'Yes, of course.'
'So if they were able to talk to one another, don't you think they'd believe that the things they were giving names to were the things they could see passing?'
'Yes, they'd be bound to.'
'What if the prison had an echo from the wall in front of them? Every time one of the people passing by spoke, do you suppose they'd believe the source of the sound to be anything other than the passing shadow?'
'No, that's exactly what they would think.'
'All in all, then, what people in this situation would take for truth would be nothing more than the shadows of the manufactured objects.'
'Necessarily.'
'Suppose nature brought this state of affairs to an end,' I said. 'Think what their release from their chains and the cure for their ignorance would be like. When one of them was untied, and compelled suddenly to stand up, turn his head, start walking, and look towards the light, he'd find all these things painful. Because of the glare he'd be unable to see the things whose shadows he used to see before. What do you suppose he'd say if he was told that what he used to see before was of no importance, whereas now his eyesight was better, since he was closer to what is, and looking at things which more truly are? Suppose further that each of the passing objects was pointed out to him, and that he was asked what it was, and compelled to answer. Don't you think he'd be confused? Wouldn't he believe the things he saw before to be more true than what was being pointed out to him now?'
'Yes, he would. Much more true.'
'If he was forced to look at the light itself, wouldn't it hurt his eyes? Wouldn't he turn away, run back to the things he could see? Wouldn't he think those things really were clearer than what was being pointed out?'
'Yes,' he said.
'And if he was dragged out of there by force, up the steep and difficult path, with no pause until he had been dragged right out into the sunlight, wouldn't he find this dragging painful? Wouldn't he resent it? And when he came into the light, with his eyes filled with the glare, would he be able to see a single one of the things he is now told are true?'
'No, he wouldn't. Not at first.'
'He'd need to acclimatise himself, I imagine, if he were going to see things up there. To start with, he'd find shadows the easiest things to look
at. After that, reflections — of people and other things — in water. The things themselves would come later, and from those he would move on to the heavenly bodies and the heavens themselves. He’d find it easier to look at the light of the stars and the moon by night than look at the sun, and the light of the sun, by day.'

‘Of course.’

‘The last thing he’d be able to look at, presumably, would be the sun. Not its image, in water or some location that is not its own, but the sun itself. He’d be able to look at it by itself, in its own place, and see it as it really was.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘unquestionably.’

‘At that point he would work out that it was the sun which caused the seasons and the years, which governed everything in the visible realm, and which was in one way or another responsible for everything they used to see.’

‘That would obviously be the next stage.’

‘Now, suppose he were reminded of the place where he lived originally, of what passed for wisdom there, and of his former fellow-prisoners. Don’t you think he would congratulate himself on the change? Wouldn’t he feel sorry for them?’

‘Indeed he would.’

‘Back in the cave they might have had rewards and praise and prizes for the person who was quickest at identifying the passing shapes, who had the best memory for the ones which came earlier or later or simultaneously, and who as a result was best at predicting what was going to come next. Do you think he would feel any desire for these prizes? Would he envy those who were respected and powerful there? Or would he feel as Achilles does in Homer? Would he much prefer “to labour as a common serf, serving a man with nothing to his name,” putting up with anything to avoid holding those opinions and living that life?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘If you ask me, he’d be prepared to put up with anything to avoid that way of life.’

‘There’s another question I’d like to ask you,’ I said. ‘Suppose someone like that came back down into the cave and took up his old seat. Wouldn’t he find, coming straight in from the sunlight, that his eyes were swamped by the darkness?’

1 *Odyssey* 11.489–491. The ghost of Achilles is speaking to Odysseus in the underworld. The quotation is among those censored in Book 3 (586e).
shadows of justice or the statues which cast those shadows, or to argue about the way they are understood by those who have never seen justice itself?

'That is not the least surprising,' he said.

'Anyone with any sense,' I said, 'would remember that people's eyesight can be impaired in two quite different ways, and for two quite different reasons. There's the change from light to darkness, and the change from darkness to light. He might then take it that the same is true of the soul, so that when he saw a soul in difficulties, unable to see, he would not laugh mindlessly, but would ask whether it had come from some brighter life and could not cope with the unfamiliar darkness, or whether it had come from greater ignorance into what was brighter, and was now dazzled by the glare. One would congratulate on what it had seen, and on its way of life. The other one would pity. Or if he chose to laugh at it, his laughter would be less absurd than laughter directed at the soul which had come from the light above.'

'Yes, what you say is entirely reasonable.'

'Well,' I said, 'if it is true, there's one conclusion we can't avoid.

Education is not what some people proclaim it to be. What they say, roughly speaking, is that they are able to put knowledge into souls where none was before. Like putting sight into eyes which were blind.'

'Yes, that is what they say.'

'Whereas our present account indicates that this capacity in every soul, this instrument by means of which each person learns, is like an eye which can only be turned away from the darkness and towards the light by turning the whole body. The entire soul has to turn with it, away from what is coming to be, until it is able to bear the sight of what is, and in particular the brightest part of it. This is the part we call the good, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Education, then,' I said, 'would be the art of directing this instrument, of finding the easiest and most effective way of turning it round. Not the art of putting the power of sight into it, but the art which assumes it possesses this power — albeit incorrectly aligned, and looking in the wrong direction — and contrives to make it look in the right direction.'

'Yes,' he said. 'It looks as if that is what education is.'

'So while the other things we call virtues of the soul may perhaps be quite close to the virtues of the body, since it's true they are not there to start with, but are implanted by custom and habit, the virtue of rational thought is different. It seems that it really is made of some more divine material, which never loses its power, but becomes useful and beneficial, or useless and harmful, depending on which way it is facing. Think of those people who have the reputation of being evil but clever. Have you never noticed the beady little eyes their souls have, how sharp they are at picking out the things they are after? This suggests that their soul has nothing wrong with its eyesight, but that it is coerced into the service of evil. The more acute its vision is, therefore, the more evil it does.'

'That is certainly true.'

'And yet,' I said, 'if this soul, the soul belonging to a nature of this sort, had been hammered into shape from earliest childhood, it might have had

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struck from it the leaden weights of birth and of becoming. These cling
to it as a result of eating, glutony, and pleasures of that sort, and direct
the gaze of the soul downward. If it had rid itself of these weights, and
turned towards the truth, then the same soul, in the same people, would
be able to see things which are true with the same clarity as it sees the
things it is directed towards at the moment.'

'Very likely.'

'And isn't something else very likely?' I said. 'In fact absolutely certain, on the basis of the discussion so far? Neither those who are uneducated
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and have no experience of the truth, nor those who are allowed to remain in education until their life's end, could ever manage the city properly. The uneducated ones lack that single mark in their life at which all their actions, whether in private life or in public life, must aim. The others, left to themselves, will never act, because they think they have emigrated while still alive to the islands of the blest.'

'True,' he said.

'It is up to us, then, as founders of the city, to compel the best natures
to get as far as that study which we said earlier was the most important to make that ascent, and view the good. And when they have made it, and
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seen all they need to see, we must not allow them to do what they are allowed to do at the moment.'

'What is that?'

'Remain there,' I said, 'and refuse to come back down again to the prisoners we were talking about, or share in their hardships and rewards — be they trivial or substantial.'

2 The islands of the blest were in traditional belief a place reserved for the afterlife of heroes. Unlike Homeric shades, heroes were permitted to retain the full range of their faculties, and to engage after death, for eternity, in the activities they enjoyed in life. 3 509a.