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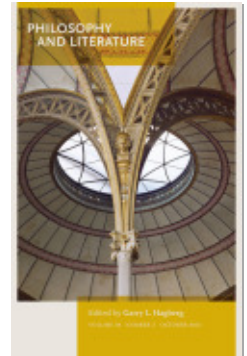
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## Dogs and Birds in Plato

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JANET McCracken

## DOGS AND BIRDS IN PLATO

**Abstract.** Arguing for censorship of the poets in the *Republic*, Socrates draws most of his examples from Homer. These examples often depict soldiers facing death on the battlefield. Homer, in turn, often represents a soldier's death with the image of dogs and birds scavenging upon his body. Homer's representations of death, then, often include dogs or birds, and these images are found in the near background of Plato's *Republic*. How does Plato himself use these animal images? I discuss Plato's depictions of dogs and birds, and characterize his general notion of their function in moral education and mental functioning.

HOMER OFTEN REPRESENTS A man's death with the image of dogs and birds scavenging upon his body. For instance: "Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles, / murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses, / . . . [and] made their bodies carrion, / feast for the dogs and birds . . ." (*Iliad* 1.1–5).<sup>1</sup> In *Iliad* Book XI, for example, a soldier's death is represented with this image four times. Similarly, the Achaeans fought like hunting dogs, or the Trojans like vultures. In such passages, dogs and birds are the recipients of a kind of earthly sacrifice, the lowly material counterparts to Hades's spiritual function. Similar parallels between dogs' and birds' custodial roles over the bodies of the dead and the gods' custody over their souls appear in many places in the *Iliad*. In Socrates's arguments for censorship of the poets in Books II and III of Plato's *Republic*, the vast majority of examples are drawn from Homer, particularly those depicting someone facing death on the battlefield, which relate to education in courage. Homer's representations of death, therefore—which surprisingly often

include references to dogs or birds—are in the near background of Plato's discussion of moral education in the *Republic*.

It is a small wonder, then, that the figures of dogs and birds themselves appear in the Platonic dialogues as examples of moral education and as objects of moral deliberation. Here, I will lay out Plato's use of these figures, and characterize Plato's general notion of their function in moral education and reflection. In addition, I will make some remarks about how these figures might be usefully extrapolated to our understanding of dogs and birds independent of their role in ancient texts.

## I

For some readers, the Homeric image of dogs and birds may be just a way to poeticize the depictions of death that Homer's story lines require him to make, depictions that would otherwise be repetitive and undramatic. Perhaps some readers simply take Homer to be availing himself of an established idiom. Perhaps the image evokes the futility of war—all that comes of it, Homer seems to say, are fat dogs and birds. I believe, however, that the image also represents an essential human condition—the condition of openness to moral education, a condition that Plato calls “ridiculousness.” Indeed, Homer's characters also seem to recognize this aspect of the image, using references to dogs and birds to ridicule their enemies, as when Hector tells Ajax, “if *you* have the daring to stand up against my spear . . . / You'll glut the dogs and birds of Troy / with your fat and flesh” (*Iliad* 13.960). The image of dogs and birds feasting upon the bodies of one's enemies or comrades can inspire rage, embarrassment, pride, shame, fear, pity, disdain, and humiliation. Homer uses it to achieve all of these effects. The image evokes a kind of excruciating tragicomedy that incites or deflates courage, the paradigmatic Greek virtue and the most important lesson in the education of the guardians in Plato's *Republic*.

In general, Plato's references to animals are ridiculous in a way similar to Hector's taunting of Ajax. These figures provoke interlocutors and readers alike to test their mettle by bringing a humble—if not humiliating—element into their high-falutin' philosophical conversation. They do not have the high drama of oratory, to which Socrates continually contrasts philosophy; they are small and bittersweet. Plato uses them in something more than a purely rhetorical way, however: there is something unsettling about how seriously he takes his discussions of horse training, shepherding, and other apparent fluff, something provocative

about the tragedy he can bring out of a comic element. Strange yet constant companions to the abstract arguments of the dialogues, Plato's references to our furry and feathered friends seem a little ridiculous, a little unnecessary—and they have tended to get a benign but unserious reception from philosophers.

At least some of the references to animals that appear in the Platonic dialogues ought to be taken seriously, however, because they represent models for education. Much of the *Republic* is taken up with issues in moral education, and much of it with how literary figures affect readers' moral knowledge. One can expect this dialogue, then, to take a certain responsibility for its use of animal imagery, to provide an introduction to its own analysis as literature. I believe the closing allegory, the eschatological myth of Er, provides such an introduction. Socrates summarizes the myth: "souls changed from animals into human beings, or from one kind of animal into another [for their next incarnation], with unjust people changing into wild animals, and just people into tame ones" (*Republic* 620d).<sup>2</sup>

The passage indicates that animals will be used in the *Republic* to represent *choices of lives*. In particular, I will argue, dogs model a philosophical, or "ridiculous," or "dialogic" life. Plato considers the dog to be a paradigmatically *tame* animal, representing, as the Er myth indicates, a just person. Various birds, I will show, model a tragic life for Plato, and they help interlocutors and readers understand both why the choice of a tragic life seems attractive, and why it really is not so. Plato figures the bird as a particularly attractive kind of *wild*, or unjust, life. This is because the bird, on account of its tragic beauty, makes a certain kind of cowardice seem like freedom and nobility.

As the opening lines of the *Iliad* remind us, dogs and birds are scavengers. As scavengers, dogs and birds are the liaisons between the old, cast-off bodies of the dead, and the new bodies of the living—the dogs' and birds' own bodies. Dogs and birds, in their role as scavengers, assist in the transformation of bodies from death to life. In the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, Socrates founds the theory of reincarnation upon this transformation. In several dialogues, particularly the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, Socrates draws explicit analogies between the crafts responsible for the care of the body and those responsible for the care of the soul. The most obvious of these is the repeated analogy between the practice of medicine and the practice of philosophy.

The theory of recollection in the *Meno*, the theory of love and learning in the *Symposium*, and the theory of education in the *Republic* all

rely upon this same analogy—that the transformation a body goes through in reincarnation (or other kinds of bodily renewal) is akin to the transformation that a soul goes through in education. The soul, like the body, is depicted as experiencing a kind of “rebirth” through the mediation of a chosen or beloved object. This is analogous to the transformation that bodies undergo after death, through the mediation of dogs and birds. It should not be surprising, then, that Plato, sensitive to Homeric imagery and a believer in the immortality of the soul, uses dogs and birds as metaphors for those through whose influences a soul is “reborn.”

A passage from Socrates’s speech in the *Symposium* makes this analogy perfectly explicit. “A person is said to be the same from childhood till he turns into an old man—even then he never consists of the same things . . . but he is always being renewed and in other respects passing away, in his hair and flesh and bones and blood and his entire body. And it’s not just in his body, but in his soul, too, for none of his manners, customs, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, or fears ever remains the same, but some are coming to be in him while others are passing away” (*Symposium* 207d).<sup>3</sup> He calls the changes that affect a soul “learning” and “forgetting.” These affect a kind of reincarnation even during this life. Diotima quite explicitly includes literary figures among the objects of love that occasion these transformative educational experiences. “Everyone would rather have such children [i.e., poetic ideas] than human ones, and would look up to Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind” (*Symposium* 209d).

Even as he argues in Book II of the *Republic* for censorship of the poets, Socrates states that “there is some truth in them” (*Republic* 377a), indicating that poetic images may have a value in education despite his present criticisms. He follows this up in Book X by reintroducing poetry to the just city, if it “has any argument to bring forward” (*Republic* 607b). Plato certainly lends evidence for the claim that literary figures can lead to knowledge by providing throughout the dialogues so many myths, images, and examples, and so many verbatim passages from the very poets that Socrates criticizes.

Thus, literary figures like dogs and birds not only help put across a variety of philosophical claims within the dialogues but also reveal certain strains of Platonic epistemology and link it in a meaningful way to his theory of education. By studying such images in depth, one can glean Platonic theories about how a particular person’s character affects her

ability to retain knowledge. This is a particularly useful way to investigate the *Republic*, because Plato's most detailed and straightforward theory of education appears in that dialogue. So let's consider a very extended image from the *Republic*, one that is put forward by Socrates explicitly to characterize the good philosophy student: the puppy.

## II

The key to the creation of the ideal city is that "philosophers rule as kings, or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize" (*Republic* 473d). In Book II, regarding the censorship of texts in the education of the guards, Socrates lands upon a figure that will direct the guards' attention to this "genuine and adequate" study of philosophy—dogs. "Tell me, Glaucon: I see that you have hunting dogs and quite a flock of noble fighting birds at home. Have you noticed anything about their mating and breeding? . . . If this also holds true for human beings, our need for excellent rulers is indeed extreme" (*Republic* 459a–c). Before they are educated, Socrates claims, the potential guards are like good dogs: quick on the uptake, fast in their pursuit of knowledge, strong, and gentle (*Republic* 375a–c), but they are not yet courageous, obedient to their city, and protective of it.

The best guardians are lucky enough to be very much like dogs by innate temperament. Like dogs, however, their increasing mastery of guardianship and their potential for good rulership depends on their being well "trained." Through education, or "training," the guardians must turn their innate gentleness into loyalty, and their innate aggressiveness into courage. The "puppy" passage is quite ridiculous, and we are therefore compelled, I believe, to take it both seriously and sarcastically. "Surely [the guards] must be gentle to their own people, and harsh for the enemy. If they aren't, they won't wait around for others to destroy the city but will do it themselves first . . . / You know, of course, that a pedigree dog naturally has a character of this sort—he is gentle as can be to those he is used to and knows, but the opposite to those he doesn't know . . . / When a dog sees someone it doesn't know, it gets angry, . . . but when it knows someone, it welcomes him even if it has never received anything good from him. . . . / Surely this is a refined quality in its nature and one that is truly philosophical" (*Republic* 375c–376b).

The potential guardian is the lover and the fighter conjoined, loving what it knows (it loves knowledge) and angry at what it does not know (it becomes angry at ignorance). Socrates depicts these canine traits as

explicitly philosophical. In this passage, Socrates glosses these philosophical qualities primarily in terms of dogs' loyalty—a dog is gentle to her own people and aggressive to strangers. The dog, then, models a philosophical disposition for a particular kind of philosophy student, one who has civic, military, or political aspirations, like the guards in the republic, or like Glaucon and Adeimantus, or even very like those students who would be reading the *Republic* in a college political science or philosophy class today.

The character of the dog is particularly well suited to inspire good guardians, precisely because it has the apparently contradictory nature that I have called "ridiculous." A dog willingly loves and willingly fights, she is gentle and fierce, and she correctly recognizes both her friends and enemies (represented in the philosophical context as knowledge and ignorance, respectively). A dog is not easily embarrassed, making mistakes boldly and correcting them diligently, without a worry about their reflection upon her status or reputation. A dog is completely devoted to her friends and on that account frightening in her hatred of her enemies.

The dog continues to be a model for students, according to Socrates, on into the period of physical training. "Our warrior-athletes," he argues in Book III (404a–c), "need a more sophisticated kind of training [than the present regimen for athletes]. They must be like sleepless hounds, able to see and hear as keenly as possible, and to endure frequent changes of drinking water and food, as well as summer and winter weather . . ." Socrates adds to this claim, oddly enough, that "you might learn about such things from Homer . . ." This is a somewhat odd set of claims all around, for a dog's good hearing and eyesight are natural, not trained, qualities, nor are these qualities very likely to result from the gymnastic or dietary regimens that are outlined for the warrior-athletes in the rest of the passage. The point of the passage seems simply that the warrior-athletes' bodies and appetites, like their spirits, should be like dogs'. In fact, in Book IV the dog becomes a simple figure for the "spirited," or emotional, part of the human soul (*Republic* 440d).

Another discussion of dogs as models for military (and in this case, also moral) trainees is followed immediately by a somewhat abrupt reference to Homer, in Book IV, at 440d–441c: "we made the auxiliaries in our city like dogs obedient to their rulers, who are themselves like shepherds of a city . . . Besides, our earlier quotation from Homer bears it out, where he says, '*He struck his chest and spoke to his heart.*'" The Homeric reference here is to a passage of the *Odyssey* (XX.17)<sup>4</sup> in which Odysseus, having



returned to Ithaca, has to struggle against his desire to kill Penelope's suitors outright. Homer describes Odysseus's posture in this spiritual struggle as "like a bitch mounting over her weak, defenseless puppies / growls, facing a stranger, bristling for a showdown," like a dog protecting its own. Note that Plato uses this provocative and dramatic poetic image unmediated by censors.

Indeed, when, in Book X, Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus return to the discussion of poetry, suggesting that they might have been too harsh in their earlier criticisms, Socrates returns to the image of the dog, saying, "Let's also tell poetry that there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy, which is evidenced by such expressions as 'the dog yelping and shrieking at its master' . . . Nonetheless, . . . if the poetry . . . has any argument to bring forward that proves it ought to have a place in a well-governed city, [we] at least would be glad to admit it" (607b-c). This is a tellingly ambiguous phrasing: the dog could as easily be representing poetry as philosophy, echoed in the image of a personified poetry "arguing" for its position.

Plato deliberately conflates the dog as poetic image with the dog as philosophical example. This is because of dogs' unique role in literature and nature as both scavengers and loyal protectors. Dogs face death in a noble and workaday fashion, while nonetheless protecting life selflessly; they maintain precisely the delicate position of the philosopher that Socrates is at pains to defend in the *Phaedo*: "that it is not right to do oneself violence, and yet that the philosopher will be willing to follow one who is dying . . ." (61d).<sup>5</sup> It may be of note that Socrates's remark follows immediately after he reveals that he has taken up writing poetry in the last days of his life (61a-c).

Socrates's remarks here evoke Odysseus's dog, Argos. Noble, devoted, and perceptive even in extreme old age and ignominious circumstances, Argos, alone in Ithaca, recognizes his master, outstripping even Penelope and Laertes. And yet, like Socrates's "true" philosopher, he knows when it is his time to die. Odysseus enters his palace in disguise. There, "infested with ticks, half-dead from neglect / . . . lay the hound, old Argos. / But the moment he sensed Odysseus standing by / he thumped his tail . . . / the dark shadow of death closed down on Argos' eyes / the instant he saw Odysseus, twenty years away" (*Odyssey* XVII.318-60).

Argos does not face his death with a tragic spectacle. Like the choices made by the souls in the myth of Er, Argos on his dunghill is "pitiful [and] funny" (*Republic* 620a). Instead of arrogantly clinging to life or self-indulgently tossing life away, he demonstrates a tempered willingness

to die. These characteristics are precisely those that Socrates exemplifies in the *Crito*, sitting in his prison cell, waiting to be executed under the law. Offered a way to escape prison and avoid his execution, Socrates, like Argos, will not run away from his home just because he has been mistreated there. He obeys the laws as Argos does Odysseus, “hearing” them tell him to be “persuaded by us who have brought you up” (*Crito*, 54b).<sup>6</sup>

The proper obligation of the good citizen toward her city, then, is like a dog’s relationship to her household and master. The dog does not choose her household, but does not consider herself free to abandon her household just because she does not agree with her treatment there. The dog’s devotion, like the patriotism of the good citizen, is neither unconditional nor coerced. She does not submit her will to that of her master; rather, she is willing, in a tempered way, to remain with her master despite clashing with her master’s will. This is also, clearly, a good model for a philosophical education. Teachers and students must prevail in their endeavor despite unavoidable disagreements between them, and students must feel that their study is uncoerced if their education is to meet with success. Through a dogged determination to study, in the face of possible humiliations on both sides, education occurs. In a community without this sense of duty, states Socrates, “A teacher . . . is afraid of his students and flatters them, while the students despise their teachers . . .” In such a city, Socrates claims, “as the proverb says, dogs become like their mistresses . . .” (*Republic* 563a–c).

Thus, the dog represents a “ridiculous” character in Plato, whose tragicomic spirit gives rise to the tempered willingness to die that we call “courage.” As such, the dog can teach us courage even in an age when such teachers are hard to find among human beings. Socrates indicates the universality of the dog’s appeal when he asks Adeimantus, “Do you think that anyone . . . would choose to fight hard, lean dogs, rather than to join them in fighting fat and tender sheep?” (*Republic* 422d).

### III

In the myth of Er (*Republic* 614b–621d), the choice of a tame reincarnation is favorably contrasted to the choice of a wild one. Plato figures the wild or unvirtuous life as a bird’s life, and he quite explicitly depicts the choice to live as a bird as a tragic choice:

Er . . . said that he saw the soul which had once belonged to Orpheus choosing a swan's life, because he hated the female sex because of his death at their hands . . . [He] saw the soul of Thamyris choosing the life of a nightingale, a swan choosing to change over to a human life, and other musical animals doing the same thing. . . . [Agamemnon's] sufferings also had made him hate the human race, so he changed to the life of an eagle. . . . Still other souls changed from animals into human beings, or from one kind of animal into another, with unjust people changing into wild animals, and just people into tame ones, and all sorts of mixtures occurred. (620a-d)

The first twenty or so souls in the underworld—poets, singers, and tragic heroes—chose birds' lives, and songbirds chose human lives. Circumstance made Orpheus, a great lover and singer, hate women instead of ignorance, or so it is implied, and he chose to live as a swan. Thamyris, also a great poet and singer, suffered wounded pride at the hands of the Muses, and he chose to live as a nightingale. In Orpheus and Thamyris, the choice to be reborn as a bird stems from a tragic character, the result of a life of seemingly unjustified misfortunes. Its tragedy, furthermore, is depicted in them as particularly appealing to the soul of an artist, someone dependent, according to Plato, upon divine inspiration. The metaphorical "scavenging" of the songbird upon the artist is represented here as a plea for artistic justice on the artist's part, almost like a prayer to the Muses for inspiration.

The misfortune that befalls such a person appears to her as abandonment or even cruelty at the hands of the gods. She does not blame herself for her unhappiness. Rather, she attributes her tragic failure, in the first instance, to others—in Orpheus's case, to women, in Thamyris's case, to the Muses. The chooser of birds, on the educational metaphor, does not interpret the humiliation that education entails as the natural result of her own mistakes, but rather as an exercise of raw power on the part of her masters. Such a person feels like a mistreated slave, one who, like the beaten, badly trained animals mentioned in Book III at 416a, goes wild, "like wolves instead of dogs."

Insofar as the musical birds in the Er myth are—extrapolating upon the swan—described as choosing human reincarnations, the choices of Orpheus and Thamyris are characterized as part of a tragic cycle. Indeed, the implication of the myth is that tragedy, at least for the soul of an artist, is cyclical. The envious musical birds apparently chose human lives because their lives as birds (much envied by human singers) did not provide the satisfactions they had hoped for when they chose life

as a bird the last time around. Plato depicts artistic expression and the music of birds as inadequate to the desires that motivate them, and, because they are inadequate, they are repetitively abandoned. But they are also repetitively chosen, indicating that they appear eternally attractive to a lover of artistic expression. A bird's life seems pure from the standpoint of an artist, a life of free expression and natural beauty. Disappointment with the constraints of life and the envy of those whose lives seem unconstrained go hand in hand here, and this envy and disappointment play themselves out in this myth in a perpetual tragic interchange between artists and musical birds.

The closing reincarnation myths of the *Phaedo* and *Republic* both verify that the philosophical life leads to a more stable reincarnation than do other lives. "Those who have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy," Socrates states in the *Phaedo*, "live in the future altogether without a body; they make their way to even more beautiful dwelling places" than the surface of the earth (*Phaedo* 114c). He describes Er as reporting, "There was an interchange of goods and evils for most of the souls. However, if someone pursues philosophy in a sound manner when he comes to live here on earth . . . 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" (619d–e). Socrates indicates in both myths that the philosopher's choice will distinguish itself from the repetitive, cyclical interchange of goods and evils that afflicts the choices of other lives, and that the philosophical rebirth is "smooth" and "happy"—not tragic. The tragic choices of Orpheus, Thamyris, and the musical birds, in contrast, it is implied, will repeat themselves at the next opportunity, unless a philosophical education intercedes on their behalf.

The representation of the tragic love of swans and nightingales that appears in the *Phaedo* echoes these implications of the myth of Er. There, Socrates describes the interpreter of birds as cowardly, with a tendency to make a tragic situation out of a happy one. When, he states, swans "realize that they must die they sing most and most beautifully, as they rejoice that they are about to depart to join the god whose servants they are. But men, because of their own fear of death, tell lies about the swans and say that they lament their death and sing in sorrow. They do not reflect that no bird sings when it is hungry or cold or suffers in any other way, neither the nightingale nor the swallow nor the hoopoe" (*Phaedo* 84e–85a).

Agamemnon, the twenty-first soul in the myth of Er, chooses an eagle's life, because his "sufferings also had made him hate the human race" (*Republic* 620b). Again, the choice to live one's next life as a bird represents human disappointment and envy. Where Orpheus and Thamyris resented having been done out of the rewards they believed were owed to their talent, however, Agamemnon has, according to his lights, been done out of the rewards due his position. He has a moral and political complaint with human life, not an aesthetic one. His situation, as he understands it, parallels that of "the just man, who is simple and noble, . . . as Aeschylus says" (*Republic* 361b–c). The reference to Aeschylus indicates that Plato takes this character's situation to be tragic. Agamemnon and the eagle in the myth of Er, then, are apparently also involved in a kind of tragic interchange, but theirs evokes the debate in political philosophy that is the *Republic's* fundamental theme.

Outraged by the seeming unfairness of his treatment in life, being vanquished by an inferior, Agamemnon envies the eagle's power and freedom. And, like Orpheus and Thamyris, Agamemnon does not acknowledge his own part in the tragedy of his life; he blames Clytaemnestra. Homer depicts the ghost of Agamemnon in the underworld similarly, appalled even in death by the apparent injustice of his rewards in life (*Odyssey* XI.484–7). Homer evokes this imagery also in the *Iliad*, where he describes Agamemnon's Trojan victims, ironically, as "craved far more by the vultures than by wives" (*Iliad* I.189). In his choice of an eagle's life, Plato's Agamemnon parallels Homer's; he is arrogant in death as he was in life, still seeking the glory he believes is his due, instead of accepting with nobility the reward that is the just due of every individual. Thus, even the tragic heroism of the great Agamemnon comes across in the Er myth as a kind of cowardice.

The decision to live as a bird is depicted in all of these cases as a wild choice, a choice to live, in a sense, like a wild animal. Er explicitly describes this kind of choice as unjust. Yet since, according to Socrates, one would never choose willingly this patently unjust life, knowing it to be unjust, we must understand these tragic lives to be motivated by a kind of ignorance that makes such a choice, falsely, seem rational and good. Plato represents the motivation for the choice of a bird's life as a kind of disgust with the tame domestic life of civil obedience that is natural for the dog and good for the guardians of the ideal city. It grows out of a sort of arrogant cowardice—fear and disdain of every mortal's lot: death. The lovers of birds are afraid of the lowliness of death, afraid to lose, finally and without recourse, their status, their reputation, their power.

Flight, with all its cowardly connotations, is even more of an essential characteristic of birds than predation or singing. In loving birds, on account of this truly superhuman ability, one loves something lofty, beautiful, and apparently free. Of all the animals, birds seem closest to the gods. By choosing to live as birds, the tragic characters in the myth of Er try to escape all the lowly, slavish aspects of human life—and death. The lover of birds, narcissistic and arrogant, wants to be looked up at. But birds, inevitably, are beyond human reach. Life among their ranks can never satisfy human desires. Hence, life as a bird will never redress the tragic character's disappointments with human life. Life as a bird does not satisfy the desires that motivated it; it can never, in a sense, be high enough to reach the standards of the arrogant character that chooses it. Because life as a bird ends in a disappointment comparable to that of the bird lover, the bird will choose again as it did before—to live as an artist or ruler, closer to the gods even than she, she will imagine, because of their humanity.

Even in death, then, Orpheus, Thamyris, and Agamemnon are trying to escape death. In this way, Plato indicates, arrogance will always be a masquerade for cowardice. Cowardice, in its turn, is just that variety of ignorance in which one believes one's own life deserves a better treatment than that of others, a better treatment than—one ought to know—it will inevitably receive. The tragic cycle represented by Plato in the love of birds is an unending interchange between cowardice and arrogance. The past incarnations of birds love their own mortal lives too much to give them up, and so, they will never accept—as philosophers do, according to Socrates—the end of that mortal cycle to which embodiment leads.

In the political terms so important to the *Republic*, the choice of a bird's life indicates a soul that loves freedom more than justice. It expresses the ideal of freedom that leads a government to make democratic reforms. It should not be a surprise, then, that the tragedy of bird loving in the myth of Er recalls Socrates's criticisms of democracy in Book VIII. "What about the animals? Are we, with Aeschylus, going to 'say whatever it was that came to our lips just now' about them? — 'Certainly. I put it this way: No one who hasn't experienced it would believe how much freer domestic animals are in a democratic city than anywhere else'" (563c). This somewhat abrupt reference to Aeschylus indicates the tragic character of Plato's "democratic man." And Socrates describes the democratic man in birdlike terms. He flies hither and thither without discipline, "yielding day by day to the desire at hand"

(561c). He is shameless (562e), immoderate (561d), insatiable in his desires (562b); and his beliefs, personified by Socrates and like spiritual scavengers, “rush up and occupy” (560c) his soul.

Just like the man who chooses to be reborn as a bird, however, the democratic man, according to Socrates, becomes enslaved by his insatiable desire for freedom. Socrates describes the tyranny into which democracy falls in exactly the cyclical terms in which he describes tragic reincarnation in the myth of Er: “Excessive action in one direction usually sets up a reaction in the opposite direction. This happens in seasons, in plants, in bodies, and, last but not least, in constitutions. . . . So extreme freedom [changes] to extreme slavery” (563e–64a). Because the immoderate and unreasonable desire for freedom is motivated by a hatred of slavery, tyrannies, Plato implies, are inevitably overthrown by democratic insurgents, and democracies are invariably susceptible to tyrants.

#### IV

For the ancient Greeks reading the Platonic dialogues, birds were signs; vehicles for divination. Plato certainly has this in mind whenever he uses the figures of birds. In the *Phaedo*, he represents Socrates, in his last moments, as a champion of bird reading. “I believe myself to be a fellow servant with the swans and dedicated to the same god” (*Phaedo* 85b). The tragic character who chooses life as a bird is, in a sense, a disappointed prospective prophet. She envisions knowledge as fortune telling; she wants more to prevail than to know. Socrates, in granting the birds their prophetic function, grants to the tragic character the verity of the divine inspiration for which she hopes. Like the prophetic birds, however, divine inspiration passes over one at its own will—it cannot be conquered by a human being, cannot be, as Socrates warned Meno, “tied down” (*Meno* 97e)<sup>7</sup>: hence the need for philosophy.

A useful understanding of Platonic figures of birds as signs or diviners can be derived from the extended metaphor of the aviary that Socrates puts forward in the *Theaetetus* (197c–200c)<sup>8</sup> as a possible model for the mind. Theaetetus and Socrates do not, ultimately, accept this image as a representation of knowledge (200b–c). Nonetheless, Plato gives us the aviary, *as false*, to reflect upon when we read the *Theaetetus*. Perhaps, by recognizing falsehood, we can learn to distinguish truth from it. The aviary depicts a wrongheaded way of thinking about knowledge, a way in which one envisions one’s ideas as birds.

The aviary illustrates the particular sort of ignorance under whose constraints the lover of birds suffers, ignorance very much like a frustrated diviner's naive dependence on birds. Socrates sets up the metaphor as follows:

. . . by the birds we must understand pieces of knowledge. When anyone takes possession of a piece of knowledge and shuts it up in the pen, we should say that he has learned or has found out the thing of which this is the knowledge . . . But [a person] may yet make a false judgment about it . . . because it is possible for him to "have," not the knowledge of this thing, but another piece of knowledge instead. When he is hunting for one piece of knowledge, it may happen, as they fly about, that he makes a mistake . . . as you might catch a ring-dove instead of a pigeon. (*Theaetetus* 197d–199b)

The image is unsatisfactory, according to Socrates, because "it follows that a man who has knowledge of something is ignorant of this very thing not through want of knowledge but actually in virtue of his knowledge . . . But presumably he will not think he is judging falsely" (*Theaetetus* 199d–200a). The mistaken individual Socrates describes here makes the same kind of tragic choice as Orpheus, Thamyris, and Agamemnon in the myth of Er. Because her "hunt" for knowledge is unguided and untamed, she chooses, in a sense, whatever idea seems good to her—which is tantamount to choosing an idea according to her desires, choosing what she pleases.

This choice, then, is "in virtue of her knowledge," because all the ideas she has to choose from are things she knows (at least according to the hypothesis), and because she desires knowledge; but it is a mistaken choice nonetheless, because her desire is not to make the correct choice for its own sake, but to conquer a situation. And since she makes a false judgment, her choice will not satisfy the demands she makes of it—it will not, for instance, correctly answer the question she has been posed, nor therefore will it position her well in a conversation. Not thinking that she has judged falsely, she will not attribute this disappointment to herself, but to the questioner or the person who tries to correct her mistake. And because she has not properly attributed the cause of her mistake, she cannot guarantee that she will not make it again.

The use of birds to put across this particular—and according to Socrates, failed—model of knowledge is essential to its mechanics. Birds fly around, even when they are caught in a cage, and the model does



not function without this quality of birds. Birds are essential, in addition, to that part of the model that is successful, just as they are to that part which is disappointing. The aviary does model how one might forget something that one has learned, and answer a question wrongly even though one has been taught the answer, both of which mistakes often occur, and require epistemological explanation.

The essential utility of the birds in “the aviary” can be understood by trying to work the analogy with another kind of animal—say, for instance, dogs. First of all, in that first moment of learning in which one originally gathers the animals into a pen to hold for a subsequent occasion, no hunting would be needed with dogs. They would as likely as not follow one into the pen—certainly so if one offered them food as a persuasive tactic. In the second moment, when one tries to recall what one has learned, one would simply call the dog that one needed. Even if one mixed dogs and birds in the cage, the second moment, recalling what one has learned, would be easier, because the dogs would assist the thinker in her search for the birds, as hunting dogs do.

This ridiculous spin on the *Theaetetus* aviary is not just a lark. It demonstrates that different epistemological stances can be usefully represented through the figures of animals. In particular, this reading of the aviary shows that on a Platonic model, the person who has a tragic, romantic, notion of ideas, the person who imagines ideas to be lofty and free, will make mistakes more easily than the person who imagines her ideas as tame, workaday animals—as friends. The “friend of wisdom,” the philosopher, imagines ideas as dogs; thereby she imagines wisdom to reciprocate her friendship. Wisdom the dog is a trustworthy coworker in her hunt for the truth, eternally there when she needs it. With Wisdom at her side, all she needs to do is call ideas by the right name, and they will come to her assistance.

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1. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), p. 77; hereafter abbreviated *Iliad*, with passages specified by chapter and line number.

2. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), pp. 971–1223. All Platonic passages are taken from this collection; hereafter, on first mention, dialogues will be cited in endnotes identifying translator and pages in the collection; after that, passages will be cited in text by dialogue name and Stephanus number.
3. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, pp. 457–505.
4. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), p. 411; hereafter abbreviated *Odyssey*, with passages specified by chapter and line number.
5. Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, pp. 49–100.
6. Plato, *Crito*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, pp. 37–48.
7. Plato, *Meno*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, pp. 870–97.
8. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. M. J. Levitt, rev. Myles Burnyeat, in *Plato: Complete Works*, pp. 157–234.