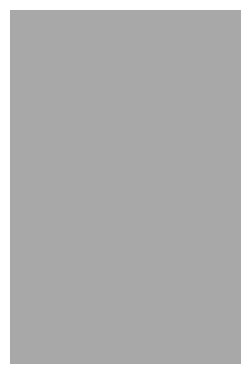


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include references to dogs or birds—are in the near background of Plato’s discussion of moral education in the *Republic*.

It is a small wonder, then, that the images 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 images, and characterize Plato’s general notion of their function in moral education and reflection. In addition, I will make some remarks about how these images 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 deters 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 images 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 buff, 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).²

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).³ 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

explicitly philosophical. In this passage, Socrates glosses these philo-

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 connects 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).⁵ 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 A

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,

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

(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)⁷: 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)⁸ as a possible model for the mind. *Theaetetus* and Socrates do not, ultimately, accept this image as

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