

# On Conversion as “The Turning Round of a Soul From Some Benighted Day” (Plato)

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## ABSTRACT

Conversion is one of many concepts of a philosophical origin that are used in both the psychology of religion and other social sciences as well as canonical texts. Although Plato is commonly believed to have been its creator, scholars do not agree on the term he used to refer to it. The prototype of the Christian religious conversion is taken to be the Greek verb *epistrephō* (“convert,” “turn,” “return,” or “go back”), whose prototype is the Old Testament Hebrew verb *šūbh* (“to become converted”). The term *epistrephō* ascribed to Plato does not occur in those fragments of his myth of the cave in Book VII of the Republic in which he mentions conversion, first as a metaphor (the emblematic image of turning one’s head in the opposite direction) and then literally (conversion as a specific art). In both instances, Plato uses the term *periagō* (“turn around”) and *periagōgē* (“[the act of] turning around”). The latter word is used in the title of this article, which references Plato’s myth of the cave. Plato’s philosophical metaphor for conversion was then taken up by Christians, who imbued it with a religious sense. Why did they also take up the word *epistrephō*, which has no relation to conversion as understood by Plato? To answer this question, one must first know why the authors of the Septuagint translated the Hebrew term *šūbh* as the Greek term *epistrephō* and not as *periagō*. Thus, ascribing to Plato the authorship of the term *epistrephō* as related to his understanding of conversion clashes with historical evidence. Instead, the author’s intentions are reflected in *periagō* and *periagōgē*.

## KEYWORDS

*epistrephō*,  
the myth of the cave,  
philosophical conversion,  
religious conversion,  
*periagō*

“So that they may turn from darkness to light”.

Acts 26,18

## INTRODUCTION

In both psychology and other social sciences, conversion is one of those significant notions that rarely are “unambiguous and without definitional issues”. The cause of this is the variability and changeability of psychosocial phenomena, as well as the multiplicity of scientific paradigms” (Soiński, 2006, p. 387; cf. Soiński, 2010). The notion of religious conversion also involves similar definitional issues. Brian Zinnbauer and Kenneth Pargament (1998, p. 165) criticize scholars of religious conversion for treating the term “religious” without due consideration, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding whether they mean conversion as a purely

religious process or whether they mean the role religion plays in it. This ambiguity makes it more difficult to differentiate religious conversion both from nonreligious shifts in worldviews or ideologies and from religious change, which is not conversion. It also makes it more difficult to develop a single, adequate notion of conversion that could combine all aspects of this phenomenon (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998, p. 161; cf. Soiński, 2006, p. 388). These authors (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998, p. 165) proposed the enigmatic concept of spiritual conversion, in which the sacrum, as a spiritual power, is synonymous with God, Christ, Allah,

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Buddha, or another deity with whom the converted person feels a spiritual bond; however, this definition is also confounded by the problems mentioned above.

Since, much like any other term with a broad scope, conversion carries with it definitional issues that cannot be circumvented through a single, synthetic account, let us follow the advice of Aristotle (384–322 BC), who, in his *Politics*, wrote, “He who thus considers things in their first growth and origin [...] will obtain the clearest view of them” (Aristotle, 2012, p. 25). Similarly, Werner Jaeger (1888–1961), a scholar of the history of upbringing in antiquity, posited that the true sense and content of the Greek term *paideia* will “become clear to us only when we read its history and follow its attempts to realize itself” (Jaeger, 1947, p. v).

### PLATO’S ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE<sup>3</sup>

Book VII of Plato’s (427–347 BC) *Republic* opens with the myth of the cave, which has been the subject of numerous interpretations and adaptations throughout the years. Speaking vicariously through Socrates, Plato invites his interlocutor Glaucon (514 A 1–517 A 8) to be shown “in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened”<sup>4</sup>. This opening statement presages a rational argumentation, carried out by Plato using a certain image [*eikon*] that will reveal the sense and direction of the *paideia* system developed further in the book, containing the ideals of ancient Greek culture. The subject of the allegory will be human nature, its relationship with culture [*paideia*], and its lack thereof [*apadeusia*] (cf. Jaeger, 1947, p. 294).

In the underground cave, the entrance to which faces the light and which sits on the bottom of a steep slope, reside prisoners who have been there since childhood. Their legs and necks are bound with chains that prevent them from turning their heads, so they are forced to look straight ahead. Behind their backs, on the other side of the slope, burns a great fire, casting a light over the prisoners’ heads on the side of the cave. A road stretches upwards between this fire and the prisoners’ backs, and on this road travel people carrying on their shoulders various objects of stone, wood, and other materials, which depict all sorts of existing things. Some of them talk, and the echo of their voices reaches the cave. Along the road, there is a wall, the height of a person, and only the objects the people carry on their shoulders reach over it. Thus, the fire casts the shadows of the items on the cave wall. Because of the prisoners’ conditions, they cannot see anything but these shadows, so, for them, they are the only true reality, as is the echo of the people passing by, which the prisoners take to be the shadows’ voices.

If one of the prisoners were to be freed from his chains and to turn his head, if he were to leave the cave and look at the light, then, being blinded by it, he could not see those things whose shadows he had previously seen. Then, once he adjusted to looking at them, if someone were to tell him that only now is he seeing things that are more real than what he had seen previously, he would insist that the true reality was the shadows to which he had grown accustomed. Thus, he would quickly return to the cave. However, if someone were to lead the prisoner out of the cave against his wishes and stand him behind the wall in the clear sunlight, only after a long while would he be able to, by

degrees, see what is on the slope. First, he would see only the shadows of people and things, then, he would see them by their reflections in the water, and finally, he would see the things themselves. He would also see the sky only by the light of the stars and the moon. Again, a long time would need to pass before the prisoner could finally look at the sun and understand that it is the true reality that governs everything in the visible world and that it is the cause of what he and others previously saw as shadows. Then, returning in his thoughts to his past life, knowledge, and compatriots, he would praise the change in his circumstances so much so that he would no longer desire to return to the cave. However, if he were to go back down and sit with the prisoners again, he would no longer be able to see in the dark. Thus, having to argue with his fellow prisoners about the shadows, he would not only risk ridicule, but he would also be told—because the prisoners do not realise that adjusting one’s eyesight to darkness requires time—that the time outside the cave has ruined his eyes and therefore one should not leave the cave. Plato (517 A 8) ends his allegory as follows: “if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death”.

What exactly does the myth of the cave symbolize? The cave symbolizes the visible world, life as perceived by the senses. The fire, which casts its light into the cave, stands for the sun. Life in pure light symbolizes the spiritual life. Leaving the cave and seeing the world outside is an image of the way that the soul takes upwards, towards the world, which can be known through the mind. Its visible symbol is the comparison of the good with the sun, which lights up the whole world (Jaeger, 1947, p. 299; Reale, 1996, p. 235).

### PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT OF CONVERSION

Turning away from that which is sensual towards that which is intelligible is symbolically portrayed in the myth of the cave as being freed from chains and as turning away from the shadows towards the light. Wishing to free himself from watching the shadows and to face the light, the prisoner must turn his neck [*periagein ton auchena*] (515 C). This emblematic image of turning one’s head in the opposite direction is developed by Plato further in Book VII (518 C–532 D), where he undertakes the topic of conversion.

Plato uses the image of the cave to contrast his notion of *paideia* with its popular understanding, referring to some who “can put a knowledge into the soul which was not there before, like sight into blind eyes” (518 C). However, education is a different matter. Each person’s soul—according to Plato—has the ability to learn. Thus, true education involves bringing out this, heretofore dormant, ability. “As if the only way our eye could face towards [*strephein*] the light were by turning the whole body round, so we must turn [*periakteon*] <with our whole soul> away from the realm of becoming until it can bear to look at the brightest pinnacle of reality” (cf. Jaeger, 1947, p. 295). “And this, we say, is the good [*agathos*]” (518 C). The ability residing in a person’s soul, says Plato, is conversion [*periagōgē*]: “an art of the speediest and most effective shifting or 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" (518 D).

Now, having encouraged his brother Glaucon to consider where to find people suitable for rule, Socrates says this: "The process, I said, is not the turning over [peristrophē] of an oyster-shell, but the turning round [periagōgē] of a soul passing from a day which is little better than night to the true day of being, that is, the ascent from below, which we affirm to be true philosophy" (521 C).

What does the turning over of the shell mean? Socrates means the game in which Athenian children were divided into two teams, "white" and "black," and would throw an ostrakon, or a shell, one side of which was white ("day") and the other was black ("night"). If the shell fell with the white side up, the "black" team ran away, chased by the "white" team. However, if the shell turned up, or "black," the "white" team ran away and was chased by the "black" team (cf. Plato, 1993, p. 22, n. 17; Plato, 1958b, p. 211). Deciding whom to appoint as the ruler of an ideal republic is not a game, however. A republic can be properly organized only when those who are appointed to rule are shown a life better than a life of ruling because "for only in the State which offers this, will they rule who are truly rich, not in silver and gold, but in virtue and wisdom, which are the true blessings of life" (521 A).

Thus, if possessing knowledge about the absolute good as the natural aim of all human activity is the measure of the one who deserves to rule, then the ruler must be a philosopher, since he has received the true upbringing (paideia) that Plato holds to be synonymous with philosophy (519 C; cf. Jaeger, 1947, p. 319). Here, the nature of the philosophical upbringing is identified with the turning of "the entirety of the soul" towards the light from the source of everything, that is, the idea of the good. Thus, it is a turn away, conversion in the most basic and concrete meaning of this word (cf. Jaeger, 1947, p. 295).

Suppose that a constitutive element of the broadly understood notion of conversion is change, which occurs when one thing becomes another, something becomes something other than it was. Thus, it encompasses all movement that can be perceived not only through sight but also in thought. Then, one can speak of a philosophical conversion, as the "the turning round of a soul passing from a day which is little better than night to the true day of being, that is, the ascent from below, which we affirm to be true philosophy." Although philosophy is not the light towards which the soul should turn, it is the true path towards the light. This act requires changes in one's way of life. Indeed, those who crave personal goods are not fit for rule, as "they go to the administration of public affairs, poor and hungering after the own private advantage, thinking that hence they are to snatch the chief good [...], and the civil and domestic broils which thus arise will be the ruin of the rulers themselves and of the whole State."

In the allegory of the cave (514 A 1–517 A 8), Plato uses only one word to refer to conversion in this sense: the verb *periagō*, which appears twice to mean "to turn one's head" (514 B) and "to turn one's neck" (515 C). Thus, it denotes physical movement that can be perceived through sight. In the remainder of Book VII, from 518 C to 532 B, Plato interprets his allegory of the cave. Now, this material act of turning one's head in the opposite direction becomes a metaphor of the

immaterial act of the turning away of the soul. The same verb, *periagō*, appears again in 518 C, but this time, it means "to turn from the world of becoming". Meanwhile, the noun *periagōgē* (conversion) appears three times: first in 518 D as "an art of conversion"; second in 518 E, "by this conversion is rendered"; and finally, in 521 C as "the turning round of a soul passing from a day which is little better than night"<sup>5</sup>.

In Book VII, Plato uses different words with an identical scope of meaning ("turning away") to denote an act of change. These include the verb *strephō* in the phrase "turn from darkness to light" (518 C) and "turn the vision of their souls" (519 B). The same word will also appear with the *peri*-prefix (around), as in the verbs *peristrophō* ("turned in the opposite direction", 519 B) and *peristrophē* ("turning-over of an oyster shell", 521 C), as well as with the *meta*-prefix (with, after, or behind), as in the verb *metastrephō* ("turned in the wrong direction", 518 D and "compel the soul to turn her gaze", 526 E); the noun *metastrophē*, meaning "passing from becoming to truth and being" (525 C) and "translation from the shadows to the images" (532 B); and the adjective *metastreptikos*, meaning "guide and convert the soul to the contemplation of being true" (525 A). This multiplicity of words related to the word "conversion" [*periagōgē*] in Book VII of Plato's Republic conveys to the reader, as Jaeger (1947, p. 417, n. 77) notes, "the same visual image, that of the turning of the head and the eyes to the divine Good".

The word "conversion" is associated with the religious sphere, as it denotes a change in the relationship of man to God. Thus, relating it to the sphere of philosophy may be controversial<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, philosophical conversion, which is the subject of Plato's allegory of the cave, has long attracted interest from philosophers and historians of philosophy<sup>7</sup>.

Many years ago, Arthur Darby Nock (1902–1963)—English classical philologist, theologian, and historian of philosophy—devoted an entire chapter in his book *Conversion* (1933) to the topic of conversion to philosophy (p. 164–186). For him, conversion is "the turning from luxury and self-indulgence and superstition (another frequent object of philosophic criticism) to a life of discipline and sometimes to a life of contemplation, scientific or mystic" (Nock, 1933, p. 179). In other words, conversion is the turning away from one thing towards something else: that which was once the chief priority now loses importance. Here, Nock also refers to fragments 518 D–E of Plato's Republic.

If we were to look for one word that best expresses the character of each philosophical school of the pre-Christian period, according to Nock (1933, s. 167), this would be the Greek word *agōgē*, or the way of teaching and living<sup>8</sup>. "Any philosophy of the time", he goes on to say, "set up a standard of values different from those of the world outside and could serve as a stimulus to a stern life, and therefore to something like conversion when it came to a man living carelessly" (Nock, 1933, p. 173). However, Nock also contrasts conversion with adhesion as a useful supplement and not as a substitute (Nock, 1933, p. 7).

For Jaeger, *paideia* is synonymous with conversion (Jaeger, 1947, p. 295–300), which is illustrated by his commentary to Plato's fragment 518 C–D (Jaeger, 1947, p. 417, n. 77). In Plato's *paideia*, the term "conversion" is not only precisely defined but also intended to have signifi-

cant meaning<sup>9</sup>. Jaeger does not acknowledge the criticisms levelled by some against Plato's understanding of conversion as allegedly imbued with intellectualism.

Conversion was also a topic of interest for Pierre Hadot (1922–2010), French philosopher and historian of ancient philosophy. In his 1968 essay *Conversion*, Hadot quotes fragment 518 C of the Republic, which he considers the first example of a reflection on the meaning of conversion<sup>10</sup>, and writes that “it is in the political domain that the ancient Greeks underwent the experience of conversion. [...] More radical again, but less widespread, is the philosophical conversion. In its origins, it is closely bound to political conversion. [...] The philosopher is himself converted because he knew to turn his gaze away from the shadows of the sensible world and turn it towards the light which emanates from the idea of the Good” (Hadot, 1968, p. 980).

As Nock (1933, s. 14) has shown, only one context of conversion was available to ancient pagans—the philosophical one—since philosophy, with its clear notion of the lower and higher levels of life, encouraged people to turn away from the former towards the latter. Continuing this line of thought, Paul S. MacDonald (1951), American historian of philosophy, assumes the existence of two dimensions related to conversion. The philosophical dimension, which is this-worldly, and the religious dimension, which is other-worldly (MacDonald, 1997, s. 307). In his article on religious conversion, he also refers to fragment 518 C–D of Book VII of the Republic.

Thus, what about philosophical conversion sets it apart from religious conversion? Jaeger (1947, p. 295) sees a difference between philosophical conversion as the experience of turning away “the entirety of the soul” towards light of the idea of God and between the taking up of the Christian faith. The latter was later called conversion, referring to the philosophical notion, although philosophical knowledge is deeply rooted in objective reality (cf. Jaeger, 1947, p. 295). For MacDonald, philosophy is a process of rational argumentation: “Philosophers would readily admit that one can be persuaded or convinced to alter one's beliefs on the basis of another's arguments, but surely would be reluctant to countenance the possibility that one could be converted to a philosophical position. [...] The philosopher must always be able to account for the grounds and consequences of conversion from the ‘old world’ to the ‘new world’. [...] It is the process of thinking involved in this transformation which distinguishes it from religious conversion” (MacDonald, 1997, p. 304). Similar to every religious experience, “aside from the natural sphere, the supernatural or ‘superpsychological.’” must also be considered. “Thus, it must never be forgotten that religious conversion remains a mystery both for the one who converts as well as to the one who studies the structures and mechanisms of this process” (Soiński, 2010, p. 440).

## CHRISTIAN CONTEXT OF CONVERSION

The evolutionary development of the emblematic image of turning one's head/neck in the opposite direction has been traced from the allegory of the cave, which took place in Socrates' dialogue with Glaucon, to the notion of conversion [*periagōgē*]. Thus, one can imagine that this

notion was born in Plato's head and that even the very word “conversion” is derived from him<sup>11</sup>. The question of this term's genesis is not the subject of my interest here, nor is it the psychological analysis of the phenomenon of conversion. However, keeping in mind the historical starting point assumed here, I am concerned with the significance of Plato's notion of conversion in the genesis of the Christian notion of conversion. Jaeger (1947, p. 417, n. 77, where he refers to fragment 518 C–D of the Republic) is convinced that Plato should be considered the originator of this notion. Moreover, he ascertains that the word was transferred to the Christian experience in early Christian Platonic circles.

Giovanni Reale (1931–2014), an Italian professor of ancient philosophy at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, holds that Plato's metaphor of “conversion” has been taken up by Christians and developed in the religious direction. Indeed, he adds, “the religious and ascetic connections (naturally in an Hellenic sense) is [sic] already largely present in Plato” (Reale, 1996, p. 235), and he follows Jaeger in considering Plato as the first author of the notion of conversion. Both Jaeger and Reale mean the word *periagōgē*, although the former adds that Plato sometimes uses *metastrophē* and the corresponding verbs *peristrephēsthai* and *metastrephēsthai*<sup>12</sup>.

Nock holds that (see above) the word that characterizes all philosophical schools in the pre-Christian period and that is related to philosophical conversion is the Greek word *agōgē* (“way of teaching” and “way of living”). If so, then an analogous word that would accurately reflect the nature of religious conversion would be the word *epistrophē*. At least, this is the conclusion one may draw from various studies on this topic. However, why should that word not be *periagōgē* or *periagōgē*, which first appears in Book VII of the Republic, whereas the word *epistrophē* does not appear at all? Although it appears in Book II (381 D), it does so only in the context of a fragment of Book XVII of Homer's *Odyssey* (VIII century BC.) quoted by Plato: “the gods, taking the disguise of strangers from other lands, walk up and down cities in all sorts of forms” (emphasis added—R. S.). We also encounter it in Book X of the Republic (616 C)—“the spindle of Necessity, on which all the revolutions turn”—as well as in fragment 620 E, in reference to Clotho, one of the three Moirai denoting humanity's lifespan and fate, which here “ratifies the destiny of earth” (emphasis added—R. S.). The word *epistrophē* can also be found in Plato's *Phaedrus* (247 A) and *Sophist* (216 C) and in *Axiochus*, a dialogue on death attributed to Plato. Thus, why are some authors convinced that *epistrophē* in particular reflects the sense of Christian conversion?

Fragment 518 C–D of the Republic has already been brought up by Nock, who, having traced the subsequent course of the Christian notion of conversion in ancient Greek culture, wrote that “Plato spoke of the object of education as a ‘turning around of the soul’ (Republic, 518 D ff.): the word *epistrophē*, later used by Christians of conversion, is applied to the effects of philosophy, meaning thereby an orientation or focusing of the soul, the turning of men from carelessness to true piety, for which *conversio* is used by Cicero (On the Nature of the Gods, i.e., 77)” (Nock, 1933, p. 179–180). However, the word *epistrophē* does not appear in the fragment of the Republic quoted by Nock! It contains

only the verb *periagō*, the noun *periagōgē*, and the verbs *strephō* and *metastrephō*.

Likewise, in his doctoral dissertation at the University College Cork, Ireland, David Twomey (2006) writes that one of the terms used by Plato in his allegory of the cave is the term *epistrephō*, derived from *strephō*, which, according to many authors, is the precursor or prototype of the Christian phenomenon of conversion (Twomey, 2006, p. 31)<sup>13</sup>. Even if one were to agree with this, how could the otherwise highly conscientious author of this dissertation not notice that neither of these words appears in the allegory of the cave? Moreover, Twomey claims that Jaeger stated that “the word (*epistrophē*) was transferred to Christian experience [...]” (Twomey, 2006, p. 32), while the word *epistrophē* is not used by Jaeger in this point (cf. Jaeger, 1947, p. 417, n. 77). Furthermore, Twomey (2006, p. 31) references Nock, quoting the passage where he uses—mistakenly (see above)—the word *epistrophē*.

MacDonald (1997) is also unable to properly account for the word *epistrephō*. Having first stated that the Latin verb *converto*, which appears in the Vulgate, is almost a direct translation of the Greek verb *epistrephō*, he considers the latter to be the most important term “which Plato employs towards the end of the famous analogy of the cave. Here, then is an explicit philosophical usage of the term which predates the NT [the New Testament] and inaugurates a secular etymology with which Augustine, amongst others, would have been well aware of” (MacDonald, 1997, p. 306). In reality, *epistrephō* not only does not appear in the latter part of the allegory of the cave but is also entirely absent from Book VII of the Republic<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, emphasizing the verb form of this word in the NT<sup>15</sup>, MacDonald claims that the NT does not use the noun *epistrophē*. However, this attestation is proven false by the following fragment of the Acts: “The members of the church saw them off, and as they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria they told how the Gentiles had been converted [*epistrophēn*], and this news was received with the greatest satisfaction by all the brothers” (Acts 15, 3). However, this is the only place in the NT where this noun is used.

These examples of difficulties with the words *epistrephō/epistrophē* point, on the one hand, to the fact that people are fallible and make mistakes, and on the other hand, that the source of these difficulties, as Étienne Gilson (1884–1978) notes, is the fact that “from the second century A.D. on, men have had to use a Greek philosophical technique in order to express ideas that had never entered the head of any Greek philosopher” (Gilson, 1941, p. 43).

The word *epistrophē* was also brought up by Pierre Hadot (1968) in his essay, where he discusses conversion in its philosophical and religious sense. There, he writes of the “change of mental order, which may range from the simple modification of an opinion to the total transformation of the personality. The Latin word *conversio* corresponds to two Greek words with different meanings: *epistrophe*, which signifies a change in orientation and implies the idea of a return (return to the origin or return to the self)<sup>16</sup> and *metanoia*, which signifies a change of mind or repentance, and implies the idea of a mutation and a rebirth (Hadot, 1968, p. 979). There is, then, in the notion of conversion, an internal opposition between the idea of a “return to the origin” and the idea of “rebirth.” In Hadot’s view, “ancient philosophy is never

therefore the building of an abstract system, but appears as an appeal to the conversion through which a human being recovers his original nature (*epistrophē*) in an uprooting from the perversion in which ordinary mortals live, and in a drastic reorientation of his whole being (metanoia again)” (Hadot, 1968, p. 980).

French Jesuit and Professor Emeritus of Theology Paul Aubin (born 1922) devoted a 236-page book to the comparative analysis of the Greek words *epistrophē* and *epistrephein* in the context of the Greek and Christian notions of conversion. Such a comparison must involve the contrasting of two stances towards existence, writes Cardinal Jean Daniélou (1905–1974) in the foreword, a statement whose meaning remains pertinent. For modern people as well as for the Greeks, conversion is, above all, trust in oneself. In contrast, for a Christian, Christian, conversion is trust in God, meeting a living person towards which he turns (cf. Aubin, 1963, p. 5). Thus, texts that Aubin included in his meticulous philological analysis must reflect this contrast. On the one hand, these were the New Testament and the writings of the Greek apologists Saint Clement of Alexandria and Origenes (c. 184–c. 253 AD), and, on the other hand, the writings of the stoics, Gnostics, and Plotinus (204/5–270 AD). The result of this painstaking work is a set of approximately 1500 biblical and extrabiblical uses of the two Greek words of interest to Aubin<sup>17</sup>.

In his 1958 doctoral dissertation, William Holladay (1926–2016)—American pastor, theologian, and professor of the Old Testament—carried out a detailed linguistic analysis of the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew stem *šûbh* and concluded that forms with the stem *strephō* account for over 70% of the translated words there (Holladay, 1958, p. 20). Most frequently, the word *šûbh*—meaning “turning towards,” “converting,” or “returning to”—is given as *epistrephō*, whereas when *šûbh* means “turning away from,” it is equally frequently given as *epistrephein* or *apostrephein* (Holladay, 1958, p. 25).

The relationship between the Old Testament word *šûbh* and the New Testament word *epistrephō* was also subjected to a comprehensive analysis based on an exhaustive bibliography by Rev. Leszek Sikorski. A detailed analysis of the fragments where this word appears reveals its general meaning as follows: “after moving in a given direction, to then move in the opposite direction, which, in consequence, assumes and means the return to the starting point” (Sikorski, 2002, p. 246). In the theological meaning of this word, this is, “on the one hand, leaving God, and on the other—conversion and return to God. In the prophetic books, *šûbh* becomes a technical term that denotes the ways of man’s return to God—a return which serves as a starting point for an entirely new beginning” (Sikorski, 2002, p. 246). Jewish translators of the Old Testament who spoke Greek translated *šûbh* as *epistrephō*, which then entered the New Testament. *Epistrephō* entered the Septuagint from lay linguistic practices. For example, it appears in Aeschylus’ (525–456 BC) tragedy *Agamemnon* as well as in Homer. “The known late Judeo-Hellenistic literature uses this word in its religious sense” (Sikorski, 2002, p. 250). In the New Testament, the word *epistrephō* is used 36 times, while the noun *epistrophē* is used only once, in Acts 15, 3 (“declaring the conversion of the Gentiles”). However, as Sikorski (2002, p. 250) notes, the term *epistrephō* is used 18 times in the lay sense of

“returning” or “turning to” (e.g., Matthew 10, 13; 2 Peter 2, 22), whereas the remaining 19 times (after accounting for the noun *epistrophē*), it is used in the theological sense of “conversion” or “becoming converted” (e.g., Mark 4, 12; Luke 1, 16n; 22, 32; Acts 15, 19; 2 Corinthians 3, 16).

Let us return to the verb *periaō* used in the allegory of the cave. In the sense of “turn away,” or “convert,” it occurs in the New Testament six times with the changed meaning of “take [something] with oneself,” “walking around [something],” and “circling around [something]” (e.g., 1 Corinthians 9,5; Matthew 4, 23), although the verb *periaōgē* is not used here. There are also formations of the verb *agō* with prepositions, such as *anagō* (23 times), *apagō* (16 times), *diagō* (2 times), *eisagō* (11 times), *katagō* (9 times), *metagō* (2 times), *paragō* (10 times), *sunagō* (59 times), and *hypagō* (79 times). The noun *sunagōgē* (“synagogue”), from *sunagō*, is used 56 times.

A direct comparison of the frequencies of the words *epistrophō* and *periaō* in the New Testament, considering nouns and word formations, shows that *periaō* is used almost twice as often (273 times) as *epistrophō* (120 times). These results have only an orientational value, as I did not include the division between the lay and the theological meanings of the word, as was done by Sikorski (2002, p. 250) with the word *epistrophō*. Such a difference in meaning may change the above proportion, but this shift remains to be confirmed by an appropriate semantic analysis.

## CONCLUSIONS

At this point, one may ask about the purpose of such terminological analyses. The answer is suggested by Gilson (1955, p. 5): “There are in the canonical writings some terms of philosophical origin, and since they were there, it is no wonder that they became, later on, a source of theological and philosophical speculation. All historians agree about this fact, but chiefly on account of religious differences, they do not agree on its historical interpretation”. Indeed, the basic sense of these philosophical terms “is not a philosophical one; they are meant to convey, in words familiar to their readers, the essentially religious message of the Christian revelation” (p. 6).

Although scholars agree that Plato was the creator of the philosophical notion of conversion (e.g., Jaeger, 1947; Reale, 1996), the term that he used to denote it is unclear. The commonly identified word *epistrophō* (and *epistrophē*) does not occur in those fragments of Book VII of the Republic where Plato talks about conversion, first metaphorically in the allegory of the cave as turning one’s head in the opposite direction (514 B), and then literally in 518 C (“an art of conversion”) and which the authors discussed in this article refer to. In both of these cases, the words used by Plato are *periaō* and *periaōgē*. The word *periaō*, which I quoted in the title, is used in fragment 521 C.

Thus, ascribing to Plato the authorship of the term *epistrophō*, which would be related to his notion of conversion, is not supported by historical evidence. Therefore, *periaō* and *periaōgē*<sup>18</sup> are the terms that reflect the author’s intentions. Why, then, did Christians who—as Jaeger and Reale uniformly claim—took up this metaphor of conversion and developed it in a religious direction, also take up the

word *epistrophō*, unrelated to conversion as understood by Plato? To answer this question, we would have to first know why the authors of the Septuagint translated the Hebrew word *šûbh* into the Greek word *epistrophō*, not *periaō*.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For example, the conversion of Simone Adolphine Weil (1901–1943; cf. Kotkowska, 2010, p. 181) or Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009; cf. Kukołowicz, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Plato uses the term *paideia* to denote the liberating work of knowledge in the very highest sense (cf. Jaeger, 1947, p. 295).

<sup>3</sup> Also referred to as the myth of the cave. When Plato calls his ideal state and his ideal man myths, he means not only that they are unreal but also that they are models for the real to imitate (cf. Jaeger, 1947, p. 260). The myth of the cave expresses the whole of Plato: his metaphysics, epistemology, dia-lectic, ethics, the mystical ascent, and even Platonic political theory (cf. Reale, 1996, p. 231).

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the Republic are retrieved from <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html>

<sup>5</sup> Clement of Alexandria (150–215 AD), who considered philosophy to be an introduction to faith, also refers to the 521 C fragment in his *Stromata*.

<sup>6</sup> This double meaning of the word “conversion” is indicated even in the Polish dictionary *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego* (vol. 2, Warsaw 2006, p. 872), in which “to be converted” first means “to change” one’s faith and second, “to change” one’s professed beliefs and ideas.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Soranzo and Robichaud (2017).

<sup>8</sup> In Book VII of the Republic, the word *agōgē* appears in several places, for example, in fragments 523 A and 525 A

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jaeger (1947, p. 295).

<sup>10</sup> In the Polish translation, the French word *conversion* is given as *konwersja*. However, as Soiński (2006, p. 388) writes, the Polish terms *nawrócenie* and *konwersja* are used interchangeably even though “theology clearly distinguishes them: *konwersja* has a more external meaning and it denotes changes in religious affiliation, whereas *nawrócenie* denotes a decision leading up to an internal change, as well as the process of changes occurring within the relationship with God”.

<sup>11</sup> This notion was attested to by Jaeger (1961, p. 10): “Even the word <conversion> stems from Plato, for adopting a philosophy meant a change of life in the first place”.

<sup>12</sup> The same word, *periaōgē*, from fragment 521 C of Book VII of the Republic as well as *metastrophē* are mentioned by the French historian of philosophy Henri Gouhier (1898–1994) in his book *Les conversions de Maine de Biran*, Vrin: Paris 1947 in footnote 1 on p. 8–9.

<sup>13</sup> Soiński (2006, p. 388) writes: “To describe the experience of change, the first Christians used two Greek terms: *epistrophō* (turn around, convert, turn, turn back) and *metanoia* (a change of the mind)”.

<sup>14</sup> In this part of the allegory (fragment 515 E; Platon, 1958a, p. 361)

the word apostrephōmenon ("would turn away") occurs.

<sup>15</sup> This emphasis stems from the fact that, according to MacDonald, the prototype of the Greek epis-trephō is the Hebrew verb *šûbh* ("to convert"), which appears in the Old Testament (see below).

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Amable de La Valette-Monbrun (1872–1930), in his book devoted to the dramatic process of the Catholic conversion of the famous French philosopher Marie-François-Pierre Gonthier Maine de Biran (1766–1824), considers philosophical conversion as a conversion towards oneself (towards philosophical contemplation), an assumption unto oneself, or a return to oneself (cf. Monbrun, 1927, p. 35).

<sup>17</sup> The New Testament also contains such forms of the verb strephō with prepositions, such anastrephō (9 times), apostrephō (9 times), diastrephō (7 times), ekstrephomai (1 time), katastrephō (2 times), metastrephō (1 time), sustrephō (2 times), and hypostrephō (35 times), which—aside from ekstrephō and katastrephō—also occur in Plato. There are also three nouns: anastrophē (13 times), katastrophē (2 times) and sustrophē (2 times).

<sup>18</sup> Reale would likely agree with this point: "This image indicative of the head from the opposed parts is taken and developed [by Plato] a little after and specified as a <conversion> (*periagōgē*) of the soul from becoming

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RECEIVED 06.12.2021 | ACCEPTED 19.12.2021