Of all the questions that the myth of Er raises, the question concerning its relation to the rest of the Republic is one of the most pressing. The aim of the interpretation that I propose here is to demonstrate the continuity of Socrates’ investigations throughout the Republic, including the myth of Er, by taking the theme of the choice of life as the guiding thread. Indeed, Socrates’ principal goal in relating the myth of Er is the same as in all of the complex philosophical argumentation deployed up to that point: to demonstrate that the choice of a certain *bios* is of crucial importance for the becoming of the soul. However, in spite of this continuity, the difference in the orientation of the questioning in the myth of Er and the rest of the dialogue is, at first glance, striking. Indeed, whereas the challenge put to Socrates by Glaucon and Adeimantus at the beginning of book II is to demonstrate that the just and virtuous life is intrinsically superior when it comes to securing happiness, the myth of Er is centred rather on the impact of physical, social and material conditions on the becoming of the soul—here described as being immortal and bound to a cycle of reincarnation. It is the nature of this complex thematic unity that I aim to clarify in this article.

My analysis will proceed in three stages. First, I will discuss the peculiar and apparently incongruous character of the question of choice of life in the myth of Er in relation to Socrates’ famous exhortation to care primarily for the soul. To resolve the apparent paradox that results from this comparison,
I will then endeavour to clarify, by relying on two crucial passages from books IV and VIII, the nature of the causal relationship between the choice of life conditions, actions and virtuous disposition of the soul. Finally, in light of the preceding analysis, the last part of this text will be dedicated to the protreptic function of the myth and to its possible use as a tool of self-transformation.

1. That Which Is
   the Object of Choice According to the Myth

From a thematic perspective, the myth of Er can be divided into five main parts:

1. What happened to Er after his ‘death,’ presentation of his initiatory journey (614b–615a)
2. What was taught to Er about the judgement of souls: the punishments and retributions (615a–616b)
3. Er’s vision of what supports the cosmic order (616b–617d)
4. Explanations concerning the responsibility of souls in the choice of their next incarnation, and Socrates’ general reflections on the mixing of the diverse components of a life (617d–621a)
5. Conclusion of the story, where the journey of the souls towards incarnation is described (621a–621d).

While parts 1, 2, 3, and 5 are essentially narrative, the fourth part, which concerns the choice of a life by souls preparing to be reincarnated, has clear philosophical implications. Rather than being content with the mere reporting of Er’s discourse, Socrates speaks in his own name, explaining why the choice of a model or pattern of life is of primary importance for human beings. The fact that Socrates speaks directly here in order to draw out lessons justifies paying special attention to this passage and this is why my analysis will focus on this fourth part. It is true that Socrates introduces the myth of Er in order to evoke the rewards and punishments that await the soul in the afterlife, which seems to indicate that the second part of the myth is the most essential. However, the altogether summary character

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3 I thus disagree with Druet (1998), 28, when he claims that ‘Socrate accorde tout crédit à Er; il se contente, ici et là, d’émonder un récit rendu touffu par l’abondance des détails’. Between 618b6 and 619b1, Socrates addresses himself to Glaucon and brings out the myth’s philosophical lesson. Strictly speaking, this section does not thus constitute a ‘niveau de récit,’ a ‘level of narrative’. 