

## Why Kephalos? A Significant Name in Plato's *Republic*

*David Konstan,*  
New York University

As is well known, the conversation that is recorded in Plato's *Republic* takes place in the home of Kephalos, the father of Polemarchus, who contributes to the discussion, and the orator Lysias. Kephalos was a wealthy metic, who owned an arms factory manned by numerous slaves (metics were not permitted to own land in Athens). In the charming preface to the dialogue, Socrates recounts how he was waylaid by Polemarchus and some others as he was heading back to town from Piraeus, and compelled to accompany him to his place. It is a well-wrought preface, and Plato is said to have revised the opening sentence several times before he was satisfied with it. The first word, κατέβην ("I went down"), while standard usage for heading in the direction of Piraeus, also suggests a kind of catabasis, a descent as though into the cave, as scholars have noted. But why Kephalos' house? Why there?

I wish to suggest that the name is significant, a "nom parlant" or "sprechende Name." For it suggests the word κεφαλή, "head." And the reason why Kephalos departs the scene early rather than staying on, as Polemarchus does, to participate in the following discussion is precisely that he is too much in the head.

Socrates observes that he found Kephalos much aged, and that he was sitting on a couch and leaning on a cushion. The word for "cushion" is προσκεφάλαιον, literally a "head-rest" or "pillow," and I expect that Plato chose the word to underscore the name of his host. Kephalos greets Socrates enthusiastically, and affirms that in the measure the pleasures of the body have decreased, his desire for and pleasure in (ἐπιθυμῖαι τε καὶ ἡδοναί) conversation have increased (328D). Kephalos explains that many of his contemporaries complain about old age, missing the pleasures they took in sex (τὰ φροδίσια) as well as drinking and feasting. He himself, however, feels as Sophocles once replied, when someone asked him his feelings about sex, and whether he could still make love (συγγίγνεσθαι) to a woman. Sophocles affirmed that he rather felt that he had escaped from a rough and violent master, and Kephalos agrees that he now enjoys peace and freedom (εἰρήνη γίγνεται καὶ ἐλευθερία), since his desires are no longer torment him and have relaxed (αἱ ἐπιθυμῖαι παύσωνται κατατείνουσαι καὶ χαλάσωσιν, 329C). Socrates suggests that Kephalos may bear old age more serenely because of his wealth, to which Kephalos replies that this is true, but only because it allows him to acquit himself of any debts, and so approach death in the confidence that he has committed no injustice. The dialogue now enters upon its primary theme, with Socrates raising the question, as he does also in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (4.2.18), of whether it is always right to give back something one has borrowed. With this, Kephalos

withdraws to attend to a sacrifice (an act of repaying the gods, we may note), and leaves it to Polemarchus to proceed with the elenchus or interrogation.

In a nutshell, my claim is that Kephalos is made to abandon the pursuit of the nature of justice precisely because he is no longer sufficiently driven by the kind of passion that philosophy requires. As Socrates puts it, someone who truly loved knowledge (φιλομαθής) would not be dulled or desist from erotic passion (οὐκ ἀμβλύνοιτο οὐδ' ἀπολήγοι τοῦ ἔρωτος, 6.490B), but would persist until he had grasped its true nature. The driving force behind the desire to transcend the phenomenal world and achieve a knowledge of the Forms is precisely *erôs*. There is no need to elaborate on Plato's doctrine of erotic desire here, and the way in which he sublimates ordinary *erôs*, of the sort that motivates the tyrant, to the higher passion of the mind, which seeks what is most like itself. Many scholars have discussed Plato's complex attitude in this connection.<sup>1</sup> Kephalos lacks this profound craving. Though he professes a desire for conversation (*logoi*), he is content to leave the serious discussion to younger men, whose yearning is more intense than his. He is too much the head, and a part of his soul that is necessary for philosophy has withered. Hence the name.

There may, nevertheless, be another point to Kephalos' delight in his freedom from sexual desire. Although *erôs* is at the heart of philosophical pursuit in the *Republic*, as it is too in the *Lysis* (where it is equated with *philia* and *epithumia*), the *Symposium*, and the *Phaedrus*, the *Republic* stands apart from these other dialogues in eschewing the slightest hint of pederastic passion. This is a dialogue in which there are no lovers, no beloveds; the philosophical quest has been purged of any physical dimension. If Kephalos lacks the passion to pursue higher things, and so must leave the scene, he is at the same time Plato's way of signaling that the time for mundane love affairs is over, and all the discussants, young though they may be, implicitly share Kephalos' indifference to sex.

To this suggestion, let me add a brief coda. Kenneth Dorter has suggested that the name Er, which occurs in the genitive form Ἐρός in the final myth of the *Republic*, might be intended to evoke the word ἔρωτος (p. 131).<sup>2</sup> As Dorter puts it: "we may wonder whether Plato intended his audience to hear echoes of the word *erôs* in the name Ἐρός, and chose Ἐρός as his protagonist as a way of encouraging us to use the accounts of eros and Er to complete each other." Other puns on

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<sup>1</sup> Let it suffice to cite, *exempli gratia*, Paul W. Ludwig, "Eros in the *Republic*," in G.R.F. Ferrari, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 202–231.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Dorter, "Free Will, Luck, and Happiness in the Myth of Er", *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28 (2003) 129–42.

the name Er have been suggested as well.<sup>3</sup> Without necessarily endorsing Dorter's proposal, I may observe that it makes a nice bookend to the interpretation that I have offered of the name Kephalos. The two names would thus mark the trajectory of the *Republic* from dispassionate head to the erotic desire for wisdom, hinting — though Plato never quite makes it explicit — that true knowledge involves more than cognition in the limited way we might understand it today, and is a function of the embodied soul, with its due share of passion.

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<sup>3</sup> See Pierre Destrée, “Who Is Plato’s Soldier Er? A Note on ΗΡΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΑΡΜΕΝΙΟΥ, ΤΟ ΓΕΝΟΣ ΠΑΜΦΥΛΟΥ (*Resp.* 614b3–4),” *Classical Philology* 115 (2020) 566–77, who rejects the connection with *erōs*: “in the myth of Er, the soldier Er/Ἡρός himself does not take part in the choice of life but remains a mere spectator of the scenes he reports. Thus, Er/Ἡρός can hardly be seen as representing human beings who have to choose their next life, or as personifying their core desire” (p. 568). Destrée proposes instead a “pun on the Homeric word that typically describes such a soldier, ἥρωσ, ‘hero’” (p. 570). Another suggestion involves the word for “spring” (ἵρως, the contracted genitive of ἔαρ); see Stephen Halliwell, 2007. “The Life-and-Death Journey of the Soul: Interpreting the Myth of Er,” in G.R.F. Ferrari, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 445–73, p. 448 n. 6. It is only fair to note that Destrée is not convinced by my own suggestion concerning the name Kephalos.