

Introduction

Plato's *Republic* abounds with imagery. The dialogue opens with Socrates's words "I went down yesterday to the Piraeus" (327a).¹ This language of descent is reminiscent of Odysseus's descent into Hades in Homer's *Odyssey* and of the tradition of *katabasis* poetry more generally.² The main argument of the dialogue models the soul on the city, which itself is imagined distinctly from any real, concrete city. In the middle of the dialogue, Socrates describes the forms in terms of the sun and a divided line. The philosopher is freed from his chains in a cave and forced to climb a rugged path to discover the outside world, only later to descend again to rule (514a–20d).³ The book concludes with the myth of Er, which speaks of souls who are ascending and descending (614b–16b). Throughout the dialogue, there are numerous citations of poetry from Homer, Simonides, Aeschylus, Pindar, and references to comedy. Even the Platonic dialogue itself is an image of Socrates and his friends, gathered together and discussing the nature of justice, a discussion that never took place except in the imagination of Plato and his readers.

At the same time, Socrates is highly critical of images at numerous points in the *Republic*. He tears down the Homeric tradition of poetic education; argues that the *mimēsis* of bad men is morally destructive; explains that artistic and poetic images are thrice removed from the truth; and places images at the very lowest section of the divided line, in contrast to *noēsis* and hypothetical reasoning.⁴ Socrates criticizes *mimēsis* more generally, and even banishes poetry from the ideal city. And yet images are central to the arguments within the dialogue. We might ask, for example, what difference it makes that Socrates uses an image of the city as a "paradigm" for the soul, and how we understand Socrates's conclusions about justice as a result. Or if Homeric images are an insufficient form of education, why does Socrates use other images to describe the forms? Why do stories

such as the noble lie or myth of Er form part of Socrates's own argument? While some commentators have argued for a more sophisticated interaction between philosophy and poetry in the dialogue, more can be said about how images function as part of argument in the *Republic*.⁵

On the one hand, simply to regard Socrates's arguments against the problems inherent in imagery as ironically undermined by Plato's authorial use of images would be insufficient. Socrates is forcefully critical of traditional poetry, especially Homer, and its educational role in the formation of citizens. On the other hand, Socrates's frequent use of images suggests that imagery has a significant part to play in philosophical practice despite its limitations and dangers.

One solution to the difficulty is to argue that the use of images plays a rhetorical role. For example, James Kastely has recently argued that the dialogue educates in a preparatory way those people who are unprepared to undertake the more difficult work of dialectic, which alone counts as true philosophy. On this view, Platonic imagery functions as a species of rhetorical argumentation but not philosophy.⁶ Other authors have argued that contrast between the dialogue's imagery and its arguments are instances of Platonic irony or that the dialogue should be read as developing its ideas over the course of its ten books.⁷ While poetry may stand in tension with philosophical practice, philosophy cannot and should not free itself of images entirely. Each of these positions has its merits and helps us to better understand the subtleties of the dialogue.

What has been less widely explored is to describe how images form a part of philosophical argument in the *Republic*. Indeed, image making is central to the dialogue's argument at nearly every turn, and not only in rhetorical or pedagogical ways. That Plato uses particular images—such as the image of the ship as a model for the state—is not disputed. What is not often sufficiently recognized is that the main philosophical arguments of the text about central matters such as justice or the nature of the forms are highly reliant on images. Through examining the use of imagery in arguments, we can learn better how Plato philosophizes with images, and thereby something more about how Plato understands philosophical language itself. For Plato, the aim of philosophical language is not merely to create reality through words, as do the poets, nor to manipulate reality for the sake of power, as do the sophists. Rather, philosophical language seeks to disclose the nature of being in the process of its being sought. However, because being always exceeds and partially eludes the capacity of human beings to grasp its nature, our language likewise must reflect that human

limit. The language of images arises at the intersection of being and the human being. Images of the right sort can disclose being to us, but partially and perspectively. When we recognize that these images *are* images, rather than treating the images as perfect representations of being, we also grow in self-knowledge in how we understand ourselves as seekers of truth. Plato's Socrates uses the language of imagery and paradigm to make arguments and philosophical claims, but then also offers cogent arguments as to why an image needs to be understood as an image. Plato thus includes in this dialogue an assessment of imagistic philosophical language and its limits.

From the arguments in Book One with Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus, to the images that Socrates uses to describe the forms, and onward to the myth of Er, Socrates uses images to make his arguments.⁸ The dialogue as a whole is also an image insofar as it constructs an imaginary dialogue between a group of people that goes beyond verbal interchange to include a vivid setting: the mention of races at a festival, the description of a slave pulling on Socrates's cloak, the seat upon which Cephalus sits, and so on. If one were to say that images are not and cannot be properly philosophical for Plato, then the rather peculiar conclusion at which one might arrive would be that the *Republic* does not show Socrates practicing philosophy at all. And yet such a conclusion is unacceptable. For one, the *Republic* not only prepares its readers to take up philosophy by, for example, encouraging the philosophical journey through the image of the cave, although this is part of its work. It also makes numerous positive claims about the nature of justice in both the city and soul. Socrates not only offers arguments that break down the insufficient ideas of his interlocutors in Book One, but also constructs positive models of the just soul and just city. The dialogue is rich in moral and political content. When examined carefully, we find that the development of this content is highly reliant on images for its construction. There is no section of the dialogue in which the reality of the forms is described in image-free language, or another Platonic dialogue in which the nature of justice is described apart from images and paradigms. Thus, the images in the *Republic* do not teach content that elsewhere has been arrived at through some image-free method of coming to know. Instead, images are part of the very development of some of the most significant moral and political claims in the dialogues.

Philosophy as Socrates practices it within the dialogue includes a variety of modalities that are appropriate to the particular task at hand. His use of images encourages his interlocutors to live better lives, practically and concretely. His image of the tyrant's soul, for example, helps to

argue for the claim that the just person is much happier than the unjust person and makes the tyrant's life look unappealing in contrast to that of the just person. The imagination also has epistemic value, insofar as the highest objects of knowledge—the forms—are beyond images, but ordinarily, human beings must rely on images in order to make sense of and to talk about these forms. This limit of language is not merely negative, however: intelligible images can assist human beings in coming to know the forms. Moreover, many of Socrates's images in the middle books teach his interlocutors—and Plato's readers—*that it is the case that* images are insufficient to grasp everything about the forms. And this understanding of imagination's own limits is itself crucial to being a philosopher, insofar as the philosopher's growth in self-knowledge and human limit is part of what distinguishes her from the poet.

Images can serve as part of a slow and gradual movement of Socrates's interlocutors—and also Plato's readers—toward the forms. The forms themselves are not reducible to images, and not every image is helpful for learning more about the forms. However, human beings do not simply access the forms all at once, through using the right image-free philosophical technique. Instead, Plato shows Socrates using images as part of the practice of philosophy. Such images need not be understood as entirely truthful or entirely false. Rather, we can understand the image as a way of accessing the reality of the forms partially and incompletely. As Jill Frank argues, philosophers are spectators who look to the forms and their images, and who therefore may not see the whole of that which they seek. Instead, philosophers in the *Republic*, no less than in the *Symposium*, occupy a middle ground.⁹ Images allow a seeker of truth to embark on a path that may slowly lead to a philosophical vision of the forms.

Socrates's use of such images is not merely rhetorical or pedagogical, but rather heuristic. Socrates does not teach others with images from the point of view of being a master of an area of knowledge, and then use images that can convey his knowledge to a beginner. Rather, Socrates uses images to *discover* more about the nature of justice, how and whether justice is beneficial, and other philosophical problems. Indeed, images are a pervasive part of his philosophical argument. Images can distract or mislead when they are of the wrong kind or when they are not properly understood *as* images. However, the right sorts of images, such as intelligible images, can lead to a process of discovering more about the forms. The early books of the *Republic* display how images are used to discover the nature of justice. The middle books then provide a series of images in which images are

treated in terms of a larger ontological and epistemological whole. Later books then explore the limits of images, further reinforcing their limited and partial nature.

Before beginning, Socrates's use of terms for image and imagination ought to be further explained. Classical Greek has no single word that adequately captures the entire range of meaning of the English term "imagination." I take our contemporary sense of "imagination" to include both, more narrowly, the human faculty by which images are presented in the human mind to represent objects and, more broadly, the representation of images that inform how a social group interprets the world and its meaning. Poetry and works of art are both works of the imagination in this latter sense. To ask how the imagination functions as part of argument is not limited to a problem of philosophy of mind—indeed, Plato's Socrates says next to nothing about how images function as part of a thought process, along the lines of how Aristotle treats image making as a mental faculty in *De Anima*. Rather, his concern is focused on how the imagery found in a shared language, whether poetic, philosophical, or "ordinary" language, affects how we think about the nature of justice or other moral and political goods. Homer's imagery, and the imagery of many other traditional poets, is found wanting for its incapacity to address fundamental claims about the nature and value of justice. However, Plato develops alternative images that do claim to unfold and elucidate the nature of justice, while also reminding his own audience of the limits of his subsequent claims.

A variety of Greek words are used to describe the imagination. Socrates uses the term *eikasia* to describe the lowest portion of the divided line. *Phantasia* is also used to describe the faculty of image making, but the term could also be translated as "appearance," due to its close connection to sensory experience. However, in the *Republic*, Socrates speaks more often of images than of the faculty of imagination itself. An *eikōn* is a copy or an image that may either reveal or distort some aspect of that which it copies. An *eikōn* can refer to art, or even shadows or clouds, as well as to an internal mental representation of an object. Socrates frequently uses the language of paradigms (*paradeigmata*) or type (*tupos*) to describe the subject matter under consideration, such as the image of the city as applied to the individual soul in the discovery of justice. Paradigms and models are often used in order to give conceptual form to a complex or elusive concept. Sometimes the term "paradigm" is used more informally only to designate an argumentative example. Thus, another added difficulty is that Socrates does not always give a precise account of what his own Greek terms for

“image” or “imagination” mean. Thus, understanding how images work as part of argument requires looking at each place that Socrates uses images with some care for its specific and contextual use, rather than relying on a single operational definition of image and then applying it to all cases of argument within the dialogue.

Socrates's engagement with images is not limited to how the individual human subject mentally represents objects. He is also deeply interested in the question of how his own Greek world's poetic and dramatic culture communicates moral and political ideals to a whole community, and the effect that dramatic performance has on the souls of those who listen. Plato's concern with poetry in the *Republic* is not primarily aesthetic, but rather with how the educational practices of his own day use poetic imagery in a way that is insufficient for the formation of true wisdom. Thus, *mimēsis* or imitation is also relevant to the discussion of images. The active imitation of an epic, tragic, or comic character may result in the imitating subject becoming like the person whom he imitates. As Andrea Nightingale has demonstrated, Plato as author writes in the form of a dialogue that is partially reliant on these same genres that Socrates criticizes.¹⁰ Any examination of the various ways that Plato treats the images best includes an analysis of their use, the diverse ways that Socrates and his interlocutors talk about their use, and how Plato as author uses images in his own practice of writing a dialogue.

Plato's treatment of the imagination is not systematic but rather seen best through examining his practice. In the absence of a unified account of how the imagination may function positively, this book's approach is to pay greater attention to the praxis of using images and his words about their use.¹¹ My approach here is primarily to examine a range of ways that the text uses images in the course of the argument of the *Republic*. While this may be less satisfying than an account that unifies in a clear and comprehensive way a single theory of images, Plato's treatment itself is more varied than will allow it.

In this work, I do not seek to provide a comprehensive interpretation of every image in the *Republic*, although a wide range of images and arguments are examined. I also set aside many controversies about points of textual interpretation that do not bear directly on the question of imagery. Still, my claim is that Plato's use of images is pervasive and part of the *Republic*'s main arguments, not limited only to a few well-known images such as the pilot of the ship, the myth of metals, or the cave.

This work takes up the main lines of argument in the *Republic* from Books One to Four, which use imagistic language heuristically, in order

to discover the nature of the justice to the human being. I then turn to the middle books, where Socrates uses images in order to show how they can either distort or disclose reality, but *if understood as images*, they can be crucial in a person's seeking to understand the forms. The sun, divided line, and cave images are themselves images that situate the idea of a visual image into a larger context.¹² Last, I take up the later books' discussion of degenerate cities and souls and the critique of *mimēsis*. Socrates's revisiting the nature of *mimēsis* further reinforces the partial and limited nature of image making, including philosophical imagery.

The following chapter begins with a broader look at Plato's relationship to poetry and how the dialogue form itself is responsive to Socrates's concerns about poetry in Books Two and Three. The remaining chapters proceed chronologically, taking up how Socrates uses images as argument beginning as early as Book One to develop a notion of justice. Images can either offer access to intelligible reality or potentially distort; often our particular images of ideas such as justice both disclose being and partially distort its nature. Philosophy can only be practiced well if the philosopher is aware of the ways in which images both conceal and reveal—a self-awareness lacking in many earlier poetic practices before Plato. In the *Republic*, there is no image-free way of speaking about philosophical objects. That is, there is no philosophical language that can wholly free us from the limits of images. Socrates treats images as limited but necessary for philosophical insight. In this way, Plato's understanding of what counts as philosophical language challenges many contemporary understandings of philosophical language as precise and non-imagistic because capable of capturing reality. For Plato, a central task of philosophy is to help us to understand ourselves as image-makers who need the imagination to access reality and yet must be cautious of not too easily accepting our images uncritically.

Socrates even gives us images, such as the imagery of the cave, that can teach us to consider a reality beyond the imagination's own limits, thus encouraging self-knowledge and a sense of self-limit. Such self-knowledge has political value in discouraging tyrannical action. Individuals and an entire culture alike can be imprisoned by unthinking false images of reality that prevent them from properly understanding reality, yet images are part of the journey upward to the forms. The imagination is both a cause of human ignorance or limit, and a potential source of liberation. The *Republic* is best understood as a means of educating its own readers in how to imagine justice philosophically, rather than as an exact political plan for a state.¹³

The order of the book's arguments proceeds as follows.

Chapter 1 begins with the criticisms of poetry in Books Two and Three as a larger context for understanding the dialogue and its more specific arguments. Socrates's treatment of poetry and the initial criticisms of *mimēsis* are explored. I argue that the main objections to poetry in Books Two and Three are unified around the problem of poetic education. Among his concerns are audience passivity, the failure to communicate a hidden sense, and moral harm that arises from the imitation of bad characters. However, while Socrates wishes to eliminate certain kinds of poetry from the city, Plato as author finds ways to reincorporate certain elements of *poiēsis* into his own form of writing. However, Plato does so in ways that take account of these sorts of criticisms. For example, he builds in features to the dialogue that encourage his audience to engage in a more critical hermeneutic rather than to remain passive. The Platonic dialogue also includes both narrated and mimetic elements, but its *mimēsis* asks the audience to imitate Socrates and his mode of philosophical argument, thus strengthening rather than weakening the exercise of reason.

Chapter 2 examines how images are central to the arguments offered by Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Socrates. Instead of seeing Book One as containing three "definitions" of justice that are each in turn refuted by Socrates, these arguments are better understood as a series of paradigms of justice. Cephalus and Polemarchus use paradigmatic images, that is, they give verbal descriptions of justice that present an iconic picture of what the just life looks like. Socrates does not insist on moving to greater abstraction, but instead responds to them with a series of counterimages that help move them to a better understanding of justice. His method is dialectical in the sense that while their views of justice are not adequate, Socrates responds by expanding the scope of justice, without completely rejecting some of the insights brought out by these initial descriptions.

Chapter 3 examines the argument between Thrasymachus and Socrates. Here, paradigmatic argument again is central to the exchange between the two figures. However, because Socrates and Thrasymachus have such fundamentally different values and beliefs, this approach to argument proves to be ineffective. The paradigmatic examples on which they each rely to show that rulers either do or do not care for those over whom they rule remain fundamentally in conflict. For this reason, the remainder of the dialogue takes a different approach to the argument. This chapter also explores how Plato as author uses imagery at the level of the dialogue's drama. For example, a reference to Polemarchus's death at the hands of the Thirty invites the further exploration of questions about justice by Plato's reader. While

audience passivity is among Socrates's criticism of traditional poetry, Plato as author asks his own audience to be critically engaged and not only passive recipients of his message.

Chapter 4 takes up Glaucon and Adeimantus's new formation of the challenge posed by Thrasymachus. Glaucon frames the problem by offering two opposing arguments, in a kind of *dialexeis*, with the just and unjust man on either side. The argument continues in terms of images, most notably Glaucon's use of narrative in offering the myth of the shepherd's ring, Adeimantus's poetic images, and Socrates's own city-soul analogy. The chapter takes up each of these three kinds of image making in turn and shows how the imagery contributes to the argument. For example, the narrative about the shepherd's ring invites the listener to increased self-knowledge through a process of identification and disidentification with the shepherd. The chapter also explores the nature of the city-soul analogy and argues that it is both rhetorical and heuristic in its approach.

Chapter 5 begins by briefly examining the image of the "simple" city that Socrates proposes. Although Glaucon rejects it as a "city of pigs," I argue that his main objection is not to its animallike nature but rather on account of it being an overly feminine city that lacks a place for masculine activities of war and political honor. The chapter then looks at how the main models of justice in the city and soul ought to be understood as models, rather than as exacting descriptions of justice itself. While these images of city and soul help us to learn more about justice, Socrates's language about his own process shows that these paradigms are meant to bring insight into the nature of justice itself and to encourage his listeners to want to live a just life. This visual language emphasizes a Socratic concern with knowledge as insight, in which verbal models are used to encourage knowing as seeing.

Chapter 6 examines the "three waves" with special attention to their comedic nature. Socrates's proposals are presented as both comic and as serious critiques of his society. However, rather than stopping where comedy does with critique, the dialogue also invites us to consider *why* we find certain ideas funny. He thus encourages a form of social self-criticism intended to help the polis to see its own limits and to reenvision its own possibilities.

Chapters 7 and 8 offer a detailed analysis of Socrates's images of the sun, divided line, and cave. I argue that Socrates's main focus in these books is not to offer a detailed metaphysics so much as to help his listeners imagine the forms and what it would mean to come to know them. Images are used not only because they are pedagogically useful but also because the forms themselves can only be known partially and perspectively. Socrates's

visual images offer a picture of knowing as intellectual seeing, in which the objects of knowledge are stable and enduring, while our own access to them is limited. Moreover, the epistemic value of images is complex. They are the lowest element on the divided line, but intelligible images can also point us to the forms. Socrates's images of the forms are themselves examples of such intelligible images. Thus, the idea of the form as a "look" (in the most literal sense of the word) remains crucial. The divided line and sun images offer an omniscient viewpoint of the forms and other ways of encountering the world. In contrast, the image of the cave takes on the perspective of an individual person who comes to seek and to contemplate the forms over time.

Chapter 9 finally turns to the remaining books, in which Socrates offers a variety of images about imperfect cities and souls. Socrates offers images of degenerate regimes and their corresponding souls, and of the image of the tyrant's soul in particular. He tells a myth about making choices within the constraints of necessity in the myth of Er. These images do not flesh out the nature of the ideal city, but instead offer ways of conceptualizing and responding to living in imperfect cities. Socrates encourages self-knowledge and the development of justice in one's own soul as the best ways to respond to living in a nonideal or even corrupt regime. This chapter also takes up the critique of *mimēsis* in Book Ten and argues that its late placement is carefully situated. Socrates's audience is better positioned to reflect on the distinction between poetic and philosophical imagery. Unlike the divine craftsman, who possesses full knowledge, the philosopher occupies a middle epistemic position. Images are useful when they help us to grow in understanding of being (the forms) but these images are limited. Part of good philosophical practice is to recognize the limits of the images used in order to argue and to discover more about the forms. The myth of Er is an instance of a myth that explores a topic beyond human knowledge—death and life after death—by addressing the human longing for truth and goodness. Liminal spaces, such as the border between life and death, do not easily lend themselves to precise descriptions. However, imagery understood *as imagery* allows us to encounter and to develop narratives about such liminal aspects of human experiences. The Platonic use of images reflects a Platonic engagement with the human being as "in between" the mortal and the divine.