PRISON-BREAKING FROM THE CAVE

Abstract: This paper examines the philosophical significance of nature (‘φύσις’) in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. The word is used in the protasis of the conditional clause at 515b-c where Socrates proposes to inquire into “what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly if in the course of nature (φύσει) something of this sort should happen to them.” This instance of “nature” has been a matter of philological and philosophical debate, with attention paid principally to the narrow passage of the Allegory for reconstructing Plato’s meaning. This paper wages an argument from the standpoint of the argument of the dialogue as a whole, showing that a particular reading of ‘φύσις’ in the passage coheres with the conception of human nature in the *Republic*’s moral psychology. The discussion begins with consideration of the difficulties presented by the manuscript tradition, which sees variation in the recording of the clause in question. Then the attempts by scholars to resolve the problem—or else to express their inability to resolve it—are addressed and shown to be unsatisfactory. Finally, an interpretation that fits the mention of ‘φύσις’ together with Plato’s conception of the philosophic nature, described in Book VI of the dialogue, is offered.

Keywords: Plato, Republic, Nature, Allegory of the Cave

There are three monumental images of prison-breaking in Plato's work. The first is in the counterfactual scenario entertained in the *Crito*: the fantasy of Socrates escaping his prison and his fate (*Crito* 44e-46a). Socrates argues with our fantasy, persuading us that neither justice nor the good lies in its realization. The second such image is the poetical simile of the body as the prison of the soul. The "lusts of the flesh" imprison the soul, Socrates says, and philosophy seeks to set it free (*Phaedo* 82e-83a). Freedom is fully realized only upon death, however, for it is death that separates soul from body (*Phaedo* 64c). Thus, Socrates seems little disposed to encourage, in his reader, a desire for prison-breaking.

But the third prison-break image, by contrast, is whole-heartedly endorsed. It is the moment of liberation for one lucky soul fettered, by chains and by ignorance, at the bottom of an allegorical cave (*Republic* 514a-515c).[1] The release of this prisoner, Socrates argues, is the only hope that any of us can have for rest from unending evils in cities (473c-e). Far from the penalties of injustice and death, this prison-break delivers us to happiness and harmony.

The Allegory of the Cave is easily one of–if not *the*–most memorable passages of Plato's work. It is also easily one of the most disputed, with scholars vying for their various interpretations of (i) how the allegory corresponds with the Divided Line;[2] (ii) whom Socrates means to be represented by the prisoners at the bottom of the cave, on one hand, and the

[1] Though "lucky," it is apparent that this individual experiences the freedom with mixed pleasure. They are "compelled" to move from their station once their bonds are broken, and they undergo extremes of confusion and enlightenment in their ascent to the sunlight outside of the cave.

[2] Bloom 1968, 405-406; Irwin 1995, 275-279; Karasmanis 1988; Malcolm 1962; Raven 1953.

puppeteers partially responsible for their beliefs, on the other;[3] and (iii) what kind of education and what objects of learning are appealed to in the account of the ascent from the cave by that one lucky soul who is set free.[4] These debates have highlighted the philosophical richness of the allegory as well as its clever evasiveness. Though most memorable and most impactful, the image is also frustratingly resistant to final comprehension.

The present discussion wades into these deep waters of interpretation in relation to a very narrow passage in the allegory. It is the moment when Socrates has his interlocutors imagine the seeming impossible: the release of one of those individuals fettered at the bottom of the cave.

> σκόπει δή, ἦν δ᾽ ἐγώ, αὐτῶν λύσιν τε καὶ ἴασιν τῶν τε δεσμῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφροσύνης, οἵα τις ἂν εἴη, εἰ φύσει τοιάδε συμβαίνοι αὐτοῖς: ὁπότε τις λυθείη καὶ ἀναγκάζοιτο ἐξαίφνης ἀνίστασθαί τε καὶ περιάγειν τὸν αὐχένα καὶ βαδίζειν καὶ πρὸς τὸ φῶς ἀναβλέπειν.
>
> "Consider, then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly if in the course of nature something of this sort should happen to them: When one was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn his head around and walk and to lift up his eyes to the light." (*Rep.* 515c)[5]

From this moment of release, the newly freed prisoner is submitted to a different kind of compulsion. He is forced to endure a journey of enlightenment that corrects his ἀφροσύνη.[6] The

[3] Cross and Woozley 1964; Ferguson 1922; Wilberding 2004.

[4] Malcolm 1962 and 1981; Wilson 1976.

[5] Translations of the *Republic* are based on Grube, rev. by Reeve, in Cooper 1997.

[6] Some scholars understand those bound at the bottom of the cave to be in a state worse than mere ignorance, of having perverse beliefs. They have *apaideusia*, what Wilberding 2004, 134

full educational ascent is not what concerns me, though. Instead, the very moment of release—the moment that Annas identifies as "admittedly mysterious"—is the focal point of this discussion.[7]

What causes the prisoner's chains to break? Does he break them? Or does someone else break them? Or do they inexplicably fail? The text does not resolve this query. Socrates depicts the action in the passive. "Someone is released" (τις λυθείη) and "is necessitated suddenly to stand up" (ἀναγκάζοιτο ἐξαίφνης ἀνίστασθαί). Many scholars have proposed that there must be "someone" exerting the force of that second passive verb.[8] That may be. There is good reason—based on inference from the value that Plato places on the Socratic activity of elenchus in all of the dialogues—to understand a separate individual, and specifically a Socratic guide, as the agent of the freed prisoner being made to stand up.[9] But how can we explain the prior step, the loosing of the fetters?

Some accounts transpose the (already imagined) agent of the second passive verb onto the first, making the individual who compels the released prisoner to stand up also act as

---

summarizes as "the complete denial of moral objectivity." This is, or is very like, the epistemic condition of the lovers of sights and sounds (476c). This is the miseducation that Socrates says, at the beginning of the allegory, is what the allegory is about, alongside *paideia*.

[7] Annas 1981, 253: "After the first (admittedly mysterious) release from bonds it requires the person's own utmost effort to toil upwards out of the Cave."

[8] For example, Barney 2008 and Weiss 2012.

[9] See Elliott 1967 and Irwin 1995, 276-279 for such readings.

releaser.[10] Others defy the passivity of the verb, making the prisoner a breaker of his own bonds.[11] Still others make the cause not a particular agent but, rather, a process of education.[12] These latter interpretations are especially difficult to reconcile with the image because they

[10] Weiss 2012, 57 says "Socrates envisions a releaser who compels (515d, 515e), forces (515e), and drags (515e-516a) his hapless victim out of the Cave." Ferguson 1922, 23 says, "The rescue must therefore be made by force, by the *charis biaios* of a physician from without. The *agon* must not be softened into a natural process due to some divine change. Rescue comes from a method of education." Likewise for Bloom 1968, 406. Barney 2008, 363 makes the τις of the line refer to a releaser: "the compulsion is said to be exerted by some agent—a mysterious τις, 'someone', at 515c6, who releases the prisoner and compels him to turn around."

[11] Annas 1981, 253, despite acknowledging that the moment is "admittedly mysterious," sees the prisoner breaking his own chains: "The person who starts to think is shown as someone who breaks the bonds of conformity to ordinary experience and received opinion, and the progress of enlightenment is portrayed as a journey from darkness into light."

[12] For example, Karasmanis 1988, 162 says that "the education begins from the moment in which the prisoner is released, that is, within the Cave (515c). Plato indicates this by saying that the rescue of the prisoner is done by force, and the rescued man is perplexed and dazzled (515d-516a, cf. 518a). Education requires guidance, even compulsion." Irwin 1995, 275-279 reads this way, as well as Reeve 1988, 51 who suggests a variety of educational programs–not only Socratic elenchus–as liberators: "When, through training in a craft, or through training in music and gymnastics, a prisoner is purged of his unnecessary appetites, he is freed from his bonds and 'turned around.'"

require a process prior to the moment of release that culminates in the release itself. The release is depicted as too instantaneous and the environment at the bottom of the cave too deprived of opportunity for there to feasibly be an educational process prior to the release.[13] Even if we grant that the sudden emergence of a releaser could explain the disruption, we need still to account for *why this prisoner* and *why now*.[14]

This paper proposes an alternative and new reading: the fetters break because this particular prisoner is special in his nature. That is, there are inborn, immutable qualities of this individual that cause the fetters at the bottom of the cave not to hold him. Accordingly, the passive voice of the verb λυθείη should be understood as, effectively, agentless. It is not that nothing causes the loosing of the fetters—for the nature of the prisoner is to be understood as cause—but that *no person* causes the loosing. The release occurs because the nature capable of escape has at last been born.

NATURE IN THE CAVE

The role of nature in the allegory is manifestly important, but subtle and enigmatic all the same. As many scholars have emphasized, Socrates frames the allegory as being about "our nature" (τὴν ἡμετέραν φύσιν) in relation to education and miseducation (514a).[15] There is a totalizing

[13] Storey 2022, 22 shows that the initial release should not be considered internal to the educational process, for the ascent facilitated by mathematical learning comes "*after* the prisoner's release and turn towards the statues."

[14] Weiss 2012 proposes that the impetus is a desire to start Kallipolis.

[15] Every interpretation of the allegory must account for and make sense of this opening claim. For especially interesting ways of attending to it, see Hall 1980, 80; Wilberding 2004; Zamosc

generality to the allegory, then. It illuminates something about all of us (hence ἡμετέραν) and pertains not to some incidental feature, but our φύσις. Translations and interpretations that would have us understand this ἡμετέραν φύσιν as merely prefiguring the 515a5 assertion that the prisoners are "like us," are deflating the sense of the phrase.[16] Socrates does not intend for us to think of the image as mirroring only the unfortunate features of our current political environment, but to be accounting for the human condition.[17]

The next reference to φύσις occurs in the narrow passage with which this paper is concerned. There are textual emendations that must be accounted for here. Socrates asks us to consider the release (λύσιν) and healing (ἴασιν) of their (αὐτῶν) chains and ignorance (τῶν τε δεσμῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφροσύνης), what sort of thing it would be like if some such thing by nature came to pass for them (οἷα τις ἂν εἴη, εἰ φύσει τοιάδε συμβαίνοι αὐτοῖς).[18] Present focus is particularly the word 'φύσις' appearing in the dative here, but there is a dispute regarding the 'εἰ' that appears just before it, and the dispute must be acknowledged before any interpretative

---

2017. Capuccino 2021,431-2 considers that the 'ἡμετέραν' might be indexed to the interlocutors (Socrates and Glaucon) and that, because they are philosophers, it may refer to philosophers generally by extension, but she notes that Socrates never refers to himself as such, nor to his interlocutors, thus making such declaration of personal possession of the philosophical nature unlikely here.

[16] See Smith 1997 for an examination of what is meant by the "like us" claim.

[17] See Hall 1980 for emphasis on the human condition.

[18] The Grube-Reeve translation appears to opt for Schleiermacher's correction with its choice of "what it would naturally be like, if something like this came to pass."

progress can be made. The 'εἰ' is testified by manuscripts A (Parisinus Graecus 1807, 9th century AD, with interlineal and marginal additions)[19] and F (Vindobonesis, suppl. Gr. 39, late 13th-14th centuries AD), which are undisputed primary sources.[20] But it is omitted by manuscript D (Marcianus Graecus 185, coll. 576, ca. 12th century AD), and it is replaced with 'ἢ' by Iamblichus. Schleiermacher corrected the text to 'φύσει εἰ', suggesting that the εἰ, in its position after 'φύσει' had been dropped by haplography. This difference of position is significant, for it determines which clause takes the 'φύσει' as adverb. Socrates has us imagine either "what sort of thing it would be like by nature if some such thing came to pass" (οἵα τις ἂν εἴη φύσει, εἰ τοιάδε συμβαίνοι αὐτοῖς) or else "what sort of thing it would be like if some such thing by nature came to pass" (οἵα τις ἂν εἴη, εἰ φύσει τοιάδε συμβαίνοι αὐτοῖς).[21] That is, "by nature" modifies the apodosis and asserts that the results of the protasis being realized will be natural, or else it modifies the circumstances of the protasis and frames the inquiry according to a very specific condition (i.e. something occurring "by nature").

In either case, the meaning of φύσει remains to be mined, but clarity in how nature figures in the thought experiment would be helpful in that mission. Slings hopelessly concludes

---

[19] These details of the manuscripts are drawn verbatim from the Loeb edition edited by Jeffrey Henderson (2013, xxv).

[20] Boter 1989, 65. Slings's apparatus amends Burnet's by noting that the version of manuscript A in question is A^{pc} (A *post correctionem*), which means that εἰ was added in what Boter calls "correction-ink", i.e. added after the manuscript was first produced (Boter 1989, 83).

[21] The Grube-Reeve translation renders this as "what it would naturally be like, if something like this came to pass," inexplicably placing the φύσει in the clause prior to where Plato placed it.

that "φύσει omnino suspectum."[22] But he nevertheless perpetuates the transmission of the texts Apc and F: with the φύσει following the εἰ and internal to the protasis clause. This discussion follows the same orthodoxy. Accordingly, Socrates is understood as inquiring into what the prison-break would be like in the circumstance of the prison-break occurring "naturally" or "by nature" or "by the aid of nature," however our further analysis of the word bears out.

Adam 1902, *ad loc* interprets "nature" here as a reminder that the conditions at the bottom of the cave are "against nature," echoing Socrates' earlier examination of upbringings that are concordant with nature (κατὰ φύσιν) or else against it (παρὰ φύσιν) (456c).[23] To be deprived of understanding and intellectually unfree is "against nature" for human beings, given that their good consists in the well-functioning of the rational part of their souls. "Their release is therefore a return to their nature, and therefore may be described as 'natural.'"[24] On this reading, the φύσει of the passage is reconciled to the first mention of φύσις in the allegory—"our nature" (τὴν ἡμετέραν φύσιν)—by establishing nature as a normative concept. It is the correct or best

[22] We might expect Slings to say it is the εἰ that is doubted since it is the word omitted, added, and moved about in the text, but the position of the φύσει makes a difference to the sentence in a way that makes it the object of suspicion instead.

[23] See also 375e, 444d, and 466d.

[24] Adam 1902, *ad loc* 515c6. Barney 2008, 358 concurs with this interpretation of φύσει in the passage, but concedes that it is "enigmatic."

condition for us to be in, and the allegory provides an examination of how education and miseducation advance or diminish that correct condition.[25]

Hall 1980 complicates this interpretation of φύσει and advances it. Observing that the argument of the dialogue does not in fact support understanding ignorance as unnatural or "against nature" for the vast majority of individuals, Hall argues that the normative force of "natural" in the passage cannot pertain to individual psyches, but instead must pertain to the collective. It is unnatural for a community to be deprived of knowledge through being deprived of a philosopher ruler. The establishment of correct rule is what is natural. "Instead of representing our individual intellectual limitations as unnatural, the allegory shows us that without philosophic rule we are like men shut up in an underground cavern denying the sunlight in the world above."[26] The release from bonds and healing of ignorance are "by nature," on this reading, in the sense that they correct course for the community.

This type of interpretation has in its favor that it coheres with Socrates' normative conception of nature.[27] We ordinarily think of nature merely as an origin or source of "natural" beings and objects. "Artificial" beings and objects, by contrast, are produced by *techne*. But

---

[25] This might also be what is meant by Shorey 1903, *ad loc* 515c: "Lit. 'by nature.' φύσις in Plato often suggests reality and truth." It is unclear how Shorey intends for this to help us understand the passage, but perhaps he means that φύσις is a standard in the way that Adam takes it to be.

[26] Hall 1980, 81.

[27] See Nendza 1988 for discussion of this normative conception particularly in Book V, when Socrates is clarifying the crucial institutions of the ideal city.

Socrates conceives of a second sense of "natural": as a normative standard to which both objects originated in nature and those originated in artifice may adhere. That is, nature is a measure as well as a producer. A "natural" object, on this conception, may yet be "unnatural" in either of two ways: by originating in nature but failing to adhere to the "natural" normative standard or else by adhering to the standard but originating in artifice. An example of the former is a tyrant, someone born with a philosophic nature but raised poorly and corrupted (492a), and of the latter, perhaps a just city.

Plato captures the two separate dimensions of "natural" in two separate locutions. His preferred way of capturing the sense of adhering to a standard is with 'κατὰ φύσιν.'[28] By contrast, he captures the idea of originating in nature with the dative construction.[29] For example, Socrates asserts that "whatever is in good condition whether by nature or by craft or by both" (τὸ καλῶς ἔχον ἢ φύσει ἢ τέχνῃ ἢ ἀμφοτέροις) is resistant to undergoing change (381b). Nature is evidently the source or cause or origin–pick which notion best appeals–of the phenomenon under

[28] Translators obscure the consistency by varying the rendering in English. Consider Shorey's choices, for example: "a city established on principles of nature (κατὰ φύσιν) would be wise as a whole" (428e); "the production of justice in the soul establishes its principles in the natural relation (κατὰ φύσιν)" (444d); "each one ought to mind as his own business the one thing for which he was fitted by nature (κατὰ φύσιν)" (453b); "the law we proposed accorded with nature" (456c); "of those who consort worthily with philosophy, some well-born and well-bred nature (κατὰ φύσιν), it may be, held in check by exile" (496b).

[29] Beware the occasional dual form, which in the nominative and accusative cases looks like the singular dative. See 410e.

examination. Also, in describing the class of rulers as "smallest by nature" (φύσει ὀλίγιστον), he cannot mean that it is smallest in accord with a normative standard, but that nature produces only a few people who are genuinely fit to rule (428e-429a). When Socrates imagines the effect of an education in music for someone who is "spiritless by nature from the start" (ἐξ ἀρχῆς φύσει ἄθυμον), he is imagining someone born spiritless before they have been made to adhere to a normative standard (411b).

Some of his uses of the dative may appear mixed between the two senses. For example, when reiterating the purpose of searching for an account of justice, Socrates says, "We'll find out what sort of thing justice is and how it must by nature bring profit to its possessor (ὡς φύσει λυσιτελοῦν)" (392c).[30] We might be inclined to read this as saying that nature is the cause of justice being beneficial precisely by being the standard to which justice adheres.[31] But this is where we can see that the conception of nature as a source or cause is complex. In being the origin of an entity, nature shapes and determines what is good for that entity, which just is the establishment of the normative standard for that thing. The origin and the standard are not identical, but one does inform the other. They are easily taken as one, but Plato nevertheless observes that they are distinct. Because he assigns a different opposite to each—the opposite of

[30] Shorey translates this instance as "the nature of justice," placing the word entirely outside the clause of its application.

[31] Likewise for the description of the "cleverest doctors" as εἶεν μὴ πάνυ ὑγιεινοὶ φύσει (408d), and of the disposition of well-bred dogs, that they are such a way "by nature" (τοῦτο φύσει αὐτῶν τὸ ἦθος) (375e), and of the "natural" guardian that he must be φύσει φιλόσοφον (376c).

κατὰ φύσιν is παρὰ φύσιν and the opposite of φύσει is τύχη or even τέχνῃ—we can readily see that they are necessarily different.

When Adam and Hall make the φύσει of the cave passage into a reminder of the παρὰ φύσιν conditions at the bottom of the cave, they set the κατὰ φύσιν sense of "natural" as the dominant reading, and perhaps as the exclusive reading. Read in this way, the passage cannot be understood as setting nature as an origin or source of the surprising release of the prisoner. This is unfortunate, for both philosophical and philological reasons. Philosophically, it is unfortunate because it cuts off an entire dimension of Plato's conception of naturalness. And philologically is it unfortunate because it does not honor Plato's usual distinction between 'κατὰ φύσιν' and 'φύσει'.

The sense of originating in nature yields a more sensible reading all around. "Let us consider," Socrates says, "if some such thing came to pass for them by nature (φύσει)." If an act of nature directly causes what he goes on to describe, then we can understand the event to be *possible* through specifically that act of nature. The event is the release of the prisoner's fetters. What act of nature could cause that? Whatever act it is, that act is among the necessary conditions for making the release possible. Nature is a cause. Importantly, this means that educational programs or releasers or mysterious "someones," even Socrates himself, are conjoint causes at best, and perhaps only downstream or secondary causes.

Before attempting to reconcile this reading with the first mention of φύσις in the allegory, we should look forward to the subsequent mentions of the concept in the same image. The word is invoked twice more, both at the end of the allegory, and in both cases in the context of describing the individuals who will be compelled to knowledge in the way that the released prisoner is compelled to knowledge. After describing such individuals as possessed of especially

keen eyesight (ὡς δριμὺ μὲν βλέπει), Socrates refers to them abstractly and collectively as "a nature such as this" (τῆς τοιαύτης φύσεως) (519a). And, a little further on, he admonishes his interlocutors and himself that "our work" (ἡμέτερον δὴ ἔργον) is to ensure that the "best natures are compelled to attain to learning" (βελτίστας φύσεις ἀναγκάσαι ἀφικέσθαι πρὸς τὸ μάθημα) (519c). The "best natures" here must be those possessed of the keen-eyesight described in the antecedent passage. There are no further mentions of φύσις in the allegory.

Now, it seems apparent to me—once we see in these latter passages that φύσις can pick out not a general human condition, but a particular psychic profile defined by innate distinct characteristics (e.g., keen eyesight)—that the φύσει attending the event of the release could also be picking out a particular psychic profile. But how exactly can this reading work? In what way can a particular psychic profile attend, in the dative, the event in question? By being born. The event occurs by nature (φύσει τοιάδε συμβαίνοι αὐτοῖς), and this means that the special nature described at the end of the allegory—the "best" nature, i.e. the remarkably keen-sighted nature—causes the event to come about. It is by means of this nature (instrumental) or from this nature (source) that a release is possible. In other words, the particular psychic profile is causal.

It may seem impossible to reconcile this understanding to the framing of the allegory as being about "our nature" (τὴν ἡμετέραν φύσιν). Once the keen-sighted nature has been carved out as distinct, implying that there are more natures than one among human beings, it is puzzling that Socrates should refer to a singular nature as "ours." But Socrates has in mind, at the opening of the allegory, to make our collective condition the focal point of the image. Each of the particular psychic profiles has its own potential in relation to education and miseducation, but the collective of all those dispositions is something that meaningfully is all of ours, seeing how we are bound together as social and political beings. What is true of any one particular psychic

profile—that this one is money-loving, this one honor-loving, and that one truth-loving (581c)—is true of "us." It is "our nature" to be these various ways. In this, my interpretation adheres to Hall's collectivity reading.

In sum, my suggestion is that we understand φύσις as playing a causal role in the release of the prisoner at the bottom of the cave. Specifically, it is the "best nature" that makes the event possible, and it must be the case that the prisoner himself is possessed of that nature. He is special. The bonds cannot hold him. Briefly, we should describe the special nature my interpretation attributes to the prisoner in order that it may be clear how it can be a cause of the release. My discussion turns to this task presently.

THE NATURE OF THE PRISONER

Interpreting the text conservatively, we can describe the nature of the prisoner by restricting ourselves to the resources of the passages constituting the allegory. As already mentioned, Socrates convinces his interlocutors of the potential for knowledge—i.e. the potential for ascending from the cave—among individuals who are "keen-sighted" (519a). The context of that trait being emphasized is a fuller description of individuals who are "popularly spoken of as bad, but smart men." These individuals, Socrates explains, are recognized by the majority for their sharp intellects, despite the foul purposes to which those intellects have been put.

> How quick it is to discern the things that interest it, a proof that it is not a poor vision which it has, but one forcibly enlisted in the service of evil, so that the sharper its sight the more mischief it accomplishes. (519a)

Evidently, Socrates is seeking for Glaucon to agree to the existence of a natural type (τῆς τοιαύτης φύσεως) by describing the way it appears in non-ideal circumstances (519a). Having

secured Glaucon's agreement, Socrates next describes how differently that same type will appear in ideal circumstances:

> If a nature of this sort had been hammered at from childhood and freed from the bonds of kinship with becoming, which have been fastened to it by feasting, greed, and other such pleasures and which, like leaden weights, pull its vision downwards–if, in being rid of these, it turned to look at true things, then I say that the same soul of the same person would see these most sharply, just as it now does the things it is presently turned towards. (519a-b)

These two pictures account for education and miseducation (παιδείας τε πέρι καὶ ἀπαιδευσίας) of the same natural type (514a).

Upbringing accounts for all of the difference between the two pictures, but it is only partially explanatory of all the details we find in each. The keen-sightedness is equally explanatory, and technically explanatorily prior, in making this individual into either the "bad, but smart" or else enlightened citizen they become. That is, their *nature* as intellectually sharp individuals is largely determinant of their outcome. Applying this to the released prisoner, we can say that he is intellectually sharp in a way that cannot be dulled even by miseducation, i.e. by being forced into fetters. He will persist as "smart" and unequal to other miseducated individuals. This inequality in the strength of his mind is the most prior cause of the chains not holding him.

If we allow ourselves to interpret the text more liberally, stepping beyond the confines of the allegory passages, we will find the conservative reading reinforced. The Book VI description of a "philosophic nature" (τῶν φιλοσόφων φύσεων) sets the very same intellectual sharpness as

the distinguishing feature of anyone capable of knowledge (485a).[32] This "nature must be possessed from the start" (τὴν φύσιν αὐτῶν πρῶτον δεῖ καταμαθεῖν) by anyone who will undergo the philosophical education of Kallipolis (485a). They "must above all strive for every kind of truth from childhood on" (485d), be "moderate and not at all a money-lover" (485e), be "just and gentle, from youth on" (486b), be a "fast" learner (486c), "one with a good memory" (486c), and "someone whose thought is by nature (φύσει) measured and graceful" (486d). The emphasis on possession of these traits at the outset of the education demonstrates that individuals possessed of this nature are so *by nature*, in the sense that nature, not nurture, is the cause. There remains the possibility that they will grow up to be παρὰ φύσιν.[33]

This description spells out the metaphorical "keen-sightedness" in terms that more readily pertain to the soul.[34] The soul is not, strictly, an eye. If it is "keen-sighted," it must be by possession of psychic traits that enable the soul to do whatever it is that is analogous to seeing.

---

[32] Ferrari 2017 endorses this kind of interpretation when he takes the allegory to be exploring the risks of depriving particularly the philosophical nature of the education suited to it. Ferrari does take the φύσει of the passage to refer to the philosophic nature as well. He is concerned with framing the deprivation of education as the cause, however, rather than accounting for the nature itself as a cause.

[33] In McDavid 2024, I make the case that nature is dynamic for Plato, in the sense that it individuals start life with a nature that is potential and the endurance of appropriate education and training brings that potential to fulfillment. Inappropriate upbringings will fail to fulfill the potentiality, hence resulting in a character 'παρὰ φύσιν'.

[34] This is not merely my inference. The beginning of Book VI asserts that "the guardian who is to keep watch over everything should be keen-sighted rather than blind" (484c) and continues on to provide the description of the philosophic nature in order to account for "how it is possible for someone who have these qualities" (485a).

That psychic power is knowledge, or at least learning, and so all these traits that enable the philosophic nature to learn are the traits that make that nature "keen-sighted."[35]

The "best nature" in the cave passages is the philosophical nature, then, and the philosophical nature is the one possessed by the released prisoner who goes on to attain knowledge. The fact that the prisoner has "a nature such as this" explains his capacity for learning, and Plato's use of the dative φύσει when Socrates asks us to consider how the prisoner will be released indicates that this special nature is among the causes of the release itself.

OBJECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

There are several strong objections to my reading. Here we consider three. First, the interpretation does not account for the bonds themselves. In failing to specify what they represent, the case is not made that the metaphorical "keen-sightedness" is sufficient to weaken or break them. Indeed, as Reeve 1988 and Scott 2020 suggest, the bonds are best understood as a

[35] Note that the condition involves more than only reason being stronger than appetite. Some scholars have portrayed the readiness for learning, and even the outcome of learning, as consisting in the suppression of appetitive desire. For example, Scott 2020, 21 says that "education is not the art of implanting knowledge in the soul, but of changing the direction in which it looks (518d3-7)." The text Scott draws on for support is among the cave passages. See also Reeve 1988, 51 who summarizes the prisoner's release with "a prisoner is purged of his unnecessary appetites, he is freed from his bonds and 'turned around.'" Reeve and Scott both understand the fetters in the cave to be "bonds of unnecessary appetite" (Reeve 1988, 21). That may be so, but to focus on only that aspect of the image while ignoring Plato's insistence that the prisoner himself, independent of his bonds, is possessed of extraordinary potential ("bad, but smart"), is to misunderstand what Plato is doing with the image.

metaphor for unnecessary appetites. Such desires have a very strong and negative influence on the soul. Socrates indicates exactly this when, in the passage quoted at length in my previous section, he says that "feasting, greed, and other such pleasures" drag the prisoner's vision downwards like "leaden weights" (519a-b). The prisoner is attributed the potential to see true things "most sharply" just in case these leaden weights can be dropped. But this sharpness is explicitly identified by Socrates as being "just as it now does the things it is presently turned towards" (519b). That is, the prisoner endures bondage even with his keen-sightedness. This shows that his nature is not sufficient for breaking the bonds.

This point must be conceded. The bonds surely do represent unnecessary desires. The image echoes the depiction of the negative influence of appetitive desire upon the functioning of reason at 485d.[36] And given that the prisoner is able to exercise his sharp-sightedness even while in the grip of this destructive appetitive desire, his nature as "keen-sighted" is not sufficient for singularly causing his release. But his nature is *necessary* to the event and explanatorily prior to whatever it is that is required in addition. And, most importantly, his nature as a truth-lover does weaken the strength of appetitive desire in his soul, even if it cannot entirely mute those desires independent of external intervention. This is what Socrates means when, in describing the philosophic nature as a lover of truth, he says, "We surely know that, when someone's desires incline strongly for one thing, they are thereby weakened for others" (485d). The prisoner's nature is partly defined by its resistance to the bonds, then, even if it is not defined as unbound.

[36] See Wilburn 2014, 73 for discussion of the mechanism by which appetite deteriorates reason. The image and the use of the word "lusein" also echoes the *Phaedo*'s description of the soul being released from the prison of the body.

This explains why φύσις alone is isolated as a cause in the dative. Though strictly not sufficient for causing the release, it is prior to any and all other complementary causes.

The second objection to consider fits together well with the first, for it focuses on the necessity of a second causal element. Even if we accept that the inborn rational capacities of this prisoner are exemplary, there must still be a catalyst for his transformation. He has been staring, apparently with sharp vision, at the shadows on the wall of the cave all this time, and suddenly his shackles fall away. But why now? Something must have changed in his environment to precipitate this change in his condition. This is where champions of education and the Socratic elenchus will rush to suggest that it must be the influence of someone exerting pressure on his beliefs that allows the prisoner to blink, so to speak.[37] A Socratic figure breaks the spell, initiating the soul's disconnect from the worldly things that are gripping it.

This point, too, is conceded. If the philosophic nature alone is not sufficient for breaking the chains, then there is surely a complementary cause. However, it is doubtful that we should identify any particular conception of the catalyst as necessary. Though it is reasonable to posit education or an educator as the catalyst, for that process or agent can be understood as operating the hammer that frees the prisoner (519a), the figure of Socrates as Plato imagines him in the

[37] See note 28 above. Elliott 1967 and Irwin 1995, interpreting Socratic elenchus as the cause of release, will also be in this group. Capuccino 2021, 435 in her magnificent treatment of the issues under discussion here, makes a charge of this variety in insisting that "il movimento non è della natura, ma della paideia, che si realizza grazie a una capacità naturale propriadi tutti gli esseri umani, al capacità di essere educati." The nature in question, she charges, is a mere potentiality (for becoming educated), and this renders it entirely inert when an actualizing force is not acting upon it.

Apology and other early dialogues offers an alternative account. Socrates, reared by the laws of a non-ideal, ignorant, and unjust Athens, escaped the metaphorical bonds to become something of a philosopher.[38] But was assisted by a "daimonion" rather than a teacher (*Apology* 31c-d). And even if Socrates always needed some kind of intervention for becoming the Socratic figure we so love, it was nevertheless the case—in Plato's mind—that his very nature was the cause of the intervention being effective. Education is not a necessary element of the release either, then, for all that is needed is something that might trigger the philosophic nature to question the images presented to it.[39]

Finally, we consider an objection gleaned from interpretations denying that the nature described as "best" in the allegory corresponds to the philosophic nature of Book VI. This is the reading of Weiss 2012. On her view, the initial release represents an attempt to turn a non-ideal state into a Kallipolis by appointing to the position of ruler someone who might *approximate* the philosopher. "Since, however, philosophic natures cannot be manufactured—they are, after all, *natures*—the founders set about to produce philosophers who mimic the real thing, philosophers who, though their first and natural love is the realm of sights and sounds, the realm of opinion,

[38] Socrates is certainly a gold soul in Plato's estimation, but does not possess the knowledge of Forms that Plato takes to be definitely of the fully developed philosopher. He is not a *knower*, though he does possess the inborn capacities for knowing.

[39] Weiss 2012, 57 n. 21 proposes that simple contradictions in among the shadows could be the triggering event: "In principle of course, the prisoners in the Cave might conceivably be tipped off to the unreality of the shadows when they find something contradictory or puzzling in them. The intellect, we know, is awakened by puzzling features of the large and small, hard and soft (523a-524d)."

can nevertheless be trained to prefer the intelligible realm."[40] This reading makes the allegory entirely political. What we are made to imagine is a random selection of someone who will undergo a rigorous education. Nature is not explanatory in that initial ascent, except to the extent that those selecting an individual for the project will seek the "best" (considered comparatively rather than absolutely) nature, on the basis of their limited ability to discern differences in the darkness.

A significant disadvantage of this reading is that it cannot make sense of 'φύσει' in the passage. Weiss might retreat to a reading like that of Adam and Hall, asserting that the word highlights the παρὰ φύσιν conditions of the prisoners. The problems with such readings have already been addressed. To further her troubles, though, she must multiply the referents of "philosophic nature," making the phrase refer not only to those who love truth *by nature*, but also those who love truth *in accord* with nature. She must make pains to convince us that the philosophic nature of Book VI is fundamentally distinct from the philosophic nature of Book VII.[41]

Socrates tells against this reading when he says, "only a few natures possess all the qualities that we just now said were essential to becoming a complete philosopher" (491a), and asks Adeimantus, "Or do you think that [...] a weak nature is ever the cause of either great good or great evil?" (491e). Given that the ascent is possible only for the one nature, we cannot propose that other natures will make the ascent, not even if we insist that it is only that initial ascent from the non-ideal environment.

---

[40] Weiss 2012, 62.

[41] She reasons that "whereas Book 6's corrupted philosophic natures start out good and are made bad, Book 7's philosophers start out bad and have to be made good" (67).

CONCLUSION

This article argues that the moment of prison-break in the allegory of the cave is best understood as being precipitated by the nature of the released prisoner. He is intellectually sharp and "fit" or ready for knowledge in a way that distinguishes him from all the other, differently natured prisoners, and that prevents the "bonds" of worldly desires from holding him fast. His inborn love of truth, quickness in learning, and excellent memory empower him. The breaking of his chains occurs "by nature" in the sense that it is his nature that is the initial cause of the chains breaking.

The primary advantages of this reading are (i) that it recovers the richness of Plato's conception of nature as a cause and (ii) that it comports well with the epistemological and psychological theories of the larger dialogue, allowing that *some*, not all, are capable of learning.

Chapman University BRENNAN MCDAVID

mcdavid@chapman.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adam, J. (1902.) *The* Republic *of Plato*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Annas, J. (1981.) *An Introduction to Plato's* Republic. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barney, R. (2008.) "*Eros* and Necessity in the Ascent from the Cave." *Ancient Philosophy* 28 (2): 357-372.

Bloom, A. (1968.) *The* Republic *of Plato*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Capuccino, C. (2021.) "Omnino suspectum? Un altro dettaglio trascurato nella caverna di Platone (seconda parte)." *Annali Della Scuola Normale Superiore Di Pisa. Classe di Lettere e Filosofia* 13: 427-459

Cooper, J. (ed.) (1997.) *Plato: Complete Works.* Indianapolis: Hackett.

Cross, R.C. and Woozley, A.D. 1964. *Plato's* Republic. Palgrave MacMillan.

Elliott, R.K. 1967. "Socrates and Plato's Cave." *Kant-Studien* 58: 137-157.

Ferguson, A.S. (1922.) "Plato's Simile of Light. Part II. The Allegory of the Cave (Continued)." *The Classical Quarterly* 16: 15-28.

Ferrari, F. 2017. "Natura e costrizione nel paragone della caverna." *Pegé /Fons* 2: pp. 123-35.

Hall, D. (1980.) "Interpreting Plato's Cave as an Allegory of the Human Condition." *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 14 (2): 74-86.

Irwin, T. (1995.) *Plato's Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Karasmanis, V. (1988.) "Plato's *Republic*: The Line and the Cave." *Apeiron* 21: 147-171.

Malcolm, J. (1962.)"The Line and the Cave." *Phronesis* 7: 38-45.

—-. (1981.) "The Cave Revisited." *Classical Quarterly* 31: 60-68.

McDavid, Brennan (2024.) "Φύσις in Plato's *Republic*." *Ancient Philosophy* 44: 323-338.

Nendza, J. (1988.) "Nature and Convention in Book V of the 'Republic.'" *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 21 (2): 331-357

Raven, J.E. (1953.) "Sun, Divided Line, and Cave." *Classical Quarterly* 3: 22-32

Reeve, C.D.C. (1988.) *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato's* Republic. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Smith, N. (1997.) "How the Prisoner's in Plato's Cave are 'Like Us.'" *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 13: 187-204.

Storey, D. (2022.) "The Soul-Turning Metaphor in Plato's Republic Book 7." *Classical Philology* 177: 525-542.

Weiss, R. (2012.) *Philosophers in the Republic: Plato's Two Paradigms*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Wilberding, J. (2004.) "Prisoners and Puppeteers in the Cave." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 27: 117-139.

Wilburn, J. (2014.) "Akrasia and the Rule of Appetite in Plato's *Protagoras* and *Republic*." *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 8: 57–91.

Wilson, J.R.S. (1976.) "The Contents of the Cave." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Supplementary Volume 2: 117-127.

Zamosc, G. (2017.) "The Political Significance of Plato's Allegory of the Cave." *Ideas Y Valores* 66: 237-265.