Commentary on Moors

by Drew Hyland

Professor Moors has presented us with a provocative and challenging portrayal of the significant philosophic role of myth in Plato’s Republic. Moreover, he has embedded in his general account of myth in that dialogue illuminating interpretations of the three “presented” myths therein, Glaucon’s myth of Gyges, the autochthony myth or “noble lie” of Book 3, and the myth of Er in Book 10. In my commentary, I wish to essay three objectives; first, I shall indicate that many of the controversial aspects of Professor Moors’ position are ones with which I happen to agree. On these I stand ready to aid Professor Moors in the defense of his position, should he want or need such aid. Second, I shall raise a question concerning his general interpretation of myth in the Republic, not, I hasten to add, a rhetorical question but a straightforward one on which I hope Professor Moors will be able to shed light. Finally, I shall focus on one of the specific myths he discusses, the “noble lie” of Book 3, and suggest a possible expansion of his interpretation.

Professor Moors joins a growing number of Plato scholars who demonstrate the impoverishment of that interpretive standpoint, long dominant in Anglo-American scholarship, which ignores the so-called “literary” dimensions of the dialogue and focuses exclusively on the logic of the explicit “arguments” therein. He shows us that to ignore such “literary” elements as the myths is in fact to miss a central dimension of the larger argument of the dialogue as a whole. More specifically, Moors shows how the three presented myths occupy crucial transitional
points in that larger argument, serving to “offset...the structure and limitation of opinion” (page 215) in the *Republic*, thereby demonstrating as well the limits of poetry, while at the same time pointing beyond those limits to the necessity of philosophy in a well-ordered life. I find quite persuasive the interpretation of Glaucon’s Gyges myth, that it intimates the inadequacy of appearance (or the lack thereof) and of the judgments of the many, thereby demanding of Socrates that he present a defense of justice which moves beyond opinion to knowledge, beyond appearance to being, as the standard of persuasion. Even more convincing is his construal of the myth of Er as underscoring the conviction with which Book 9 concludes, that the question of justice and the choice of the good life is finally an individual more than a political issue, that the political issue of justice is, from the standpoint of philosophy, surely derivative of the individual’s choice of the right life to lead. Tangentially connected to this position, Moors takes a stand on the controversial question of the “real possibility” of the “city in speech,” arguing that as a city in speech it is not intended as “real,” that it “abstract(s) from the sensual world” (page 217), that “only in a city completely founded in discussion from the beginning can such a coincidence of political rule and philosophy be possible” (page 219), and that “it is for the purposes of discussion that the city must be regarded as possible, not for the purposes of political reform” (*ibid.*). The development of positions such as these make Professor Moors’ paper a thought-provoking and fruitful one.

I now turn to the development of my question regarding Moors’ interpretation of the general significance of myth in the *Republic*. He argues plausibly that the myths function as crucial transitions in the overall argument, in particular, that they both underscore and embody the limits of opinion and the limits of poetry while at the same time pointing to the necessity of philosophy. Since virtually all human beings begin with the realm of opinion and are raised and/or educated by poetry, myth, as an instance of poetic opinion, appeals to the level at which all human beings begin while pointing beyond that level. Thus, “each myth concerns themes of discussion at a level corresponding