Φιλοσοφια
Volume 26, 3: 2025

FROM THE RELIGIOUS TO THE MYSTICAL: THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF *METHEXIS* AND *DIALEKTIKĒ* IN PLATONIC PHILOSOPHIC EDUCATION

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This paper aims to demonstrate that, in Plato, the education of philosophers is essentially both religious and mystical, necessitating engagement in both methexis — active involvement in the practices of religion, such as participation in rituals, dances, processions, and festivals — and dialektikē — advanced intellectual training replete with mystical undertones. By looking closely into the Republic and the Laws, this study further contends that all the disciplines in the Platonic curriculum (mathematics, astronomy, music, and gymnastics) carry an underlying religious character, serving not merely an intellectual or moral purpose, but also acting as a sort of toner, preparing the soul for a more perfect participation in the Forms. In other words, in Plato's view, without methexis, it would be extremely difficult — if not altogether impossible — for anyone to thrive in dialektikē. Methexis complements dialektikē inasmuch as dialektikē completes methexis. The two, hand in hand, are what every philosopher needs to engage in, before reaching not only theōria (the contemplation of the Forms and the apex of philosophic[1] education) but also homoiōsis theōi (the state of godlikeness), which Plato presents as the ultimate telos of the entire educational journey — from paideia to philosophia — and of human existence.

Keywords: methexis, dialektikē, philosophic education, Plato, religious, mystical

INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years, thanks in part to the publication of *A Platonic Theory of Moral Education* by Mark Jonas and Yoshiaki Nakazawa (2021), the academic world has witnessed a renewed interest in Plato, particularly his thoughts on education (Yacek 2023, 695). This renewed fascination — a sort of renaissance, so to speak — in Platonic studies (Yacek 2023, 695), in effect disproves the rather hasty and biased conclusion by some that Plato and his ideas are already obsolete in the present.

But then, despite the recent influx of studies on Plato's educational philosophy, many (if not most) of them do not associate, whether directly or indirectly, what he had written about education with any religious or mystical connotations. Jonas and Nakazawa's (2021) book is an excellent example, because while it is partly instrumental in reigniting a new spark in Platonic educational theory, it never mentions or even hints at the Forms, which is a central concept in Plato's entire philosophic project. There are plenty of other works similar to it, whose main focus is the cultivation of civic virtue, moral character, and maturity, or dialogical skills, leaving the religious and mystical dimensions of Plato's educational philosophy underexplored and even sidelined (see, e.g., O'Hear 2024; Berk 2023; Kotsonis 2023; Longa 2023; Mintz 2023; Pageau-St-Hilaire 2023).

Mason Marshall (2021, 215) declared that it is a mistake to speak about Plato's educational thought without any reference to the Forms — those transcendent realities from which all things derive their being and intelligibility — because at the heart of Plato's educational vision, it cannot be denied that he means every educated person to arrive at the knowledge of these Forms. It is very clear in the Allegory of the Cave: one must get out of the shadows and behold the Sun, the source of knowledge (see *Republic* VII, 514a-517a). But not only do I concur with Marshall (2021) that the Forms are indispensable — a *sine qua non,* I should say — in any serious and deepened discussion of Plato's educational views, I also believe that, firmly anchored on his theory of Forms, his philosophy of education carries certain religious and mystical dimensions.

In this study, I focus my examination on *philosophia*, the education of philosophers. I argue that a philosopher's educational formation is deemed incomplete if it does not incorporate both *methexis* (μέθεξις) and *dialektikē* (ἡ διαλεκτική τέχνη) — two integral and complementary components that render Platonic philosophic education essentially religious and mystical at the same time.[2] But what is *methexis*? And what is *dialektikē*? And how do they complement one another? These are among the questions that I endeavor to answer in this work.

THE RELIGIOUS FOUNDATION: *METHEXIS* AS SACRED PARTICIPATION

The common view on Platonic philosophic education is that it is a significantly advanced intellectual cultivation and moral formation. However, there is another, not-so-common view that is equally correct: this advanced educational stage is also inherently religious and profoundly mystical (Dombrowski 2005). Many scholars circumvent this truth, instead opting for a secular interpretation of the ancient Greek thinker. Yet, when we take a closer look at several dialogues (e.g., *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, and *Symposium*), we cannot help but recognize how replete they are with religious and mystical undertones. That is especially true when we examine Plato's corpus through the lens of *methexis* — a uniquely Platonic concept[3] that is key to understanding the underlying religious elements in his thought, particularly in the education of philosophers.

Methexis is a common Greek term that is often translated as *participation*. In Plato, however, *methexis* does not simply pertain to making oneself a part of something in a passive way; rather, it connotes something deeper: forging a relationship (*Phaedo* 100c–d*; Parmenides* 131a–c). That is why *methexis* is also understood as akin to *communion*, for it entails active engagement in which the participant consciously imitates (*mimēsis*) that into which they participate (Allern 2002, 82). In short, *methexis* is characterized by *mimēsis.* This idea is ubiquitous throughout Plato's philosophy, beginning with his metaphysics where he presents all levels of reality as linked to one another through a chain of *methexis*: first, we have the Forms, the source of every vitality, intelligibility, and divinity, belonging to a wholly and far superior world of eternal ideas; second, we have the cosmos, which flows from and participates in the Forms by means of imitating or mirroring their intelligible and divine order; and finally, we have the embodied souls of humans who, in turn, participate in this divine order of the cosmos through their cultural life — expressed in songs, dances, rituals, and festivals that mirror cosmic harmony and rhythm (*Republic* 509d–511e; *Timaeus* 28a–29d, 37c–39e, 47b–47e). Thus, *methexis*, in the form of *mimēsis*, is ultimately a reflection of a relationship, of communion with the divine. It is precisely for this reason that *methexis* is considered a sacred participation.

Seen from this perspective, *philosophia* is no longer solely concerned with intellectual and moral refinement. It becomes a training ground for mimetic *methexis* — a participatory imitation of the divine — where every discipline in the curriculum is oriented toward a fundamentally religious purpose, which is necessary for the soul to successfully undertake the subsequent mystical ascent of *dialektikē*. Each discipline — from music and gymnastics[4] to mathematics (consisting of arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, and harmonics) and finally dialectic — serves as a stepping stone toward fuller communion with the divine, the Forms. Together, they form a structured sequence of sacred exercises that tone the soul, disposing it for a more complete *methexis*, which alone prepares the mind and character for the rigors and visionary demands of *dialektikē*. These disciplines thus function like a kind of philosophic liturgy; for through them, the soul gets to rehearse and, at the same time, deepen its mimetic *methexis* of the Forms, participating ever more perfectly in their intelligibility and divinity. In this context, *philosophia* is transformed from a merely intellectual and moral program into a sacred and religious enterprise.

Having established *methexis* as sacred participation in divine order, we can now trace how this concept structures Plato's entire educational design. Each discipline in the curriculum — music, gymnastics, mathematics, and dialectic — embodies a distinct mode of participation that tunes different aspects of the soul to the divine. What follows, then, is not merely a commentary on the curriculum but an exploration of how each stage of learning becomes an ascent through ordered forms of *methexis*. Let us therefore examine how *methexis* shapes each stage of education. Each discipline is presented not for its intrinsic value alone but as a necessary phase in the soul's preparation for *dialektikē*.

For Plato, music — which includes singing and dancing — holds a paramount place in human life. He recommends it to children early in their formation (*Laws* 664b-e), and even more strongly to adults, for a person can only be considered well-educated when they know how to both sing and dance well (*Laws* 654b). The deeper reason,

however, is not merely aesthetic or social but religious — and, surprisingly, even "methexic." As James Bernard Murphy (2024, 199) observes, "musical education [is what] prepares citizens for a lifetime of mandatory participation in religious festivals. At the festivals, the gods themselves — who gave us music and dance — are our dance partners and choral leaders." Those who have reached the stage of philosophic education are not ordinary citizens. According to Vilius Bartninkas (2023, 202), at religious festivals, they are not mere spectators but active participants, performing special duties as judges, inspectors, or overseers of musical and choral performances and competitions. The same religious and participatory character, as we shall see, also applies to gymnastics.

In Plato's educational scheme, gymnastics is as essential as music, and he repeatedly affirms their co-importance (see, e.g., *Republic* 409c–412a; *Laws* 803e–804d; and 830e–832a). Gymnastics not only provides physical training but likewise serves as an "effective training for the soul" (Reid 2010, 170). As a physical endeavor, it naturally forms the body into a disciplined instrument, capable of sustaining a life of virtue, as gymnastics is meant to be a lifelong pursuit. But that is not all, for as the *Laws* (795e-796b) suggests, such training has a sacred dimension: it is part of the care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*), through which one attunes to the divine order and progresses in spiritual ascent. For Plato, then, gymnastics is not to be taken lightly; it is not something optional. Rather, it is a necessary and pious practice — a religious regimen, we may say — that prepares the whole person, in body and soul, for the imitation of the divine. This is particularly true for those who undergo philosophic education: they need to be an exemplar of good health, strong physique, formidable spirit, and divine likeness. This religious preparation (*methexis*) across music and gymnastics is therefore the prerequisite formation that ensures the soul is morally and spiritually steady before it engages the sheer intellectual force of *dialektikē*.

In regard to mathematics, it is not reducible to mere numbers, shapes, measurements, or equations. In the *Republic*, Plato presents the discipline as a complex and interlinked course of study comprising of five distinct sciences, namely: arithmetic (*arithmētikē*) as the study of number in itself (522c–525a); plane geometry (*planē geōmetria*) for understanding figures in two dimensions (526a–b); solid geometry (*stereometria*) for the study of three-dimensional forms (528b–530b); astronomy (*astronomia*) for the contemplation of the ordered movements of the heavens (527d–529d); and harmonics (*harmonia*) for discerning numerical ratios in musical consonance (530d–531c). From how Plato describes each of these sciences, it is evident that mathematics is a propaedeutic discipline that trains the intellect to move beyond the changing and fleeting images of the world toward the fixed, reliable, and eternal truths — the Forms.

Thus, mathematics is not merely an intellectual tool; it is also a preparatory program that habituates the soul toward the sacred. We can take our cue from his discussions on the nature and purpose of astronomy. In the *Laws* (821b–d and 967a–e), Plato tells us, through the character of the Athenian Stranger, that by studying the unchanging order of the heavens, we are compelled to admit that there must be a divine designer behind it all. And such an admission naturally leads to piety and reverence for the gods. As Walter Burkert (1985, 327) states, "Astronomy becomes the foundation of religion … the stars have a claim to a real cult with sacrifices, prayers,

and festivals." In this light, the religious value of mathematics becomes apparent: by facilitating understanding of the eternal ratios and harmonies that permeate the cosmos, mathematics helps the soul not only to learn about the divine cosmic order, but also to participate (*methexis*) in it through a mimetic alignment — that is, by imitating in thought and practice the order established by the gods. That is because to be able to contemplate the numerical proportion in music, or the revolutions of the heavens, is to rehearse (i.e., mimic) the very order that the gods themselves have set, thereby allowing the soul to assimilate itself to what is most stable and divine. Thus, mathematics serves a dual function: it sharpens epistemological vision while simultaneously orienting the soul toward the sacred, aligning human life with the divine order and, through this necessary *methexis*, preparing the philosopher for the higher, mystical ascent of *dialektikē*, which culminates the curriculum.

THE PHILOSOPHIC CULMINATION: *DIALEKTIKĒ* AS METHOD OF MYSTICAL ASCENT

Having completed the preparatory *methexis* of the intellect — in which, through mathematics, one learns to imitate the eternal order by grasping non-sensible objects — the philosopher is now ready for the final, transformative discipline: *dialektikē*. Unlike purely rationalist interpretations that reduce dialectic to abstract reasoning, I contend that it functions as a transformative *mystagōgia*, a view supported by scholars such as Betegh (2022). Yet this reading goes further: it shows that the entire educational arc is systematically unified — *mimēsis*, *methexis*, and *theōria* form a single, integrated *telos*, a liturgical formation through which the final vision becomes possible.

Plato presents *dialektikē* (ἡ διαλεκτική τέχνη) as the *kephalaiōdes* (κεφαλαιώδης, or "coping-stone") of his educational program — the discipline that crowns and perfects all earlier studies, including music, gymnastics, and mathematics (*Republic* VII, 534b–c). As the apex of philosophic education, dialectic distinguishes itself by leading the soul beyond hypotheses (ἐξ ὑποθέσεων ἀνιόντα) to encounter the unconditioned first principle. Unlike the mathematicians (*hoi mathēmatikoi*), whose sciences remain tethered to unexamined axioms and stop at *dianoia* — the stage of reasoning bound by assumptions — the dialectician uses such postulates as mere stepping-stones (*hōsper epi bathmōn*) and refuses to rest content before reaching the *to anypotheton archēn* (the unconditioned first principle). *Dialektikē* proceeds "not making use of anything visible, but through the Forms themselves" (*eidē kath' hauta*, *Republic* 511b), moving always toward what requires no further ground.

Thus, for Plato, dialectic is not merely the culmination of intellectual training but the discipline that unifies and consummates all previous studies within a mystical ascent. It transfigures the preparatory sciences into a single vision of ultimate reality — a transformative encounter with what lies "beyond being" (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, *Republic* VI, 509b). Here, philosophy passes from reasoning to initiation (*mystagōgia*), as reason gives way to noetic insight and vision.

What sets *dialektikē* apart from other sciences (*epistēma*i), however, is its apophatic progression. Like the later practice of negative theology, it moves through

successive acts of negation — stripping away the sensible (*aisthēton*), the imagistic (*phantasmata*), and even the boundaries of discursive thinking (*dianoia*) — so that the soul may approach "that which is beyond being in dignity and power" (*epekeina tēs ousias presbeia kai dunamei*, 509b). The Form of the Good (*to agathon*) can neither be represented in images nor fully captured in argument. It is the very condition of intelligibility itself (*to tou gnōston aitia*). The dialectical ascent (*anagōgē*), therefore, yields not new hypotheses but an immediate, self-validating vision of truth (*Republic* 509b–511e). In this way, *dialektikē* is no longer simple analytical reasoning; it functions as a *mystagōgia* — an initiation into divine reality, a transformative event that purifies the intellect (*nous*) and transfigures it into likeness (*homoiōsis*) with what it beholds. This preparatory phase is essential, as Plato never conceives education as purely intellectual; it is always religious and formative at its core. As I have shown earlier, he identifies both music and gymnastics as modes of soul-shaping, and that is because they align human desires and passions with the harmonies of justice and virtue (*dikaiosynē kai aretē*, *Republic* 401d–402a). Likewise, mathematical studies function as "compulsions of the soul" (*anankazousin tēn psuchēn*), turning it away from the visible toward what truly is (*Republic* 525d–526c). These earlier practices prepare the student for reverence and participation in the invisible order, and, as I have already mentioned, function almost as a philosophic liturgy that rehearses readiness for the truth. When the soul, thus habituated, finally enters *dialektikē*, it is already liturgically formed; dialectic takes this religious orientation and interiorizes it, elevating mimetic participation (*methexis*) into mystical vision (*theōria*).

The consequence of dialectical ascent (*anagōgē*) is not the possession of abstract knowledge (*epistēmē*) but the transformation of the knower. Plato insists that liberation from the "leaden weights of our birth" (*molibdous desmous ek tou genesthai*, 519a–b) — the attachments to sensible pleasures — is required before the intellect can turn to the proper objects of study. More importantly, when one arrives at the dialectical vision of the Good, that moment is defined not just by one's knowing of the Good, but even more so by one's becoming like the divine (*homoiōsis theōi*) that one has come to know. At the end of dialectic, there is not only *theōria* — the contemplation of the source of truth and order — but also conformity to the divine, the ultimate *telos* of Platonic education (cf. Itao 2023; see also Murphy 2024, 144, 172, and 180, footnote 370). And so, the culmination of dialectic cannot be said to be purely epistemological; it is also ontological — because the soul is transformed, reshaped, and assimilated to the divine, and for this, prepared for just governance of itself and the *polis.*

Moreover, the structure of dialectical ascent (*anagōgē*) bears a deliberate resemblance to the religious initiation rites (*teletai*) of Plato's time (cf. Betegh 2022, 233). The curriculum as a whole may be read as a mystagogic sequence: preparation (*proaulos*) through *mousikē*, *gumnastikē* (*Republic* 401d–402a), and *mathēmata* (522c–531c); purification (*katharsis)* through the apophatic stripping of *dialektikē* (532a–534e); and illumination (*epopteia*) in the vision of the Good (508d–509b). Just as the Eleusian initiates[5] were prepared through ritual for a sacred vision, so the Platonic philosopher is prepared through education for the intellectual vision of the intelligible principle (*Phaedrus* 249c–250b*; Symposium* 210a–212a). In this sense, *dialektikē* is the intellectual analog of initiation (*mystērion*): not neutral reasoning but mystical unveiling (*Republic* 519c–521b, 532a–534e).

However, this analogy, while structurally insightful, has its limits. Plato never claims that the philosopher literally participates in the Eleusian rites; rather, he adopts their initiatory pattern as a powerful metaphor familiar to his audience. Unlike the Eleusian *teletai*, which were confined to a single ritual sequence culminating in a vision of agricultural or chthonic deities, Plato's *dialektikē* is essentially intellectual and civic. In the mysteries, purification (*katharsis*) was a ritual act; in *dialektikē*, it becomes an apophatic purification of thought, a stripping away of assumptions that leads to a vision beyond being (*Republic* 509b). The philosopher's ascent (*anagōgē*), moreover, does not end in private bliss or escape but in *homoiōsis theōi*, the likeness to God that demands a *periagōgē* — a turning back toward the cave (*Republic* 519d). Philosophic initiation, then, is inseparable from civic service (*praxis*), transforming *theōria* into the art of ruling (*Republic* 540a).

This integration of philosophy, religious preparation, and civic duty, which defines the philosopher's *periagōgē* in the *Republic*, is not confined to that dialogue. It finds fuller and more explicit expression in the *Laws*, where Plato provides a systematic defense of ritual and piety as foundations of civic education and the well-ordered state. In the *Laws*, Plato emphasizes that the end of education is piety (*eusebeia*) — the alignment of human life with divine order (716b–e). Nonetheless, while it places greater emphasis on ritual and civic piety, on the whole, the *Laws* — Plato's last, which he left unfinished — still remains within a philosophic framework. Take the case of how Plato considers astronomy in this work: given that it makes one study the heavens intently, more often than not, it leads to the acknowledgment that there is indeed a divine designer, a being to whom reverence and homage must be paid (821b–d, 967a–e). Here, civic ritual and philosophic inquiry are woven into a single *paideia*, in which the lawgiver's role is as much spiritual as political. There is an undeniable continuity that underscores how *dialektikē* cannot in any way be divorced from its religious matrix; for the *anagōgē* — the mystical ascent — depends on the soul's prior liturgical shaping, whose goal is not detached speculation but divine assimilation (*homoiōsis theōi*).

In sum, *dialektikē* stands at the crucial crosspoint between the religious and the mystical in Plato's vision of education. It gathers up the mimetic exercises (*mimēsis* and *methexis*) of *mousikē*, *gumnastikē*, and *mathēmata* — forms of participation that train the soul through imitation — and transfigures them into a direct ascent (*anagōgē*). The process involves a profound transformation. What begins as imitation (*mimēsis*) is ultimately converted into participation (*methexis*). The philosopher's role shifts accordingly: a liturgical rehearsal becomes a powerful mystical vision (*theōria*). Yet this mystical unveiling does not abolish the religious foundations but presupposes them: without the prior shaping of the soul through ritual, civic piety, and philosophic liturgy, the ascent of dialectic would be impossible. Dialectic remains, in the deepest sense, liturgically conditioned — an intellectual mystery built upon the religious life of the *polis*. In this way, Plato's curriculum is neither reducible to rational philosophy nor to cultic ritual but integrates both into a single transformative process. Through *dialektikē*, philosophy becomes initiation (*mystagōgia*). It leads to communion with the Good (*to agathon*) and reshapes the soul in its very likeness (*homoiōsis theōi*).

THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF *METHEXIS* AND *DIALEKTIKĒ*

Plato's view of education is far from a simple accumulation of knowledge; it is meant to transform the whole person. To reduce Plato to a rationalist alone is to miss the religious and even mystical character of his *paideia*. As both the *Republic* and the *Laws* suggest, education rests on a tension and balance between two indispensable elements: *methexis* (μέθεξις, participation) and *dialektikē* (ἡ διαλεκτική τέχνη, dialectic). The first — rooted in music, gymnastics, and civic ritual — forms the soul's desires and habits in line with justice and virtue (*Republic* 401d–402a; *Laws* 653a–654a). The second, dialectic, purifies and elevates, freeing the soul from received assumptions until it can "turn toward" the vision of the Good (*Republic* 532a–534e). Each on its own is incomplete; only in their convergence does Plato's curriculum unite moral formation with intellectual illumination. Together, they form the structural rhythm of Plato's curriculum, guiding the soul from ritual participation and civic virtue to intellectual purification, mystical ascent, and finally to *theōria* — the vision of the Good (*Republic* VI, 509b–511e). Together, they form a vital synergy: the religious and civic grounding of *methexis* supplies the soil in which the mystical ascent of dialectic can take root.

The complementarity of *methexis* and *dialektikē* is not simply a theoretical point but something Plato himself seems to insist on. One can see this most clearly by considering what happens if philosophy were reduced to dialectic alone. In such a case, reasoning would easily collapse into the sort of empty cleverness that Plato criticizes in *Republic* X, where argumentation turns into mere play with images or *mimēsis* (595a–602b). Such reasoning, however sharp, does not truly engage the life of the soul. In other words, the practice of logic on its own can drift into sophistry if it is not sustained by the moral, civic, and religious orientations that come from shared participation. Yet the reverse is also true. Ritual and participation by themselves may habituate the soul, but they do not, by that fact, bring it to see "that which is beyond being in dignity and power" (*epekeina tēs ousias presbeia kai dunamei*, *Republic* VI, 509b). Civic and cultural practices, however noble, can ossify into routine unless they are clarified and transfigured by dialectical questioning. Only *dialektikē* strips away unexamined assumptions, purifies the soul of intellectual dross, and raises it to noetic encounter with the Forms. Plato envisions education as a continuous movement from participation to contemplation, each sustaining and perfecting the other.

This complementarity comes to light when we trace the structure of Plato's curriculum. His educational program forms a continuous arc. The earlier stages — *methexis* through *mousikē*, *gumnastikē*, and civic ritual — are meant to train both desire and imagination so that the soul learns to take pleasure in order and proportion. Mathematical studies then deepen this orientation by turning the mind away from the shifting realm of sense toward stable, intelligible structures (*Republic* 522c–531c). Only when this groundwork has been laid does dialectic become possible, for it marks the critical passage from these preparatory exercises to the higher, and in some sense apophatic, search for what transcends all beings.

The culmination of this educational ascent is *theōria* (θεωρία), the direct vision of the intelligible order. In the *Phaedrus* (247c–e), Plato evokes the image of the soul's charioteer catching sight of the Forms and drawing nourishment from the

vision of truth. The *Republic* pushes this ascent to its highest point. At 509d–511e, the philosopher turns toward the Good itself, the radiant source of all intelligibility. Yet this vision is not simply a matter of knowing in the ordinary sense. Plato is clear that the Good is said to lie "beyond being" (*epekeina tēs ousias*, 509b), a reality that cannot be captured by *logos* but only seen in immediate communion. Here, philosophy becomes mystical: the soul, purified of its attachments and stripped of assumptions, is transformed by what it beholds. That is because what one meets in this vision resists ordinary description, but it leaves its mark by reshaping the soul itself. To look upon the Good is, in some way, to be drawn into its likeness (*homoiōsis theōi*), carrying out what earlier civic rites could only hint at.

The final stage of *dialektikē* is thus understood as a pursuit that is strictly beyond *epistēmē* (propositional knowledge). Plato's ultimate goal is not merely to gain intellectual understanding of *ousia* (Being/Essence, the Forms), but to achieve a change in the soul's own *ousia*. As such, philosophic education aims for *theōria* — a transformative vision that culminates in *homoiōsis theōi* (godlikeness). This concept — that the goal of philosophic ascent transcends mere knowledge and even the Forms themselves — was later systematized by Plotinus, who situated The One as the ultimate principle, affirming that the highest goal is not only to know the divine order, but to be united with it. Even so, the philosopher is not excused from life with others. The one who has seen must turn about (*periagōgē*), taking up again the burden of guiding and guarding the *polis* (*Republic VII*). As Murphy (2024, 151) emphasizes, "*Paideia* is *periagōgē*."

Theōria, therefore, does not terminate in private bliss as mentioned earlier. In Plato's model, the philosopher must return to the cave (*Republic* VII, 519c–520e), bearing the fruits of vision to transform civic life. As Werner Jaeger (1943, 295) explains, "The essence of philosophical education is 'conversion'. . .. It means more specifically the wheeling around of the 'whole soul' towards the light of the Idea of the good, the divine origin of the universe." The philosopher's ascent, thus, issues in a priestly vocation. Having been initiated into divine realities, he or she becomes a *mystagōgos* — a guide who leads others into the mystery. Seen this way, *philosophia* is not just an abstract pursuit but something closer to a sacred task. The philosopher is not there only to think about eternal things in the safety of contemplation; they also have to find ways of living them out in the *polis*, holding together the concerns of ordinary people with the wider order of the cosmos.

The journey of ascent is incomplete unless it is translated into practical action (*praxis*) — into how one governs, teaches, and worships. The Platonic philosopher becomes a kind of priest or priestess, building a bridge between the religious foundation of *methexis* and the mystical freedom of *dialektikē* (cf. *Laws* XII, 951d; see also Bartninkas 2023, 202). This characteristically priestly role illustrates the close connection between Plato's religious and mystical themes. Take again the Allegory of the Cave (*Republic* VII, 514a-517a): it is not simply about waking up the intellect, but about learning how to serve as a kind of mediator. The one who has looked upon the Good cannot remain apart; he or she carries an obligation to return, to bring some of that light back into the darker corners of civic life. The end of philosophic education, then, is not escape into another world, but the work of reshaping this one so that, in

some measure, it reflects the divine. *Philosophia*, hence, is not just a theory; it is a sacred practice that links an individual's personal growth to the renewal of their society.

In recent years, the role of civic rites has become harder to downplay, and Murphy (2024) pushes this more sharply than most. He won't allow us to treat them as a decorative afterthought; on the contrary, he insists that they matter in ways that go right to the heart of Plato's project. Murphy calls this process "civic deification," and what he means is that the rituals embedded in Plato's *paideia* are not simply the inherited gestures of an older piety, performed out of habit, but deliberate and symbolic acts through which the city itself is drawn upward, ritually and communally, into relation with the divine. In Murphy's reading, Plato's educational vision is not exhausted by the intellectual or even the mystical dimension of dialectical ascent, but unfolds along three parallel yet interwoven paths: the metaphysical, by which the philosopher rises to the Good itself beyond being (*Republic* 509b); the cosmological, by which contemplation of the heavens impresses upon the soul the ordered harmony of divine craftsmanship (*Laws* 821b–d, 967a–e); and the civic, by which ritual, law, and worship bind the life of the community into participation with the divine order. This third ascent is crucial, for it reminds us that the philosopher's own assimilation to God (*homoíōsis theōi*) cannot be conceived in isolation, as though it were a private act of illumination detached from the city; rather, it is inextricably tied to the transformation of the community itself.

Thus, recognizing their immense role, Plato places the philosopher at the forefront of what Murphy (2024, 206) describes as a kind of civic procession—an upward movement in which the whole city, not just the individual sage, is drawn toward the divine. The philosopher does not merely ascend for himself or herself, nor does he or she retreat into private bliss; his or her ascent is undertaken on behalf of the city, which he or she leads, like a priest or priestess at the front of a liturgy, into closer likeness with the divine (*homoíōsis theōi*). In this procession, no citizen is to be abandoned: philosophers and statespersons guide from the front, while demagogues and tyrants drag at the rear, but all are summoned to "follow in the company of god." The image, for Murphy, discloses the radical civic dimension of Platonic education — namely, that salvation and assimilation are never strictly individual but bound up with the *polis* as a whole. To bring the city nearer to God is at once the philosopher's duty and his or her own salvation; conversely, to live in a corrupted city, if one cannot reform it, is to live as though already a citizen of the heavenly city, measuring one's life by the standard of divine order even amid political decay. I should say, however, that while Murphy persuasively emphasizes the civic dimension of *homoiōsis theōi*, one might ask whether this risks overstating the political at the expense of the mystical movement of ascent.[6] This paper instead seeks to hold both dimensions together, showing how civic service complements rather than competes with mystical contemplation.

Finally, the complementarity of *methexis* and *dialektikē* discloses the structural principle of Platonic philosophy. Only their union prevents education from drifting into either habit or abstraction. However, when combined, they form a unified religious–mystical way of life, culminating in *theōria* and returning to priestly service in the *polis*. *Philosophia* is thereby revealed as initiation, mediation, and transformation: a lifelong ascent from ritual participation, through dialectical

purification, into mystical vision, consummated in civic deification, confirming that *homoíōsis theōi* is indeed the ultimate educational *telos* for Plato (cf. Itao 2023; see also Murphy 2024, 144, 172, and 180, footnote 370).

CONCLUSION

The full arc of Platonic philosophic education turns on the living interplay between *methexis* (participation) and *dialektikē* (dialectic). Education is not only about sharpening the mind; it is a path that reshapes the person. Its horizon is *homoíōsis theōi* — becoming like the divine. With that vision comes a responsibility. The philosopher must mediate between what is seen in the light and how people actually live. As *Republic* VI–VII makes it clear, this is a philosophic duty, not a ceremonial privilege. One ascends to the Forms, but then returns to the cave — back to ordinary life — to help others turn toward what is true and good.

This vocation is more than knowledge acquisition. It is a form of service. Plato envisions a form of "civic deification," not in the sense of ritual exaltation, but rather of elevating the city's habits and values to meet higher standards (Murphy 2024). The philosopher-ruler tries to harmonize the city's soul with the measure of the Forms. That work is practical: teaching, deciding, persuading, making laws, and — above all — modeling a life ordered by reason and virtue. This is how Plato's ideals stop being remote abstractions and start to find a foothold in lived experience. However, not everyone views him in that way. Some readers — Jonas and Nakazawa (2021) among them — downplay the part played by the Forms, and in doing so they risk trimming Plato's vision down to something narrower than he intended. Once that happens, Plato's vision can easily be mistaken for little more than moral training or social utility, stripped of its deeper aim: the soul's journey toward what endures beyond the temporal. That reading captures something important — Plato does care about civic virtue — but it misses the *telos* that animates the entire project. Without the Forms — especially the Good — education shrinks into technique. It makes competent citizens, perhaps, but not souls drawn toward wisdom.

The Forms matter today for precisely this reason. They give direction and depth. They keep education from becoming mere socialization or skills-training by naming what our best efforts are for. They also protect the language of truth, goodness, and beauty from cynicism. In a form-centered pedagogy, teachers do not just transfer information; they accompany students in a conversion of attention — learning to love what is worth loving, thinking carefully, and acting justly. This, in effect, echoes Plato's conviction that education is never only about utility but always about the transformation of the whole soul; and especially at the stage of *philosophia*, education is never only an intellectual and moral cultivation but always — though often overlooked — a religious and mystical vision.

Plato's call, then, is simple and demanding: "Seek the light; let it change you; and come back for others." The philosopher's return is not a retreat but a mission. It holds together two necessities: the pull of transcendence and the press of civic life. If we take that pattern seriously, education becomes a lifelong practice of becoming — and helping others become — what the truth asks of us. In this way, Platonic

philosophia still speaks across the centuries, challenging us to hold wisdom and service together as one vocation.

Finally, this paper contends that the true *telos* of the philosopher's education lies in this synthesis: Plato's curriculum systematically integrates *methexis* and *dialektikē* into what may be called a priestly vocation of civic mediation. This constitutes the paper's central interpretive contribution: the philosopher, having attained *homoiōsis theōi* through mystical contemplation, becomes a mediator who sanctifies and preserves the *polis* through wisdom and service.

Ultimately, recovering Plato's vision of philosophic education as a journey from the Religious to the Mystical holds profound significance for contemporary thought. In the field of philosophy of education, the complementarity of *methexis* and *dialektikē* challenges purely mechanistic or vocational models, recovering the notion that *philosophia* must begin with the holistic cultivation of the soul through sacred practice in preparation for ultimate insight. For civic formation, the political mandate of *homoiōsis theōi* (godlikeness) ensures that the philosopher's knowledge is never morally indifferent but intrinsically bound to the civic duty of *periagōgē,* the return that brings divine order to the *polis* — a corrective to the moral neutrality often associated with modern expertise. Finally, this analysis shows that Platonic *mystagōgia* offers an intellectualized framework for spirituality, affirming that the highest reaches of rational inquiry need not lead to skepticism but to a transformative vision in which contemplation (*theōria*) itself becomes the truest form of pious action.

NOTES

1. In this paper, I use *philosophic* rather than *philosophical* to refer to Plato's conception of education. While both terms are correct, *philosophic* preserves an older usage that more closely reflects the ancient understanding of *philosophia* as a lived pursuit of wisdom and virtue, not merely an abstract or theoretical discipline. The choice underscores the transformative, way-of-life dimension of Plato's educational vision.

2. When speaking of the "religious" dimension of Platonic *paideia*, I do not mean to associate Plato with the later, systematized forms of spirituality that drew from his thought. For Plato, the religious rests on civic piety and harmony with the cosmic order. This is quite different from what came after. Stoic writers such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius stressed moral self-sufficiency and inner autonomy, while Plato's ideal of *homoiōsis theōi* always remained bound to civic life and the transformation of the *polis*. Neo-Platonists like Plotinus and Proclus deepened his language of ascent (*anagōgē*) but tended to end it in a private union with the One. Plato, instead, requires the *periagōgē* — the turning back toward the cave — so that the vision of the Good serves the community. This sense of return left a deep mark on later Christian Platonists such as Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, who reimagined Plato's ascent and descent within a theological story of spiritual participation in God. Seen in this wider line of influence, the "religious" side of *paideia* is best read as the shared, almost liturgical shaping of citizens toward the divine order that also grounds political life.

3. Albeit the term *methexis* existed in ordinary Greek, Plato is its first philosophic architect, using it to explain the relationship between the world of becoming (the sensible realm) and the world of being (the eternal Forms). In this precise metaphysical sense, *methexis* is uniquely Platonic.

4. In *Republic* VII (521c–531c), Plato omits explicit mention of music and gymnastics from the advanced curriculum, but in *Laws* VII (803e–804d; 830e–832a), he recommends their lifelong practice, treating them as essential for sustaining harmony of soul and body.

5. The Eleusian initiates (μύσται, *mystai*) refer to the newly admitted members of the Eleusian Mysteries (*ta Mystēria*), one of the most celebrated of the ancient Greek mystery cults, widely known for its annual religious festival held in honor of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis (near Athens).

6. For alternative perspectives that enrich the discussion of dialectic and the allegories of ascent, see Lloyd Gerson (2003), who situates *noēsis* within the structure of Platonic education; Catherine Rowett (2018), who reinterprets the ascent imagery in the *Republic* as a dynamic pedagogy of vision; and Miriam Byrd (2019), who examines *dianoetic* reasoning as the necessary prelude to *dialektikē* in Plato's *Republic*.

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