

Plato on the weakness of words

A defence of the Digression of *Ep.* vii

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Abstract

This is a defence of the authenticity of Plato's *Epistula* vii against the recent onslaught by Frede and Burnyeat (2015). It focusses on what *Ep.* vii has to say about writing and the embedded philosophical Digression and evaluates this in the context of other mainly late dialogues. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates ends with *resignation* regarding the potential of language study as a source of truth. This is also the case in *Ep.* vii, where the four means of knowledge (names, definitions, images (diagrams) and knowledge/insight/true opinion) do not offer the essence of reality due to the weakness of language, in this case owing to a diagram with contrary properties. Consequently, name and definition are impermanent and conventional. *Contra* Burnyeat, definition is not impossible but useful in the acquisition of knowledge. Only after dialectical examination comes a flash of insight into reality. So, reality (truth) must, as in the *Cratylus*, be studied directly. Significantly for Plato (as opposed to Socrates), the epistemology is illustrated by a mathematical case. Hence it is relevant to look at mathematical procedure in middle and late dialogues. Moreover, the possible role of division is considered. Finally, the critique of writing justified by the Digression is placed in the context of the general aversion to the written word. The epistemology of the Digression is shown to be a fair and competent synopsis of the later Plato's epistemology. Hence, there seems to be no reason *thus far* to doubt that *Ep.* vii is a genuine work of Plato.

Strategy of the Article

This is a defense of the authenticity of *Ep. vii* against the recent onslaught by Frede and Burnyeat.¹ It focusses on what *Ep. vii* has to say about writing and the embedded philosophical digression and evaluates this in the context of other mainly late dialogues. One important and relevant work is the *Cratylus*, which is a riddle: Socrates argues against both Hermogenes and Cratylus, but he ends with *resignation* regarding the potential of language study as a source of truth. We need to study reality (the Forms) directly, in itself. The theory of language and the correctness of names is, after all, convention. This is also the case in *Ep. vii*. The four means of knowledge (names, definitions, images and knowledge/insight/true opinion ‘about them’ (342c5) (to be dealt with in turn)) do not offer the essence (*to on*), but only an uninteresting, non-essential property (τὸ ποῖόν τι) of reality. This is due to the weakness of language (τὸ τῶν λόγων ἀσθενές) 342e f., in this case owing to a diagram with contrary properties (343a5-7). Consequently, the name (343a9) and definition (consisting of names and verbs) of the diagram are impermanent and conventional (343b2-3, 5-6), and each of the four means is ‘unclear’ (ἄσαφές) (343b6-7), offering only a property and not the essence of a given thing (343b7-c3). This property, expressed in words or ‘pointed out’, can then easily be refuted empirically (343c3-5). It is not said or implied that, e.g., definition is impossible, only that it is ‘unclear’ and impermanent and conventional. On the contrary, definition is useful in the acquisition of knowledge.

¹ This article was provoked by the recent publication by M. Burnyeat and M. Frede (ed. D. Scott), *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter* (Oxford, 2015). The focus will be placed only on Burnyeat’s handling of the Digression: ‘the author is philosophically incompetent’ (cf. also at 132). ‘The argument is invalid’ and unintelligible: ‘connect the fact that words have meaning by convention to the conclusion that definition is difficult or impossible, hence that knowledge of the essence is difficult or impossible?’(122-3). It will appear that the present author does not share this opinion.

Only after much rubbing of three of the means together (344b4-5), i.e., dialectical examination of the three, comes a flash of insight in the fourth means (*phronesis* and *nous*) into reality. So reality (truth) must, as in the *Cratylus*, be studied directly. Significantly for Plato (as opposed to Socrates), the epistemology is illustrated by a mathematical case. Hence it is relevant to look at and include the evidence of mathematical procedure in middle and late dialogues. Moreover, the possible role of division is considered. Finally, the critique of writing justified by the Digression is placed in the context of the general aversion to the written word.

In a careful scrutiny of the words and implications of the Digression and its wider context, the epistemology of the Digression is shown to be a fair and competent synopsis of the later Plato's epistemology. Part of the epistemology is the view that words are weak, causing the skepticism about writing which is well-known from the later work. Everything speaks in favor of authenticity. Hence, there seems to be no reason *thus far* to doubt that *Ep. vii* is a genuine work of Plato.

I The *Cratylus*²

Hermogenes claims that the correctness of names is convention and agreement: any name you give a thing is correct. A name is based on the rule (*nomos*) and usage (*ethos*) of those who established the usage and call it by that name (384d). Socrates lures a hesitant Hermogenes (386a) into a trap by implying that his position involves a Protagorean (private) ontology (385e ff.). But this is a strawman: attacking Protagoras is irrelevant against conventionalism. You can use the names of any private or public language about anything you like without a flux ontology. In other words, even though my servant can be called by any name I fancy, he/she is still him/her. However, Socrates goes on with

² Dating this dialogue is difficult. The trend now seems to group it with late-middle dialogues such as *Theaetetus* and *Parmenides* (R.G. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato* (Oxford, 1989), at 147, cf. 216 f.).

‘natural’ actions and ‘natural’ tools (386e ff.) and classifies naming as a natural action and names as tools (387c-388a) in analogy with crafts like weaving, drilling and carpentry (388cd), leading straight to Cratylus’ linguistic naturalism (390de). But this is a controversial question begging analogy. Naming (calling and using) may be an ‘action’, but it is not analogous with burning or cutting, for instance. We may well ‘instruct each other, that is, divide things according to their natures’ (388bc) without embracing linguistic naturalism. Conventionalism may serve the same purpose. Names are conventional signs that express things to those who already *knew* the things before they established the conventions (433e).

Socrates is exploring the correctness of names (391a). But from the later dialogues there is ample evidence that he (Plato) does *not* want *contention over names*. This gives a greater store of wisdom in old age³. We must study ‘truth’ directly (*Crat.* 439bc). ‘Surely no one with any understanding will commit himself or the cultivation of his soul to names’ (*Crat.* 440c). Consequently, *Cratylus* ends with *resignation* regarding the potential of language study as a source of truth. We need to study reality (the Forms) directly. The theory of language and the correctness of names is, after all, convention.⁴

³ *Polit.* 259cd, 261e, cf. *Phd.* 100d4-7 (on the choice of words for nothing less than ‘participation’), *Rep.* 533de, *Tht.* 199a, *Tim.* 28b3-4, *Soph.* 220d, *Laws* 644a, 864ab. One may have to make up names where none exist (*Polit.* 260e).

⁴ Cf. W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1978), 5.30 on M.D. Roth’s unpublished *Cratylus* dissertation: ‘An Examination of Plato’s *Cratylus*’ (Univ. of Illinois, 1969). According to Roth, linguistic naturalism here takes two forms, both of which are refuted. The correctness of a name may be either that it *makes clear* the nature of the named thing, or that it *imitates* the named.

II *Epistula vii*⁵

The four means of knowledge as conditions for insight

Some of the four means of knowledge are alluded to in other late dialogues. The *Theaetetus*: primary elements have no *account* but can be *named* only (201e f.). Just as the things themselves are woven together, so their *names*, woven together, come to be an *account*, because a weaving together of *names* is the being of an *account* (202b). In addition, in *Parmenides*: the One is without *onoma*, *logos*, *episteme*, *aesthesis*, *doxa* (142a, 164a). And in the *Sophist*: if there is a *name*, there is an *account* (*logos*) (244cd), one must agree about the *account*, not just the *name* of the *thing itself* (218c, 221cd, cf. the dialectician must be able to take and give a *logos* of the *ousia* *Rep.* 534b).⁶ Finally, and importantly, the close parallel in the *Laws*: there are three things to be noted about any given thing (including the soul): *ousia*, *logos*, *onoma* (895de).⁷ And anyone who is knowledgeable about virtues

⁵ Dated 353-2 by D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford, 1953), at 139 and Ledger at 199, 209, 224. After the third visit to Sicily (361-0), and after the murder of Dion 354. Close to the *Laws* (cf. n. 7 below).

⁶ *Rep.* x 596a: a form for every common name. This rule is restricted in division in *Politicus* (262b-263b) by distinguishing true subdivision (εἶδος) from portion (μέρος). In general, *naming is important in the divisions* made in, e.g., *Sophist* (219a-220d) and *Politicus* (262e). It is no small matter to *name* a subdivision informatively. One must make divisions where there is a real 'cleavage' between specific forms (*Polit.* 262b, cf. *Phdr.* 265e).

⁷ O. Apelt, *Platons Briefe* (übersetzt u. erläutert) (Leipzig, 1921), at 138 n.72) rightly points to this as one of the other signs of evidence of closeness of *Ep.* vii to the *Laws*.

needs to know both the *onoma* and *logos* (964ab). These means are obviously part of Plato's late epistemology, and *Ep. vii* seems to belong squarely there.⁸ I shall now look at each of the four means of knowledge in turn, with a view to considering their use in other (mainly late) dialogues.

(1) Names

Names are conventional in *Ep. vii* 343a9 ff.: what is called 'straight' may be called 'bent' and *vice versa*. This is the view of Hermogenes in the *Cratylus* 384d-385e.⁹ It is arguably also Plato's view that names cannot by themselves give information about reality. They give the false impression that everything is always moving and flowing. We must study 'truth' directly (*Crat.* 439bc). 'Surely no one with any understanding will commit himself or the cultivation of his soul to names' (*Crat.* 440c).¹⁰

Similarly, in *Ep. vii* names are impermanent and of no help in giving essential information about 'the knowable and real being' (342b1). In fact, names share with the other three means the fact

⁸ A.E. Taylor deals with these terms in *Mind* xxi (1912).

⁹ Disregarding the possibly misplaced 385b-c.

¹⁰ D. Sedley, 'Plato on Language', in H.H. Benson (ed.), *A Companion to Plato* (Oxford, 2009), 220-1, cf. *Plato's Cratylus* (Cambridge, 2003), at 154 n. 15 supports his view that Socrates resists conventionalism with a reference to *Crat.* 433e2-434a3, where Socrates at this stage of the conversation praises Cratylus for his choice of the theory of names as likenesses of their *nominata*. However, the fact that Socrates at this stage encourages an interlocutor (καλῶς λέγεις 434a3) does not prove that he agrees and that Cratylus has spoken the truth (ἀληθῆ λέγεις, as was suggested earlier at 390d11). We must acknowledge that the conversation runs through stages and has its own dramatic course, ending in resignation (440c).

that they give only particular qualities (ποῖόν τι), not the essence (ὅν).¹¹ This is because of ‘the weakness of language’ (342e). They are unclear witnesses of the essence of things (343b7) because name and definition refer to empirical evidence, *in casu* a geometrical diagram (343a9, b4). Perhaps this is the reason Plato does not worry about names (*Soph.* 220d, 227c). Some are even ridiculous (*Soph.* 227a, 224b), and one must agree about the *account*, not just the *name* (*Soph.* 218c). But in division it is nevertheless important to name the classes and sub-classes (cf. *Crat.* 388bc: ‘a name is a tool for giving instruction and dividing being’). Plato may even occasionally conceive of ‘appropriate’ names, bearing a similarity to or indicating the named (*Soph.* 223a, 221cd). Names do at least give an indication of the essence, telling you what to look for. If there is a name, there must be an account (*Soph.* 244cd).

(2) Definitions (accounts)

Definitions are composed of names and predicates and inherit the ‘weakness’ of names: they give the quality not the essence of things, and are unclear. Socratic definitions notoriously failed. One instructive example is the abortive attempt at defining virtue in the *Meno* 99e ff. (cf. *Prot.* 361a ff, *La.* 190b). Socrates offered as a model definition the easier one: shape is that which alone of existing things always follows color (*M.* 75b). The definition of moral terms is trickier.

So, what is the status of a ‘Platonic’ definition? The definition of knowledge is a case in point: knowledge requires one to take and give an *account* (*logos*) of being, *define* the Good, and distinguish it from everything else by an *account* (*logos*) (*Rep.* 534bc). A rather ambitious and complex project, one would suppose: knowledge is (defined) to be able to define etc. In the *Theaetetus* definition of knowledge as true opinion with an account, three kinds of account are *refuted*: statement, enumeration, and distinguishing mark (*Tht.* 206c-210a). This result could be a devastating blow to

¹¹ E.g., *Tht.* 196d οἷόν ἐστιν.

the usefulness of definition in the acquisition of knowledge. But in the *Theaetetus* the distinguishing mark or *logos* was ‘getting hold of the differentiation’ (208d). When *coupled with* correct opinion (and being about individuals like the sun or Theaetetus), this is rejected as being either superfluous or circular (208e-210b). Hence, it cannot be claimed that *logos* (account) *as such* as part of a definition of knowledge is ruled out. And true enough, Socrates (Plato) is a declared ‘lover’ of definition by *genus* and *differentia* in later dialogues (*Phdr.* 266b, cf. *Phil.* 16b).

Another example of such late definitions could be the definition of love, which is important for further understanding (*Phdr.* 263d, 237d). This requires a collection of data (265d), and then one must make a systematic division and determine the class to which the *definiendum* belongs (*Phdr.* 263b ff., 265e). This method is what enables one not only to define but also to think and speak (*Phdr.* 266b, cf. *Parm.* 135bc). The definition of the angler in preparation of a definition of the sophist (*Soph.* 218e ff) is preceded by acknowledgement of the importance of agreeing about the thing itself with a definition and not just agreeing about the name (*Soph.* 218c).¹² Statesmanship is defined in the *Politicus* at 258b-268d, 287b-311c. In the *Philebus* the Promethean method consists in finding the unit to be divided into many (16b-17a), inherent in *any* subject talked about (15d, 17de), e.g., sound or letter (17a-18d, cf. *Soph.* 253ab). Finally, in the *Laws* the definition of the soul as ‘motion capable of moving itself’ (*Laws* 895e10-896a2, cf. *Phdr.* 245c-246a) is preceded by a series of divisions of kinds of motion (893b-894c).¹³ There is evidence that Plato is anxious to the very end that those in charge have a notion of the one in the many, e.g., the ability to see the common element in all four

¹² Divisions are carried out in *Soph.* 218b-231c and 264b-268d.

¹³ The classification of motions 893b-894c may be interpreted as divisions falling under either transmitted or self-generated motion. See also R.F. Stalley, *An Introduction to Plato's Laws* (Oxford, 1983), at 136 on division in *Laws*.

virtues, whether it is single, composite or both, or even whether there are more than four, or whether it is a unity. The same applies to the beautiful and the good (*Laws* 965b-966b).

So, definition obtained by division is obviously now crucial, but it is also clear that while in some (most) cases the job is easy, e.g., iron, silver, angler, weaving, and *arithmetical* and *geometrical* entities, in other important cases, e.g., love, justice and good, it is difficult (*Phdr.* 263ab, *Polit.* 277a-283b). In fact, Forms (and other entities) which are easy to understand (e.g., mathematical entities) have perceptible instances that can be pointed at, thereby saving us from giving an account. But the most important Forms, e.g., virtues, have *no likenesses* and must be understood *via* an account (*logos*) (*Polit.* 285d-286a, cf. *Phdr.* 250b).¹⁴ However, this turns out to be an advantage: a definition couched in *words* is preferable for those who can follow it to a model or visible illustration (*Polit.* 277c).¹⁵

¹⁴ In the *Rep.* the problem was that the moral concept relied too much on defective psychological experience and therefore needs a longer, more ‘precise’ and clearer treatment, involving derivation from the Good (cf. *Rep.* 435cd, 504b, e).

¹⁵ The definition of soul as self-motion in *Phaedrus* and *Laws* is there considered ‘secure’ according to Burnyeat (129). He thinks this counts against the definition skepticism of *Ep.vii*. However, the soul definition has empirical connotations, it even has an image (winged chariot *Phdr.* 246a), and writing is generally analogous to painting (*Phdr.* 275d5) or an image (*ibid.* 276a9). Mathematical definitions too are considered ‘secure’ by mathematicians (*Rep.* 510c)! In the *Cratylus* the name-giver’s job is to express in letters and syllables the essence of things (423e f.), and names, verbs and statements may be assigned incorrectly (431b). There is a less strict correctness for sense qualities and images than for numbers (432ab), which means that you may have an inappropriate letter in a name, or an inappropriate name in a statement (*logos*), which is then not quite accurate. However, it

The definition (*logos*) in *Ep.* vii is geometrical, of the circle. This is for two reasons: partly because of the stage of development which math had reached at the time and the *model* it provided of scientific procedure, and partly (and importantly) because of a *kinship* Plato saw between math and ethics.¹⁶ As claimed already in the *Republic*, math prepares one for the vision of the Good. Not

is ok if it expresses the pattern (*typos*) of the relevant thing (432e). Definitions of moral qualities could be possible candidates.

¹⁶ The educational system of *Rep.* is meant to further abstract thinking, and here counting and calculating are effective (522c, 526ab). The mathematical disciplines make it ‘easier to see the form of the good’ (526de). Cf. *Laws* 818c f., 819c, and in the *Epinomis* the hint of the numerical nature of virtues (978b) and the emphasis on number in general: nature forms species and genus according to each proportion (990e, cf. *Tim* 31c, 47a, *Phil.* 25e). For hypothetical method, *M.* 86e f. The kinship between math and ethics comes to the fore in the philosophical μετρητική (*Polit.* 284a, d, cf. *Phil.* 16c), the imposition of limit (*Phil.* 25a-c), and of course in Plato’s lecture on the Good, which is equated with unity: ἀγαθὸν ἔστιν ἓν (Aristoxenus *Harm.* 2.20.16-31.3 (Macran), cf. Arist. *EE* 1218a20-21, 25 τὸ ἓν αὐτὸ τὸ ἀγαθόν), and that the principles of everything are τὸ ἓν and ἀόριστος δυνάς (Simp. *in Ph.* 151.6-19 and 453.25-454.19). J. Brunschwig, ‘EE I 8, 1218a15-32 et le περί τὰγαθοῦ’, in P. Moraux and D. Harlfinger (eds.), *Untersuchungen zur Eudemischen Ethik* (Berlin, 1971), identifies the view criticized here as Plato’s. Cf. also *Epin.* 991d8-992a1: if one fixes his eye on unity, he will see one bond connecting all mathematical and astronomical subjects. De Strycker, ‘On Fr. 5a of the *Protrepticus*’, in I. Düring and G.E.L. Owen (eds.), *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century* (Göteborg, 1960) 100 ff. stresses the interdependence of ethics and physics (*Rep.* 505a2) implied in the quote from Aristoxenus, and confirms the translation of τὸ πέρας as ‘finally’

only did that science provide a model of reasoning deductively that appealed to Plato, but it was akin to ethics: the Form of Good was the cause of the being and intelligibility of other Forms, and indeed everything else. Mathematics is regarded as an educational *way* of approaching the end goal, the good, ‘the bond’ (*Epin.* 991e5 f.) that keeps the whole together. The virtues and values seem to have a numerical nature (*Epin.* 978b). According to the late lecture on the Good, this *was* unity (ἕν), understood mathematically *and* ethically.

A contributory reason for choosing a definition of the circle is that the circle has perceptible instances, geometrical diagrams. Thus, math is a steppingstone between the sensible and intelligible toward full insight, and thus a necessary part of the epistemology.

So it is no accident that Plato focusses on mathematics and geometry of all sciences, and that mathematics figures in the epistemology of *Ep.* vii, too. We find the same Form language in the mention of the circle that we see in *Republic* and *Philebus*, and we do not have to assume intermediates there, either. In the *Philebus* 62ab there is an implied distinction between the dialectician and the philosophical mathematician (cf. 57e f.), who have knowledge of and can define justice and the circle respectively. The difference between mathematical objects and Forms is irrelevant here. What is in focus is the intelligible status of the circle. Mathematicians are able to *define*, say, unit, circle and sphere, but only dialecticians *understand* how such concepts connect with the good and may be presumed to deliver more precise (perhaps numerical) definitions which are not dependent on space. This is implemented by illumination (*Ep.* vii 344b).

At this stage I shall comment on Burnyeat’s critique of the remarks on definition in the Digression. Extract from Burnyeat and Frede (2015):

(LSJ s.v. πέρας, IV). Another rendering is ‘the Finite is the Good, which is identical with the One’ (C. de Vogel (ed.), *Greek Philosophy* (Leiden, 1969), 1.274 n.1).

‘The argument VII contains one and only one attempt at philosophical argument. Its premise is that words get their meaning by convention. Its conclusion is that neither individual words nor words combined in a definition can display the essence of a thing apart from its quality. This is supposed to make knowledge of anything extremely hard to achieve, ‘because of the weakness of language’ (343a1). The premise, I take it, is true. Words do get their meaning by convention. What of the conclusion? Set aside for the moment the idea of individual words expressing the essence of their *nominata* and focus on words combined in definitions. Is it true that definition cannot display the essence of a thing apart from its quality? Every reader of the Socratic dialogues knows that a definition is precisely the attempt to capture in words the essence of a thing apart from its quality. That is the very definition of definition, so to speak, not only in Plato’s Socratic dialogues but throughout antiquity. So, if no combination of words can capture the essence of a thing apart from its quality, then definition is impossible. This conclusion is not only false, it is shown to be false by the perfectly good (if clumsily expressed) definition of circle which our author provided earlier: ‘that which everywhere extends an equal distance from its extremities to its centre’ (342b7–8). In short, the premise of the one philosophical argument in the *Seventh Letter* is true, its conclusion false. Hence the argument is invalid.’ (*The Pseudo-Platonic Letter* vii, pp. 122 f.).

First, Burnyeat strangely ignores the argument of *Ep.* vii 343ab: words (names) have no stability and are conventional (arbitrary), and this spills over in definitions, composed as they are of words. They have no permanence (βέβαιον) (343b5-6). All four means give τὸ ποῖον, not in addition τὸ ὄν, as 342e

may suggest, but solely τὸ ποῖον (343c1-5), and therefore each of the four is ἀσαφές (343b6-7). It is not that definition is *impossible*. We are given a definition of the circle at 342b7-8. Only it is unclear and non-essential. It is easy to refute by sense perception (343c3-4). A definition (giving a likeness) goes some way toward truth. This is exactly the view of the *Cratylus*: a definition of qualities (and images in general) should be judged by a more generous standard than quantities (432e). The final stage is illumination (*Ep.* vii 344b, 341c5-d2) or derivation from the Good (*Rep.* 511b-e, 534bc). The relationship between conventionalism (arbitrariness), instability, and unclearness (not giving the essence) is not rendered explicit. But it may be argued that this relationship is causal: the unstable and contrary empirical evidence causes the names and definitions to be unclear and conventional (arbitrary).

Second, Burnyeat focusses on a geometrical definition which he surprisingly takes to be a Socratic definition (cf. also p. 131). He thinks that it is monstrous to think that it cannot ‘capture the essence’. But if we take the reference to be a Socratic definition, then it notoriously failed. Even if some illustrative definitions of speed, shape, color, mud, etc. are acceptable, the same does not apply to *values*.¹⁷ An early example of a deficient definition could be ‘the holy is loved by all gods’ (*Euthyphro* 11ab). It does not give the οὐσία but a πάθος. Perhaps this a ποῖον? Further, the definition of justice in the ‘Platonic’ *Republic* (433ab, 443de) is not accurate. There is a better, longer way, giving a more accurate view of the virtues (435d, cf. 504b-e) to be achieved not by definition but by the ‘way up’ in the Line and Cave culminating in a vision, hinted at in the Digression of *Ep.* vii

¹⁷ Plato is of course aware of the difference between unproblematic and problematic terms (cf. e.g., *Euthyphr.* 7b-d, *Crat.* 432e, cf. *Phdr.* 263ab). Plato’s dissatisfaction with Socratic definition and its methodology is evident in the *Meno* 86c-89a and 89d-96c, *Phd.* 99d-102a and *Rep.* 509d-511e. The outcome is definition by division (*Phdr.* 265d-266b and several late dialogues).

(343e1-2, 342d1-3¹⁸). However, if stylometric studies are to be trusted,¹⁹ we are not dealing with early or middle definitions here, but with *late* Platonic definitions (*Phdr.* 265d-266b): (1) seeing things dispersed together brings them under one kind (ιδέα) with the intention of defining each thing, (2) divide into kinds, in accordance with natural joints; cf.: know the truth, define it and divide it into kinds until something indivisible is reached (277b). What is the matter with such definitions? Are divisions too empirical? Step 1 (collection) does seem to involve particulars, while step 2 (division proper) appears to be confined to kinds.²⁰ Are they therefore just a training for apprehending the highest class of existents (*Politicus* 285e f., cf. *Phdr.* 250b-e: justice and self-control do not shine out through their images)? And perhaps more relevant for the Digression, what about definitions of divine circles and spheres (*Phil.* 62a)? Geometrical figures may conceivably be defined by the same method of collection and division, and numbers may similarly be derived from the one and the great-and-small.²¹ I shall deal with that below. Here we must simply conclude that there are certain problems with late Platonic definitions, too.

¹⁸As νοῦς is singled out, τούτων (342d1) most likely refers to the aforementioned three cognitive states, and τᾶλλα (d3) then refers to the two other cognitive states. It is also νοῦς that is later involved in illumination (344b7).

¹⁹ Close to the *Laws*, Ledger, 148-150. Cf. H. Raeder, 'Über die Echtheit der Platonischen Briefe', in *Rheinische Museum* N.F. LXI (1906), 440 ff., 537.

²⁰ Seeing the dispersed together (συνορῶντα[]τὰ πολλαχῆ διεσπαρμένα *Phdr.* 265d3-4) suggests an empirical procedure. Collection involving particulars *Soph.* 235c5-7, 253d5-7. Cf. H. Raeder, *Platons Philosophische Entwicklung* (Lpz., 1905), at 216. Division proper dealing only with kinds *Phdr.* 277b, *Phil.* 16e.

²¹ Ross, ch. xii.

Third, Burnyeat asks rhetorically: How can the conventionality of language have any epistemological consequences at all? (123). Well, it could have the consequence that words do not ‘capture essences.’ Burnyeat claims that this is a non-sequitur because of a ‘possibility’ that a name-giver knows the essences and encodes them in the language, and that the author of the *Digression* is philosophically ‘incompetent’ for not seeing this (132). However, this is a Socratic elaboration of conventionalism requiring a hypothetical (doubtful 397c, 438c) name-giver possessing the craft of name-giving. Socrates is not optimistic (440c, 439bc). Conventionalism in itself is unable to find essences, but this does not mean that such essences do not exist. Hermogenes in the *Cratylus* feels unnecessarily that he has to distance himself from Protagoras, who (in the *Cratylus*) cannot accept universal values. It is also difficult to understand Burnyeat’s view that the author ‘finds the conventionality of language an obstacle to thought, knowledge or communication’ (123). This overlooks the dialectic moving up and down using names, definitions, and various perceptions, in good will (343e, 344b).

(3) *Drawn diagrams*

We are in a mathematical context, where diagrams are relevant. They are perishable (342c2) and full of contrary properties (343a5-7, cf. *Phd.* 74a-75b, *Rep.* 476a). The drawn circle has in it the property of straightness. But flux, too, infects the diagrams (no stability).²² This defect transfers a weakness to

²² Having contrary qualities (genuine or not) and being in flux are often co-present and even mixed up (*Phd.* 78d-79a, *Crat.* 439c-e, *Sym.* 211ab, *Rep.* 479a-d, *Tht.* 152de, *Tim.* 50a, 52a. Cf. Arist. *Met.* 987a32-b10, 1078b12-1079a4, 1086a37-b11. Cf. T. Irwin, ‘Plato’s Heracliteanism’, *PQ* 27 (1977), 1-13. Burnyeat thinks that the other defect of words of unchangeability (343a3) is the ‘opposite’ of

the referring names and definitions. Hence, as we saw above (p. 9), definition couched in words is preferable to a visible illustration (*Polit.* 277c). But mathematics needs diagrams, and one could still come across other visible illustrations than diagrams, such as weaving, analogies or myths as tools of knowledge. For pedagogical reasons. This is just the *conditio humana*: dependence on images.

(4) *Knowledge, reason, true opinion*

These are *mental* states, neither vocal nor in bodily shape (342c5-6), and therefore different from both the three steps above and from real being (342c7 f.). According to Plato, there is strictly speaking no knowledge of the visible.²³ But in *Ep.* vii one can have knowledge, reason and true opinion about (περί) names, definitions and diagrams (342c4-5).²⁴ Moreover, names relate to the physical world (ἀὐτῶν 343a9 refers to τῶν α5). However, such ‘empirical’ knowledge is different from full *a priori* knowledge (342e).²⁵ And the empirical nature of such knowledge is the Platonic reason why it is ‘unclear.’

the changeability just mentioned (127). However, it concerns specifically the physicality of the written words and not their semantic naming function at all.

²³ *Rep.* 529c and *Tim.* 27d6-28a4, 29b3-d3, 52a1-7, *Phil.* 59b7.

²⁴ I take it that περί ταῦτ’ (342c5) refers to the three means (name, definition and image) mentioned above.

²⁵ It should be noticed that true opinion is included here, at this stage. Cf. *Symp.* 211c6-8. *Phil.* 59d1-5 on *nous* and *phronesis* in the strict (purest) sense, cf. *Ep.* vii 344b3-c1, esp. 344b7.

The special status of mathematics

Mathematics offers a special case of ‘hybrid’ knowledge. In geometrical thinking in the Line (*Rep.* 510b-511e), mathematicians use geometrically visible figures as *images* of their invisible objects (*Rep.* 527b) and leave their assumptions ‘undisturbed’ and cannot account for them (533c, cf. *Crat.* 436d), and thus do not have full knowledge (no *nous* 511d). They argue about the square itself or the diagonal itself (*Rep.* 510d), or about numbers in themselves (525d), the units of which are all precisely equal to each other and not divisible into parts (526a, cf. philosopher’s arithmetic (*Phil.* 56de). Hence, it has been thought that the ‘invisible objects’ of mathematicians are either intermediates²⁶ or isolated Forms of circle, line, square, cube, etc. (cf. *Phil.* 62a and *Ep.* vii 342c2-3), but without the clarity and truth granted to objects of dialectic (*Rep.* 510d, 511c, e).²⁷ However, the two ways of conceiving the

²⁶ They are eternal (*Rep.* 527b) but many (*Rep.* 526a). See J. Adam, *The Republic of Plato* (Cambridge, 1965²), 2.159ff. and Aristotle, *Met.* A 6 987b 14ff. P. Shorey, *Plato, the Republic* (Cambridge Mass., 1963) calls the notion of intermediates in Plato ‘silly’ (at 164 n. a) and a ‘fancy’ (at 165 n. d) without evidence, a chief source being *Rep.* 526a. However, Plato is explicit that different faculties (δυνάμεις) have *different fields* (*Rep.* 477d, 511e, cf. *Phil.* 57b5-6). But he excuses himself from dealing with the relations between the fields on the ground that it would be a long story (*Rep.* 534a).

²⁷ J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic* (Oxford, 1981), 251-2 illustrates well this dilemma of classification of the cognitive states of mathematicians and philosophers: either there is a difference in objects which clashes with the Form language of mathematical objects, or there is just a difference of method which wrecks the logic of the Line. But this forced choice of alternative is an *illusion*, if we are right in concluding that $(d:c)=(b:a)$ (cf. next note). Mathematicians are ‘dreaming’ (i.e., taking image for original, 476c) about the Forms (533c) with their multiple numbers and figures. We may

mathematical object may not really be alternatives. Mathematicians have *dianoia*, not *nous* (511d, 526a), they are ‘dreaming’ about reality (533bc). If mathematicians relate to philosophers as people looking at shadows (*eikasia*) relate to ordinary people (*pistis*), then mathematicians may be said both to have their *own* subject and to *share* it with the philosophers.²⁸ Their definitions are an advance upon the visible diagrams but are still assumptions that are not accounted for (οὐδένα λόγον 510c).

have it both ways. The dreamer ‘looks’ at an image which is different from the real object, but which is intimately tied to and somehow is that object. The mathematical numbers and figures are not yet fully intelligible, i.e., seen in their relation to the Good (508b-509b).

²⁸ Let the Line look like this from the top: a, b, c, d. Then as (a+b):(c+d), so a:c and b:d. Or as *noesis:doxa*, so *episteme:pistis* and *dianoia:eikasia* (*Rep.* 534a). In the first presentation of the Line (509d-510b), where the focus is on ontology, we learn that as (d+c):(b+a), so d:c (the visible world is an image of the intelligible) and c:b (mathematicians use c as images of b).

Can it be inferred that mathematical objects are *images* of Forms? Yes. Formally, Plato begins by dividing the line into two unequal parts, and then divides the two parts in the same ratio (509d). So (a+b):(c+d)=a:b=c:d. This coupled with the information that the visible world is an image of the intelligible (510a) allows the inference that the objects of mathematicians are an image of Forms. Moreover, mathematicians are dreaming, that is, taking images for originals. Second, in the Cave those freed from the Cave that look at outside shadows and reflections (516ab) are parallel to prisoners who look at shadows *in* the Cave and parallel to mathematicians (*Rep.* 532b-d). Finally, the Line is a continuation and ‘going through in detail’ (διεξιόν) of the Sun (509c). And the point of the Sun is precisely that the visible world is an *illustration* (ὁμοιότης) of the intelligible (d:c=b:a). So as the sun is responsible for visible colors and their generation, so the Good is responsible for objects of knowledge being knowable (providing truth) and existence (508b-509b). Thus, there is a *causal*

There are differences between the sciences and arts (*Phil.* 61de): most of them deal with the sensible world (59e), the most exact, dialectic (*nous* and *phronesis* 59d), deals with Forms like justice itself, and can give a philosophical account of it. However, as in *Ep.* vii, the mathematician has *definitional knowledge* of the circle and the divine sphere itself (*Phil.* 62a). D. Frede²⁹ suggests that in spite of the ‘divinity’, this cannot refer to Forms which are dealt with by the philosopher, but to mathematical objects. Now the arts are divided into pure and impure, philosophical and applied (commercial) arithmetic and measuring (μετρητική), and *dialectic* (57de, cf. 56d). Philosophical math deals with absolutely *even* units, applied math with unequal units (56de), but dialectic is clearly distinguished from philosophical math in the *Philebus*, as in the *Republic* (e.g., the Line). According to the logic of *Philebus* (57b), this would mean that their field is different. However, philosophico-mathematical objects have the Form prefix αὐτό,³⁰ as in the *Republic* (510d, 525d). So there is a

relation involved in both areas, and it can be inferred that mathematical objects are images (products) of the Good (or truth and being 508d4-5).

²⁹ D. Frede (ed.), *Plato Philebus*, (Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1993), 75 n.2. One might add that the terminology of ‘itself’ is used of geometrical figures in the *Republic* (510d, 524e). Not Forms in an unqualified sense. But K.M. Sayre, *Plato’s Late Ontology* (Princeton, 1983), at 301 n. 91, cf.164 holds that the characters of Forms are ‘numerically exact proportions.’ He identifies three types of math here, including ‘intermediates’ (284 n.30). He also claims (somewhat surprisingly) that ‘Forms result from the imposition of Limit... The ‘ones’ listed at 15a3-5 are to be understood as Forms (291 n.3).

³⁰ Cf. e.g., *Crat.* 439c8, *Euthphr.* 6d10-11 (Socratic ‘idea’), *Phd.* 74a11, c1, *Rep.* 479a1-2, e, e3 and 7, 507b5, 510d7-8, 524e6, 525d9 f., 526b2, *Phdr.* 247d6, *Pol.* 284d1-2, *Phil.* 62a. The fuller prefix is: αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό (e.g., *Tim.* 51c1, *Sym.* 211b1).

possibility that the situation is the same as in the Line of the *Republic* (cf. n. 27 above). The late Platonic concept of μετρητική clarifies the relation.

In *Politicus* 284e in connection with dialectic dealing with division, we get two kinds of μετρητική. One refers to a *norm* (philosophical μετρητική), the other is relative (mathematical μετρητική). This distinction is ‘indispensable for the establishment of absolute truth’ (αὐτὸ τὰκριβές) (Taylor *ad loc.*) (284d1-2).³¹ Here, what distinguishes philosophical objects (Forms) from mathematical objects is that the former are seen as *norms*. Philosophical μετρητική is involved in all (*practical*) crafts (*Polit.* 284a, d, cf. *Phil* 16c). In this way, they produce good and fine products (284b1-2). Including, it may be suggested, good divisions. In the *Philebus* this normative μετρητική is given a mathematical twist: the ‘imposition’ of limit (‘number to number’ or ‘measure to measure’ 25a8-b1) on the unlimited (more and less 25c10-11, 26d1-2) likewise generates commensurate and harmonious outcomes (25e1-2). ‘A coming into being created through the measures imposed by the limit’ (26d8-9).

At the cosmic level, the cause of this is the Demiurge (27b1). Reason is king over earth and heaven (28c7-8) and belongs to the kind of cause of everything (30d10-e1). This inevitably recalls the excellent Demiurge of *Timaeus*, who fashions this most beautiful world on an eternal model (29a). He shaped the chaotic elements with *forms and number*, making them as perfect and excellent as possible (53b).

Where does all this take us in understanding the Digression? It sheds some light on the status of mathematics in the Digression. For instance, the status of the circle itself has been subject to

³¹ J. Skemp, *Plato the Statesman* (Bristol, 1987²), at 172 translates: ‘true accuracy (αὐτὸ τὰκριβές) in dialectical method.’ I prefer Taylor’s interpretation because of the Form prefix αὐτό (A.E. Taylor (ed.), *Plato, The Sophist and The Statesman* (London, 1961), at 299).

scrutiny in other late works, and its relation to Forms has been laid out in various ways: it is an image of the unique real circle, which is also in some sense a mathematical norm.

Division in Ep. vii

A certain version of dialectic with divisions is very much on display in later dialogues such as *Politicus*, *Sophist*, and with some modification *Philebus*. If *dialectic proper* is strictly about pure and stable Forms (*Phil.* 57e-59d), what is the subject of the ‘divine gift’ of Prometheus, which is also regarded as *dialectic* (*Phil.* 16c-17a)? It is about the unity of *any* of the other things that exist in any and every kind of subject (17e, cf. *whatever* is said to be consists of one and many, limit and unlimitedness 16d). This is not necessarily a dichotomous division. It is *applied*³² dialectic, useful and necessary for every craft (*Phil.* 16c). And divisions call for *names* for the divided classes, and *definitions* are the purpose. In many cases *illustrations* are given. These are precisely the three tools necessary for knowledge in *Ep.* vii. Hence, we may suspect that division is behind definition in *Ep.* vii. This is also to be expected, considering the dating of the *Epistle*.

Opposed to this is ‘armchair’ dialectic (‘solely through Forms to Forms and finishes with Forms,’ *Rep.* 511c1-2). The second half of the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* on the communion of Forms does contain some pages on this type of dialectic (249d-257a), and the *Politicus* reveals that the divisions are performed with a view to being better philosophers, i.e., reasoning abstractly and getting at the highest class of existents (*Polit.* 285c-287a). Justice and self-control are likely to be among them (*Phdr.* 250b).

³² I borrow the expression from D. Frede, 70 n.1.

However, *Philebus* (19b) implies that the ‘most important’ (formal) Forms of unity, similarity, sameness and their opposites are *involved* in division.³³

In other words, there can be no doubt that *division* is the preferred method (dialectic) throughout the late phase.³⁴ Division is present in the *Philebus* (16b-17a) and, importantly for our purpose, in the *Philebus* we must take it that the mathematical definition is achieved by the Promethean method of division.³⁵ It is behind both the definitions of justice and the circle. Again, it shows up in *Laws* 965b-e on virtue and in *Timaeus*, where right-angled triangles are divided into the half-equilateral scalene and the isosceles, and four of the regular solids are constructed out of (divided from) the former (53c-55c). Numbers, too, can easily be dealt with in division, e.g., in even and odd numbers.

³³ J. Ackrill, ‘In Defence of Platonic Division’, in J. Ackrill, *Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford, 1997), ch. 6 touches on the relation between division and combination of kinds and regards the latter as an extension of the former, a view that has more to commend it than the contrast that Ryle’s polemic suggests (ibid. at 109).

³⁴ *Phdr.* 266b (division enables one to think and speak), but *Soph.* 259e (the weaving together of Forms is what makes speech possible for us, cf. Ackrill (1997) ch. 4), *Soph.* 227ab (the method of dealing with words aims at acquiring intelligence by classifying crafts according to kinship), *Polit.* 286d (divide according to real Forms), *Phil.* 16c (finding the one, inquire, learn and teach), *Laws* 965b-966a (finding the unity). The several divisions of the sophist up till *Soph.* 232a are preparatory for the examination of the more important question of non-being (cf. N.P. White, *Plato Sophist*, (Indianapolis, 1993), xii). Cf. Stalley at 136 on *Laws*.

³⁵ As argued by Ackrill (1997) at 100.

If division is indeed behind definition in *Ep.* vii, which need not be a mathematical definition, then one wonders what is wrong with definitions reached through division. Late definitions depend on dividing nature at the joints. So depending on the interpretation of ‘nature’, the source of error could lie in the empirical matter dealt with. This is where *elenchus* and illumination come in. They can be employed to overcome the defect of empirical definitions.

What role is played by ‘illumination’ and *elenchus* in division? *Elenchus* clearly has a place in pre-illumination (*Ep.* vii 343c6-e1, esp. d2, 8, cf. *Republic* 534bc).³⁶ Judging from division in other late dialogues, it is unclear whether *elenchus* and illumination form part of division itself. Rather, as in *Ep.* vii, they seem to *follow upon* division with definition. It is when the cognitive powers *meditate* on definition (and name and illustration) that the final insight is reached through *elenchus*. At this stage one thinks entirely abstractly (*Rep.*) and learns realities through one another, if they are somehow akin, or through themselves (*Crat.* 438e). The blending of kinds is *proved* (*Soph.* 256c2). Most revealing is the statement in the *Politicus* after all the preceding divisions: the existents of highest value and importance (aesthetic and moral Forms) are demonstrable only by reason (there are no sensible likenesses), and ‘all our present discussions have the *aim* of training us to apprehend this highest class of existents’ (*Polit.* 286a, cf. 285d-287a). However, it is possible that *elenchus* (and illumination) may also occur *during* collection and division. The aim of seeing the one in everything is almost a slogan in the late dialogues, and in *Epinomis* it is made explicit that in conversations one should refer the particular to the general under questions and refutation (*elenchi*) (*Epin.* 991c). The ‘units’ discovered are only understood in their interconnections (*Phil.* 18cd, cf. *Soph.* 253b-e), and

³⁶ In *Crat.* the dialectician can ask and answer questions (390c), *Polit.* divisions train us to give and take an account of everything and to apprehend the highest class of existents (286a), division is just a means to become better philosophers (285d, 287a).

this applies to ‘every kind of unity, similarity, sameness and their opposites’ (19b). This means that it is difficult to separate examination (*elenchus*) from collection and division.

In the *Republic* it was clear that ‘it is only the power of dialectic that can reveal’ the truth itself (533a), and in *Ep. vii* full knowledge or reason contemplating the Forms crowns the epistemological model. How does this final insight (illumination) come about? It requires a person who is both intelligent and moral (akin to the Forms of virtue). One may get the impression that this is middle dialogue illumination (*Rep.* 511 bc, 534bc). But the setting and method are different. When names, definitions, and perceptions have been ‘rubbed against one another³⁷ and tested’ in dialectical conversation (344b4-5), then ‘*phronesis* and *nous* being strained to the utmost shine forth³⁸ about their given object’ (344b3-c1, like a flash of light in the soul 341c7-d2). If our reading is right, the method is division assisted by formal Forms. The ‘way up’ (collection) is in many cases down to earth (not ‘through Forms to Forms’). ‘Discerning a single thing that is also by nature capable of encompassing many’ is a divine capability of dialecticians (*Phdr.* 266b). One must be able not only to see the many instances but also understand the one and relate everything to it in an overview. The best method is being able ‘to look beyond the many dissimilar instances to the single notion’, ‘get an exact idea of the common element in all the four virtues,’ ‘explain adequately the essence of what we have to contemplate, whether it is a single entity, a composite whole or both’ (*Laws* 965b-d). Turning to *Ep. vii*, the definition of the circle has to be ‘rubbed against’ name and diagram, that is, it must be tested in dialectical conversation to yield the final insight in the unique (possibly numerical) essence of circle.

³⁷ Cf. rubbing state against individual like fire-sticks to make justice shine forth (*Rep.* 435a1-2).

³⁸ Plato uses the verb ἐκλάμπειν of, e.g., wisdom (*Sym.* 175e5) or justice that shines forth (*G.* 484b1, *Rep.* 435a2).

Forms

Philosophical *dialectic* deals with the clear, accurate and most true (*Phil.* 58c3), or the stable, pure, true and simple (59c2-3). This is Plato's way of indicating the abstract realm of Forms at this stage. There are in *Ep.* vii Forms of colors³⁹, shapes or figures as straight or curved (not circles?), values (good, beautiful and just), natural and artificial bodies, the elements of fire, water, etc., living beings and qualities of souls, and actions and affections (342d3-8).⁴⁰ They can only be contemplated by *phronesis* or *nous* (*Ep.* vii 344b7),⁴¹ but only *via* the four preliminary means: words, definitions, bodily shapes or figures, and mental states (342d8-e2). Cf. the Line and the Cave of *Republic*.

The wide population of Forms in *Ep.* vii puts it in the company of *Parm.* 128a-130c, *Phil.* 15a and not least *Cratylus*: an artificial body like a shuttle and names in general (389b-390b, cf. *Rep.* x 596a). But also actions, perhaps like sitting or flying (*Soph.* 263a), the *Sophist's*, *Politicus's* and *Philebus's* many Forms of *arts*. In another category is the *Timaeus's* 'living being of which all other *living beings* are parts' (30c) and fire (and other *elements*?) (51b). Finally, especially cherished values like the beautiful, the good and justice (*Crat.* 439c, *Laws* 966a).⁴²

The hard question is of course: are these later dialogue Forms *transcendent* in the sense of the middle dialogue Forms? Or has the theory undergone a reform since the *Parmenides* or the *Sophist*? In addition, are all the Forms mentioned here transcendent? For instance, are types of shuttles, colors or angling transcendent? If yes, in what sense? One is tempted to raise this question when looking

³⁹ Cf. *Crat.* 423de: color, sound and shape each have an essence.

⁴⁰ The soul is not included, while qualities of soul, actions and affections are. This is perhaps surprising in view of the fact that its definition is reached by classification, and that this applies to kinds only (cf. n. 20 above).

⁴¹ Cf. *Rep.* 511d, *Phil.* 59d.

⁴² Cf. *Phdr.* 250b-e, 278a *Phil.* 15a, 62a, *Laws* 966a, *Epin.* 877c-978b.

hard for old-fashioned Forms in, e.g., the *Politicus*, *Philebus*, the *Laws*, and *Epinomis*. Unsurprisingly, the odd man out here is the *Timaeus*, where the full-fledged transcendent Forms (including fire⁴³) appear again (52a). The Forms (the model) are still transcendent in the sense that they *do not receive in themselves anything else nor enter anything else* (52a). This makes the issue of the date of the *Timaeus* acute.⁴⁴ An early dating would make a reform more likely, and Owen's

⁴³ Just like other 'elements', Fire is implemented or generated by regular solids in 'space'. In this case the pyramid (*Tim.* 56b). This makes one speculate whether the Form of fire is to be conceived of as the regular solid the pyramid. Should it be analyzed further back into triangles with unequal sides, or in the case of earth isosceles triangles (*Tim.* 54c)? More ultimate principles are known to the god or those who are dear to him (53d). If these entities are the new Forms, this is one of the few hints in the dialogues of a mathematization of the Forms.

⁴⁴ *Ep.* vii and *Epin.* are both judged authentic by Ledger, 148-151, 199-200 and regarded as chronologically close to the *Laws* (148-150). The authenticity of the *Epin.* and Raeder's view is defended in E.N. Ostenfeld, *Human Wisdom. Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Skt. Augustin, 2016), 320-1. The report of Diogenes Laertius iii 37 that the *Laws* was left 'in the wax' is explained by Ledger, 205 as indicating that this long work, probably written alongside other works, was still unpublished at the author's death.

Ledger and Brandwood disagree about the *dating* of the *Timaeus*: Ledger, 200-205 judges it, with the *Critias*, as Plato's latest work, while L. Brandwood, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge, 1990), 206, 250 considers it to be early in the late group. Sayre, 1983, App. B and 312 n.70 follows G.E.L. Owen, 'The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's Dialogues,' *CQ* 1953 in dating it before the *Parmenides*.

reformist dream would come true. However, in terms of stylometry it seems unrealistic to put it before the *Parmenides*. It may even be post-*Laws* (Ledger 200-205). So we may have to accept that Plato believed in transcendent Forms to the very end. The deep question, then, is what is meant by ‘transcendence’ (*chorismos*). As our letter seems close to the *Laws*, and *Timaeus*,⁴⁵ the same transcendence is very likely also the status of *Ep. vii* Forms. In other late dialogues Forms are really real, eternally self-same, true (*Phil.* 58a), and clear, precise (*ibid.* c), and stable, *pure and without anything mixed in* (59c).⁴⁶ ‘Ever to be the same, steadfast and abiding, is the prerogative of the divinest of things only’ (*Polit.* 269d). This looks like a characterization of what we call ‘abstract entities,’ which is hardly what Plato has in mind.⁴⁷

Summing up, the final steps of the epistemology of the digression are (in part reconstructed) as follows: division leads to names and definitions. Each of the four means presents one quality only, oral or pointed out, and easily refuted by sense perception. Where an illustration (not truth) is relied on, one can avoid ridicule in examination of the four means (343d1-2). However, when the focus is placed on truth, the refutation of the defender of words, writings and answers makes him look ignorant

The *Philebus*, by contrast, Ledger, 198-199, 208 places first in the late group, before *Ep. vii* and *Sophist-Politicus*, while Brandwood, 206 puts it late (cf. ‘Stylometry and Chronology’, in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge, 1992), at 114). R.A.H. Waterfield, ‘The Place of the *Philebus* in Plato’s Dialogues’, *Phron.* 25,3 (1980) regards *Phil.* as pre-critical.

⁴⁵ See nn. 6 and 8 above.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Tim.* 52a, *Sym.* 210c-211b).

⁴⁷ See Ross, 21 on the notion of beauty as not separate but *different*. A very watered-down sort of transcendence, hardly satisfactory for Plato’s τὸ ὄν ὄντως (e.g., *Phil.* 59d4), ὁ [] ἀληθῶς ἐστὶν ὄν (*Ep. vii* 342b1).

of the subject even though the fault lies with the four means. Only when names, accounts and sense perceptions are tested in friendly questions and answers can truth light up.

Criticism of writing

In the *Phaedrus* Plato perceives writing as inferior (a paradox: a writer condemning writing). The written text is secondary, contains nothing clear and reliable: the written *logos* (statement) resembles a painting, as it is a helpless depiction of the living *logos* (speech, conversation, dialectic), which is knowledge ‘written’ in the soul of the learner (276a5-6).

The author who knows about justice, beauty and the good ‘sows his literary garden’, that is, writes down for his own pleasure reminders for the knowledgeable and for those who will follow him when he plays with words and tells myths of justice and the like (276d). However, the oral dialectic is preferable, because it ‘sows’ *logoi* (statements or arguments) with knowledge in an appropriate soul. These arguments can defend themselves and develop and make the possessor happy (276e-277a).

Plato concludes his presentation in *Phaedrus* by saying that any written work (rhetorical, political, etc.) is objectionable if the author believes that it contains important lasting truths. All writing is necessarily pleasure literature, and no work of poetry or prose must be taken seriously, nor what has been said and performed for the sake of persuasion, without any reference to questioning and teaching. The written text can only be a reminder for those who already know. Clarity, perfection and seriousness belong only in what is learned and said to inform and truly written in the soul about *justice, beauty and goodness*. This is *logoi*, which arise and grow in the soul itself and are its true property (277d-278b). Socrates and the interlocutor Phaedrus emphatically agree with this view. Is that not, therefore, for once Plato’s serious view? In writing? Socrates ends his play with *logoi* (speeches, texts) with this message to rhetors, poets and legislators: if they have written with

knowledge, can defend their work and are aware of the inferiority of the written, they are philosophers (278cd). This also saves Plato's own dialogues from a contradiction.

Ep. vii seems (at first sight) more dismissive of writing and speech: 'There does not exist and will not exist any writing by me on this subject [that is, the truth]. For it (truth) is not communicable in words (ῥητόν) like other studies, but after much interaction between teacher and student about the subject matter and living together, it suddenly arises in the soul as a light that is lit by a leaping spark, and then nourished by itself' (*Ep. vii*, 341cd).

The truth is not suitable for writing or saying (ῥητόν) to the broad public (341d5). Such a presentation will only benefit the few who can discover the truth themselves with a little help (e2-3). Others will be filled with either unbecoming disgust or foolish expectation (341e3-342a1, cf. *Ep. ii*, 314a). Writing and public oral lectures are therefore worth little compared to dialectic. Moreover, the first and highest principles are easy to remember because they are 'in the shortest form' (344e). That is why they do not *have* to be written down, either. The letter does not even allow writing down for the sake of remembrance. As we shall see, the letter contains (and this is new) a philosophical justification for this low assessment of writing. But is it not paradoxical that after such an attack on written *logos*, Plato offers a written 'true *logos*' (342a3-4) of epistemology? Are Plato's own dialogues not affected by this criticism?

There are several possible interpretations here: 1) the dialogues are not to be interpreted as technical works, 2) they do not directly contain Plato's own opinions, and 3) they certainly do not contain Plato's deepest thoughts (σπουδαιότατα 344c6). It is obvious that the dialogue genre is different from monological non-fiction and therefore does not fall into the category from which Plato distances himself. As for the claim that the dialogues are not Plato's opinion, we must remember that Plato himself does not speak in his dialogues (they are not treatises), and that Plato can therefore, in a sense, claim that there is no writing by him. However, this does not apply to the personal *Ep. vii*.

But the third claim should also be considered: the fact that there is no writing on this subject (the deepest truths: the good, the beautiful and the just) is true enough, because such writing is not possible. According to Plato, language is weak because it cannot get hold of the nature of things, only their special characteristics. The good, the beautiful and the just cannot be expressed in the ‘unchangeable’ (written) words (343a1-4). Both names and definitions have uncertain references (342e2 ff, 343b8-c5), are ‘unclear’ (343b6 f.), and are only images (343c7) of the actual being we seek.

Phaedrus concluded the critique of writing with a self-reference to Socrates/Plato that a serious writer does not ‘write in water’ about justice, morality, and values, since everything in writing about anything contains much play (*παιδιά*) and only a little seriousness. The same applies to everything performed orally to persuade without questioning and instruction, while clarity, perfection and seriousness exist only in the dialectic. At best, a text contains reminders for the knowledgeable (276a-277a, 275d1, 278a1). This not only provides room for the dialogues but may also contain a reference to and characterization of them. Moreover, if authors have written with knowledge, can defend their work and are aware of the inferiority of the written, they are philosophers (278cd). This also saves Plato’s own dialogues from a contradiction.

Ep. vii concludes the critique of writing with similar general considerations (344c1-e2): a serious writer does not exhibit his innermost thoughts in print (344c1-3). This applies to Plato’s own dialogues (344d7-9). Plato does not write about his innermost thoughts and principles. Fortunately, however, we still find no rejection of the possibility of writing entertaining dialogues, although their usefulness as *memos* for informed individuals is now rejected (344e). The fact that all *oral* communication is also dismissed as a medium for serious thought (341c5) makes a different point from *Phaedrus*, which rejects what is said for persuasion (monological rhetoric). Incidentally, the

rejection of all oral expression of the supreme principles means that the letter cannot be used by the esoterics⁴⁸ to support the theory of a secret oral doctrine.

Ep. ii is most strict: avoid all writing and memorize, no treatise (σύγγραμμα) of Plato exists or will exist (cf. *Ep. vii*, 341c), and the treatises that already exist belong to a Socrates who has become beautiful and young or new (314bc). The meaning of this statement is a conundrum. Naturally, it relates to Plato's remarkable anonymity. He is apparently distancing himself from what is available by attributing previous publications to a 'Socrates' who is in some sense new (νέος). The reference is then to the Socrates-of-the-dialogues (not the historical figure).⁴⁹ Morrow sees the letter as an

⁴⁸ This refers to the so-called 'Tübingerschule', which finds a secret 'ungeschriebene Lehre', a doctrine of principles only communicated orally. The authenticity of the *7th Letter* is debated but is generally accepted. The recent attempt to reject it (Burnyeat and Frede) seems too speculative to carry conviction. It could have profited from consultation of H. Raeder's solid philological defense (cf. n. 50 below).

⁴⁹ Cf. P. Friedländer, *Plato. An Introduction* (Princeton, 1969), 379 n.10 on the combination of καλός and νέος. If *Ep. ii* can be dated to the late 360's (between the last two trips to Sicily) or just after the third trip (Friedländer, 244), Plato could claim that he is not the author of his earlier work, having (a young or new) Socrates present his thoughts. E.g., at *Tht.* 184a and *Soph.* 217c Socrates claims to have met the old Parmenides as 'quite young', a possible reference to the *Parmenides*, where Socrates has to defend 'his' Forms. Later Plato has other characters discuss his views. In this way this passage favors an early date (between the middle and late dialogues), and thus the *genuineness* of *Ep. ii*. Friedländer, 239-40 compares *Ep. vii* 324b8: νέος ἐγώ ποτε ὄν [] ἔπαθον interestingly with the autobiography of 'Socrates' in the *Phaedo* 96a: νέος ὄν

unintelligent forgery, depending on the *Ep. vii* and *Timaeus*.⁵⁰ But Bentley, Raeder, Friedländer, Harward, and others accept the letter as genuine, *inter alia* because of its moderate use of hiatus avoidance.⁵¹

We find criticism of writing elsewhere in the late Plato: the written laws are imitations of truth (*Politicus* 300c), and it is impossible for a generally simple principle to be adapted to circumstances that are always complicated (294c). Writing laws is an old man's sobering play (*Laws* 685a).

Then why *did* Plato write, unlike Socrates, who wrote nothing? If we are to take his own words at face value (which is dangerous), he does so as a game, and as a reminder to himself and others who follow him and know what he is talking about (*Phaedrus* 276d, 278a). Contributing reasons may have been that the existing culture had increasingly become dependent on writing, and that Plato, unlike Socrates, ran a research institution where at least some of the dialogues could be used in teaching.

But why dialogues, exactly? Apart from the reasons that have already been mentioned, it is because they come closest to dialectic, which is the way to knowledge. But why is there then a trend towards *less* (genuine) dialogue in the Corpus (*Politicus*, *Sophist*, *Timaeus*, *Laws*)? This is explained partly by Plato's age: as an elderly professor, Plato does not discuss, he lectures. And partly by distance in time and in philosophy from Socrates (who is passive and, in the *Laws*, absent). But he still writes under the cover of the dialogue form.

θαυμαστῶς ὡς ἐπιθύμησα. Even if this does not imply that the latter is simply *Plato's* autobiography, it does suggest a portrait *composed* of a historical and a Platonic Socrates.

⁵⁰ G.R. Morrow, *Plato Epistles* (Indianapolis and N.Y., 1962, rev. ed.), 109-118. Surprisingly, he does not consider the solution above. Cf. also Guthrie 4.65 f.

⁵¹ Raeder (1906), 440 ff., 537. Friedländer, 241-245 on *Ep. ii*.

However, one may still wonder why Plato could possibly have inserted a written synopsis of his epistemology in his own warning against writing. First of all, writing about the most important questions ‘would best come from’ Plato (341d), but he has actually *not* done so (341c, 344d). Even if the digression, ‘the true doctrine’ (342a), were a revelation of his deepest thought, which it is not, it would be addressed not to the public but to the few recipients of the letter, the followers of Dion (341de).

Conclusion

The *philosophical Digression* (Ep. vii, 342a7-344c1) is a fair synthesis of Plato’s later epistemology to be dated among the later dialogues and certainly close to the *Laws* (also according to stylometry). It is certainly not the work of an ‘incompetent amateur’. A good deal of effort has been invested in putting the Digression in the context of later dialogues. The burden of proof lies firmly on those who deny the validity of the argument advanced here. The other topic discussed above, the *critique of writing* (341b7-342a1, 344c1-d2), in which the Digression is embedded, and which is given a philosophical justification in the Digression, is plainly central to Plato’s later philosophy. It does not reveal an external hand either, or the presence of an amateur, but is argued well enough to be of continuing influence since antiquity.

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