

From Book 7 of the *Republic*, the allegory, excerpted, freely translated and paraphrased:

514a-515d: “After all that,” I said, “compare our nature of education and non-education to an experience like this. Picture people living in a cave, underground...in which they’ve been bound from childhood by the legs and neck, so that they’re stuck in the same spot, and see only straight ahead because fetters around their heads make it so that they can’t turn them. And light comes from a fire above and some ways behind them, and in between the fire and the prisoners runs a path up above, along which a wall is built, like puppet shows have ... Picture people carrying all kinds manufactured objects that protrude above the wall [like the puppets do]--shaped like people and animals...”

“That’s a weird image,” he said, “and weird prisoners.”

“They’re like us,” I said.

“Would any of them ever have seen anything of themselves or one another except the shadows cast by the fire on the wall of the cave before them?...Or of the carried objects?...So if they were able to talk to one another, don’t you suppose they’d think that in naming what they saw they’d be naming the objects themselves?...”

“By God, I do,” he said.

“Then,” I said, “in every way, such people would not think there was any reality apart from the shadows of the manufactured objects.”

“They’d have to,” he said.

“Look at what it would be to release and heal them from these bonds and this insanity, if by nature something like this happened, if one time one of them were released and made to get up suddenly and to turn around and walk, and look up toward the light...

“Wouldn’t he think that the things he saw before were more real?”

“Far more real.” ...

“And if,” I said, “someone dragged him forcibly out of here up the rough and steep ascent, not letting go until he pulled him out into the light of the sun, don’t you think he’d suffer pain and also be really angry to be dragged like that, and when he got out into the light of the sun, don’t you think with his eyes full of the beams he wouldn’t be able to see a single thing even though now they’re called real?”...

516 c-d[But once he could see], when he remembered his first home, and what ‘wisdom’ was there among his fellow-prisoners, wouldn’t he consider himself blessed in the change and pity them?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“And if there had been honors and tributes among them which they bestowed on one another and prizes for the one who was quickest to make out the shadows as they pass and best able to remember their customary precedences, sequences and co-existences, and so most successful at guessing what was to come, do you think he would be very keen about such rewards, and that he would envy and emulate those who were honored by these prisoners and lorded it among them...”

518b-d: Then education isn’t what people say it is. What they say is that they can put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes. ... But our present argument indicates that the true analogy for this indwelling power in the soul and the instrument whereby each of us apprehends is that of an eye that could not be converted to the light from the darkness except by turning the whole body. Even so this organ of knowledge must be turned around from the world of becoming together with the entire soul...until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being. And this, we say is the good, do we not?

Of this very thing then there might be an art, an art of...conversion of the soul, not an art of producing vision in it, but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should, an art of bringing this about.