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Why Did Plato not Write the 'Unwritten Doctrine'? Some Preliminary Remarks

In memoriam Charles H. Kahn

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Abstract: This article asks the question "Why did Plato not write the 'unwritten doctrine'?" and answers it by citing a combination of two obstacles. The first derives from the limitations of the episteme available to an embodied soul about the essence of the good. Even if the dialectician has access to some kind of knowledge, the mismatch between the unchanging essence of the good and the precarious *logoi* which aim to identify it (and allow others some measure of access to it) can never fully be overcome. At best, Socrates (or Plato) can lead souls to an incomplete account of it: It is possible that even the most expert dialectician can only have a claim to knowledge, but no absolute certainty. Another obstacle lies in the audience or readership itself: No shortcut to understanding is possible, and yet a mere written presentation, which is all they have, is just such a shortcut, and so represents an empty promise. In memory of Charles H. Kahn (1928–2023), a letter of his from September 5, 1989, concerning the question "Why did Plato not write the 'unwritten doctrine'?" is published, along with some comments.

Keywords: Plato; unwritten doctrines; lecture; good; philosopher

With regard to Plato's literary activity, at least three questions can be asked: Why did Plato write at all, given his criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus* (274b–279c)?[1] Why did he write dialogues and not treatises?[2] And why did he not also publish in writing everything that he considered worth communicating orally? In the following, I shall not engage with the first two questions, but restrict myself to the last one. That Plato

1 On this point, see the answer of Griswold (1986) 219–29.

2 On this point, see Griswold's edited anthology from 1988, containing the important essay Griswold (1988) 143–63.

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did not publish everything in writing that he considered worthy of oral communication is shown by the mention of "so called unwritten doctrines" (*legomena agrapha dogmata*, Arist. *Ph.* IV 2.209b14–15) and by at least one public lecture on the Good (*Peri tagathou akroasis*) that has been documented (cf. Aristox. *Harm*. II 30).[3] Furthermore, we can assume that the content of the 'so called unwritten teachings' and the public lecture on the Good is not *simpliciter* identical to what Plato wrote in the dialogues. That this is the case is also made clear by the above-mentioned testimonies of Aristotle and Aristoxenus: According to Aristotle, Plato called the receptacle (*metalêptikon*) by different names in the *Timaeus* and in the "so called unwritten doctrines" (*legomena agrapha dogmata*), but nevertheless showed that place (*topon*) and space (*chôran*) are the same (cf. Arist. *Ph*. IV 2.209b13–16). This is undoubtedly a misunderstanding of the *Timaeus*, where place and space are nowhere shown to be the same.[4] However, there is no doubt that Plato called the *metalêptikon* by different names in the *Timaeus* and in the "so called unwritten doctrines". This difference is underlined, among other things, by Aristotle's report on Plato's research into the principles in *Metaphysics* A 6. According to this passage, Plato introduced two principles, the ideal numbers, the *mathêmatika* as *metaxy*, and the element of the One as the cause of the Good, while Duality is the cause of the Bad (cf. *Metaph*. A 6.987b10–988a17).[5] There is "not a word" about this in the dialogues.[6] At the same time, we cannot see in this report a mere misunderstanding of the dialogues, as it goes far beyond what is explicable in terms of a 'misunderstanding'.[7]

The only other option is to connect Aristotle's report to the "so called unwritten teachings".[8] But since there the *metalêptikon* – or cause, in the sense of the *hyle* – is called "the great and the small" (cf. *Metaph*. A 6.988a13–14), we can assume that Plato, on Aristotle's account, called the *metalêptikon* "*chôra*" in the *Timaeus* and "the great

3 I am following the late dating now also advocated by the esotericist Gaiser (1980); Gaiser is supported by Eder (1986).

4 See Cherniss (1945) 16. For a critique of Cherniss' sweeping conclusions, cf. Vogel (1949) 204–5.

5 See the synopsis in Cherniss (1945) 7–8.

6 See, rightly, Cherniss (1945) 8.

7 As Cherniss (1945) 7–24 wrongly does. For criticism, cf., among others, esp. Vogel in Wippern (1972) 41–87; Ross (1951) 142–53; Krämer (1959) 380–4; Ferber (1989) 154–216, esp. 211–6.

8 Alexander already relates the report *Metaph*. A 6.987b33 to the Aristotelian text *Peri tagathou* and thus probably also to the Platonic *Peri tagathou akroasin* – cf. *In Arist. Metaph*. 56.35 and also Wielen (1941) 8–9. However, there is no need to connect A 6.987b10-988a7 to the probably late and unique lecture that is supposedly summarised in the three books of the Aristotelian treatise *Peri tagathou*. It could also be a summary of earlier *synousiai peri tagathou*, whose existence can be assumed in the period after books VI and VII of the *Republic* were written – on this point, see Ferber (1989) 211–6. That the remark in *Metaph.* A 9 – "[…] but mathematics has now become philosophy, although they say that it has to be pursued for other reasons" (992a32–b1) – concerns book VII of the *Republic* is also recognised by Burnyeat (1987) 234 n. 52.

and the small" in the "so called unwritten teachings". Furthermore, Aristoxenus reports in his anecdote on the *Peri tagathou akroasis* that this culminated in the statement: […] *kai, to peras hoti t'agathon estin hen* ("[…] and, finally, that the Good is one", *Harm.* 31).[9] Since this is the concluding statement of the *akroasis*, this sentence clearly does not refer to the idea of the Good *alongside* other ideas, e.g. the beautiful (cf. *Resp.* VI 507b), but to the idea of the Good standing *over* the other ideas, i.e. the *megiston mathêma* (cf. *Resp.* VI 505a, VII 519c). However, this explicit claim made by Aristoxenus is not found in the presentation of the *megiston mathêma* via a series of analogies in books 6 and 7 of the *Republic*.[10] Nor do we find it anywhere else in the dialogues.

We can therefore state (1) that Plato had an 'unwritten teaching' and (2) that it is not *simpliciter* identical to the 'written teaching' presented in the dialogues. On these points, the two opponents H. Cherniss and H. J. Krämer are in agreement.[11] These two statements probably represent the lowest common denominator in the gigantomachy about the 'unwritten doctrine'. However, even this lowest common denominator has been called into question, e.g. by R. E. Allen, who has argued that there was no 'unwritten teaching' at all.[12] Moreover, while K. M. Sayre admits the

9 For the possible translations, see Cherniss (1945) 87 n. 2. Following Cherniss, *ibid.* I translate *to peras* adverbially. However, the translation suggested above leaves open the meaning of *estin*, which can probably only be deduced non-esoterically, i.e. from the series of similes. See Ferber (1989) 76.

10 Cf. Cherniss (1945) 17; Ferber (1989) 76.

11 See Cherniss (1945) 1–30. Cherniss (1945) 16 is of the opinion that the "unwritten doctrines" (*Phys*. IV 2.209b14–15) only involve "verbal variation". However, he admits that Aristotle's report in *Metaph*. A 6.987b10–988a17 offers something completely different from what we find in the dialogues (cf. Cherniss 1945, 17). Likewise, see Krämer (1959) 389–486, with somewhat exaggerated criticism of Cherniss. More reliable is Vogel's critique in Wippern (1972) 41–87; Ross (1951) 142–53. In his review of Wielen, Cherniss concedes that, for Plato, too, the ideal numbers are limited to the decad, a claim which is nowhere attested in the dialogues; cf. Cherniss (1947) 244–9.

12 Allen writes as a result of his tracing the 'unwritten teaching' back to the *Parmenides*, cf. Allen (1983) 271: "The result has been a perverse [*sic*] tendency to claim that Plato privately thought a kind of esoteric doctrine quite unlike anything exhibited by the dialogues. But the final part of the *Parmenides* differs from the doctrines of the dialogues, not because it is esoteric, but because it is aporematic. This is why Aristotle at one point in the *Physics* (IV 209b14-15) refers to the so-called 'unwritten doctrines' – so called because, Aristotle thought, the *Parmenides* does not state a doctrine but implies a doctrine, and Aristotle, interpreting the dialogue, tells us what that doctrine is". For the refutation of this singular statement, which is also based on an interpretation of *Metaph.* A 6. 987b10-988a17 that has already been refuted by Ross (1924) 162–77 and Cherniss (1944) 182 n. 6, insofar as the ideal numbers are not mathematical numbers, see Ferber (1989) 163–8, 288–300. Incidentally, the wording "so-called unwritten teachings" (*legomena agrapha dogmata*) (*Phys.* IV 2.209b14–16) indicates that is a commonly used expression and thus probably a recurring designation for a recurring activity and is thus not to be understood in a derogatory sense, cf. Kühner and Gert (1898) §404, as well as Szlezák (1993) esp. 172–4. Following a suggestion of Szlezák (1993) 160 n. 11, I have

existence of an 'unwritten doctrine', he believes that we find it formulated in slightly different terms in the *Philebus*, with the result that the discrepancy between the dialogues and the 'unwritten doctrine' disappears.[13] Nonetheless, both of these positions conflict with the extant evidence and can be easily refuted, so that we can take the consensus view as our starting point until there is evidence to the contrary.

In the following, I do not wish to propose a new reconstruction of the content of these 'unwritten doctrines',[14] but will only try to answer the preliminary question: Why did Plato not write them down? Among other things, these doctrines deal with the Good – as at least *one* unwritten *Peri tagathou akroasis* testifies – so it seems sensible, in part I, to begin to answer this question by examining the passage in which Plato is most concerned with *the* Good or the idea of the Good in the dialogues, namely in the series of similes of the *Republic*. For one thing, the authenticity of the *Republic*, in contrast to that of the *Seventh Letter*, is not in doubt. It does not contain any explicit criticism of writing, but, at the same time, unlike the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, it says as much about the central theme of the written and unwritten doctrines as Plato considers useful to include in a written publication, despite his critique of writing. The answer given by the *Republic* does, however, seem to conflict with the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*. In part II, I therefore aim to show that Phaedrus' critique of writing does not contradict what is said in the *Republic*, but rather confirms it.

I

(a) Probably the most obvious answer to the question "Why did Plato not write down the 'unwritten doctrine'?" is that he wanted to keep it secret. The thesis of the

therefore corrected 'so-called', Ferber (1992) 138–9, to 'so called', in the sense of "what are called (*sogenannte*) unwritten teachings".

13 See Sayre (1988) 94: "A more credible alternative is made available by rejecting the assumption, shared by Cherniss and his adversaries alike, that the Platonic principles reported by Aristotle cannot be found in the dialogues. In *Plato's Late Ontology* I have argued that the view attributed to Plato in the *Metaphysics* can be found in the *Philebus*, with terminological changes illuminated by the later Greek commentators. Since the themes of the Lecture on the Good can be identified point by point with Plato's philosophy according to Aristotle, the alleged discrepancies that fueled the controversy in effect disappear". Sayre (1983) 112–7, 118–86, seeks to identify the report of Aristotle in *Metaph.* A 6. 987b10–988a 17 with *Philebus* 28c–31a. However, like Allen (1983) 271, he relies on an interpretation of Aristotle's testimony that has already been refuted by Ross (1924) I 162–77, esp. 173–4, and Cherniss (1944) 182 n. 6, insofar as he identifies the ideal numbers with mathematical numbers. Cf. the critique in Ferber (1989) 299–300.

14 For a new reconstruction, cf. Ferber (1989) 154–216, 291–303.

'unwritten doctrine' as a 'secret doctrine' was, for example, still advocated by H. J. Krämer in *Arete bei Plato und Aristoteles*, in opposition to the positions of F. Schleiermacher, E. Zellers, P. Shorey and H. Cherniss.[15] However, P. Natorp had already expressed opposition to the notion of a 'secret doctrine', although he accepts the existence of an 'unwritten doctrine'.[16] This belief in a secret doctrine behind the one presented in the dialogues was probably one of the reasons for which the Tübingen School encountered so much criticism.[17] It is to the credit of T. A. Szlezák that he distinguished the notion of an 'unwritten doctrine' from that of a secret doctrine in the sense of the Pythagoreans.[18] The decisive argument for this claim on the basis of the dialogues seems to me to have been given too little attention. Indeed, in the *Republic* we do find indications that Socrates has left something out and that what Socrates has left out is not just anything, but rather the "description" (*diêgesis*) (*Resp.* 506e6) of the "father" (*patros*) or capital – and not just of the "interests" (*tous tokous*) (507a2) as illuminated in the introduction to the simile of the sun, which is something "lengthy" (*sychna*) (509c7) and "abundant" (*poly*) (509c9), as the introduction to the simile of the line makes clear. However, nowhere does Socrates say that he is keeping something back because he wants to keep it secret. Instead, he emphasises three times that he wants to speak out about what is being kept back (cf. 507a1, 509c10, 533a2). Someone with a genuinely secret doctrine would not want to talk about it. Indeed, if such a person is to be consistent, he will avoid even the appearance of having something to hide, in order not to pique anyone's curiosity and to avoid the aggression that is directed against those who lay claim to a knowledge that is not and should not be accessible to others. In other words, such a person will be open, but knows exactly what he has to hide. Socrates, by contrast, is not open and indicates that he has something to hide. But even if this 'unwritten teaching' was only communicated to the members of the Academy and, as a result, might have inadvertently attracted the opprobrium attached to being a secret teaching from outside the Academy,[19] the non-secret character of Plato's 'unwritten teaching' about the Good is corroborated by the fact that he is said to have given at least one public lecture about the Good (cf. Aristox. *Harm.* II 30–31). Since the Heidelberg Colloquium of 1967, the Tübingen School has also avoided the expression 'secret doctrine',

15 Cf. Krämer (1959) 453: "Since the dreaded 'secret doctrine' – it is indeed a question of such, namely the 'inner' teaching of the academic school – has not been lost, but has been handed down in outline, it is just as baseless to relativize it as it is to deny it".

16 Cf. Natorp (1903) 415.

17 Cf., e.g., Vlastos (1981) 392–3; Wieland (1982) 38–50.

18 Cf. Szlezák (1985) 400–5; Jaeger (1912) 131–48.

19 Cf. Gaiser (1980) 10–24; Ferber (1989) 159–60.

probably at the suggestion of H.-G. Gadamer.[20] Instead, there is talk of an indirectly transmitted, intra-academic or esoteric teaching.[21]

(b) In the interim, another explanation has come to prominence and has been adopted by the Tübingen School, which H.-G. Gadamer formulated as follows:

> It seems to us an arid schematism to see in the principles of generation of the numbers, the One and the Two, the principles of generation of all insight and the law of construction of all factual pertinent discourse, and it may have been this appearance that made it appear inadvisable to Plato to fix this teaching in writing.[22]

However, the appearance of "an arid schematism" can hardly have been the decisive reason for Plato to refrain from publishing in writing the 'unwritten teaching', since, in the *diairesis* of the *Statesman* (cf. 261a–266a) and the *Sophist* (cf. 219a–224e), which Plato did publish, we find not merely the appearance but also the reality of 'arid schematisms' which, moreover, especially in the case of the *Sophist*, border on the ridiculous. Nevertheless, Plato did not shy away from publishing these 'arid schematisms'. Why should he have refrained from publishing *a fortiori* the probably more serious 'arid schematisms' of the 'unwritten doctrine' when he had already published the ridiculous schematisms of the 'written doctrine'? Moreover, this explanation is not corroborated by any Platonic dialogue or testimony. For an analogous reason, M. Burnyeat's explanation is not fully convincing either, although it derives from the *Republic*. There, Socrates says that Glaucon can no longer follow the dialectic because the representation is no longer pictorial (cf. 533a). Burnyeat adds:

> After the mythology (both execration and worship) which has come to surround the Lecture on the Good, this explanation of why the unwritten Chapter is unwritten – sheer technical difficulty – has the ring of prosaic truth and the merit of deriving from Plato himself.[23]

However, if sheer technical difficulty was really the main reason why Plato did not write down the 'unwritten doctrine', the question still remains unanswered as to why Plato nevertheless published such technically difficult dialogues as the *Parmenides*. At the beginning of the latter dialogue, Adeimantus and Glaucon appear again (cf. 126a), having heard about the conversation between Parmenides, Zeno and Socrates from their half-brother Antiphon, who himself heard about it from

20 Cf. Gadamer (1964) 10; Vogel (1986) 28.

21 Cf. Gaiser (1968) 31–84; Krämer (1968) 106–50, *passim*. Cf. especially Krämer (1968) 150: "First of all, to ward off misunderstandings, in five points what does not follow from this: It follows from it neither a 'secret doctrine' […]", apparently a correction of Krämer (1959) 453.

22 Gadamer (1964) 31, citation without footnote. Approving Krämer (1966) 68 n. 12; Gaiser (1968) 585; Wippern (1972) xxxvii. Cf. on the other hand Vogel (1986) 32–5.

23 Burnyeat (1987) 232.

Pythodorus (cf. 126b–c). Neither Adeimantus nor Glaucon can reproduce the conversation; only Antiphon can. The fact that Plato has neither Adeimantus nor Glaucon reproduce the conversation shows that he did not *want* Adeimantus or Glaucon to reproduce the conversation, and the fact that he did not want them to could be an indication that they were overwhelmed.

This assumption is supported by the observation that only the young Socrates is able to answer Parmenides' questions, while the young Aristotle is only introduced in the second part (cf. 137b–c).[24] But if Plato did not publish the 'unwritten teaching' simply because Socrates would no longer have been able to follow him or simply because of its "sheer technical difficulty", he probably would not have been able to publish the *Parmenides* either. In addition, Plato could have presented the 'unwritten doctrine' by creating a fictional dialogue between two Pythagoreans who would have been equal to the technical difficulty of the argument. In fact, W. van der Wielen has even suggested that Plato had a Pythagorean recite a myth in the last part of the *Rede over het Goede* (*Lecture about the Good*).[25] Finally, 'sheer technical difficulty' does not, in itself, seem to rule out the possibility of a written publication, but, on the contrary, would seem to call for a written rather than an oral presentation. For a mere oral statement – like an oral last will – is just as open to misunderstanding as a written one, if not more so.[26] 'Sheer technical difficulty' can hardly have been the only reason why Plato did not consider it opportune to fix the 'unwritten teaching' in writing. Rather, the decisive reason ought to be sought in the nature of written communication, as opposed to oral communication.

(c) Burnyeat is, however, correct to answer this question on the basis of the *Republic*. He also sees correctly that the Platonic message that is communicated in the *Republic* is determined by the capacity of the dialogue partners, in this instance Glaucon. At the same time, it is also determined by the capacities of Socrates, who by no means claims to be infallible. The direct continuation of the passage in which Socrates takes Glaucon's comprehension into account reads:

> Only, I said, dear Glaucon, you will no longer be able to follow! Because it shouldn't be because of my willingness, and you shouldn't just have a picture of what we're talking about, but the thing itself (*auto to alêthes*), as far as it shows itself to me at least; whether right (*ontôs*) or not, I may not assert that, but that there is such a thing (*toiouton ti*) [to be seen] must be asserted (*Resp.* 533a1–5. I follow the translation of Schleiermacher).

24 However, this should not necessarily be taken as a reference to the young philosopher Aristotle, cf. Allen (1983) 195–8, even if an allusion cannot be completely ruled out.

25 Cf. Wielen (1941) 194–5, which Vogel (1949) 305, n. 52, calls to mind in a nevertheless critical remark.

26 Cf. Cherniss (1945) 9: "[…] for in ordinary life one would hesitate to accept as evidence for a philosopher's doctrine a student's or colleague's report of his oral remarks against the authority of the philosopher's own writings".

Hence the reason for Socrates' reluctance to fully express himself in the seventh book about 'the thing itself' is that, as at the beginning of the series of similes, he does not in any sense possess the science of the thing itself, i.e. dialectic, at the present moment (cf. *Resp*. 506e2–3), but only has an opinion: "whether right or not, I may not assert […]". If this already applies to what he says here, it also applies *a fortiori* to what he does not say to Glaucon and in which Glaucon could then no longer follow him (cf. 533a1–2). In his own imagery: He has climbed out of the cave, but does not yet see the good, as he is blind, blinded by the brilliance of the sun. This corresponds to the fact that "every soul" (cf. 505d11), including that of Socrates, seeks the Good, but "is in a hopeless situation (*aporousa*) and not adequate (*hikanôs*) to grasp what it is […]" (505e1–2). Likewise, in the interpretation of the allegory of the cave, Socrates distinguishes his hope from God's knowledge of whether this hope is true (cf. 517b6–7):

> For the dialectic that is to follow upon mathematics is an adumbration of the possible; and the end – knowledge of the Good – is a hope or *hypothesis* warranted by the success of the method so far as it has been tested. *Elpis* is the normal Ionic word for a good hypothesis […].[27]

A hope understood in this way is not yet an infallible science, but "opinion without science" (*Resp*. 506c6). However, Socrates considers it shameful to express an 'opinion without knowledge' about something that can only be grasped sufficiently (*hikanôs*) by means of science (cf. 506c). This is probably why he also does not express his full meaning in the simile of the line and in book VII about dialectic, which not only touches on the Good – a common misinterpretation[28] – but should grasp it (cf. 511b4–7), i.e. comprehend or define it by means of an "infallible logos" (cf. VII 534b–c). Comprehensively *fixing* it in writing would make this 'opinion without knowledge' wholly invariable. But that would be inappropriate for the changing opinions about the immutable science that is being sought. Although the good is to be grasped by means of an 'infallible logos' (534c2), it does not follow that Socrates already possesses this 'infallible logos'. While, according to a Kantian saying, "in this kind of reflection it is in no way permissible to opine" (CpR, A XV),[29] Socrates himself does not possess this science. He has only an 'opinion without science', i.e. a fallible opinion. However, if Socrates nonetheless expresses himself in writing by means of three similes about the Good, this is because these proceed from the sensible, towards which wavering opinion is the appropriate attitude. But vacillating opinion cannot be dialectic, which without recourse to the sensible only makes use of the

27 Ferguson (1950–1951) 13 n. 33.

28 Cf. against the theory of intuition promoted by Cornford (1965), which is still advocated by Lafrance (1980) 90–1, Ferber (1989) 100–1, 156.

29 Vogel (1986) 6, n. 10.

"Ideas themselves" and thus reaches its end with them (cf. 510b8, 511c1–2). Instead, dialectic actually deserves the name of knowledge (*epistêmê*, cf. 533 c–d).

In purely theoretical terms, these passages of doxastic-aporetic reserve can be explained with reference to the figure of Socrates:[30] While the Platonic Socrates only has an opinion, Plato has full knowledge of the Good. But this purely theoretical possibility does not apply, because "every soul" (505d11) – i.e. not only that of Socrates, but also that of Plato – is indeed looking for the Good, but is "placed in a hopeless situation (*aporousa*) and not sufficiently (*hikanôs*) knowledgeable of how to grasp what it is […]" (505e1–2).[31] In addition, 'every soul' – including that of Plato and those of the philosopher kings and queens – is still incarnated (cf. *Resp.* 498a, 614–621d) and is subject to the cognitive limitations resulting from this incarnation (cf. *Phd.* 66e–67a), from which even the philosopher kings and queens are unable to completely withdraw. Plato seems to have maintained the doctrine of rebirth, *metempsychôsis* or *metensômatôsis*, throughout his life (cf. *Men*. 81b; *Phd.* 81e, 83e; *Phdr*. 248d; *Ti*. 42b, 90e; *Leg*. 903e–c; *Letter VII*, 335a). The fact that Plato likely never arrived at an infallible science of the Good is also suggested by the presumably late *Peri tagathou akroasis*, where he says: "Not only the happy man, but also the one who gives a proof, must keep in mind that he is a human being".[32] This probably means: Just as the lucky man must keep in mind that he can fall into misfortune, so, too, must the man who offers demonstrations keep in mind that his argument may not be valid, i.e. may start from untrue premises and draw invalid conclusions. This may be also an allusion to the "human weakness" (*anthôpinê astheneia*, *Phd.* 107b1) to which Plato adhered until the end of his life (cf. *Plt*. 278c8–d6; *Leg.* 853e10–854a1).

The reason for Plato's refusal to write down the 'unwritten doctrine' of the Good is that although it *should* be a science in the dialectical sense, he does not actually possess this science. Fixing this 'unwritten teaching' in writing would, therefore, have conferred on it an immutability that would not have been appropriate to its doxastic changeability. It is thus an error on the part of H. Krämer to assert:

> It remains decisive that, on the basis of Platonic philosophy, the theory of principles has the highest possible degree of certainty, which nothing else can match. Nothing can be waived on this primacy and that is what matters factually and philosophically historically.[33]

30 Krämer (1987) 200–2.

31 Cf. Verdenius (1981) 416: "the phrase *hapasa psychê* (*Resp*. 505d11) implies that it is also beyond Plato's own power".

32 Cf. Gaiser (1968) 455: (Testimonium 11); and Krämer (1968) 118 n. 44: "The notion of the inadequacy of human cognition is Socratic, and particularly Platonic-Academic [sic.]. It is encountered here in the transference to the mediation of knowledge. It is obvious, although not certain, that Plato himself expressed it in this form in lectures or similar courses".

33 Krämer (1987) 200–1; repr. in Krämer (2014) 483.

But if Plato, as Krämer assumes, had already reached this "highest possible degree of certainty" by the time book VII of the *Republic* was written, he would have arrived at that point where "there is rest from the road and the end of the journey" (VII 532e). However, he credits God, at best, with knowledge in this emphatic sense (cf. 517b 6–7), he who alone deserves the title "wise" (cf. *Symp*. 204a; *Phdr*. 278d). We have no evidence that Plato himself ever reached this "highest possible degree of certainty" either when he wrote the seventh book or later. In principle, dialectic in the *Republic* is like the city described in the *Republic*: The former is the ideal method;[34] the latter the ideal state. But the ideal method is not realised in the visible letters of the written text any more than the ideal state is realised in Athens. With the (oral) *elenchus* clearly in view, it is only postulated as an ideal of knowledge (cf. 534b8–c6).

II

The question now arises as to whether we can extend this justification for Plato not having written down the 'unwritten doctrine' to the "criticism of writing" in the *Phaedrus*. W. Luther has demonstrated that this 'criticism of writing' refers literally to Plato's main work, the *Republic*, and this interpretation has been taken up by H. Krämer and T. A. Szlezák.[35] We can then connect the statement "A truly glorious one, O Socrates, you name alongside the lesser play (*phaulên paidian*); the play of one who knows how to play poetically with speeches (*mythologounta*) about justice and the other things you mentioned" (*Phdr*. 276a) to the *mythologein logô* in the *Republic* (cf. 501e4; 376d9). W. Luther and H. Krämer correctly draw the conclusion that Plato's criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus* concerns the Platonic dialogues themselves; i.e. the dialogues are play compared to that which the philosopher is serious about.[36] In fact, the second part of the *Parmenides*, for example, is also referred to as "play" (137b2) and the *diairesis* of the *Statesman* (cf. 261a–266a) and *Sophist* (cf. 219a–224a),

34 Compare the apt characterisation of dialectic by Robinson (1953) 70: "The fact is that the word 'dialectic' had a strong tendency in Plato to mean 'the ideal method *whatever that may be*'. In so far as it was thus merely an honorific title, Plato applied it at every stage of his life to whatever seemed to him at the moment the most hopeful procedure". It is also important to note that "Plato's view, that dialectic as such attains certainty, is liable to suggest to us certain inferences which he did not draw. In the first place, he did not conclude that any person is actually in the sure possession of a considerable portion of truth. His view is rather that we should attain certainty if we practice dialectic aright, but owing to its loftiness and difficulty, we are unable to do so" (72).

35 Cf. Luther (1961) 526–48, esp. 536–7. Cf. Krämer (1964) 137–76, esp. 148–52; Szlezák (1985) 14.

36 See Luther (1961) 537, 539; Krämer (1964) 148–53, esp. 149; already Krämer (1959) 462, with further references to the literature.

which border on the ridiculous, are not to be taken completely seriously in terms of their content (cf. *Plt.* 268d8, e5, *Ti.* 59d2).

The *Republic* would thus correspond to the play of discourse about justice, but would not yet be serious. As a playful mythology, it does not yet contain the certainty about justice that would derive from dialectic. In the fourth book, Socrates draws attention to a "further and greater path" (*makrotera kai pleiôn hodos*) (435d3), which is necessary for the precise determination of the cardinal virtues. However, this precise determination is found nowhere in the *Republic*, with the result that, from the perspective of the *Phaedrus*, the content of the *Republic* would be mere play, in contrast to the seriousness of this precise determination.[37] But does the reason given for Plato not having expressed himself in the *Republic* about the 'unwritten doctrine' also align with Phaedrus' criticism of writing?

(a) His 'criticism of writing' assesses the story of the invention of writing by the Egyptian god Theuth (cf. 274c5–275b2) and essentially contains three critical points concerning the written logos. Two of them do not concern the written form itself, but only the fact of written publication:

> [2] But once it is written (*graphê*), every discourse roams (*kylindeitai*) equally among those who understand it and among those to whom it does not belong (*par' hois ouden prosêkei*), and understands not who to talk to and who not to.
> [3] And when it is offended or undeservedly abused, it always needs its father's help; for it itself is neither able to protect itself nor to help (*Phdr.* 275d9–e5).

It seems decisive to me that two points in the so-called 'criticism of writing', namely [2] the public accessibility of texts and [3] the fact that they need help, are wrongly called criticisms of *writing*.[38] What is at issue is not so much a critique of *writing as such*, but more precisely a critique of *written publication for a wider audience*, because obviously neither being publicly accessible to everyone nor needing help result from the written form per se as opposed to certain texts being written publications *for a wider audience in the absence of the author*. This criticism does not touch on publication *for narrower circles*, in the sense of reading a written *logos in the presence of the author*, as we find in the case of the reading "of the Zenonic writings" (*tôn tou Zênônons grammatôn*) (*Parm.* 127c3) in the introductory scene of the *Parmenides* (cf. 127b–d), just as little criticism is directed at the writing of "memory aids (*hypomnêmata*) for the forgetful age, when he reaches it, and for everyone who follows the same trail" (*Phdr.* 276d3–4). The use of writing does not, in

37 Cf. on this exact determination, Ferber (1989) 206–11.

38 An exception is Wieland (1982) 17, who correctly states: "Writing as such is not criticized. Criticism is levelled at those who deal with it in an inappropriate manner and who demand results from it that it simply cannot provide".

itself, entail publication for wider circles, just as publication for a wider audience does not necessarily entail the use of writing. A text does not need to be published for a wider audience or even at all, but can be used as *hypomnêmata* "retained for its own sake" (*heautô* […] *thêsaurizomenous*) (*Phdr*. 276d3) "and for everyone who follows the same trail" (276d4). Conversely, a publication for broader and narrower audiences need not be set in writing.[39] Plato, for example, made the 'unwritten teaching' public, as the probably late and public *Peri tagathou akroasis* proves, but he did not publish it in written form. Both points of criticism – i.e. [2] public accessibility and [3] the need for help – derive from the decisive first point, which identifies the constitutional weakness of writing in terms not of the external consequences resulting from publication, but rather of internal factors.

> [1] For writing (*graphê*) has this terrible thing (*deinon*), Phaedrus, and in this it is really similar to painting; for the latter also presents its offspring as living, but if you ask them something, they remain silent in a reverential manner. The same applies to writings: you might think they speak as if they understand something, but if you ask them eagerly about what they say, they always denote one and the same thing (*hen ti sêmainei tauton aei*) (*Phdr*. 275d4–9).

Writing gives the impression that it is alive, although it is actually dead. It thus stands in decisive contrast to the soul, whose essence is self-movement (cf. *Phdr*. 245c5–246a2) and thus always life (cf. 245c7). Writing is not only visible, like sensible things, but also "rolls equally among those (*kylindeitai*) who understand it and among those to whom it does not belong" (cf. 275e1–2), just as sensible things do between the non-existent and the purely existent (cf. *Resp.* 479d4–5). In contrast to the self-movement of the soul, writing is unable to move itself. It is not a "principle of motion" (*archê kinêseôs*) (*Phdr*. 245c9). This invariance in the written *logos* provides the decisive perspective from which Plato criticises writing. But this first point of criticism explicates what can already be deduced from the *Republic* with regard to withholding the essence of the Good. There, the reason given for Plato's refusal to write down the 'unwritten teaching' was the immutable character of writing. Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, the critical weakness of the written *logos* is its invariance. The explicit criticism of the *Phaedrus* thus builds on suggestions made in the *Republic* about the reason for Socrates' reluctance to determine the decisive content of dialectic. More specifically, it fills it out by adding points [2] and [3], which focus on the dangers of interpretation that the work faces once published.

(b) In the *Phaedrus*, in contrast to the *Republic*, Socrates seems to have knowledge and not just opinion. The "genuine sister" (*Phdr*. 276a1–2) of the written *logos* is namely "what is written with understanding (*met' epistêmês*) in the soul of the

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39 Cf. the fundamental explanations of Jaeger (1912) 131–48, esp. 143: "But the publication itself, the *ekdosis*, consisted in both [Plato and Aristotle] in the reading of the *logos* by the author".

learner, well able to help itself, and knowing both how to speak and be silent, and to whom it should" (276a5–7). However, it is not even immediately clear from the text that this episteme refers to Ideas: "And shall we say that whoever has knowledge (*epistêmas*) of what is just, beautiful and good (*dikaiôn te kai kalôn kai agathôn*) will act less intelligently than the husbandman with his seed?" (276c3–5). As in the *Republic* (cf. V 506a4), here, too, a multitude of the just, beautiful and good (cf. *Phdr.* 277d10, 278a3) is spoken of, whereby the *Phaedrus*, in contrast to the *Republic*, still assumes that the good has a plural character. This plurality could also refer to the *dogmata* of the just, the beautiful and the good, which lie between the sensible phenomena and the singular idea of the just, the beautiful and the good – those "*dogmata* of the just and the beautiful under which we have been brought up from childhood (*ek paidôn*) as if by parents, obeying them and honouring them" (*Resp.* 538c6–8). However, we can assume that the Ideas are not excluded, on the grounds that the phrase "from the just, the beautiful and the good" (*dikaiôn te kai kalôn kai agathôn*) is connected by Phaedrus to "justice, and the other things you mention" (*dikaiosunês te kai allôn hôn legeis*) (*Phdr.* 276e2–3). This assumption is confirmed by the fact that the gravity of speech called for by these matters leads to the employment of the dialectical art (*tê dialektikê technê*) (276e5–6). But this dialectical art is directed to "the true nature of each thing" (*to te alêthes hekastôn*) (277b5), i.e. the Idea of each thing which the dialectician seeks to define (by the method of collection and division) (cf. 277b6–8). The dialectical art thus focuses on the Ideas (cf. 273e2). Nowhere, however, is it said in the *Phaedrus* that the dialectician has already gone through the series of Ideas, i.e. that he has also gained knowledge of the Ideas that would ultimately entitle him to do so "as far as the matter permits, to treat the genus of speeches with art" (277c4–5), whether to teach or to persuade (cf. 277c5–6). However, neither the "many efforts" (*pollê pragmateia*) (273e5) required by the dialectical art nor the "long detour" (*makra hê periodos*) (274a2) have been made. It is to be followed for the sake of great things (*megalôn gar heneka periiteon*) (274a3), but what these are is not explained in the *Phaedrus.*

(c) The fact that the dialectician has only a claim to knowledge with regard to Ideas, but no unassailable certainty, is clear from the designation of the dialectician. In contrast to the poet, speechwriter and legislator, he is given the name 'philosopher':

> If he composes such things, knowing full well how the matter is in truth (*ei men eidôs hê to alêthes echei*), and is able, in discussing what has been written, to offer help and even to refer to what he has written only as something bad (*phaula*), such that he does not merely have to be called by the name that derives from it, but by a name that refers to that to which he has seriously applied himself (*eph' hois espoudaken ekeinôn*) (*Phdr.* 278c4–d1).

It is not said here that the dialectician's claim to knowledge has already been made good. Rather, the if-clause *ei men eidôs hê to alêthes echei* (278c4–5) shows that Socrates does not yet assume that this condition will be met. What he presupposes is only that he has made a serious effort (*espoudaken ekeinôn*) to do so. But even if the dialectician has made good on his claim to knowledge, he still is not *sophos*, but only a *philosophos*. The then-sentence (or consequent) reads:

> To call any man wise, O Phaedrus, seems to me a great thing, and befitting God alone; but a friend of wisdom or something like that (*ê philosophon ê toiouton ti*) would be more appropriate to himself and also more becoming to himself (*Phdr.* 278d3-6).

In other words, *even if* the dialectician knows how things are in truth and *even if* he has knowledge of the Ideas, he is still not wise, but only a friend of wisdom. In this way, a fundamental, insurmountable boundary between human knowledge and divine knowledge is already drawn in the area of knowledge of the Ideas. What does that mean, however, other than that human knowledge, in contrast to divine knowledge, has not yet reached the "highest possible degree of certainty" (H. Krämer) or is infallible in the field of Ideas, but contains a 'doxastic' proviso? *A fortiori*, the dialectician has not yet reached the 'highest possible degree of certainty' by recognising the idea of the good that is superior to the ideas, or even the two principles. This has the following consequence for the naming of the poet, speechwriter or lawmaker:

> Therefore, whoever has nothing better (*timiôtera*) than what he has drafted or written after much turning over, joining together and crossing out, you will rightly call him a poet or speechwriter or legislator (*Phdr*. 278d8–e2).

There is a consensus that *timiôtera* here refers to what is unwritten. *The unwritten is 'more valuable' than the written.* The disagreement begins with the interpretation of the nature of this *timiôtera.*[40] After the detailed analyses of T. A. Szlezák, however, it can hardly be doubted that *timiôtera* refers not to an occasional spoken clarification of what is written, but to "a theory that is richer in content and more precisely justified" that is not developed in the dialogues.[41] If, by contrast, *timiôtera* only meant occasional verbal assistance, it would be difficult to see why the poets and speechwriters whom Plato attacks as non-philosophers would not also be capable of

40 For the various positions, see Krämer (1959) 462, on the one hand, and Vlastos (1981) 394–7, and Heitsch (1987) 41–50, on the other. See Vlastos, *ibid.*; Krämer (1964) 148–54; Szlezák (1978) 18–32; and Szlezák (1985) 20 n. 20; against Heitsch (1987) see the detailed discussion of Szlezák (1988) 390–8, and Krämer (1989) 60–72, esp. 61–9, which make the views of Vlastos and Heitsch, and implicitly Wieland (1982) 27, appear scarcely justifiable.

41 Szlezák (1985) 44.

making use of such assistance, in virtue of which they would also be philosophers. Indeed, what writer would not be a philosopher, if the only issue was how "to vindicate them [one's statements] against stupid or malicious misunderstandings, to refute sophistical objections to them, to reinforce them by showing how they follow from strong premises or have illuminating implications"?[42] However, since the Platonic Socrates sees himself as a philosopher as opposed to a poet, speechwriter or legislator, it can be assumed that he possesses what are *timiôtera* with regard to content. In the context of *Phaedrus*, this more valuable thing should be the essence of the soul, which he omitted prior to his poetic speech about the charioteer with the two horses:

> But of its essence (*tês ideas autês*) we must say this: how it is constituted in itself (*hoion men esti*) requires in all ways a divine and extensive investigation (*theias kai makras diêgêseôs*), but that with which it can be compared, [requires only] a human and easier one (*anthropinês te kai elattonos*) (*Phdr.* 246a3–6).[43]

It is not, however, possible to comprehend the nature of the soul (*psychês oun physin*) in a worthy manner without comprehending nature as a whole (cf. *Phdr.* 270c1–2).[44] But both the nature of the soul and nature as a whole belong to the subject matter of the *agrapha dogmata*.[45] We may thus assume that the missing *timiôtera* are *timiôtera agrapha dogmata*. It is true that the *Republic*, with its doctrine of the tripartite soul, also contains a psychology (cf. *Resp.* IV 434c–441c) to which the image of the chariot of souls could refer. But it is precisely the *Republic* that draws attention to the "longer and greater path" (435d3), which is necessary for the exact determination of the soul "whether it has these three types in itself or not" (435c5–6), and that is not undertaken in the *Republic* or, indeed, elsewhere.[46] Just as in the *Republic* even

42 Vlastos (1981) 395.

43 It is questionable whether *tês ideas autês* means an idea of the soul in the technical sense. See the detailed discussion in Griswold (1986) 88–92. But even if we take the idea of the soul in a non-technical sense, Scheiermacher's translation "essence" still captures the correct meaning, given the omission of a dialectical method directed to the essence of the soul: "[…] but it is obvious that if someone artfully communicates speeches, he must also be able to show exactly the essence of the nature of the one (*tên ousian deixei akribôs tês physeôs toutou*) to whom he speaks, but this will be the soul" (*Phdr.* 270e2–5).

44 For a defense of this reading, according to which *tês tou holou physeôs* refers to the nature of the universe and not to the nature of the whole at hand, cf. Szlezák (1985) 39; in a different way de Vries (1982) 331–3; and Verdenius (1981) 333–5.

45 Cf. Aristotle *De An.* I 2.404b21–27; Ferber (1989) 181–4.

46 Cf. Szlezák (1978) 29: "It [the problem of the discussions missing from the *Phaedrus*] is nothing other than the program of the psychology of the dialogue *Republic*. There the question is asked whether the soul has different components or not; there the number of components is fixed at three: and there, thirdly, the powers of the three soul 'parts' are investigated separately (4.435 ff. and 9.580ff.; cf 10.611b–612a)". What is decisive, however, is that the psychology of the *Republic* is also

the best "opinions without knowledge" (V 506c6) are *blind* (cf. 506c7), so, too, in the *Phaedrus*, does the procedure that dispenses with the dialectical determination of essence resemble the "wandering of a blind [person]" (cf. *Phdr.* 270d9–e1). Just as we do not get to see the essence of the Good in the *Republic*, in the *Phaedrus*, we do not yet see the essence of the soul. As in the *Republic*, a *diêgêsis* is left out in the *Phaedrus*: In one case it is the *diêgêsis* of the essence of the soul; in the other case that of the father or the essence of the good (cf. *Resp.* 506e6–7). Just as in the *Republic*, the "longer and greater path" (435d3) for the precise determination of the parts of the soul and thus also of the virtues (cf. 435d, 504b) is not followed, so, too, is the "long detour" (*makra hê periodos*) (*Phdr.* 274a2) presupposed in the *Phaedrus* for the precise determination of the nature of the soul not made (cf. 270e, 271b).

In the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, however, this path is the path of dialectic. If Socrates has the *timiôtera*, this does not mean that he has already exercised this oral dialectic. It would in any case be a "divine and lengthy" investigation, i.e. probably an investigation in which a human being differs from a god with hardly any knowledge. Socrates does not claim to possess the art of dialectic himself: Just as he is only a friend of wisdom, he is also only a friend (*erastês*) of dialectic (cf. *Phdr.* 266b3–5). But when he thinks that someone else is able to see what has grown into one and what into many, he follows them, as in "the footsteps of an immortal" (cf. 266b6–7); i.e. he compares the dialectician more to a god than to a mortal. Finally, Socrates himself is unable to know himself, according to the Delphic *gramma* (cf. 229e5–6). But the perfect dialectical determination of the soul would also be perfect dialectical self-knowledge. However, the characterisation of the parable of the chariot of souls as a "more human and easier" or "shorter" (*elattonos*) investigation already indicates the limitations of human self-knowledge.[47] If Socrates has unwritten *timiôtera*, he has neither knowledge nor certainty about their content. However, since the *timiôtera* could only be adequately grasped by means of the science of dialectic and the Platonic Socrates does not possess this science sufficiently, he seems to have left it out, like the essence of the good. In line with what he has Socrates preach in the *Phaedrus*, Plato seems to have considered only oral communication to be a responsible approach.

The reason that Plato did not write down the 'unwritten teachings' lies not *only* in the "reception conditions of the subjects",[48] but *also* and primarily in "the essence of the matter", namely in the fact that while Platonic dialectic should be a science, the Platonic Socrates does not possess this science and for that reason could not fix it inflexibly in writing. This inflexibility of writing, which stands in contrast to the

incomplete insofar as it does not follow the "longer and greater path" (435d3) that is necessary for the precise determination of the soul (cf. *Resp.* 435c5-6).

47 On this point, see Griswold (1986) 151–6.

48 Krämer (1987) 200; Krämer (2014) 482.

weakness of human knowledge, is also confirmed by the *Seventh Letter*, to the extent that it can be attributed to Plato. There, not only the "reception conditions of the subjects" are mentioned as the reason for the lack of writing, but also the fundamental "weakness of the logoi" when it comes to capturing (immutable) being (cf. *Letter VII*, 343a1, 343b8–c1). *Logoi* are only able to grasp a (changeable) quality of being: "Because of this impotence no person of understanding (*noun echôn*) will dare to lay down [in them] his thoughts (*nenoêmena*) and moreover in an unchangeable way (*eis ametakinêton*), what is the case with written ones" (*Letter VII*, 343a1–4, translated by H. and F. Müller).

Platonic love as a "desire for eternity" (L. Robin) requires the written form (cf. *Symp*. 209c–e): "For what, so to speak, would someone live if not for such pleasures?" (*Phdr*. 258e1–2). But Platonic ignorance about the ultimate – i.e. especially the essence of the Good – calls for oral communication. The written and the spoken are united in the Platonic conception of the philosopher who loves wisdom but does not have it.[49]

In response to this paper, I received the following letter from Charles H. Kahn.

September 5, 1989

Dear Rafael Ferber,
I was very happy to make your acquaintance in Perugia a few days ago and sorry not to be able to stay for the discussion of your paper. I read your draft on the airplane flying back to the U.S. and I liked it very much. I am enclosing a recent (unpublished) paper of mine on the *Phaedrus* which will show you how close our points of view are to one another. The chief disagreements seem to be two: (1) I think the artistic distance between Plato and his Socrates is more important, and more flexible, than you seem to believe (In this connection I enclose the paper "Plato as a Socratic" I gave at the F.I.E.C. [*Fédération Internationales d'assiociations des Études Classiques*] in Pisa) and (2) I think Plato's reticence about the most fundamental matters has nothing to do with (subjective) certainty but everything to do with problems of language and communication. I am willing to believe that Plato was aware of the fact that *his* view of the truth could only be *his* view. But that does not imply "Unwissenheit über das Letzte", and would not be a reason for reticence. (It would only be a reason for encouraging criticism and debate.) What causes the problem is the difficulty of *conveying* this view to an audience, a difficulty that can (he thought) be overcome under conditions of patient discussion and explanation, but can never be solved by any single linguistic formulation. Hence the inflexibility of writing.
Please send me a copy of your Perugia paper when it is revised for publication. I would also be glad to receive any other offprints. I enclose a few recent pieces of my own.
Yours sincerely
Charles H. Kahn

49 This text was originally published in L. Rossetti (ed.), *Understanding the* Phaedrus. *Proceedings of the Second Symposium Platonicum*. Sankt Augustin 1992, 138–55. English translation by Sandra Peterson with modifications.

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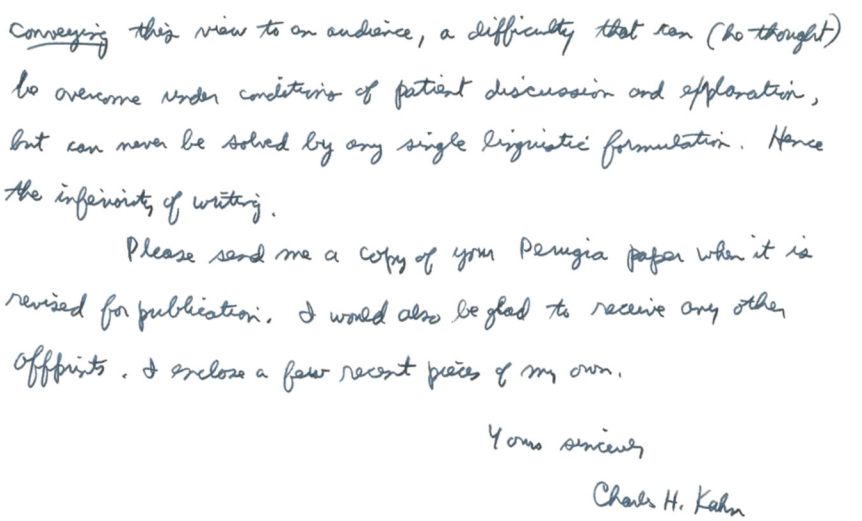
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Yours sincerely

Charles H. Kahn

Kahn's paper "Plato as a Socratic" was first published in 1990 in the *Festschrift* for Henri Joly (1927–1988) and then reprinted in 1992 in *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica*. In this paper, Kahn defends the thesis that we have to distinguish between the "historical" and the "literary" Socrates. The "historical Socrates" of the fifth century BC "certainly existed", but "to a very large extent […] escapes our grasp", whereas the "literary Socrates" of the fourth century has been passed down to us "in a diversity of portraits".[50] Kahn focuses "on the theme of Socrates *erôtikos*, Socrates as the specialist in matters of love, since this is the topic best documented for the other Socratic authors",[51] in particular in Antisthenes, Phaedo and Aeschines. His thesis runs as follows:

> To see Plato as a Socratic, then, in the sense explored here, is to see him as taking over literary forms and themes from the Socratic literature of the first ten or fifteen years after Socrates' death and making out of them a new kind of art work to serve as vehicle of a new kind of philosophy.[52]

Kahn hereby distinguishes "[…] four phases in Plato's transformations of the Socratic dialogue":

50 Kahn (1992) 580.
51 Kahn (1992) 580–1.
52 Kahn (1992) 593.

> "1. in the *Ion* and *Hippias Minor*, Plato is writing as a minor Socratic: […]"; "2. In the *Gorgias* and *Menexenus* the Platonic dialogue emerges from the Socratic cocoon". "3. In the *Lysis*, *Charmides* and *Protagoras*, Plato creates his own, specifically Platonic version of the 'Socratic Dialogue': […]"; "4. Finally, we have the *Symposium* and *Phaedo*, where Plato reshapes the Socratic conversation as a major work of literature, combining rhetoric, argument, philosophical theory and personal drama on a large scale", […].[53]

Kahn's "recent (unpublished) paper" on the *Phaedrus* "Plato on the Limits of Writing" has not, to my knowledge, been published as a separate article, but is integrated into the last chapter of Kahn's masterwork *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* under the title "*Phaedrus* and the Limits of Writing".[54] When it comes to the 'unwritten doctrines', Kahn defends the following thesis:

> If the unwritten doctrines are understood in this way, as an advanced but still provisional formulation, a kind of code or cipher for the ongoing attempt to comprehend the unity and plurality of things, then they go by definition beyond anything in the written corpus, which is frozen in place and can make no further progress towards understanding. But if these *dogmata* are taken as dogma, as definite formulae of knowledge, direct depictions of intelligible reality, then they suffer from the same defects as written statements naively understood.[55]

It would be inappropriate to the context of this commemoration to reopen the complex and controversial issue of the 'unwritten doctrines', especially the question of where the dividing line lies between what Plato thought apt to communicate in writing and what Plato thought apt to communicate in an unwritten form. What I had to say I have tried to say in the *Retraktation* to the second and revised edition of my book *Die Unwissenheit des Philosophen oder Warum hat Platon die 'ungeschriebene Lehre' nicht geschrieben*?[56]– here I bequeath the topic to future research. I would nevertheless like to conclude by modifying what Kahn's friend and precursor at Pennsylvania University, Glenn Morrow (1892–1973), said about the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*:

> […] we can properly substitute Plato for the Socrates in the *Republic* and in the *Phaedrus* on most occasions, if we remember that the real Plato, more than most authors, remains inscrutable.[57]

Acknowledgements: Special thanks are due to J. Annas, C. Gill, C. Griswold, M. Erler, C. H. Kahn, L. Rossetti and T. A. Szlezák for helpful comments. C. H. Kahn was kind

53 Kahn (1992) 594.
54 Kahn (1996) 371–92.
55 Kahn (1996) 388.
56 Ferber (2007) 80–121.
57 Morrow (1993) 75.

enough to provide the author with the still-unpublished version of two essays "Plato as a Socratic" and "Plato on the Limits of Writing". The latter independently reaches the same conclusions as this paper, at least on some points. The letter from C. H. Kahn is published with the written permission of Edna Foa Kahn.

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