

Excerpt from *The Republic of Plato*
Translated by Allan Bloom (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1968)
(Book VII. 514a-521d)

"Next, then," I [Socrates] said, "make an image of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind. See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets." 514a

"I see," he [Glaucón] said.

"Then also see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material; as is to be expected, some of the carriers utter sounds while others are silent." 515a

"It's a strange image," he said, "and strange prisoners you're telling of."

"They're like us," I said. "For in the first place, do you suppose such men would have seen anything of themselves and one another other than the shadows cast by the fire on the side of the cave facing them?"

"How could they," he said, "if they had been compelled to keep their heads motionless throughout 'life?'" b

"And what about the things that are carried by? Isn't it the same with them?"

"Of course."

"If they were able to discuss things with one another, don't you believe they would hold that they are naming these things going by before them that they see?"¹

"Necessarily."

"And what if the prison also had an echo from the side facing them? Whenever one of the men passing by happens to utter a sound, do you suppose they would believe that anything other than the passing shadow was uttering the sound?"

"No, by Zeus," he said. "I don't."

"Then most certainly," I said, "such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things." c

"Most necessarily," he said.

"Now consider," I said, "what their release and healing from bonds and folly would be like if something of this sort were by nature to happen to them. Take a man who is released and suddenly compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light; and who, moreover, in doing all this is in pain and, because he is dazzled, is unable to make out those things whose shadows he saw before. What do you suppose he'd say if someone were to tell him that before he saw silly nothings, while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what *is* and more turned toward beings, he sees more correctly; and, in particular, showing him each of the things that pass by, were to compel the man to answer his questions about what they are? Don't you suppose he'd be at a loss and believe that what was seen before is truer than what is now shown?" d

"Yes," he said, "by far."

"And, if he compelled him to look at the light itself, would his eyes hurt and would he flee, turning away to those things that he is able to make out and hold them to be really e

clearer than what is being shown?"

"So he would," he said.

"And if," I said, "someone dragged him away from there by force along the rough, steep, upward way and didn't let him go before he had dragged him out into the light of the sun, wouldn't he be distressed and annoyed at being so dragged? And when he came to the light, wouldn't he have his eyes full of its beam and be unable to see even one of the things now said to be true?" 516a

"No, he wouldn't," he said, "at least not right away."

"Then I suppose he'd have to get accustomed, if he were going to see what's up above. At first he'd most easily make out the shadows; and after that the phantoms of the human beings and the other things in water; and, later, the things themselves. And from there he could turn to beholding the things in heaven and heaven itself, more easily at night—looking at the light of the stars and the moon—than by day—looking at the sun and sunlight." b

"Of course."

"Then finally I suppose he would be able to make out the sun—not its appearances in water or some alien place, but the sun itself by itself in its own region—and see what it's like."

"Necessarily," he said.

"And after that he would already be in a position to conclude about it that this is the source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing." c

"It's plain," he said, "that this would be his next step."

"What then? When he recalled his first home and the wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners in that time, don't you suppose he would consider himself happy for the change and pity the others?"

"Quite so."

"And if in that time there were among them any honors, praises, and prizes for the man who is sharpest at making out the things that go by, and most remembers which of them are accustomed to pass before, which after, and which at the same time as others, and who is thereby most able to divine what is going to come, in your opinion would he be desirous of them and envy those who are honored and hold power among these men? Or, rather, would he be affected as Homer says and want very much 'to be on the soil, a serf to another man, to a portionless man,'² and to undergo anything whatsoever rather than to opine those things and live that way?" d

"Yes," he said, "I suppose he would prefer to undergo everything rather than live that way." e

"Now reflect on this too," I said. "If such a man were to come down again and sit in the same seat, on coming suddenly from the sun wouldn't his eyes get infected with darkness?"

"Very much so," he said.

"And if he once more had to compete with those perpetual prisoners in forming judgments about those shadows while his vision was still dim, before his eyes had recovered, and if the time needed for getting accustomed were not at all short, wouldn't he be the source of laughter, and wouldn't it be said of him that he went up and came back with his eyes corrupted, and that it's not even worth trying to go up? And if they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up, wouldn't they kill him?" 517a

"No doubt about it," he said.

"Well, then, my dear Glaucon," I said, "this image as a whole must be connected with what was said before. Liken the domain revealed through sight to the prison home, and the b

light of the fire in it to the sun's power; and, in applying the going up and the seeing of what's above to the soul's journey up to the intelligible place, you'll not mistake my expectation, since you desire to hear it. A god doubtless knows if it happens to be true. At all events, this is the way the phenomena look to me: in the knowable the last thing to be seen, and that with considerable effort, is the *idea* of the good; but once seen, it must be concluded that this is in fact the cause of all that is right and fair in everything—in the visible it gave birth to light and its sovereign; in the intelligible, itself sovereign, it provided truth and intelligence—and that the man who is going to act prudently in private or in public must see it."

c

"I, too, join you in supposing that," he said, "at least in the way I can."

"Come, then," I said, "and join me in supposing this, too, and don't be surprised that the men who get to that point aren't willing to mind the business of human beings, but rather that their souls are always eager to spend their time above. Surely that's likely, if indeed this, too, follows the image of which I told before."

d

"Of course it's likely," he said.

"And what about this? Do you suppose it is anything surprising," I said, "if a man, come from acts of divine contemplation to the human things, is graceless and looks quite ridiculous when—with his sight still dim and before he has gotten sufficiently accustomed to the surrounding darkness—he is compelled in courts or elsewhere to contest about the shadows of the just or the representations of which they are the shadows, and to dispute about the way these things are understood by men who have never seen justice itself?"

e

"It's not at all surprising," he said.

"But if a man were intelligent," I said, "he would remember that there are two kinds of disturbances of the eyes, stemming from two sources—when they have been transferred from light to darkness and when they have been transferred from darkness to light. And if he held that these same things happen to a soul too, whenever he saw one that is confused and unable to make anything out, he wouldn't laugh without reasoning but would go on to consider whether, come from a brighter life, it is in darkness for want of being accustomed, or whether, going from greater lack of learning to greater brightness, it is dazzled by the greater brilliance. And then he would deem the first soul happy for its condition and its life, while he would pity the second. And, if he wanted to laugh at the second soul, his laughing in this case would make him less ridiculous himself than would his laughing at the soul which has come from above out of the light."

518a

b

"What you say is quite sensible," he said.

"Then, if this is true," I said, "we must hold the following about these things: education is not what the professions of certain men assert it to be. They presumably assert that they put into the soul knowledge that isn't in it, as though they were putting sight into blind eyes."

c

"Yes," he said, "they do indeed assert that."

"But the present argument, on the other hand," I said, "indicates that this power is in the soul of each,³ and that the instrument with which each learns—just as an eye is not able to turn toward the light from the dark without the whole body—must be turned around from that which is coming into being together with the whole soul until it is able to endure looking at that which *is* and the brightest part of that which *is*. And we affirm that this is the good, don't we?"

d

"Yes."

"There would, therefore," I said, "be an art of this turning around, concerned with the way in which this power can most easily and efficiently be turned around, not an art of producing sight in it. Rather, this art takes as given that sight is there, but not rightly turned nor looking at what it ought to look at, and accomplishes this object."

"So it seems," he said.

"Therefore, the other virtues of a soul, as they are called, are probably somewhat close to those of the body. For they are really not there beforehand and are later produced by habits and exercises, while the virtue of exercising prudence is more than anything somehow more divine, it seems; it never loses its power, but according to the way it is turned, it becomes useful and helpful or, again, useless and harmful. Or haven't you yet reflected about the men who are said to be vicious but wise, how shrewdly their petty soul sees and how sharply it distinguishes those things toward which it is turned, showing that it doesn't have poor vision although it is compelled to serve vice; so that the sharper it sees, the more evil it accomplishes?" 519a

"Most certainly," he said.

"However," I said, "if this part of such a nature were trimmed in earliest childhood and its ties of kinship with becoming were cut off—like leaden weights, which eating and such pleasures as well as their refinements naturally attach to the soul and turn its vision downward—if, I say, it were rid of them and turned around toward the true things, this same part of the same human beings would also see them most sharply, just as it does those things toward which it now is turned," b

"It's likely," he said.

"And what about this? Isn't it likely," I said, "and necessary, as a consequence of what was said before, that those who are without education and experience of truth would never be adequate stewards of a city, nor would those who have been allowed to spend their time in education continuously to the end—the former because they don't have any single goal in life at which they must aim in doing everything they do in private or in public, the latter because they won't be willing to act, believing they have emigrated to a colony on the Isles of the Blessed⁴ while they are still alive?" c

"True," he said.

"Then our job as founders," I said, "is to compel the best natures to go to the study which we were saying before is the greatest, to see the good and to go up that ascent; and, when they have gone up and seen sufficiently, not to permit them what is now permitted." d

"What's that?"

"To remain there," I said, "and not be willing to go down again among those prisoners or share their labors and honors, whether they be slighter or more serious."

"What?" he said. "Are we to do them an injustice, and make them live a worse life when a better is possible for them?"

"My friend, you have again forgotten," I said, "that it's not the concern of law that any one class in the city fare exceptionally well, but it contrives to bring this about for the whole city, harmonizing the citizens by persuasion and compulsion, making them share with one another the benefit that each class is able to bring to the commonwealth. And it produces such men in the city not in order to let them turn whichever way each wants, but in order that it may use them in binding the city together," e

"That's true," he said. "I did forget."

"Well, then, Glaucon," I said, "consider that we won't be doing injustice to the philosophers who come to be among us, but rather that we will say just things to them while compelling them besides to care for and guard the others. We'll say that when such men come to be in the other cities it is fitting for them not to participate in the labors of those cities. For they grow up spontaneously against the will of the regime in each; and a nature that grows by itself and doesn't owe its rearing to anyone has justice on its side when it is not eager to pay off the price of rearing to anyone. 'But you we have begotten for yourselves and for the rest of the city like leaders and kings in hives; you have been better and more perfectly educated and are more able to participate in both lives. So you must go 520a b

down, each in his turn, into the common dwelling of the others and get habituated along with them to seeing the dark things. And, in getting habituated to it, you will see ten thousand times better than the men there, and you'll know what each of the phantoms is, and of what it is a phantom, because you have seen the truth about fair, just, and good things. And thus, the city will be governed by us and by you in a state of waking, not in a dream as the many cities nowadays are governed by men who fight over shadows with one another and form factions for the sake of ruling, as though it were some great good. But the truth is surely this: that city in which those who are going to rule are least eager to rule is necessarily governed in the way that is best and freest from faction, while the one that gets the opposite kind of rulers is governed in the opposite way.”

“Most certainly,” he said.

“Do you suppose our pupils will disobey us when they hear this and be unwilling to join in the labors of the city, each in his turn, while living the greater part of the time with one another in the pure region?”

“Impossible,” he said. “For surely we shall be laying just injunctions on just men. However, each of them will certainly approach ruling as a necessary thing—which is the opposite of what is done by those who now rule in every city.”

“That’s the way it is, my comrade,” I said. “If you discover a life better than ruling for those who are going to rule, it is possible that your well-governed city will come into being. For here alone will the really rich rule, rich not in gold but in those riches required by the happy man, rich in a good and prudent life. But if beggars, men hungering for want of private goods, go to public affairs supposing that in them they must seize the good, it isn’t possible. When ruling becomes a thing fought over, such a war—a domestic war, one within the family—destroys these men themselves and the rest of the city as well.”

“That’s very true,” he said.

“Have you,” I said, “any other life that despises political offices other than that of true philosophy?”

“No, by Zeus,” he said. “I don’t.”

“But men who aren’t lovers of ruling must go⁵ to it; otherwise, rival lovers will fight.”

“Of course.”

“Who else will you compel to go to the guarding of the city than the men who are most prudent in those things through which a city is best governed, and who have other honors and a better life than the political life?”

“No one else,” he said.

“Do you want us now to consider in what way such men will come into being and how one will lead them up to the light, just as some men are said to have gone from Hades up to the gods?”⁶

“How could I not want to?” he said.

“Then, as it seems, this wouldn’t be the twirling of a shell⁷ but the turning of a soul around from a day that is like night to the true day; it is that ascent to what *is* which we shall truly affirm to be philosophy.”

“Most certainly.”

“Then mustn’t we consider what studies have such a power?”

521a

Endnotes

1. It is not certain whether the Greek was “these things going by ...” or “these things present...” An alternative manuscript reading would make the sentence: “... they would hold that these things that they see are the beings.”
2. Cf. 386c, note 1. [That note gives the citation “Odyssey, XI, 489–491. Achilles speaks” to explain Socrates’ quotation at 386c: “I would rather be on the soil, a serf to another,/To a man without lot whose means of life are not great,/Than rule over all the dead who have perished.”]
3. J. H. Kells (“Assimilation of Predicate Material to the Object,” *Philologus*, Band 108, Heft 1½, 1964) makes a persuasive argument that this clause should be translated: “... that this power is the power which already exists in teach man’s soul ...” My interpretation of the sentence as a whole follows his.
4. A happy place where good men live forever. In some accounts they went there before dying, in others afterward.
5. “To go to” can have the sense of “to woo,” which is obviously also intended in this context.
6. The reference is not clear. There are several tales of men who died and later became gods; notable among them were Heracles, Pollux, and Asclepius.
7. This refers to a game, in the playing of which a group is divided into two parts—one which runs away and the another which gives chase. Who does what is determined by twirling a shell, one side of which is black and the other white. Twirling the shell is equivalent to tossing a coin (cf. *Phaedrus*, 241b).