῖ γάρ με ἤδη τῶν ἱερῶν ἐπιμεληθῆναι.
οὐκοῦν, ἔφη, ἐγώ, ὁ Πολέμαρχος, τῶν γε σῶν κληρονόμος;

[12] Text and translation from Lamb 1967.

[13] Discussion of Plato's use of dramatic irony in Seery 1988 and Gifford 2001; Seery focuses on how the irony in Plato's *Republic* encourages and enables the reader to engage with the political and ethical philosophy in the dialogue, whereas Gifford's interpretation focuses on Plato's dramatic technique in comparison with the way irony is used in Greek tragedy.

> πάνυ γε, ἦ δ᾽ ὃς γελάσας, καὶ ἅμα ᾔει πρὸς τὰ ἱερά.
>
> 'Well, then', Cephalus said, 'I'll hand over the argument to you, as I have to look after the sacrifice'.
> 'So', Polemarchus said, 'am I then to be your heir in everything?'
> 'You certainly are', Cephalus said, laughing, and off he went to the sacrifice (*Resp.* 331d6–9).

Plato's contemporary audience would have been well aware of the fate of Cephalus' legacy and so-called heir, so that the irony of these lines would not have been lost on them, especially as Cephalus had previously remarked on his satisfaction regarding the inheritance he would be leaving his sons (330b6–7). In this context, it is significant that ἱερά is the last word concerning Cephalus before he is removed from the dialogue, never to reappear or even be mentioned again. Cephalus departs to tend to a sacrifice in honour of Zeus as protector of the household, a household which will later be seized by the Thirty when Polemarchus is arrested. Most notable, however, is the description of Cephalus as laughing when he departs, in stark contrast to the grim fate of his legacy and heir, drawing attention to his ignorance in a moment of cruel irony.

Although a minor detail, adding to the level of irony is the emphasis on Polemarchus' status as the son of Cephalus in how Plato introduces the characters. Polemarchus is introduced as Πολέμαρχος ὁ Κεφάλου (327b2–3). Cephalus is ὁ τοῦ Πολεμάρχου Κέφαλος (328b8) and Lysias and Euthydemus are τοὺς τοῦ Πολεμάρχου ἀδελφούς (328b5–6).[14] The emphasis on Polemarchus as Cephalus' son combined with the references to inheritances and heirs, are tragic in light of Polemarchus' fate. Of course, the greatest irony is that a conversation focused on justice in individuals and political regimes occurs in the household of a man who will suffer the greatest injustice from a cruel and corrupt political regime.[15]

The dramatic emphasis on his departure suggests that it is a deliberate choice by the author and the very presence of this pointed irony suggests that Plato is relying on his audience having a pre-existing conception of Cephalus, thus making his historical significance relevant. It also suggests that Plato is trying to elicit a measure of sympathy for Cephalus, thus indicating that his intention was

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[14] Weiss (2024:30) notes this detail but interprets it as placing Polemarchus in the dominant role within the family.

[15] According to Lysias, the Thirty not only executed Polemarchus but also prevented his family from holding a proper funeral for him, forcing them to rely upon the charity of friends (Lys. 12.18). If Lysias is to be believed, then the injustice visited upon Polemarchus goes beyond his unlawful murder.

not to paint Cephalus in such a bad light as some believe.[16] Furthermore, an additional effect of the irony at his departure is that it draws the attention of the audience to three things about Cephalus: his choice to leave; his absence for the rest of the dialogue; and, his blissful ignorance of the future. All three aspects have implications for an interpretation of Cephalus in light of the myth of Er. Furthermore, the emphasis on Cephalus' age, the questions concerning his interest in living a just life, and the idea of the future doom to befall his household, connect Cephalus to his death in such a way that it seems as if Plato wishes his audience to keep Cephalus in mind during the description of the myth (this idea is reinforced by the connections made by Plato between Cephalus and the myth of Er, as will be seen later in the discussion).

Cephalus and the myth of Er

Central to Cephalus' character is the idea that he fears the afterlife and consequently practises virtuous living. However, as discussed above, he is uninterested in philosophical pursuits and therefore chooses to leave a conversation inquiring into the nature of justice. Based on Plato's depiction of the afterlife in the *Republic*, this choice has certain implications for the ultimate fate and salvation of his soul. In the myth of Er there are two distinct but connected afterlife systems: the system of judgment and consequences (614c–616b) and the system of choice-based reincarnation (617d–620e). Furthermore, in each of these systems is a crucial moment which ultimately determines the fate of the soul: the moment of judgment in the former, and the selection of the next life in the latter. Significantly, both moments are determined by the choices an individual makes before and after they die. As will be seen in the following discussion, Cephalus' speech and subsequent departure have major implications regarding both afterlife systems.

According to Er's account, souls arrive upon death at an unspecified location, receive judgment, and either ascend with signs of their judgment attached to their chests or descend with signs of their misdeeds fastened to their backs (614c). Then, over the course of 1000 years, each soul receives tenfold the consequence for every good deed or misdeed. The myth largely focuses on the experiences of the unjust and provides a few examples of the kinds of misdeeds that result in punishment:

> οἷον εἴ τινες πολλοῖς θανάτων ἦσαν αἴτιοι, ἢ πόλεις προδόντες ἢ στρατόπεδα, καὶ εἰς δουλείας ἐμβεβληκότες ἤ τινος ἄλλης κακουχίας μεταίτιοι…

[16] Cf. Gifford 2001:77 and Weiss 2024:39–41 for the view that Plato portrays Cephalus as unjust in his youth and his old age.

> If, for example, some of them had caused many deaths by betraying cities or armies and reducing them to slavery or by participating in other wrongdoing (*Resp.* 615b3–5).

Unfortunately, the myth is frustratingly vague about the judgment and the experience of the just souls, briefly stating that a positive judgment is based on εἴ τινας εὐεργεσίας εὐεργετηκότες καὶ δίκαιοι καὶ ὅσιοι γεγονότες εἶεν ('If they had done good deeds and had become just and pious', *Resp.* 615b7–8). The importance of piety is repeated in the subsequent line:

> εἰς δὲ θεοὺς ἀσεβείας τε καὶ εὐσεβείας καὶ γονέας καὶ αὐτόχειρος φόνου μείζους ἔτι τοὺς μισθοὺς διηγεῖτο.
>
> And he also spoke of even greater rewards or penalties for piety or impiety towards gods or parents and for murder with one's own hands (*Resp.* 615c3–4).

Based on the few details given, it seems that Cephalus' sort of conventional virtue would do well in this first afterlife system. Regardless of the difficulties presented in the section above concerning the authenticity of his morality, Cephalus has not committed any of the kinds of misdeeds that result in a soul being deemed unjust.

After this period, the souls return from above and below and mingle for seven days, swapping stories of their experiences (614e–616b). Next, they travel to the Spindle of Necessity, under which the second crucial moment occurs: the choice of the next life. In this reincarnation system, souls are presented with a number of life models detailing different types of lives. Each soul is then given an opportunity to examine the different models and choose the next life into which they will be reborn (617d–618b). A key aspect of this second afterlife system is the focus it places on the choice of the individual. According to Er, upon arrival at the Spindle of Necessity, the souls went directly to Lachesis, where they were arranged to stand in order by a certain 'προφήτην' (617d1–3), who addressed the souls:

> ἀρετὴ δὲ ἀδέσποτον, ἣν τιμῶν καὶ ἀτιμάζων πλέον καὶ ἔλαττον αὐτῆς ἕκαστος ἕξει. αἰτία ἑλομένου· θεὸς ἀναίτιος
>
> Virtue knows no master; each will possess it to a greater or lesser degree, depending on whether he values or disdains it. The responsibility lies with the one who makes the choice; the god has none (*Resp.* 617e3–5).

The importance of the individual's choice is then further emphasised when Socrates breaks from his narration of the myth to address Glaucon directly (618b6). He warns him that the greatest danger a human will ever face is when their soul chooses its next life (618b6–7). He advises Glaucon that only through philosophy

can one avoid making the wrong choice. Socrates says that, if they recall all they discussed, they will be able to make the correct choices *in* life as well as the correct choice *of* life (618c–619a). With this knowledge, one will also be able to reason that the best life is a life spent in moderation between the extremes of things, such as wealth and poverty. This understanding, combined with the wisdom to make the correct and moderate choice, is the best way for someone to have the happiest life and afterlife (619a–619b). Note that Socrates' advice specifically calls for Glaucon to recall their conversation of the evening, a conversation for which Cephalus is not present. This explicit connection between philosophical discussion and the right choice highlights the absence of Cephalus, who abandoned the conversation at its start. As will be seen, Cephalus' failure to engage with philosophy foreshadows the challenge which he will face to make the correct choice at the spindle.

After his brief interruption, Socrates returns to Er's description of the choice and allotment of lives, and the importance of choice is emphasised again by the προφήτης, who says to the souls:

> καὶ τελευταίῳ ἐπιόντι, ξὺν νῷ ἑλομένῳ, συντόνως ζῶντι κεῖται βίος ἀγαπητός, οὐ κακός. μήτε ὁ ἄρχων αἱρέσεως ἀμελείτω μήτε ὁ τελευτῶν ἀθυμείτω.
>
> There is a satisfactory life rather than a bad one available even for the one who comes last, provided that he chooses it rationally and lives it seriously. Therefore, let not the first be careless in his choice nor the last discouraged. (*Resp.* 619b3–6).

This caution to choose rationally and carefully is immediately followed by the description of the First Soul's choice, revealing why Socrates refers to this moment as the greatest danger a soul can face:

> εἰπόντος δὲ ταῦτα τὸν πρῶτον λαχόντα ἔφη εὐθὺς ἐπιόντα τὴν μεγίστην τυραννίδα ἑλέσθαι, καὶ ὑπὸ ἀφροσύνης τε καὶ λαιμαργίας οὐ πάντα ἱκανῶς ἀνασκεψάμενον ἑλέσθαι, ἀλλ᾽ αὐτὸν λαθεῖν ἐνοῦσαν εἱμαρμένην παίδων αὑτοῦ βρώσεις καὶ ἄλλα κακά· ἐπειδὴ δὲ κατὰ σχολὴν σκέψασθαι, κόπτεσθαί τε καὶ ὀδύρεσθαι τὴν αἵρεσιν, οὐκ ἐμμένοντα τοῖς προρρηθεῖσιν ὑπὸ τοῦ προφήτου· οὐ γὰρ ἑαυτὸν αἰτιᾶσθαι τῶν κακῶν, ἀλλὰ τύχην τε καὶ δαίμονας καὶ πάντα μᾶλλον ἀνθ᾽ ἑαυτοῦ. εἶναι δὲ αὐτὸν τῶν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἡκόντων, ἐν τεταγμένῃ πολιτείᾳ ἐν τῷ προτέρῳ βίῳ βεβιωκότα, ἔθει ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας ἀρετῆς μετειληφότα.
>
> The one who came up first chose the greatest tyranny. In his folly and greed he chose it without adequate examination and didn't notice that, among

> other evils, he was fated to eat his own children as a part of it. When he examined at leisure the life he had chosen, however, he beat his breast and bemoaned his choice. And, ignoring the warning of the Speaker, he blamed chance, daemons, and everything else for these evils but himself. He was one of those who had come down from heaven, having lived his previous life under an orderly constitution, where he had participated in virtue through habit and without philosophy (*Resp.* 619b7–d1).

Several reasons are given for why the First Soul makes its tragic choice: its folly and greed, the inadequate examination of the life model, and it was one of the just who had come down from heaven, having lived a virtuous life through habit and without philosophy. It is not difficult to imagine that Cephalus, who would likely be among the just souls and who also practises virtuous living without philosophy, would make the same mistake.[17] This parallel between Cephalus and the First Soul is reinforced by the theme of wealth. At the beginning of the dialogue, Cephalus claims that wealth is essential to ensuring a good life and a good afterlife. Thus, the topic of Cephalus' wealth is tied directly to the idea of what will await him in the afterlife. Yet in the myth of Er, Socrates insists that the best life is one spent in moderation, balanced between extremes such as wealth and poverty (619a–b). Furthermore, the lack of interest towards philosophical discussion that Cephalus shows in the opening scene suggests that he too might choose his next life without adequate examination. Cephalus' reliance on wealth is misplaced and his complacency, combined with his avoidance of philosophy, make him a candidate for the same kind of tragic fate as the First Soul.

Furthermore, these parallels indicate that Cephalus' apparent confidence in his status as a conventionally just man is misplaced, as the myth goes on to say that of those who chose poorly, the majority were the just souls who had come down from heaven. In contrast, the unjust were in no rush to make their choice, because they had suffered themselves and seen others suffer. This raises an important aspect of Plato's presentation of the afterlife in the myth of Er: the idea of curative punishment. Running through the *Republic* is the idea that learning improves the soul. The myth of Er reflects this in the distinction between curable and incurable souls.[18] The basis of this idea is that some of the unjust souls are judged to be incurably wicked and will be trapped and tormented in Tartarus for all eternity. This idea is demonstrated with the example of Ardiaeus, the tyrant of a city in

[17] Cf. Bloom 1991:436; Steinberger 1996:194; Pichanick 2018:149 n.4; Weiss 2024:46 n.48, who all make this connection between Cephalus and the First Soul, but only DiRado (2014) discusses this connection at any length.

[18] This idea is also seen in Pl. *Grg.* 525c and *Phd``* 113e.

Pamphylia who, in addition to other impious deeds, murdered his brother and aged father.

In the earlier mentioned scene where the souls of the just and curably unjust mingle for seven days, one of the unjust tells the story of Ardiaeus and the other souls deemed incurable. The fate of those souls is described in vivid detail:

> ἐνταῦθα δὴ ἄνδρες, ἔφη, ἄγριοι, διάπυροι ἰδεῖν, παρεστῶτες καὶ καταμανθάνοντες τὸ φθέγμα, τοὺς μὲν διαλαβόντες ἦγον, τὸν δὲ Ἀρδιαῖον καὶ ἄλλους συμποδίσαντες χεῖράς τε καὶ πόδας καὶ κεφαλήν, καταβαλόντες καὶ ἐκδείραντες, εἷλκον παρὰ τὴν ὁδὸν ἐκτὸς ἐπ᾽ ἀσπαλάθων κνάμπτοντες, καὶ τοῖς ἀεὶ παριοῦσι σημαίνοντες ὧν ἕνεκά τε καὶ ὅτι εἰς τὸν Τάρταρον ἐμπεσούμενοι ἄγοιντο.

> And there were savage men, all fiery to look at, who were standing by, and when they heard the roar, they grabbed some of these criminals and led them away, but they bound the feet, hands, and head of Ardiaeus and the others, threw them down, and flayed them. Then they dragged them out of the way, lacerating them on thorn bushes, and telling every passer-by that they were to be thrown into Tartarus, and explaining why they were being treated in this way (*Resp.* 615e4–616a4).

It is interesting that in Plato's most vivid description of afterlife punishment, there is an emphasis placed on the souls of the incurably unjust being used as a cautionary tale. This idea of souls learning from the example of others is also reflected in the earlier-mentioned signs of judgment. The just have their good deeds posted on their chests, but the unjust have their wicked deeds attached to their back (614c6–8). As the unjust souls cannot see their own signs, they serve no personal purpose. However, these signs can be seen by other souls, thus making it possible for the unjust to understand the kinds of misdeeds that result in a soul being sent to Tartarus. The souls of the curably unjust are therefore made wiser through their own suffering and the example of the incurables.

However, this presents a problem for the souls of the just who, untrained in suffering and without the benefit of this additional education, are most likely to choose poorly. As previously mentioned, the souls are given seven days in the meadow of judgment purely for socialising and exchanging personal experiences. Therefore, technically, they are given an opportunity to learn about the consequences of living the wrong life. In fact, the tale of Ardiaeus is told by one of the unjust to one of the just. Even after the meadow, during the selection process, there is still an opportunity for a just soul to learn from the example of others by watching the experiences of those who choose before them. Yet, despite this, the myth declares that most of the souls who chose poorly came from the group of just

souls and that they chose badly due to being untrained in suffering (619d) and being influenced by their former lives (620a). The consequence of the logic of this passage is that a just person will receive rewards for 1000 years in the afterlife, but because of this, they will choose their next life poorly. Then, after experiencing 1000 years of punishment, they will choose their next life well and, at the end of it, receive a positive judgment earning them 1000 years of rewards, thus creating a never-ending cycle of punishment and reward. This seemingly bleak and fatalistic pattern of repeated cycles has resulted in much criticism of Plato's conception of reincarnation in the *Republic,* as it potentially undermines the concept of justice and the very point of choice-based reincarnation (Annas 1982:132–134). However, it is at this point that the themes of choice and philosophical inquiry become integral to a reading of the myth of Er.

Plato's afterlife system is designed to be didactic and to make the audience think seriously about their choices in life now and understand that the only way to make the correct choices and thus be happy is through philosophy (Ferrari 2009:126). This lesson is emphasised by the narrative structure, which places the second afterlife system above the system of judgment in both detail and importance. The reduced role of the judgment system is seen most effectively through the diminished role of the judges. As Annas points out, they are unnamed (unlike *Ap*. 41a and *Grg*. 523e) and overshadowed by the description of the two busy highways and the constant procession of the souls travelling up or down, between which they sit (Annas 1982: 131). Plato provides only a few lines about the actual mechanics of the judgment system and dedicates almost no time to the description of the experiences of the just souls. Instead, the description of this first system focuses almost entirely on the experiences of the unjust, but even this focus is diminished by the indirect manner in which it is told, as Er describes what he overheard someone else describe to another soul: the experience of a different soul, namely Ardiaeus (Ferrari 2009:127).

In contrast is the direct and detailed manner in which the system of choice-based reincarnation is described. A perfect example is when Socrates interrupts the narrative of the myth to tell Glaucon about the importance of choosing wisely (618b5–619b1). It is possible to see this interruption as Plato's attempt to guide his audience to the proper interpretation of the following description of choice and to emphasise the importance of philosophy (Destrée 2012:121–122). Socrates advocates a life of neglecting all other concerns in favour of pursuing the kind of studies that will lead one to be able to distinguish between a good life and a bad life and make the right kind of choices to be happy. This emphasis on choice is also seen in the warnings given to the souls by the spokesman of Lachesis directly before and after Socrates' interruption (617e–619b). Furthermore, given the

deliberation with which Plato constructs his myths, it does not seem accidental that in the narration of the myth of Er, there are only three instances of direct speech being related. The first is that of the curably wicked soul who relates an eye-witness account of the fate of Ardiaeus (615d–616a) and the spokesman of Lachesis provides the second and third (617d–e and 619b). It seems significant that the first case provides a graphic description of the fate of a tyrant while the second and third instances instruct the souls to choose wisely while serving as bookends for Socrates' interruption in which he cautions Glaucon against being dazzled by wealth and rushing into tyranny. The example of the First Soul then drives this point home when, driven by folly and greed, it chooses the greatest tyranny.

Therefore, the narrative construction of the myth emphasises the importance of choice, the example of the First Soul conveys the danger of making the wrong choice, and the repeated references to practising philosophy and using reason in all decision-making, provide the solution (cf. 618d6; 619b3–4, d1, d8–e1; 621a1–2, c5). Furthermore, it is important to note that the myth only specifies that most of the souls who choose poorly are just (619d1–3). This does not necessarily mean that most of the just souls make the wrong choice. There is nothing in the myth to indicate what percentage of the group of souls in this scene chose poorly. Even if it is the majority of the just souls, there still remains a group of just souls who chose correctly, their choice presumably having been governed by reason. Therefore, the conception of the afterlife in the myth of Er is not as bleak and fatalistic as one might think.

The implications of the myth of Er extend beyond its explicit account of judgment and reincarnation to the dialogue's very beginning, reflecting on those like Cephalus who claim to practise justice without philosophy. However, if the myth of Er is designed to be so instructive, and the soul of Cephalus is in such great danger, then why does Plato remove Cephalus from the scene, thus preventing him from benefitting from the conversation and its concluding myth?

Cephalus' role

As discussed earlier, Plato places deliberate emphasis on Cephalus' moment of departure, but the reason for this emphasis is not immediately clear. Cephalus' role thus far has been to indirectly initiate the *Republic*'s conversation on justice because of his fear of the afterlife. Yet, there are many ways that Plato could have achieved this narrative function without Cephalus. The presentation of Cephalus' character and the attention drawn to his exit suggest that Plato might have another role in mind for him.

At the beginning of the dialogue, Cephalus' ideas about just living are shown to be inadequate. This refutation does not suggest that Cephalus is an unjust

man incapable of virtuous living. Rather, it reveals that his conception of justice is conventional and limited. The definition Socrates draws from Cephalus' account – telling the truth and paying one's debts – reflects a commercial ethic stemming from his background as a merchant as well as a traditional view of morality based on social order and obligation. Through Cephalus, Plato introduces ideas about justice that are conventional to Athenian society. As the myth of Er demonstrates, these beliefs ultimately render Cephalus incapable of true happiness and salvation. However, this does not necessarily mean that Plato condemns conventional beliefs. It is significant that the construction of the myth of Er places the focus on the system of choice-based reincarnation rather than the system of judgment. Furthermore, in the judgment-based afterlife system, there are very few details about what constitutes good deeds or just behaviour. It seems that Plato does not wish to engage with or refute his society's conventional views of justice or virtue on a detailed level. Instead, he incorporates them into his depiction of the afterlife and then reveals them to be insufficient through the choice-based reincarnation system. In this way, Cephalus proves useful as his fears of the afterlife are based on a traditional conception of the afterlife similar to the first system, which incorporates the traditional judgment-based afterlife of rewards and punishments.[19]

In order to show the importance of choosing philosophy while not completely undermining the conventional views that have shaped the psyche of Plato's audience, he creates a myth that emphasises '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' (DiRado 2014:72). As Destrée (2019:287) writes, 'the myth of Er is meant to replace the message we received from old Cephalus'. Cephalus serves a useful purpose by supporting the lesson of this new afterlife myth that Plato has created: it is no longer enough to be a just person; one also needs to practise philosophy to ensure the happiness and salvation of the soul.

Cephalus therefore serves a useful role as an example of a man who is not only guided by the traditional values which are ethically decent but intellectually complacent, but also as a man who is complacent about these values and ideologies. As previously mentioned, Cephalus' departure signifies a lack of interest in pursuing the conversation on a philosophical level. If one reads the myth of Er with Cephalus in mind, it is not difficult to imagine that he would make the same mistakes as the First Soul because he lacks the desire or the ability for the kind of

[19] Weiss' claim systems (2024:51 n.58) that the afterlife myths Cephalus speaks of are unrelated to the myth of Er does not take into account the distinction that Plato makes between these two.

philosophical reflection necessary for conventionally just souls, complacent from a 1000 years of blissful living, to learn from the examples presented in the Meadow and the Spindle of Necessity. Furthermore, Cephalus' presentation as a conventionally just man and his connection to the First Soul allow for a better understanding of why the souls of the just might choose poorly. After the First Soul makes its disastrous choice, the myth specifies that the souls who chose poorly did so because they were untrained in suffering, unlike the curably unjust souls (619d1–5). This is in reference to the curative punishment experienced by the unjust souls who spend 1000 years receiving penalties for their unjust deeds. As DiRado (2014:74) explains, by receiving punishments for these deeds these souls were 'constantly confronted with the consequences of poor moral decision making and so are prone to act more cautiously'. In contrast, by receiving rewards for 1000 years, the souls of the just receive positive reinforcement for their good behaviour regardless of whether it was intentional or merely a result of living in a society that forced that behaviour upon them. The danger of this system is that when the just souls descend to the Meadow and begin the journey to the Spindle of Necessity, they have no reason to question what they consider to be right or wrong. This alone would result in a dismal fate for all of the just souls, yet the myth specifically states that the souls also make their choice based on their former lives (620a). Therefore, individuals who lived self-reflective and philosophical lives are more likely to pay attention and benefit from the lessons presented to them in the Meadow and at the Spindle of Necessity.

In this regard, souls like Cephalus and the First Soul, who actively practise virtuous living without philosophical reflection, are in greater danger than the souls of the curably unjust. When the First Soul examines the life it has chosen, it sees that it is fated to devour its own children, an act which will presumably result in a punishment similar to that of the tyrant Ardiaeus, who suffers eternal torment in Tartarus. The connection between the First Soul and Ardiaeus highlights the danger faced by those who act with moral confidence but without philosophical understanding. Given the similarities between Cephalus and the First Soul, it is possible that Cephalus might share a similar fate because of his confidence and his rejection of philosophy. In this way, Cephalus serves as a powerful example of the dangers of not pursuing philosophy. The dramatic irony and historical significance of Cephalus make this warning all the more striking, as Plato's audience would have recognised him as a real person whose character and reputation were familiar to them. The suggestion that such a man might meet the same fate as Ardiaeus drives home Plato's message with greater effect.

Consequently, it is possible that Plato removes Cephalus from the scene for this reason. It is also possible that Plato removes Cephalus from the scene simply

because he is incapable of benefitting from the discussions that follow.[20] However, DiRado's interpretation that, because Cephalus understands and agrees with Socrates' 'refutation', he is capable of shifting his viewpoint and of understanding virtue in different contexts (and therefore would have been able to benefit if he had remained for the conversation), is more likely (2014:70 and 77). Regardless, whether through intellectual limitation or complacency, Cephalus cannot engage in a conversation on the philosophical level that Socrates wishes. So, Plato removes Cephalus and then emphasises his absence to transform him into an educational example to warn his audience of the dangers one faces if they are complacent about their ideologies and resistant to philosophical reflection.

Plato then reinforces Cephalus' role in the *Republic* by constructing deliberate textual and structural parallels between the beginning and the end of the dialogue.[21] The result is that Book 1 and Book 10 act as parallel bookends of the *Republic,* with Cephalus' fear and thoughts of the afterlife initiating the dialogue while Socrates' explanation of the afterlife concludes it. These connections show that Cephalus' absence from the conclusion is deliberate and that his character is meant to frame the *Republic's* central arguments about justice and philosophy. The most frequently noted parallel is the dialogue's opening line: κατέβην χθὲς εἰς Πειραιᾶ μετὰ Γλαύκωνος τοῦ Ἀρίστωνος ('I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, the son of Ariston'; *Resp.* 327a1). Some scholars interpret this line, with its ominous opening word (κατέβην) as a katabasis-themed foreshadowing of the myth of Er and the start of the recurring themes of descent and Hades.[22] In addition, there is a satisfying symbolic parallel in that the dialogue opens with Socrates and Glaucon descending together to the Piraeus and then closes with the two of them metaphorically ascending out of the conversation into enlightenment.

The connection between the opening and closing scenes is enforced again shortly after Socrates and Glaucon arrive at Polemarchus' house. In Socrates'

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[20] Bloom (1991:312) and Steinberger (1996:176) view Cephalus' departure as the removal of a patriarchal authority, whose absence is required before an inquiry into non-traditional views of justice can take place. However, Bloom's claim that this removal is necessary because it would be impious to dispute Cephalus and his traditional views, does not hold up in light of Plato's portrayal of the conventionally just man in the myth of Er.

[21] For discussions on Plato's foreshadowing and connections between Book 1 and Book 10, see Annas 1981:18–34; Seery 1988:230–234, 243; Nails 2012:1–4; DiRado 2014:71–72 and 77; Destrée 2019:285–287.

[22] While often referred to as a katabasis myth, the myth of Er does not qualify as a traditional katabasis myth, as Er does not willingly enter and descend into the afterlife (Bernabé 2015:30). For comments on the dialogue's opening line and recurring themes of descent and the underworld, see Seery 1988; O'Connor 2007:59–60; Destrée 2012:113–144.

opening lines to Cephalus, he gladly accepts Cephalus' request for conversation, declaring that he enjoys talking with the elderly (328d–e):

> δοκεῖ γάρ μοι χρῆναι παρ᾽ αὐτῶν πυνθάνεσθαι, ὥσπερ τινὰ ὁδὸν προεληλυθότων ἣν καὶ ἡμᾶς ἴσως δεήσει πορεύεσθαι, ποία τίς ἐστιν, τραχεῖα καὶ χαλεπή, ἢ ῥᾳδία καὶ εὔπορος – καὶ δὴ καὶ σοῦ ἡδέως ἂν πυθοίμην ὅτι σοι φαίνεται τοῦτο, ἐπειδὴ ἐνταῦθα ἤδη εἶ τῆς ἡλικίας ὃ δὴ ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῷ φασιν εἶναι οἱ ποιηταί, πότερον χαλεπὸν τοῦ βίου, ἢ πῶς σὺ αὐτὸ ἐξαγγέλλεις.
>
> For we should ask them, as we might ask those who have travelled a road that we too will probably have to follow, what kind of road it is, whether rough and difficult or smooth and easy. And I'd gladly find out from you what you think about this, as you have reached the point in life the poets call 'the threshold of old age'. Is it a difficult time? What is your report about it? (*Resp.* 328d–e).[23]

These lines are noticeably similar to Socrates' description of the soul's journey at the end of the *Republic*, when he explains that if one pursues philosophy properly,

> ...οὐ μόνον ἐνθάδε εὐδαιμονεῖν ἄν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν ἐνθένδε ἐκεῖσε καὶ δεῦρο πάλιν πορείαν οὐκ ἂν χθονίαν καὶ τραχεῖαν πορεύεσθαι, ἀλλὰ λείαν τε καὶ οὐρανίαν.
>
> It looks as though not only will he be happy here, but his journey from here to there and back again won't be along the rough underground path, but along the smooth heavenly one (*Resp.* 619e).[24]

The strongest connection between Cephalus and the myth of Er is through the Homeric references scattered throughout the *Republic.* In this regard, Destrée's comment that the myth of Er is 'explicitly presented as a sort of rewriting of Homeric poetry' is appropriate (Destrée 2012:110).[25] It is often acknowledged that Cephalus introduces the notion of justice in the *Republic* but he is also the first character to speak of the afterlife, based on stories he heard when he was young.

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[23] This passage has received much attention for its reference to the commonly used poetical phrase ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῷ, which can be found in Hom *Il.*22.60; 24.487 and *Od.*15.246, 348; 23.212, and in Hes. *Op.* 331. Bloom (1991:441 n.12) points out that in the *Iliad* ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῷ is a phrase used by Priam twice, although he misses the opportunity to comment on the similarity between these two aged fathers and the tragic loss of their legacy.

[24] The theme of difficult and easy roads recurs throughout the *Republic*; cf. 328e, 364d, 435d, 435d, 504b–c, 619e, and 621c.

[25] Cf. O'Connor 2007; Destrée 2019:281 and Seery 1988:242 for similar views.

These stories would have been the afterlife myths presented in the Homeric epics, exposed to Cephalus as part of his traditional education.

These parallels draw the attention of Plato's audience to the connection between the Cephalus scene and the myth of Er, demonstrating that Cephalus' brief appearance at the beginning of the *Republic* and his subsequent absence are far from incidental. His departure, character, and the narrative ironies surrounding him suggest that Plato uses Cephalus as a dramatic and philosophical device to frame the entire dialogue. As an old, pious, and conventionally virtuous man, Cephalus embodies the kind of justice grounded in custom, wealth, and social propriety rather than in philosophical understanding. His fear of the afterlife motivates his good conduct, but his withdrawal from philosophical inquiry exposes the limits of this conventional virtue. By choosing not to remain for the very discussion from which he might have profited the most, Cephalus effectively removes himself from the possibility of genuine moral understanding. The parallels between Cephalus and the First Soul then illustrate the danger that awaits such an individual. In presenting Cephalus as the starting point of the *Republic* and as its implicit warning at the end, Plato reminds his readers that justice without philosophy may be socially respectable, but it cannot lead the soul toward true wisdom or salvation.

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