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The Mystery of the Seventh Platonic Epistle:  
An Analysis of the Philosophic Digression

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Abstract  
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The Platonic Epistles recount one of the most important episodes in Plato's life: the catastrophic attempt at cultivating a philosopher king in Dionysius the Younger, Tyrant of Syracuse. Of the thirteen letters, the seventh is without a doubt the most fascinating one. Besides giving an abundance of information about what occurred in Sicily, the letter also contains a small, three page section that holds tremendous philosophic significance. These pages, traditionally called the "Philosophic Digression," provide a fantastic amount of information about Plato. If authentic, they amount to the "last word" on Plato's epistemology. Not only that, they also seek to answer perhaps the most fundamental question about Plato's philosophic style: Why does Plato refuse to write a philosophic treatise, instead deciding to stay anonymous and only write in dialogue form? In answering this question, the Digression also claims the existence of an unwritten, esoteric doctrine that possesses no substantial connection with the written dialogues. However, despite all the fascinating information contained in the dialogues, I contend that the Digression is ultimately an interpolation in an otherwise authentic letter. I argue that, despite the Digression's claims, and the theories of scholars both ancient and modern, including Aristotle, Plato did not possess any sort of "secret" or "esoteric" doctrine. Furthermore, I will advance the claim that the epistemology contained in the letter, especially with regards to the question of how can come to know the Ideas, is quite alien to Plato. Along with this, I will include a general defense of the authenticity of the rest of the Seventh Letter. I posit that the rest of letter coincides extremely well with Plato's politics. I also express skepticism towards stylometric arguments against the letter.

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To my Father:  
“...ὄψις ἀκοή μάθησις, ταῦτα ἐγὼ προτιμέω.”  
– Heraclitus

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## The Philosophic Digression in Plato's Seventh Epistle: A Masterful Forgery

### Ch. 1 – The Seventh Platonic Epistle

#### Introduction to Essay

If historical accounts are correct, then his epistles truly are some of the last works Plato wrote. At the time of his death, Plato was already a living legend philosophically,<sup>1</sup> politically,<sup>2</sup> and socially.<sup>3</sup> Only a small handful of the Presocratics,<sup>4</sup> and Socrates<sup>5</sup> himself enjoy such widespread reverence and popular mythologizing.<sup>6</sup> These last works, the product of a dazzling mind that “held the entire world at gaze,” (Post 58) are invaluable treasures. Plato became so famous, however, for his philosophic arguments and unsurpassed reasoning. While it is true that

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<sup>1</sup> Although the relationship between Plato and Aristotle is often seen in the light of philosophic opposition, even by other ancient writers (e.g. Plutarch, Eusebius, etc.) we have preserved a fragment of a poem Aristotle supposedly wrote actually in deep praise of Plato as a thinker, as an intellectual and teacher he deeply respected (F650R3, F673 R3; Olympiodorus, *Comm. Gorg.* 41.9; Barnes v.2 2463). For the best treatment that I have found on this elegy preserved by Olympiodorus, see Jaeger 1927.

<sup>2</sup> Plato's association with the political elite began at birth, but his philosophy and activities made him relevant far outside Athens. Natoli (32 ff.) gives a good discussion of the relationship between Plato and no less than Philip of Macedon. Plato also sent associates to the court of Perdiccas III, according to the *Fifth Epistle* (a letter I find to be probably genuine; see Harward 183-184).

<sup>3</sup> As will be seen below, Plato was oftentimes ridiculed or distrusted by Athenians, despite the fantastic amount of respect he commanded amongst intellectuals. We have multiple fragments particularly of Middle Comedy that support this like Amphis Fr. 6 (Kock = Diog. Laert. 3.27), from a play called *Amphicrates*. The mention of Plato occurs in line 3, “ὦ δέσποτ’, ἢ τὸ Πλάτωνος ἀγαθόν.” ἀγαθόν has a sexual connotation here (as in Aristophanes *Ec.* 426, *Pl.* 236, Fr. 52), not the Platonic Good at all, lampooning not only Plato generally but directly parodying his philosophy (see also Papachrysostomou 38). This is hardly the only Middle comedy fragment lampooning Plato, and there seems to be (Gaiser n.55) also an entire comedy entitled *Plato*, (Aristophon fr. 8; Athenaeus 12.552e).

<sup>4</sup> Thales, for instance, is said to have been the “πρῶτος παραδέδοται τὴν περὶ φύσεως ἱστορίαν τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἐκφῆναι,” (Simp. *Phys.* 9.23.29 = DK11 B1.1). There are also many tales of his impressive scientific achievements (eg. Hdt. 1.75.8-22 = DK11 A6).

<sup>5</sup> Plato gives Socrates the most powerful praise at *Phd.* 118a16-17, “ἄνδρός, ὡς ἡμεῖς φαῖμεν ἄν, τῶν τότε ὧν ἐπιράθημεν ἀρίστου καὶ ἄλλως φρονιμοτάτου καὶ δικαιοτάτου.”

<sup>6</sup> See the beginning of Diog. Laert. Book 3 for plenty of myths about Plato. Eusebius stresses how much Plato's philosophy approaches Christian truth and is superior to all other past thinkers (*Praep. Evan.* 11.1.3). Byzantine philosophers like Plethon heaped praise onto Plato while also denigrating Aristotle, see Karamanolis (in Ierodiakonou) 253ff.

Plato's philosophy made him famous, it was not just the known dialogues and doctrines that accomplished this. Plato, and the Academy he founded, became well known for its esotericism and air of secrecy. Indeed, this inspired almost violent suspicion in Athens early on.<sup>7</sup> To modern readers, as to the democratic Athens that rejected such presumably exclusionary groups, it seems strange that one of the greatest of all thinkers would instead act like a near cultist. His refusal to publish a straightforward treatise may strike us as strange. Plato's choice of actual writing, dialogue,<sup>8</sup> is also quite bizarre to us considering that before Plato most pre-Socratics wrote in either verse (Parmenides); aphoristic, obscure sayings (Heraclitus); or expository prose (many of the Milesians).<sup>9</sup>

Plato fascinates us then not only because of the formal elements of his system but also his presentation of them and the method he emphasizes in learning them. It is because the Seventh Letter, and specifically the so-called "Philosophic Digression" attempts to answer the many questions that we have about Plato that it is an especially important text and sets itself clearly

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<sup>7</sup> Plato had a reputation for being anti-democratic, a sentiment only promoted by Plato's political works. Plato also suffered some guilt by association. His uncle Charmides was one of the Ten at Piraeus, and Critias was one of the most extreme members of the Thirty Tyrants. Plato's distinct omission of their names, referring them only as, "τούτων δὴ τινες οἰκεῖοί τε ὄντες," is possibly intentional (Ep. 7 342d2). Critias is also involved as a speaking character in several dialogues and was supposedly associated with Socrates (see Comm. ad 342d2). Dionysius' own writings that the Seventh alludes to (e.g. 341b ff.) were also evidently extremely embarrassing. There are also the comedies made about him and his Academy (supra 3). According to Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1376a7-11), Plato did not hesitate to issue scathing criticism of public figures like Archibus. I do not believe Gaiser's argument that Plato's lecture on the Good was entirely motivated by the prospect of a collision with Athenian authorities and that the lecture is somehow not damaging to the Seventh Letter's digression. However, he does an admirable job of displaying just how polarizing Plato was as a figure (see esp. 21-22).

<sup>8</sup> Kahn writes an article about Plato's literary choice and in doing so compellingly critiques the received wisdom about the dialogues. Kahn questions whether Plato wrote "Socratic" dialogues in the sense that he wrote dialogues that actually contain the teachings of Socrates. He arrives at an interesting conclusion. The commonly called "Socratic dialogues" like the *Crito* may contain Socrates' actual conclusion, but Plato provides his own justification. For ones like the *Crito* where, if we believe the event actually took place, Plato could not have been present, this works quite well and presents the dialogues then as much more than just the pious reproduction of Socratic teachings but instead artistic and philosophic creations that use a Socratic position only as a goal. While I do not agree with Kahn on everything in the article (he seems to advocate the use of stylometrics to establish the chronology of the dialogues), I do find it very well argued.

<sup>9</sup> A fragment of Aristotle (DL 3.37) remarks also on this peculiar style, saying it is half way between poetry and prose. Athenaeus (505c quoting Arist.'s lost *On Poets*), however, refutes the idea that Plato was the very first to write in dialogue. However, his manner of stating this suggests that there was a definite dispute on this point.

apart from the other letters in importance. Nowhere else in the received works ascribed to Plato do we have such seemingly direct answers to some of the most perplexing aspects of Platonism nor do we have anything near as enigmatic, with the possible exception of certain particularly obscure parts of the *Timaeus* and the deductions of the *Parmenides*.

However, ironically, it is Plato's fame that forces us to be skeptical about this letter. These letters come down to us through years of transmission. Attaching the name of Plato (or some other famous writer or speaker) to a piece of writing would increase its intellectual importance. Of course, not all forgery is done for malicious reasons. In the case of the First Epistle especially, it may be that it was written benignly enough by a student and, by pure accident of history, it slipped into the Platonic canon. However, the motivation and incentive to fake a letter and call it a work of Plato is clearly there.

I write this essay because of all the above considerations. This letter seems to be a philosophical diamond. However, because of Plato's fame and especially the desire of later Platonists to defend their master in light of what happened in Sicily, it would behoove us to make sure this diamond is not just cubic zirconium. The letter's discussion of Dion and the tragic events that occurred under Dionysius the Younger's reign are also discussed in later authors such as Plutarch, so the stakes of the letter's genuineness are perhaps not quite as high.<sup>10</sup> However, the Digression is a different matter. The Digression addresses our most basic questions about Plato. To find the letter fake, or the Digression an interpolation, would be quite disappointing. Likewise, if the Digression is a fake, then that also leads to the difficult question of what other parts of the text were doctored. As will be seen, while ancient authors were aware of the letter, we can piece together what they read only somewhat and there are still plenty of holes.

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<sup>10</sup> It is tempting of course here to suggest that Plutarch relies on Plato's letter for his own account. This is somewhat true, but Plutarch obviously goes far beyond this, using sources like Timonides.

Thankfully, most of these omissions in other sources are minor and do not arouse much alarm, but the silence on the Digression is quite deafening.

Is the Seventh Letter genuine? Like too many things in life, the answer to this is not a simple “yes” or “no.” I believe, and will argue, that the Seventh Letter as a whole is authentic. I will draw mainly on its distinctly Platonic tone and style along with certain historical elements that would seem to preclude all but the most ingenious forgers. I will discuss more recent stylometric findings by authors like Morton that argue that the Seventh Letter is not stylistically similar to the other dialogues. I confess a certain amount of skepticism towards these studies, but I acknowledge that they are an important part of scholarship and the studies tackle the issue of authenticity head on. Along with stylometric analysis, I will attempt to respond to other arguments against the Seventh’s general credibility. These will include arguments against the letter’s attitude towards Socrates, Plato’s early life, and the tone of the letter. Besides refuting criticism, however, I will also advance my own positive arguments for the letter’s authenticity including its early cataloguing, early testimony, and philosophic consistency. Also, in the spirit of stylometrics, I will present my own evidence, using hiatus avoidance as the style attribute analyzed, that the Seventh shares an uncanny resemblance to Plato’s late works while the Digression is so anomalous on this account that it almost certainly could not have been from the “unwritten” Plato.

I have outlined above the topics I will be addressing concerning the authenticity of the letter in general. Now, I will briefly explain the arguments I will make that the Digression itself is an interpolation. I first will argue that the Digression’s complete absence from all Platonic discussions until the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE is quite suspicious. Secondly, I will also posit that the philosophy contained in the Digression is quite alien to Plato, in terminology and philosophic

substance; this latter section will occupy the bulk of my essay as I will also discuss extensively the theory of Plato's unwritten doctrine. This unwritten doctrine is a natural implication from the Digression's disparagement of the written form and thus its distancing from the dialogues. I take a rather "anti-esotericist" line on Plato, arguing that any unwritten teachings of his are more likely elaborations of what is contained in his dialogues. If I can establish this crucial fact about Plato, the Digression's credibility will be fatally harmed. After arguing that the Digression is a fake, I will attempt to show how its substance in fact is quite alien to Plato's philosophy as we find it throughout the dialogues and has much more to do with the late Academy and early Middle Platonism. Here I will advance my own candidate for the writer of the Digression: the last "scholarch" of the Academy, Philo of Larissa. I will attempt to show here that Philo's philosophy not only shares an extraordinary similarity with the Digression's but that he also had the motivation to forge it due to his feud with Antiochus. I acknowledge immediately that one of my arguments in the course of this paper, that Plutarch did not know of the Digression but knew the rest of the letter, may initially contradict my hypothesis that Philo wrote it, given that Philo lived more than a century before Plutarch. However, I believe that an understanding of how fragmented Middle Platonism becomes after Philo's death will resolve this contradiction, as Plutarch did not possess this forged copy because it was kept to Philonians and maybe a select few other factions of Platonism. Plutarch possessed a copy of the letter without the Digression, but that is because the Digression had not yet become a part of the most prevalent version of the letter, mainly the letter included in Thrasyllus' canon. I think this is one of the most original parts of my thesis, so I will defend it as best I can. However, I acknowledge that it is but a hypothesis, a best guess at this most difficult of philosophical and philological puzzles.

## Chapter 2 - Some Arguments Against the Seventh's Overall Genuineness and Answers

### §1 – Supposed Problems with the Letter's Account of Plato's Early Life

When defending the thesis of the Digression being an interpolation I must also defend a corollary, that the rest of the Seventh Letter is authentic. It would be rather trivial to argue that a piece of writing is an interpolation in another forgery, so I must answer those who wish to claim the entirety of the Seventh Letter is not genuine.

The first argument often presented against the letter's genuineness is that its description of Plato's political activities seems at odds with what Aristotle and others say. This argument is given its strongest form in Edelstein's work *The Seventh Letter of Plato* (esp. 5-15). Plato himself never intended to engage in politics. This claim, initially, seems quite compelling,<sup>11</sup> but it suffers several fatal flaws. The first is that the tone of the letter suggests that Plato was at heart a political reformer, "yearning for action" as Edelstein characterizes this counter argument (7). This is a reasonable interpretation of this part of the letter. Considering the writer of the Seventh Letter laments being or even being perceived as a man of "mere words" this interpretation could work. However, Edelstein dismisses this with the comment, "Convincing as this argumentation may seem to some, it surely does not have the authority of a scientific truth which others may not feel free to reject" (7). He apparently sees a comment like this to be sufficient, despite the fact that he acknowledges the interpretation can be quite convincing. If it seems convincing but is not, then it surely is worthy of an actually substantial refutation. The second reason this

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<sup>11</sup> Given Plato's aristocratic background, it strikes us as surprising that he did not get involved in Athenian politics at all. If he had even an inkling of desire to become political, the reasoning goes, his high birth could have given it to him. Secondly, the idea of the apolitical philosopher is a common and powerful image, and we are tempted to apply it to Plato.

argument fails is that, in the context of a letter specifically addressing what should be done in Sicily in light of the recent events, providing a dry, scholarly account of his intellectual influence including his interactions with Cratylus would be quite out of place. Edelstein may also have a problem of perspective here. It is true that there is quite a lot of information about Plato's life, not only for his contemporaries like Aristotle but also Diogenes Laertius (who devotes all of Book 3 of his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* to Plato) and the numerous doxographical accounts.<sup>12</sup> Even if one takes a quite skeptical view of many of these sources, there is still more on Plato than perhaps any other thinker in Ancient Greece. Compared with all the information, including amusing and informative anecdotes, the Seventh Letter seems quite paltry indeed, but that hardly implies Plato did not write it.

To review the contents of the letter, Plato recounts that he planned that, as soon as he “became his own master” (324b), he would enter politics. However, this changed with the overthrow of the democracy and the installation of the Thirty Tyrants, making it impossible for him to join such a corrupt and evil state (324c ff.). When the Thirty collapsed, Plato saw that it was possible to enter public life, but by then he had cooled somewhat to the idea, also coming to the idea that the state is nearly impossible to properly manage (325b-c). He continually hoped for political action in Athens but eventually came to his famous view that political discord would not end until philosophers became kings or kings become philosophers.

From our knowledge of Athenian politics, that Plato (certainly very high born)<sup>13</sup> would want to enter public service is not surprising at all. However, Edelstein rejects this view. He cites first of all Aristotle (Met. Bk A.6), saying that Aristotle “implies that Plato chose philosophy as

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<sup>12</sup> One need only look at 690-693 of Diels' *Doxographic Graeci* to see an astoundingly long list of anecdotes and accounts of Plato's life. While many of these are probably spurious, their sheer volume shows how legendary Plato was.

<sup>13</sup> If Diogenes Laertius and many other doxographers are to be believed.

his career and the same is maintained by later biographers” (6). Edelstein both fails to provide any other “later biographers” to back his point up and reads a fantastic amount into this passage from the *Metaphysics*. The passage clearly seeks to justify why Plato is being brought up when it says, “Μετὰ δὲ τὰς εἰρημένους φιλοσοφίας ἢ Πλάτωνος ἐπεγένετο πραγματεία,” (987a29). Plato is being mentioned in the context of a philosophy of metaphysics. Any information that Aristotle would mention here would be germane to Plato’s metaphysical beliefs. Aristotle does just that in the very next sentence where he mentions that Plato was familiar with Heraclitus and Cratylus while “in his youth,” (987a32). In an attempt to find the source of Edelstein’s claim that Aristotle had no knowledge that Plato wanted to enter politics, perhaps this phrase may be it. However, if Edelstein is correct that Plato “did what was unusual or unconventional”, then the fact that Plato was deeply interested in philosophy does not mean he could not also be interested in politics. Edelstein also attempts to compare Plato to other Pre-Socratic philosophers, noting that many of them had an aristocratic background but rejected political power in favor of philosophy. This is quite true,<sup>14</sup> but several of them also were quite active in politics as well.<sup>15</sup> There is not a single passage in the Platonic corpus that states that Plato saw politics and philosophy as mutually exclusive. Indeed, besides the obvious examples of the *Laws* and *Republic*, *Euthyd.* 306<sup>16</sup> seems to suggest that Plato saw it as possible, though rather difficult, for somebody to be both a philosopher and a statesman. The *Apology* seems like a strong counter-example to this argument initially as Plato presents Socrates in an extremely positive light for refusing to cooperate with the Tyrants’ plans. However, while Socrates is praised for this, he refuses to join not because he

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<sup>14</sup> Thales (DK 11 A1 = Diog. Laer. 1.22), possibly Xenophanes (DK21 A1 = Diog. Laer. 9.18.3), Heraclitus (DK22 A1.6 and A2 = Diog. Laer. 9.2.3-4 and Strabo 14.1.3), Anaxagoras (DK59 A1 = Diog. Laer. 2.6.4-6)

<sup>15</sup> Zeno (DK29 A1 = Diog. Laer. 9.26), Empedocles (DK31 A1 = Diog. Laer. 8.66-67), and Democritus (DK68 A1 = Diog. Laert. 9.35-36). One should not take DK68 B118 (Dionysius of Alex. in Eus. Prep. for Evang. 14.7.4) so literally as to think he did not take an interest in politics. Several, like Melissus, are unknown on this regard, but it would be an argument from ignorance to assume anything on this matter for them.

<sup>16</sup> It is tempting to take *Euthyd.* 306a2 to be contrary to the idea that statesmanship requires sound philosophy, but it is not.



believed that all politics were bad but rather that the Tyrants were so terrible that any association with them would be corrupting. Politics, when one is not under the rule of a truly terrible and hopeless constitution, is not at all antithetical to philosophy. Diogenes does not say anything about Plato wanting to get involved in politics either, but absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

## §2 – The Letter’s Attitude Towards Socrates and a Brief Discussion on Platonic Anonymity

Edelstein has other arguments as well. One is that Plato takes an uncharacteristically cool attitude towards Socrates in the letter. Edelstein contends that Socrates is only called an “aged friend” (324e) or his “associate” (325b). However, he seems to have missed 324e1 which is a certain reference to *Phaedo* 118a16-17 and is quite exuberant praise.<sup>17</sup> Also, *Phaedo* 118a15 uses similar language to the epistle, saying, “τοῦ ἐταίρου ἡμῶν.” Edelstein brings up 118a16-17 later, but makes the rather trivial remark (9 n.15) that 324e does not quite mimic the *Phaedo* passage. However, beyond the point that the praise of the epistle is not as far off from the *Phaedo* as Edelstein would like to admit, we must admit that at this point in his life Plato may be moving away from Socrates for other reasons as well. Plass writes an impressive article, in fact a response to Edelstein’s 1962 article on Platonic anonymity, that argues that Plato’s removal of Socrates as the main speaking character, in his later dialogues substituting instead characters like the Athenian Stranger “may be Plato’s way of acknowledging its cosmopolitan character, which he could take as a sign of truth,” (213 n.2).<sup>18</sup> Plato shows signs of this de-emphasis of Socrates

<sup>17</sup> “τά τε ἄλλα καὶ φίλον ἄνδρα ἐμοὶ πρεσβύτερον Σωκράτη, ὃν ἐγὼ σχεδὸν οὐκ ἂν αἰσχυνοίμην εἰπὼν δικαιοτάτον εἶναι τῶν τότε,” “But also I will tell you about the man and my friend Socrates, who I would not hesitate to call the most just man.”

<sup>18</sup> Plass finds proof of Plato’s emphasis on philosophy not being Socrates-centric in an impressive amount of places. Plato regularly attributes doctrines to other people (*Phdo.* 109c, *Gorg.* 524a, 493a, *Meno* 81a). In both the *Republic* (420a, 57b) and the *Laws* (671a, 693a) Plato argues that the individual does not matter in the city ruled by the *logos*.

elsewhere in later dialogues; many times Socrates will ask what “we” are discussing, associating himself with his interlocutors and renouncing any claim to philosophic authority. Even in the *Meno* (generally seen as a late-early dialogue) alone, there are five points where this occurs.<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere too, Socrates seems to self-consciously avoid appearing too authoritative and sincerely wants his interlocutors to come to the same conclusion as he does (*Gorg.* 473a, 474a; *Rep.* 498d), a tone that suggests Socrates is just another man in search of the truth; he just happens to also be much more gifted than others. Perhaps the most poetic statement of Socrates’ actual unimportance to the philosophic truth comes at *Phaedo* 118a. One would expect such a great sage to give as his last words a brilliant final truth, but instead he gives the simple statement that he owes a cock to Asclepius. After all of his great discussions, Socrates is still just a man. Plato, in discussing Socrates in his letter, does not want to give the impression that he came to his political ideas only because Socrates told him these ideas. Plato formed these political opinions from the events around him in Athens, bolstering his credibility when he gives “counsel.” Also, he does not want to expressly privilege Socrates, or himself, to Philosophy. He is a servant to Philosophy and seeks only to honor it. Socrates receives honor insofar as he served and defended Philosophy well. The Seventh Epistle is attempting to defend philosophy in general, to make sure it does not acquire any sense of being a quasi-cult or become associated with a single person. Given that the Seventh Epistle is generally taken to be written simultaneously with the *Laws*, it seems reasonable that Plass’ thesis can be applied rather well to the letter here. Plato is hesitant to ascribe too much to Socrates for fear of philosophy appearing to be just the personal project of one man. Later philosophers like Diogenes and Aristotle do not feel the need to protect Platonism’s image, so they do not mind saying that Socrates heavily influenced Plato. The difference in praise for Socrates between the Seventh epistle and the

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<sup>19</sup> 71b, 73d, 74a, 75b, 89c.

*Phaedo* is most likely trivial, but I admit that is a subjective impression and other readers may feel differently. Even if a reader finds a substantial difference, however, there is a very plausible philosophic explanation.

### §3 - The Poverty of Stylometric Analysis

What are some other challenges to the letter's authenticity? One of the most formidable comes from stylometric analysis, the quantified analysis of the appearance of certain key words. This approach has several key strengths. As Levinson, Morton, and Winspear (309) point out, many people have a preconceived notion of what a philosopher should look and act like. We may be expecting some sort of removed, neutral observer who, using reasoning, arrives at a conclusion. Although this is not necessarily the case we still often let that notion contaminate our judgment of style. A forceful, personal letter like the Seventh epistle seems to cut against our vision of Plato, a philosopher who focuses on creating philosophic works of art and does not engage in direct action very much. There have been many attempts<sup>20</sup> to find some sort of definitive stylistic measure for determining the authenticity of the Platonic epistles. Raeder, for instance, includes a list of rare words in the epistles, many of which were coined by Plato and used, at least for a time, solely by him. However, this seems immediately inadequate. Plato almost certainly coined these words for specific philosophic reasons. Also, what exactly counts as a "rare word?" Any definition would be inherently arbitrary. However, there are other methods and many articles written on these findings. Morton 1965 (126) makes a compelling argument that sentence length and the use of specific particles is something that is not so conscious and that authors have a harder time changing elements of style like that. However, there are problem with the use of sentence length. Different types of writing require different

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<sup>20</sup> Levison et al. (1968), Ritter (in Hackforth 105, 106), Wake (1957), Cox and Brandwood (1959), Morton (1965), Brandwood (1990), Ledger (1989), etc.

sentence complexity. A piece of literature could have quite long, flowing sentences, but a mathematical text puts a premium on conciseness. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the works ascribed to Plato are dialogues, works that are stylistically very different from epistles. However, there is one work outside the letters that can be compared with the Seventh Letter in particular, *The Apology*. Both are apologies in the generic sense, a character or writer defending himself against attacks. These two could, according to Morton, at least on purely formal considerations, be compared. Here is a comparison between the two works based on number of words per sentence:

|                 | Seventh Epistle | Apology |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------|
| Mean            | 26.7            | 17.1    |
| Standard Error  | 1.2             | .6      |
| Median          | 21.4            | 13.7    |
| Standard Error  | 1.3             | .6      |
| <25% Percentile | 12.3            | 7.6     |
| <75% Percentile | 34.3            | 23.7    |
| <90% Percentile | 52.1            | 35.6    |

At least on the face of it, the Seventh seems to be incriminatingly different from the *Apology*. It would seem that it simply could not be the case that both are from the same author. However, these statistics only work anachronistically. Outside of the epistles, Plutarch, Diodorus and others confirm that the events described in the letter happened very late in Plato's life. The *Apology*, however, is generally considered to be one of his very first works outside of his lost tragedies and (mostly) lost epigrams. Several decades have passed between the two works, regardless of whether Plato wrote the Seventh Letter or not. Any author changes his or her style over time. It is at times somewhat difficult to believe that both *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* are both from Shakespeare because the two are indeed rather different in style. Secondly, while the Seventh and the *Apology* are similar in that they are both not dialogues, they are still vastly

different from one another. The *Apology* is a work of art, specifically a speech, while the Seventh is an epistle that seeks to give specific advice. Thus the stylistic differences can be reasonably accounted for without declaring the Seventh a fake.

However, my criticism of sentence length only goes so far, especially when faced with other measures that show just as much of a break in style. To go back to my Shakespeare example, *Titus* is quite different from *Hamlet* in terms of tone and other elements, but there are still other elements that suggest Shakespeare wrote it. But is it really reasonable to say that a writer of even Plato's genius could successfully transition from Slavoj Žižek's style in *Parallax View* to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and still keep the same basic philosophy? To do so would almost certainly cause a truly radical change in thinking, but we do not find any sort of change in Plato, even if one believes the implausible theory that Plato dumps the Theory of the Forms after the first part of the *Parmenides*. My point is, a person usually changes his or her style of writing only so much over the course of his or her life. Because of that, one measure of difference will certainly not do. Even if one denies, as I do, the value of sentence length analysis, my general criticism of stylometrics will start to appear less and less convincing if more tests show definitive breaks in style between the Seventh and other works of Plato. One measure that could be possibly helpful in illustrating a break in style would be the analysis of certain particles. A writer's use of connective particles is often interesting in itself because it reveals both stated and unstated associations, associations that the writer himself may not be fully aware of. In one test, I will analyze the occurrence of the word *καί* in works ascribed to Plato. Though I think this test furthers my argument, it will not be the only test I provide. I will be expanding the samples used, beyond just the Seventh epistle and the *Apology*. If the use of particles is truly unconscious, then the medium should not make a large difference. I think

Levison et al. for providing the initial raw data from which I compiled this table:

| Work                 | Number of “καί”s | Number of words | Proportion of καίς |
|----------------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Seventh Epistle      | 473              | 8798            | 5.4                |
| Laws (Sen. 1-400)    | 365              | 6842            | 5.3                |
| Phaedo               | 156              | 2944            | 5.3                |
| Crito                | 143              | 2673            | 5.4                |
| Theaetetus           | 119              | 2071            | 5.8                |
| Republic (Sen.1-400) | 212              | 4214            | 5.0                |
| Critias              | 257              | 4952            | 5.2                |
| Apology              | 358              | 7187            | 5.0                |
| Axiochus             | 137              | 2349            | 5.8                |

This table is more informative. One could naturally object that the works I chose are rather arbitrary. Why did I not choose the *Timaeus* or the *Euthyphro*? With but a few exceptions,<sup>21</sup> these are fair concerns, though in the interest of space I chose 9 that span the length of Plato’s work from the very early (*Crito*) to the very late (*Laws*). The most important data here are the proportion of καίς. The theory that Levinson, Morton, and others advance is that once a sample work’s length reaches into the thousands of words (as all of the ones above clearly do) then the proportion should become relatively uniform. However, it is clear from above that this is not the case at all. A couple of peculiarities immediately appear. The first is that the *Theaetetus* and *Axiochus*, while both close in length, also have the same proportion of καίς. However, *Axiochus* is very often dismissed as spurious on stylistic<sup>22</sup> (along with philosophic)<sup>23</sup> grounds, but the

<sup>21</sup> The *Parmenides* would almost certainly not do well in this test. The second part of the dialogue is the epitome of logical compression. Besides being a great challenge to read, the style is unique in the Platonic corpus and would certainly skew the tests. However, this raises a point: Despite all the claims of stylometric analysis being able to establish authorship, we still assert that texts are from an author even when the numbers do not support it. The *Parmenides* has a idiosyncratic style for Plato, but it is universally assumed to be authentic, mainly because of the brilliance of the argumentation. It is Platonic because it is simply great philosophy that has fascinated thinkers from Proclus on down.

<sup>22</sup> Chevalier in his *Etude critique du dialogue pseudo-platonicien l’Axiochos* (Paris: F. Alcen, 1915) performs a very admirable critique of the style of the dialogue and notes that there are a wide variety of neologisms that were not coined until much later in authors like Philostratus and Athenaeus. See Hershbell for a synopsis of this analysis (12).

<sup>23</sup> Diog. Laer. (2.61) notes that dialogue is often considered spurious, and he has good reason to believe so. Its discussion of the relationship between the soul and body are hackneyed and extremely reliant on other dialogues

*Theaetetus* is a staple Platonic text.

However, what is bizarre is the Seventh's proportion and its relation to the other works . It is quite far away from the *Apology* and the *Critias*, but near the early part of the *Laws*, *Phaedo*, and *Crito*. This is peculiar for a couple reasons. The first is that, while it may not be surprising that the καί proportion of the epistle and the *Apology* are far away given sentence length test, it is strange that the Seventh Epistle and the *Critias* have a substantial gap in the amount of καί present. If the *Timaeus* is late in Plato (which it almost certainly is)<sup>24</sup>, then the *Critias* would even later if only because the surviving dialogue makes it clear that it proceeds from the *Timaeus*. The Seventh would then be quite close to the *Critias*. The two works are also mostly historical in tone as well and are much more extended speeches than the spirited exchange of the earlier dialogues. However, it is with these early works that the Seventh epistle actually finds itself grouped, based on the test results regarding καί. By that same test, The *Crito* and *Phaedo*, even more strangely, are closer to the epistle than the *Apology* is to the *Crito* and *Phaedo*. Καί is an extremely common word, but it seems that putting too much faith in it yields very strange results.

What about a logical connective particle, however, like δέ? Δέ has a wide variety of meanings, usually being an adversative or copulative particle. Examining the appearance of a word like this may yield less bizarre results:

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(Ax. 366a, 370d; cf. *Phd.* 62b, 82e, *Gorg.* 493a). 371a-372, the closing myth of the dialogue, also shares many similarities with the myths given in *Phaedo*, *Gorgias*, and the *Republic*. Hershbell (3) also speculates that the myth is borrowed from other writers as well, like Homer (*Od.* 4.563-69; *Od.* 11.575-600), Pindar (Fr. 129 and 130 = Plut. *Cons. ad Apoll.* 120c).

<sup>24</sup> Taylor argues that the *Timaeus* was written after 360, which would (keeping in mind Plato's death in 346) result in Plato writing the dialogue between the ages of 65 and 81 (9). He bases this information on the date of the death of Theaetetus (see *Tht.* 142b; see also Proc. *In Euc.* 1.66-7) which he places at 369, the composition of the *Sophist* and *Politicus* (366 based on Ep. 13 360b7 and Arist. *De Gen* 330b15). His analysis is too large to fit in a simple footnote, but I find it quite convincing overall. For a contrary view, see Owen *CQ* 3 (1953) 79-95 (reprinted in Smith v. 4 251-272).

| Work            | Number of Sentences | Num. of Sentences with δέ | Proportion of Sentences with δέ |
|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Seventh Epistle | 329                 | 111                       | .337                            |
| Laws (Bk. 1)    | 400                 | 76                        | .144                            |
| Phaedo          | 200                 | 32                        | .160                            |
| Crito           | 200                 | 29                        | .145                            |
| Theaetetus      | 400                 | 51                        | .128                            |
| Republic        | 400                 | 59                        | .147                            |
| Apology         | 483                 | 79                        | .164                            |
| Critias         | 172                 | 76                        | .442                            |
| Timaeus         | 895                 | 314                       | .351                            |
| Sophist         | 1532                | 192                       | .125                            |
| Politicus       | 1280                | 198                       | .155                            |
| Philebus        | 1538                | 181                       | .118                            |

The picture looks much brighter here for Edelstein and others who are skeptical about the Seventh's overall authenticity. The Seventh's .337 ratio is far away from the *Apology's* .164. Recall my argument that comparing the *Apology* and the Seventh is useless given the large period of time between them. This argument is mitigated considerably by the results of the *Laws*, *Theaetetus*, *Politicus*, *Philebus*, and *Sophist*. The biggest difference is between the *Apology* and the *Philebus*. But even then the difference is not so high as to arouse much suspicion since the *Theaetetus* is close behind and the *Republic* is also .02 away from the *Apology*. However, there are two glaring anomalies to consider: *Timaeus* and *Critias*. The *Critias* has a higher proportion than even the Seventh. To be fair, there are certainly doubters of the *Critias*, though I do not find their arguments very convincing. However, the consensus is far stronger on the *Timaeus* being almost certainly authentic and yet it too is even higher than the Seventh Letter. We encounter the same problem as using *Parmenides* in these sorts of tests. These are idiosyncratic dialogues that do not work well with these sorts of cold tests.

Stylometric analysis certainly has its advantages. When debating about the authenticity of a piece of text, a more objective test of style can be quite compelling. This is true not just for Plato but also for almost any author. Also, stylometrics can help tremendously when it comes to



establishing one of the most elusive questions about Plato: the chronology of his dialogues.

There is very little explicit evidence from either Plato himself or contemporary authors that help us establish the chronology. We can fairly safely state, for instance, that the *Laws* came after the *Republic* based on Aristotle's testimony (*Pol.* 1264b24-7; see also *Diog. Laer.* 3.37 and *Olymp. Prol.* 6.24). Brandwood (1), notes as well that the references between the *Sophist* (217a) and *Politicus* (257a, 258b) establish that *Sophist* was written beforehand. The *Timaeus* also makes it clear that the *Critias* is its sequel (20b-c, 27a-b; *Crit.* 107a). In terms of safe evidence,<sup>25</sup> that is about it, which is a pitifully small amount.<sup>26</sup>

However, we should be extremely hesitant about these tests because they sometimes present results that contradict our conceptions about an author's canon. I hold a healthy skepticism about the value of this sort of analysis and I have yet to find a test that provides truly compelling evidence for the Seventh's spuriousness. Stylistic analysis may help as a subsidiary argument, but it is no silver bullet, despite the promises of statisticians. I still defend the Seventh's authenticity.

#### §4 – The General Tone of the Letter and a Pitfall in Translating the Epistle

Another argument leveled against the letter is its general tone. Muller<sup>27</sup>, for instance, commenting on 345c1<sup>28</sup>, finds this phrase most intolerable and describes it as possessing the

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<sup>25</sup> There are some other references that help us with chronology, but they are nowhere near as certain. For instance, the *Timaeus* (17b-19b) seems to make a reference to the *Republic*. The *Sophist* (217c, 216a) also seems to reference the *Parmenides* (127b2, c4-5), but these are tentative at best and there are certainly reasons to doubt these claims.

<sup>26</sup> For more than enough proof for how open the Platonic chronology really is see Thesleff 7-17, where he includes an impressive and very wide-ranging list of different chronologies from authors. The authors go from 1792 up to Kahn in 1981. We see everything from Plato writing half his dialogues before Socrates even dies (with the *Ap.* Being a late middle one) to a unitary view where they were all written very close to each other and are a coherent whole.

<sup>27</sup> Muller's article was difficult to track down for me, but a very able summation of it is contained in Stenzel (1953).

<sup>28</sup> The whole sentence (345b7-c2) reads, “εἰ δὲ ἠύρηκέναι ἢ μεμαθηκέναι, ἄξια δ' οὖν εἶναι πρὸς παιδείαν ψυχῆς ἐλευθέρας, πῶς ἄν, μὴ θαυμαστός ὢν ἄνθρωπος, τὸν ἡγεμόνα τούτων καὶ κύριον οὕτως εὐχερῶς ἠτίμασέν ποτ' ἄν

“arrogant bearing of a spiritual Führer,” (266). He may not necessarily attach the same connotations to the word “Führer” that English-speakers do now, but considering he elsewhere derides the epistle’s writer as militaristic, the dictatorial and authoritative connotations we attach to the word may be intended. Muller clearly sees the writer as a dogmatic and self-appointed sage of “philosophy” and has difficulty comprehending that he and the anonymous creator of the ironic and often self-deprecating Socrates could be identical. However, while ἡγεμόνα could indeed be translated as Führer in German, it does not necessarily mean that.<sup>29</sup> I find multiple passages in Plato where the word is used but a translation like “teacher” would be more suitable. These include passages like *Alc.* 119e6,<sup>30</sup> *Symp.* 197a7, *Lys.* 214a2, and *Laws* 670e1.<sup>31</sup> I believe Muller may be overemphasizing the “arrogance” of the writer here. However, while he may be overestimating it, that does not mean Plato was a totally humble man. There are many accounts that detail his haughtiness quite extensively along with some pretty amusing stories (e.g. *Diog. Laer.* 3.26, 39, 4.7, 6.26; *Alexis Fr.* 180, *Aphis Fr.* 13). Muller not only mistakes the tone of the letter specifically but also is incorrect about Plato’s general tone.

Muller also pairs with this charge of arrogance the more philosophic point that the writer of this letter holds what Muller thinks is a very unplatonic attitude towards the relationship

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;” “While he claims to have discovered these truths by research or instruction, really if he admits the value of them to the liberal education of the soul, how could he possibly (lest he were a wonderful man) treat the teacher of and guide to these truths with such disrespect?”

<sup>29</sup> There are certainly many passages in Attic Greek that imply “guide” or “leader”: *Xen. Mem.* 1.3.4; *Eur. Ph.* 1616; *Soph. O.T.* 804; *Thu.* 7.50. Earlier authors like Homer (*Il.* 2.365, 487; 9.85; 11.304 and *Od.* 10.505, 15.310) and Herodotus (5.14, 6.43, 7.62) also support this translation. However, context is everything and not a single one of these references deals with education, philosophy, or enlightenment. The closest is the passage from Xenophon since it deals with Socrates, but it is used so as to defend Socrates against all charges of impiety. It is meant to emphasize Socrates’ obedience to the gods. In Plato the word has a distinctly theological and soul-related meaning in the *Phaedo* (80a4, 94c7, c10; 107e1, e3; 108a2, b8, c4).

<sup>30</sup> I acknowledge that the *Alcibiades*’ authenticity is heavily debated, perhaps even more so than the Seventh Letter. For a helpful bibliography of recent defenders of this dialogue see Smith *Apeiron* 37.2 (2004): 94 n.6 along with her extensive commentary on these recent champions of the work’s authenticity.

<sup>31</sup> See England’s commentary on this passage. He also seems to take the word ἡγεμών to mean teacher, “It is not clear from this passage whether the influence of the older men on the taste of the younger is that of example, or is by way of precept...the older men’s theoretical and practical skills [enable] them to give good teaching to others.”

between word and action. Muller (270) contends that Plato never put his ideas from the *Laws* and the *Republic* into action and that to Plato reasoning, *logos*, was more important than actions were. The statement at 328c5, then, must seem very bizarre and unlike the Plato Muller imagines, especially the independent clause, “Μὴ δόξαιμι ποτε ἐμαυτῷ παντάπασι λόγος μόνον ἀτεχνῶς εἶναί τις.”<sup>32</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, much of Muller’s, like Edelstein’s, complaints follow from a preconceived notion of what a philosopher should look and act like when in fact Plato, as an Athenian aristocrat, does not necessarily have to follow these conventions in the slightest. Aristotle understands this when he discusses Plato’s thoughts and frames them in a practical framework (e.g. *Pol.* 1266a1, 1266b37, 1293b1 ff., 1327a11, *Rhet.* 1376a10). Besides Muller’s mistaken belief about Plato’s actions as a person, his portrayal of the relation between word and deed is simply wrong as the opposition is discussed quite explicitly elsewhere in the dialogues including *Crito* 52d5<sup>33</sup> and *Tim.* 51c5.<sup>34</sup> Plato believed strongly I argue that it is not simply enough to believe the right things. If one truly understands philosophy, then one must seek to realize these ideas. Whether it be the obligation of the Philosopher King to rule and not simply sit and contemplate the Good without ever realizing or Socrates allowing himself to be executed because he believed he made a promise to Athens to respect their laws. While it must be admitted that, if the Seventh Letter were removed from the canon, we would not have any straightforward statement that Plato intended to enter politics, there is such a strong intellectual theme throughout the dialogues that one must match actions (when possible) with

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<sup>32</sup> “I may one day appear to myself to be all just words.”

<sup>33</sup> This *Crito* passage is one of the strongest examples I think of the close relation between true understanding and doing in Plato. The laws of Athens asks Socrates if he did indeed agree to live in accordance with them, not only by word but by deed as well. Plato believed quite strongly, it seems, in the old saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” Socrates confirmed his wisdom by choosing to be executed. It is this self-sacrificing action that demonstrates he truly was the wisest and most just man Plato had ever known, the recall the *Phaedo*.

<sup>34</sup> The passage from the *Timaeus*, “οὐδὲν ἄρ’ ἦν πλὴν λόγος,” “...To have been nothing but words,” is actually very reminiscent of 328c5. The writer of the epistle is concerned that somebody will make that exact same statement about him. It comes as a realization to a person, who then discovers he was in error before. While the letter’s clause is not in the imperfect, the meaning is the same.

words that one could very easily imagine his intention to become active in politics. However, he realized that given his age but also personal strengths, he would be best suited to teaching and influencing future leaders. He may not be sitting on the throne himself, but he wishes in the letter to help the one who is king.

### Ch. 3 – Reasons to Believe the Letter is Authentic

Up until now I have been only attempting to dispatch arguments against the authenticity of the Seventh Letter. I have argued against stylometrics, arguments against the tone of the letter, and some of the historical matters. What are some arguments that can actually be offered in support of the letter's authenticity?

#### §1 – The Numerous Sources Attesting to its Early Existence

The first obvious reference that I can find to the Seventh Letter is in Cicero. In *De Finibus* he references 326b and Plato's condemnation of Syracuse banquets.<sup>35</sup> He mentions them again in *Tusc. Disp.* 5.35.100, this time with an undisputable reference to the epistle.<sup>36</sup> If only the first reference in *Fin.* is considered, one may pass that off as Cicero having only cursory knowledge of Plato's thoughts on Syracuse. However, it is the direct, extended quotation from the epistle<sup>37</sup> that demonstrates he almost certainly had the entire letter in front of him. Cicero's general knowledge of Plato is rather unimpeachable. Besides having several Latin translations of

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<sup>35</sup> "Verum esto...sit voluptas non minor in nasturcio illo quo vesci Persas esse solitos scribit Xeniphon, quam in Syracusanis mensis quae a Platone graviter vituperantur." This is most likely a reference to the epistle where Plato condemns the decadence of the Sicilians; however I admit that this could also be possibly a reference to Rep. 404d1. However, the reference to Syracuse there comes only in the process of deciding what will be in the "City of Pigs." It hardly justifies Cicero saying that Plato "graviter viturperat [Syracunsas mensas]."

<sup>36</sup> "Est praeclara epistola Platonis ad Dionis propinquos, in qua scriptum est his fere verbis..." What follows is a direct quotation from 326b.

<sup>37</sup> "For one's existence was being spent on devouring food twice a day and never sleeping alone at night, and all the practices which accompany this way of life."

Plato attributed to him,<sup>38</sup> Cicero makes numerous references to Plato elsewhere in his works.<sup>39</sup> That Cicero knew of the general works of Plato (including less prominent ones like the *Menexenus*) and the main body of the Seventh Epistle seems well established. Cicero is certainly a later author in the timeline of Greek philosophy, and this is potentially worrisome. However, while he is the first one to explicitly quote the Seventh Letter he is not the first to allude to it. The 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE scholar Thrasyllus (see Diog. Laer. 3.61.1) includes epistles, “thirteen in number,” which is precisely how many letters we inherit from antiquity. This may not necessarily include the Seventh Letter, but given that Diogenes says the first words, “ἐν αἷς ἔγραφεν εὖ πράττειν, Ἐπίκουρος δὲ εὖ διάγειν, Κλέων χαίρειν,” which is exactly how the Seventh Letter starts, it appears a rather safe assumption. A grammarian by the name of Aristophanes, who Chroust (34) points out lived in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE (Morrow 1962 p. 5), also provides a catalog (3.62) and says that the epistles belong in the fifth trilogy with the *Crito* and the *Phaedo*. Considering what is said earlier about Thrasyllus, it is safe to assume that there are no differences between the letters found in Thrasyllus’ collection and those listed by Aristophanes. Otherwise, Diogenes would presumably have noted that Aristophanes found certain letters to be spurious, and Aristophanes apparently does just that with certain other dialogues.<sup>40</sup>

From above, it seems that at least as early as the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE we have

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<sup>38</sup> *Phdr.* 245c, *Apol.* 31, *Men.* 247e, *Gorg.* 470d

<sup>39</sup> *Academica* is probably the longest and most obvious example of this as both sides try to draw on Plato for support (e.g. 2.60, 2.142), showing Cicero’s broad and impressive knowledge of Plato. However, that is hardly the only source. Novotny (63-73) shows just how fascinated Cicero was with the Platonists. Pliny (*NH* 31.6) notes that Cicero named the colonnade at his house at Puteoli *Academia*. His house in Tusculum had two colonnades, with one of them named *Academia* (*Cic. De Div.* 1.8; *Tusc. Disp.* 2.9; 3.7). His comments in the (1.39) and *De Legibus* (1.15, 3.1) show also his total admiration for Plato as a thinker.

<sup>40</sup> These are not the only catalogers of Plato’s works that antedate Cicero. Diogenes also mentions other writers who classify works and specifically cites the epistles here (3.50.8). Albinus (*Isag.* 3) also includes them. For a more complete collection of catalogs see Chroust n.13. All of these seem to include the epistles in some way. That they were at least acknowledged well before Cicero is beyond debate at this point.

13 epistles and they seem to have become so well known that Cicero could refer to them as if they were common knowledge. This is some strong evidence in support of the Letter. And this is to say nothing of Church Fathers<sup>41</sup> and later rhetoricians, grammarians, and historians who make liberal use of the Seventh Letter and other major ones like the 6<sup>th</sup>. It seems as though the letters were fairly well acknowledged as authentic. This does not mean they necessarily were, but if they were forged, they must have been fabricated some time quite soon after Plato's death for them to have become accepted enough to land in Aristophanes' catalog without a hint of suspicion and to become so tremendously popular.

## §2 For Those Who Still Believe: The Stylometric Case for the Letter's Authenticity

However, doxographical and testimonial evidence gets us only so far. As discussed above, one of the most commonly proffered arguments against the Seventh is its style, that it is quite odd when compared to Plato's other works. However, stylistic analysis, for those true believers in it, actually offers at least one compelling argument in favor of the letter's genuineness: Plato's avoidance of hiatus. This criterion has the added benefit of not relying on inherently arbitrary "key words" for the analysis. Instead, it relies on Plato's avoidance of placing two vowels in different syllables next to each other without a consonant in between. As Harward (90) points out, hiatus avoidance was in vogue during Plato's life, largely thanks to the school of Isocrates who mastered this style.<sup>42</sup> As will be seen below, there seem to be two quite

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<sup>41</sup> With much thanks I acknowledge Morrow's diligent cataloging (5 n.7-8) of the references found both in the Church Fathers and the later writers like rhetoricians and grammarians.

<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Isocrates wrote the book, quite literally, on this matter and laid down the law on avoiding hiatus (τέχνη fr. 1). It should be noted that Isocrates forbade its usage no matter where in the sentence one may be tempted to place a hiatus. As Dionysius of Halicarnassus notes (*Dem.* 38) the hiatus created a distinct silence for a period of time that

distinct periods in Plato’s usage of this stylistic convention. In his early works he made almost no attempt to avoid hiatus, but in his later ones, from *Sophist* down to the *Laws*, he seems to have almost obsessed over it. Here is a helpful table compiled by Raeder (see Morrow xii)

| Title of Work <sup>43</sup> | Pages in Raeder text | Instances of “Illegitimate” <sup>44</sup> hiatus per page |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|---|
| <i>Lysis</i>                | 14.9                 | 45.9  |
| <i>Apology</i>              | 19.7                 | 38.7  |
| <i>Gorgias</i>              | 61.6                 | 35.7  |
| <i>Phaedo</i>               | 49.2                 | 40.9  |
| <i>Republic</i>             | 193.7                | 35.2  |
| <i>Sophist</i>              | 39.6                 | .6  |
| <i>Statesman</i>            | 43.2                 | .4  |
| <i>Timaeus</i>              | 53.0                 | 1.1   |
| <i>Philebus</i>             | 43.2                 | 3.7   |
| <i>Laws</i>                 | 236.8                | 5.8   |
| <i>Ep. 13</i>               | 2.9                  | 29.6  |
| <i>Ep. 3</i>                | 3.4                  | 27.3  |
| <i>Ep. 7</i>                | 20.0                 | 9.2   |
| <i>Ep. 8</i>                | 3.9                  | 8.7   |

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eliminates a smooth style and aims more for an archaic, “austere” sound. Thucydides is more representative of the archaic style while Isocrates is probably the exemplar of the smooth, continuous style and rhythm.

<sup>43</sup> Raeder did add in all of the epistles, but since the others not included on here are so short I found them to be not very useful in the examination.

<sup>44</sup> Neither Raeder nor Harvard give criteria for what would count as a “legitimate” hiatus. Presumably, they just mean one that was unavoidable lest the sentence become hopelessly awkward. This may not necessarily be the case, however. Pearson argues in his article “Hiatus and its Purposes in Attic Oratory” *AJPh* 96.2 (1975) p.138-9 that the reasons for not avoiding hiatuses is not also totally clear. Demosthenes in particular is noted for his disregard for the rules at times. Various statisticians have done exhaustive research on hiatus use in the Attic orators. However, I think the decision on whether a certain hiatus is “legitimate” or not depends on one’s individual appreciation of the oratory or prose at hand. The breaking of the rule may be intentional, either to save other qualities of the sentence or to be purposefully disconcerting to the listener, but it could just as well be accidental. I acknowledge that Raeder’s study is blemished somewhat by this. However, if one is a true believer in statistics for determining style, and my arguments beforehand do not convince you, then this little matter should not be a problem.

Several points immediately jump out here. The first is that there is quite obviously a massive drop off between the *Republic* and *Sophist*. Assuming these works are both from Plato (which they almost certainly are), Plato obviously made a quite conscious decision to change his style. The second feature is of course how diligently he maintains this style in the later works. To have maintained a fantastically low hiatus rate in a work as complex and obscure as the *Timaeus* is astounding, and this is to say nothing of the phenomenal endurance to do something approaching that with the *Laws*. Thirdly, two of the letters offered here are the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, both of which have uncharacteristically high hiatus rates. Sure enough, however, these two letters are usually rejected on almost entirely stylistic grounds and not taken particularly seriously. The Seventh and 8<sup>th</sup>, however, have rates quite close to that of the *Laws*, rates so low that, whoever wrote it, they either studied Plato's style quite closely or were very much under the Isocratean influence like Plato was.

§3 – A Recap, followed by a discussion of the Political Consistency of the Letter and Later Dialogues, particularly the *Laws*

Stylometrics, at least when it comes to hiatus avoidance, seems quite heavily on the side of the Seventh's authenticity but against the Digression's genuineness. I have detailed several reasons why the letter has very strong claims to authenticity. The first was the large amount of evidence indicating a composition within less than 200 years of Plato's death. However, it could be after Plato's death that this letter was composed, as all we have is a final date of the Mid-3rd Century when Aristophanes catalogs it. The second argument was that the use of hiatus avoidance was in vogue during the Attic period and Plato was a master of it in his



later dialogues. However, skill at avoiding hiatus would only seem to indicate a quite skilled writer, possibly contemporaneous with Plato. Thirdly, the tone of the letter seems to be quite consistent with Plato's previous dialogues. However, this argument suggests there was a writer who has become quite familiar with Plato's tone. We have created an archetype of a potential forger it seems: A 4<sup>th</sup> or early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century writer who is well versed in Attic oration and has studied Plato's dialogues so carefully as to be able to replicate his personality uncannily. This is then, probably, quite a small number. However, my next argument, that the counsel offered in the letter is so consistent with Plato's thoughts in his late dialogues, particularly the *Laws* and *Epinomis*, that only Plato could have written it. As Morrow (1950, 160) has pointed out, the counsel offered in the Seventh is very similar to that of the *Laws*. Plato is attempting to create a state of laws, the "second grade" state (see also *Pol.* 300c, 301d-e). It may not be as great as the city ruled by the philosopher kings, but it is close. Some argue (see De Blois 271), however, that the counsel offered in the Seventh Letter is not particularly helpful or Platonic, but I disagree and find it quite consistent. The letter contains various hints like making sure democracy is restored as a pathway towards establishing a proper constitution along Plato's ideals. Plutarch (*Dion* 28, 30) relays this advice as does Plato himself (*Laws* 710e). Note that this does not imply that Plato thinks democracy is an acceptable constitution; it is not to him. It is just that he considers it the best available constitution. Notice in the *Laws* passage that the Athenian Stranger puts democracy as the third best type of constitution to start from. The second is a constitutional monarchy, and the best is a tyranny<sup>45</sup> Given the information in the letters, a cooperative tyrant

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<sup>45</sup> Saunders (in Cooper) translates 710e3-4, "Οὐδαμῶς, ἀλλ' ἐκ τυραννίδος μὲν πρῶτον, δεύτερον δὲ ἐκ βασιλικῆς πολιτείας, τρίτον δὲ ἐκ τινος δημοκρατίας," as "Certainly not. The ideal starting point is dictatorship, the next best is constitutional kingship, and the third is some sort of democracy." I think this is basically right, though I would quarrel somewhat with his choice of the word "dictatorship" for "τυραννίδος." Saunders may have been trying to avoid the word "tyranny" because of the strongly negative connotations attached to it in English, but "dictatorship" is not much better in this regard. Besides, "tyranny" is really just the Anglicized version of the Greek, so it would

was clearly impossible, and a constitutional monarchy was most likely infeasible as well. As Plutarch notes, it was Dion's inability to establish democracy and move past party strife that caused his project to fail. The great importance of political leaders appearing virtuous to the people is stressed by the letter writer (351a), a sentiment echoed in *Laws* 711b-c. For a state to be good, its leaders must be good and not fall into temptation of war, revolution, and revenge. If they can achieve that, then a state may be possible (326a, c-d, 331d, 334c, and 336d). The use of the doctor analogy is seen in this letter (330c ff.) just as in *Pol.* 259a. If a nation refuses to right itself and become virtuous, one should stay away from it and not become involved in an inevitably hopeless exercise. Morrow (1962, 118) makes the point as well that the *Laws* shows a considerable knowledge of political prerequisites. In the *Republic* Plato discusses Justice before advancing to any other notion and in the *Laws* he spends two books discussing what virtues are required for successful governance. Plato obviously considered getting a proper notion of the concepts involved in governance to be paramount for a successful constitution; in addition, there are more passages where he stresses the importance of education to the constitution than I can even address here.<sup>46</sup>

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seem more natural just to use that word. Plato's intention of attempting to teach the tyrant of Syracuse philosophy goes quite well with the details in the *Laws*. However, after he falls under the influence of slanderers and exiles Dion, using a tyrant quickly became impossible. At no point during the Sicilian affair did there arise any sort of constitutional monarchy and Plato seemed well aware that it would be incredibly hard to construct one since that would imply the ability to have somebody in charge who was respected as monarch and who could command enough respect and obedience that he could safely have his powers somewhat limited and not have to rule by force and terror.

<sup>46</sup> I thank De Blois for these citations: *Pol.* 258-268, 274-277a, 279a-283b, 287-311; *Laws* 709e, 751b, and 964e; *Rep.* 473c, 486a

#### §4 – Last Remarks on the Authenticity of the Letter outside of the Digression

Judging from this, I believe it is clear that the Seventh Letter has clear notion of Plato's political priorities and they are relayed in the letter too naturally to be from a forger, even a good one. The list of potential suspects has been reduced even further to somebody with considerable knowledge of Plato's later works, particularly of his *Laws*, which may not have even been published immediately after his death. One comes to suspect eventually that the field of forgers becomes so small that the burden of proof starts to shift towards those proclaiming forgery to explain why Plato is not the most natural choice here. Barring some truly outstanding source of spuriousness, I believe the letter is almost certainly from Plato.

I acknowledge that many more objections can be raised against the Seventh Letter's genuineness, and to address all of them with any thoroughness would be beyond the scope of this paper. I chose these objections because they most directly deal with Plato's philosophy and style.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Even with these more philosophic and stylistic objections I have not covered all of them. However, I believe I will be able to refute a handful of small ones, many of which arise from Boas' article. While the article overall is excellently written and quite thorough, several of his arguments that the Seventh Letter misunderstands the dialogues (see esp. 455-456) are problematic. He argues that the doctor analogy at 330d-331d is a reference to *Rep* 425e ff. However, all he says is that it is a misunderstanding "anyone is welcome to verify for himself." Firstly, I do not see it as much of an misunderstanding but rather just a retooling, that one should not bother with those who refuse treatment. Secondly, it could just as easily be a reference to *Laws* 720a ff which also uses a doctor analogy. Would Boas seriously say the author of the *Laws* (almost certainly Plato) is misunderstanding the *Republic* as well, because he uses the analogy differently? He next says 335b reverses the meaning of *Phil.* 12b, but it also recalls *Gorg.* 493e and *Pho.* 81b and these latter two passages work quite well. Anyway, with *Philebus* passage I think Boas is the one who misunderstands as it quite clearly dwells on the name of Aphrodite and *Phil.* 12d says anybody who associates true Love with sensual pleasure is a fool, which is exactly what 335b says. I agree with him on 344c in its misinterpretation of *Phaedrus* 277, a passage I discuss later. The last claim for misunderstanding is 337c where he notes fifty as the right number of guards for a city of 10,000, but *Laws* 753d says 37 would be fine for 5,037 householders. However, I believe my comments on 337c1 in my commentary sufficiently answer this criticism. In partial agreement with Boas, though, I reject any attempts to emend the text to remove such "difficulties."

Ch. 3 – The Sound of Silence: The Complete Lack of the Digression’s Influence on  
Platonism before Thrasyllus

§1 - Not just any *Ex Silentio*: Plutarch’s Numerology of Five and the Digression

Most of the other objections to the letter’s authenticity are more purely historical in origin such as the chronology of Plato’s visit in Sicily. However, now I would like to focus on perhaps the most famous section of the entire letter, a section that is only about 4 pages long but which easily overshadows the rest of the letter in terms of philosophic and historical importance. It is often called, including by me, “The Philosophic Digression,” and it contains probably the very latest discussion of epistemology that has been attributed to Plato. However, that is exactly what I will be pursuing here, to discover whether we are justified in subscribing this Digression to Plato. The Seventh Letter is over 2300 years old. The idea that four extra pages may have slipped into the letter by another author is hardly impossible at all.

Keeping in this spirit of discussing the history of the letter, I will proceed to my first argument. I will attempt to show that scholars were certainly aware of the Seventh Letter’s existence and used it, but they were not aware of the Digression. They were ignorant of the Digression, however, because it did not exist yet. This sounds suspiciously like an *ex silentio* argument, and I admit that at its heart it is one. These arguments are by default not especially convincing, particularly with ancient sources. Over thousands of years, documents get lost.<sup>48</sup> It could simply be that an event occurred but the author was not aware of it. However, these arguments lose their strength when you show that, first, an author is indeed very well aware of

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<sup>48</sup> For a particularly sobering example of this, compare the catalog of books found in Diogenes Laertius (5.22-27), the *Vita Menagiana*, and the Life of Ptolemy attributed to Aristotle with the corpus we currently possess. Over 200 works are attributed to Aristotle, but we possess less than a quarter of those works in fact, several of which are probably spurious.

something and, secondly, he was presented with opportunities in surviving works where he would be almost obliged to mention the thing because it is so crucially relevant to his point. There are no absolute proofs of anything in history, but I think the Digression's authenticity will certainly be open to serious question if I can prove that authors possessed a Seventh Letter but did not know of the Digression.

While Cicero is the earliest author to definitively reference the epistle, he is hardly the most prolific. That honor belongs to Plutarch, and it is his decisions to mention, or more importantly not mention, the letter that are truly bizarre. Plutarch's association not only with Platonism generally but the Academy specifically has long been known, and explicit and implicit references to Platonic doctrine riddle his works. He makes numerous references to both Xenocrates and Speusippus in his writings.<sup>49</sup> The number of parallels between Plutarch and Plato is even more abundant, and any attempt to list them all would amount to a small book.<sup>50</sup> His works offer 23 distinct parallels with the Seventh Letter specifically and 39 to all the letters. It must be granted, however, that throughout these references Plutarch almost never engages in direct quotation (indeed this is one reason why *Consolatio ad Apollonium* is rejected many times by scholars). I concede that Plutarch does not make his use of the Seventh as explicit as Cicero

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<sup>49</sup> What follows are passages specifically alluding to either Xenocrates or Speusippus in Plutarch's *Moralia*. I owe much of this to O'Neil's useful index to the *Moralia* in the Loeb collection. Because there are so many passages, I will only be including the ones germane to philosophic matters. To include all of the miscellaneous anecdotes about Xenocrates especially would make this note uselessly unwieldy. For Speusippus: Defined time as the quantitative aspect of motion (1007a); valued health and money over morals and was thus criticized by the Stoics (1065a). For Xenocrates: Was a colleague of Procles (677b); theorized on the nature of heat and heaviness (948c, see Loeb ed. 12.243 n. C §3); followed Plato's Theory of the Ideas (1115a); had proto-animal rights views (965b, see Loeb ed. 12.354 n. A). However, while all of these passages show that Plutarch had a general understanding of Xenocrates, there is a list of nearly 20 fragments of Xenocrates quoted in Plutarch. See O'Neil (Loeb V. 13) for these passages. These numerous fragments reveal that Plutarch most likely had most if not all of Xenocrates' writings. To say he was well versed in the Old Academy is an understatement.

<sup>50</sup> Jones offers a valuable resource (109-53) in his book that does just this.

does, but the resemblance between Plutarch's *Dion* and the letter is striking.<sup>51</sup> There is also at least one quite obvious textual borrowing from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Letter, which was definitely not as well known as the Seventh.<sup>52</sup> Given Cicero's mention of Plato's criticism of the Syracuseans as if it were common knowledge, and Plutarch's parallels with the letter, it would be quite improbable for him not to have known of it, despite the absence of explicit quotations in the style of Cicero's references. However, in none of Plutarch's writings, including *Dion*, is there a single even indirect reference to the Digression. No epistemological concept discussed there is brought up, and Plutarch shows no signs of being even aware of its existence, despite it being very close to 338a, a text which very closely parallels *Dion* 16.

If I stopped here with my analysis of Plutarch and his relationship to the letter, we would be left with a garden variety *ex silentio* argument that would satisfy nobody. The simple absence of references is not on its own conclusive. However, I believe there are several conspicuous absences in particular that are so egregious that they transcend traditional arguments from silence. Indeed, in these cases Plutarch's silence is deafening. The first would have to be Plutarch's numerological meditation on the number 5, found in *De E apud Delphos* (389f-391d). Plutarch's affinity for Neo-Pythagorean thought is fairly well established (Jones 14, esp. n.46), but it is here we find one of the clearest displays of his interest in Pythagorean thought. Numerous examples of "5" in philosophy are discussed here, so I will provide a quick list of all the different uses of 5 along with any references Plutarch may be making.

387e: The significance of E in the Greek alphabet, as the symbol of a "mighty and sovereign number."

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<sup>51</sup> Another very likely source is Timonides, a good friend of Dion who accompanied him back to Sicily from Athens (*Dion* 22, 28, 31, 35). For a discussion on Timonides' reliability see Porter xxii, Harward 29n. and 30n. I think there is little reason to doubt the authenticity of Timonides, despite Howald in his *Die Briefe Platonis* 155.

<sup>52</sup> The parallel concerns de Pyth. Orac. 397b1, "Ἡδονὴν γὰρ οὐ προσίεται τὸ ἀπαθὲς καὶ ἀγνόν." Compare with 315c3, "πόρρω γὰρ ἡδονῆς ἴδρυται καὶ λύπησ τὸ θεῖον." Thanks to Jones (151) for this clever find.

388a: Describing five as a divine number because it is the “marriage” between the first even and first odd (Cf. Plut. 263f, 1012e, 1018c; Clem. *Stro.* 5.14.93.4).

388c: Identification of 5 with nature because multiplying 5 by itself, no matter how many times, creates a number whose last digit is 5. Relates it to the growing of wheat and how wheat multiplies into more wheat.

388e: Invokes Heraclitus (B 90) to argue that five is the greatest number and never creates anything except itself or “τὸ τέλειον.”

389c: Five is literally divine because it shares a unique attribute with the gods, the ability to create itself and the complete universe.

389d: The importance of five to music theory (cf. *Rep.* 530d-531c)

389e: Five basic tones to melody: quarter tone, half tone, tone, tone and a half, double tone.

389f: The 5 worlds of the *Timaeus* (*Tim.* 31a; see also Plut. *Mor.* 421f, 422f, 430b, and 887b).

390a: Aristotle’s Fifth Element (*De Caelo* 276a18)

390a: 5 Regular Solids of Plato (*Tim.* 54e-55c)

390b: The Five Senses

390c: Homer’s Division of the world (*Il.* 15.187)

390d: Five levels of existence for objects: Point, line, plane, solid, soul

390e: Five levels of living things: God, demon, hero, man and beast

390f: Aristotle’s Five-fold psychology, though with a definite Platonic tint

391b: Plato’s five first principles (*Soph.* 256c)

391b: Relationship between Infinite and Definite (*Phil.* 23c).

As can be seen, Plutarch makes several direct references to Plato and his attitude towards Five in *De E*. The reference at 391b is a creative and obscure one as Socrates does not at first seem to

think a fifth cause is needed, but Plutarch assumes Plato thought there was one and decided to leave that to us. It is truly puzzling, however, that here of all places not a single reference is made to the Digression. The epistemological discussion proper (342a4 ff.) immediately starts off with an enumeration of different levels of knowledge. I count the use of “five” or “fifth” four times in the Digression, far more than similar words appear in or around any of the above references.<sup>53</sup> The denigration of the “Four” (343b7) would fit in perfectly as well with Plutarch’s similar discounting of it (390d-e). What is going on here? Plutarch’s goal in this discourse is to give the Pythagorean fascination with numbers as fair a hearing as possible, but yet he ignores the most explicit, more nuanced, and most philosophically important reference to five of all in “Plato.” That a member of the Academy would not mention this important use of five, that it undergirds all of reality (or rather our understanding of reality since there are five levels of knowledge if you count the thing-in-itself), is astonishing.

## § 2 – The General Fascination with Five in Middle Platonism

So Plutarch seems not to be aware of the Digression’s use of the number five. I have found the association between five and Plato in Seneca’s letters (esp. 65.7-10) where he says that Plato in fact improves upon Aristotle’s four causes by adding the “The Idea”<sup>54</sup> as a fifth cause. Now, the epistemology that Seneca seems to ascribe to Plato differs quite radically from that of the Digression, primarily because this “Fifth” cause is implied to be totally accessible to the individual, as shown by the example of the sculptor using the Idea as his model. However, it is

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<sup>53</sup> In determining this I went to each of the references included in the list above. After locating the passage, I checked the surrounding six pages to see if there is any other reference to “five,” “fifth,” or any other related word. It appears Plutarch was extremely thorough in his reading of Plato, which makes the absence of the Digression only more surprising.

<sup>54</sup> Using Campbell’s translation of Seneca. Tarrant (1983 p.84) uses “paradigmatic cause.” I think either one works fine. The point is that Seneca describes it as a “fifth” cause.



clear that that Seneca associates five with Plato.<sup>55</sup> However, the interest in five extends beyond Plato and also was used in various ways for God<sup>56</sup> and other forms of metaphysics. In metaphysics one should especially look at the anonymous *Didascalicus* (esp. 9) which identifies the Ideas with five things: God, the Ideas, souls, sensibles, and matter. Numenius also seems to have some sort of a five-level metaphysics too (Fr. 13, 16, 18, 22). And yet, throughout all of these different philosophies that either discuss Plato (like Seneca) or are expressly Platonic, not once is the Digression referenced. While these are more conventional *ex silentio* arguments than the Plutarch one above, I still find them quite significant.

### §3 – A Quick Note on Philo Judaeus

Tarrant (1983, 80) mentions an author who also should be discussed in relation to the Digression: Philo Judaeus. Philo definitely studied the rest of the Platonic corpus quite intensely (Tarrant 1983, 96 n.39).<sup>57</sup> He makes numerous references<sup>58</sup> to the difficulties of obtaining knowledge, but preserves sudden revelation as a source (*Sac.* 12-13). Passages in the Digression such as 340b2 and 341c7 would almost certainly appeal to him and he could rely on the authority of “Plato” to support his arguments. Indeed, the Digression makes the soul “bursting into flames” through revelation the only way to receive true knowledge. Philo, when discussing Plato, of course always mentions him inside an exegetical setting. Specifically, he is attempting to study the Torah and interpret it philosophically and metaphorically, in order to show that its philosophic

<sup>55</sup> Tarrant (*Phron.* 1983) offers 58.16-24 as an example of this association. See his analysis on this at p.84

<sup>56</sup> Tarrant (97 n.54) again provides helpful information on these passages. The identification of the Fifth and God appears twice in the *Didascalicus* and Aetius 1.7.31 (see Diels *Dox.* 304a1-2, b23-24). The Aetius passage is especially interesting because it ascribes to Plato a certain “hierarchy of divinity”: The Creator, sphere of fixed stars, astrals, element-powers, and the all-embracing cosmos. Compare this passage with [Plato]’s *Epinomis* (984b2 ff. see also Harward’s commentary on this) which presents a radically different view of divinity.

<sup>57</sup> Tarrant here references the index on Philo from Leisegang. The dialogues used include all the greatest hits of Plato along with less prominent ones like *Ion*, *Eryxias*, and *Axiochus*. An interesting note to make about Philo is that it seems his most cited dialogues (*Tim.*, *Phr. Laws*, *Rep.*, respectively) are all either quite late or very relevant to the Seventh Letter. I am not sure how significant this actually is, but there are certainly aspects of all these dialogues that Philo found intriguing, especially the concepts of revelation and divine plans, that are contained in the Digression.

<sup>58</sup> Tarrant (96 n. 40) lists many, among them Prov. Fr. 1, Fug. 135-6, and the rather lengthy Ebr. 166-205.

heft makes it the equal to the best of Hellenistic philosophy. Philo read almost everything in the Torah through an allegorical light, including the revelations of Moses. Moses, he argues, spoke through riddles and allegory. This sort of esoteric style for revelation, that it is so great as to be ineffable (esp. 343d) except through riddles and veiled speech, agrees very much with the Digression and Philo could make much hay out of Plato's castigation of Dionysius and his arrogant attempt to lay down Plato's thoughts in plain language.

#### Ch. 4 – The Esoteric Doctrine

##### § 1 – Introduction of Problem and Presentation of Evidence

Perhaps the most intriguing part of the entire Digression comes at the very end of it, from 343e1 on. The writer states that it is not simply enough to have a good memory or quick thinking to learn the first principles of the universe. One must also have the right nature as well. It is on these grounds, then, that the writer claims that it will not do to attempt to write these principles down but instead one should learn them through conversation and other oral transmission. If this is the case, then what of the dialogues? Do they have any relation to this ultimate doctrine? Scholars have divided on this quite a bit. Some say that there is very little relation between the dialogues and the oral doctrine that this letter alleges. Others, myself included, are not so sure that is the case and think the dialogues provide an adequate baseline for the elaborations and technical matters probably tackled in the oral teachings. There is no “esoteric doctrine” as such, then, merely a more in-depth analysis of what is already discussed in the dialogues. If I can establish that this is the case, then the Digression's credibility will have suffered a truly fatal blow as the ineffability of these doctrines and the disparagement of the written word is presented as the sole motivator for the Digression in the first place. What I write here is of course just the

tip of the iceberg of perhaps the single most contentious topic in Platonic studies, but hopefully I can add some new points to this debate.

Now, Plato's reputation as a thinker and as somebody who believed in an innovative and intriguing philosophy was quite well known in Athens and Greece at the time. However, one story about him in particular stands out, Aristoxenus' account of Plato's rather strange lecture "On the Good," (*Elem. Harm.* 30-31). This is certainly a bizarre passage and apparently a memorable enough episode for not only Aristoxenus but also for Aristotle,<sup>59</sup> Speusippus, and Xenocrates (*Simp. Comm. Phys.* 151.9-11) to write about.<sup>60</sup> These sources that I provide are our principal sources, and as one can see they are not always as informative as we would like (particularly the very short passage from Albinus see below at n.54). Even the Aristoxenus passage does not give us much. Lack of evidence has hardly stopped some scholars, however, in their quest to reconstruct what they would like to think Plato taught outside of the dialogues. Commentators like Burnet (1914 p. 220-221), Taylor (1927 p503) and others<sup>61</sup> exemplify this approach. Burnet and Taylor, for instance, are able to inform us that Plato always spoke

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<sup>59</sup> Numerous sources report that Aristotle discusses this lecture in his work *On Philosophy* (Philoponus *Comm. de Anima* 75.34-76.1; Alexander *Comm. Met.* 55.20-56.35; *Simp. Comm. Phys.* 151.6-11 and 453.25-31).

<sup>60</sup> Other sources that might be cited in connection with this ill-fated lecture include Themistius (*Orat.* 21.245c-d), Proclus (*ad Phil.* 688.4-18), and Albinus (27.1.179). The Albinus passage is actually somewhat problematic and, contra Gaiser, I do not think it actually quite refers to the same event. In fact, this Albinus passage inadvertently helps my own anti-esoteric thesis. Notice that he writes at 27.1.179, "Certainly he only imparted his views on the good to a small, select group of his associates. However, if one examines his works with care, one will see that he placed the good for us in knowledge and contemplation of the primal good, which one may term God or the primal intellect," (tr. Dillon). He does not make any reference to a public discussion of the Good. To Albinus, there were two ways to gain knowledge of the doctrine. The first was to be inducted into the Academy. The second was to read the books. Initiation is the best path, but a crude version of it can be found in the works if you study them enough. This establishes a small point that not everybody considered the lecture to be especially significant or even reflective of Plato's thoughts. It builds on a much larger, point, however, that Albinus also says that the dialogues – what other works could he be referring to since all discussion on esoteric doctrine assumes oral transmission, not written – can provide a rough path to the same goal.

<sup>61</sup> Many of the scholars that pursue these flights of fancy hail from Tübingen like Kramer (who is giving a rigorous criticism by Vlastos in *Gnomon* 41 641-55), Gaiser, Happ, and Wippert. See Gaiser 29 n. 7 and his bibliography for more examples.

extemporaneously when giving quite regular public lectures.<sup>62</sup> Field, meanwhile, without any hint of irony, reaches the conclusion that the Seventh Letter is an example of one of Plato's lectures and that this letter was reproduced from lecture notes (38).<sup>63</sup> This temptation of scholars and historians to extract so much from the evidence is understandable enough given that Plato led the Academy for forty years. It would seem quite natural that he gave many more than one lecture. It is also quite understandable that scholars attempt to squeeze as much information about Plato's philosophy out of the lecture accounts as possible. Why exactly do we do this? Plato, after all, is one of those rare authors in antiquity of which we have just about everything (save for the incomplete *Critias*) he ever intended for publications and which the ancients also had. We certainly do not have as complete a collection as the Pre-Socratics or Aristotle. As already discussed above, we also have at least some information about a rough chronology of Plato's works including, most importantly of all for this section of my paper, that the *Laws* was the last of Plato's dialogues and that the *Timaeus*, *Philebus*, *Sophist*, and *Politicus* are also quite late works. The *Laws* is a monumental work and there is reason to believe (Cherniss 4) that Plato was still working on it when he died. It would seem, at first blush, obvious that we have Plato's teachings and his thoughts securely in hand, right?

Not quite. There are numerous passages both in Plato and elsewhere that many scholars see attesting to some "unwritten" or "esoteric" doctrine that escapes what is discussed in the dialogues. In this position two corollaries are asserted. The first is that Plato has an oral doctrine that the dialogues either do not discuss at all or only faintly hint at. The second, and I find this

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<sup>62</sup> Cherniss (2) gives a description, in his own memorable polemic style too direct not to put here, of this tendency of scholars to see far too much in evidence: "Yet in most of the authoritative treatments of Plato, after a scholarly reference to this lecture on the Good, the singular becomes an unexplained plural within the paragraph, the lecture a whole series of lectures, and before the section has finished we are told that Plato gave 'regular lectures,' 'systematic and continuous expositions in lecture form on some of the most important points of his doctrine.'"

<sup>63</sup> Field, C.C. *Plato and His Contemporaries* (New York 1930).

one to be more controversial and problematic, is that the theory of Ideas expounded in the dialogues is not Plato's philosophy and that he either moved away from it in his later dialogues (thus the *Laws*, *Timaeus*, etc do not contain it) or the brief mentions of an "oral doctrine" contradict the theory. This is certainly a complex topic to enter into, but hopefully I can demonstrate that this esoteric position has very little evidence to support it and almost everything against it. If I can prove that there was no esoteric doctrine that defies any attempt to rationally account for it through writing, then I will have contradicted one of the central claims of the Digression, crippling its credibility.

I list below every single source often presented as proof of an esoteric teaching:

Aristotle: *Met.* A6; *Phys.* 209b11; Fragments appearing in Alexander (in *Simpl. Phys.* 454.19ff.)

Aristoxenus: *Harm. Elem.* 30.16-31; 34

Hermodorus: Appearing in *Simpl. Phys.* 247.30 ff.

Plato:

*Laws* 894a1-5

*Meno* 76e-77b

*Phdo.* 107b4-10

*Phdr.* 274b-275e

*Phil.* 10d, 16c, 14e, 18a, 19a

*Pol.* 284a-e

*Prm.* 136d-e

*Rep.* 506d-507a and 509c9-11

*Tim.* 53c-d7

Porphyry: in *Simpl. Phys.* 453.30 ff.

Sextus Empiricus: *Adv. Math.* 10.248-88

Theophrastus: *Met.* 6a24 ff.; 11a27 ff.

This looks like a fairly considerable list, but I will contend that none of them, including the interesting doctrine that Aristotle ascribes to Plato, necessitate an esoteric school of thought.

Let us first deal with the assumed notion that the Ideas are not one of the main undercurrents, if not the foundation, of the later dialogues. This is important to establish. If the Ideas did not remain a part of Plato, then the esoterics can argue that the later epistemology of Plato cannot be found in the dialogues. This utterly refutes the central methodological premise of anti-esoterics. The first appearance of the theory of Ideas is, I contend, as early as the *Euthyphro*, but the first truly explicit mention of it appears in the *Phaedo* (100b; cf. 76d-e). However, many, including Burnet (*Platonism* 44 and *Greek Philosophy* 1.155) argue that, while the Ideas may have been in the very earliest dialogue they were abandoned after the seemingly devastating critique in the *Parmenides* and that they are not mentioned except for a single sentence in the *Timaeus*, 51c. First, it is rather disingenuous to call this passage in the dialogue a single sentence. Instead, it is a rather extended paragraph that stretches until 52c. Indeed, as Taylor in his commentary on the *Timaeus* also notices,<sup>64</sup> 51c5-d3 can be seen as a compact outline of the main arguments used to advocate for the Forms. What follows is not a single disowning or disparagement of this idea. If the *Parmenides*, following Burnet and esoteric scholars, was a

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<sup>64</sup> Taylor as usual has many astute things to say on this passage. He notes that, "A full justification of the doctrine of Forms would have to be of a length unsuitable for insertion in a cosmological discourse which itself is long enough already." (337 *ad* 51c5). This is certainly true; Plato thought apparently that laying out this metaphysical position at least to some extent was very important for the work but knew he did not have the time to give it a full treatment in the middle of the dialogue. The point is that Plato gives no sign of moving away from the Forms.

point where Plato changed his mind on metaphysics, he apparently changed it back again. There are also passages in the *Laws* that attest to the theory, at 965b-e in particular, though really this is just meant to provide an answer to the mystery of the one and the many (as England *ad* 96b4 puts it) already brought up at 962e and 963b2-964a3. The *Philebus*, meanwhile, also has passages alluding to it at 15a-b, 16c-e, 58e-59 (Cherniss 88n. 19). Two other references are also particularly important, especially for this paper. The first is Ep. 6 322d and the other is Ep. 7 342a-e. While I will eventually explain why I believe this last passage is not Platonic and is a forgery, the fact that the interpolator inserted a passage apparently expounding the Ideas is telling, in that it shows this later forger seems also to have operated under the presumption that Plato kept this basic metaphysical belief his entire life. The reference in the 6<sup>th</sup> letter is rather short and can be reproduced below,<sup>65</sup> but it is interesting because the writer of the 6<sup>th</sup> sees the theory as fundamental, a first principle for a just life.<sup>66</sup> Those in favor of an esoteric view will have to contend with the exact same letters they promote as showing a secret doctrine if they wish to defeat the anti-esoterics on this point as both passages seem relatively clear that Plato believed in the Ideas for the rest of his life.

### §3 – Aristotle’s Testimony on Plato and the Idea-Numbers

However, while it may be true that Plato believed in a general theory of the Forms, this does not at all imply that he did not believe something beyond that. He very well could have possessed in fact a far more radical theory of it than the dialogues tell, and he chose not to write

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<sup>65</sup> “Εράστω δὲ καὶ Κορίσκῳ, πρὸς τῇ τῶν εἰδῶν σοφίᾳ τῇ καλῇ ταύτῃ, φήμ’ ἐγώ, καίπερ γέρον ὄν, προσδεῖν σοφίας τῆς περὶ τοὺς πονηροὺς καὶ ἀδίκους φυλακτικῆς καὶ τινος ἀμυντικῆς δυνάμεως.” “To Erastus and Coriscus with this noble wisdom of Ideas, I say, old as I am, supplement this with knowledge and the capacity to protect themselves against evil and unjust men.”

<sup>66</sup> Which is why the writer of the 6<sup>th</sup> uses the word “προσδεῖν,” which can mean “supplement” or “put alongside of.”

it down due to its profundity. This is where Aristotle's evidence becomes important. Outside of Plato himself, perhaps the most important evidence for Plato's metaphysics comes from Aristotle. There are two reasons for this. The first is that Aristotle presents, by far, the most influential reporting and critique of Plato's positions. The second reason is that his discussions of Platonic metaphysics seem to contradict what is actually in the dialogues.

One of the first passages Aristotle mentions Plato's metaphysics in is A.6 of the *Metaphysics*, a passage we have discussed before when analyzing Edelstein's claim that Plato never had an intention to enter politics. He notes here that Plato initially became familiar with Cratylus and Heraclitean beliefs such as that all sensible things are in constant flux and there is no knowledge that can be obtained about them.<sup>67</sup> His encounters with Socrates shifted his attention to ethical matters. Like Plato, Socrates was looking for the universals of the world, "What is X?" But how does Plato arrive at any answers on ethics when the physical world is

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<sup>67</sup> Aristotle repeats this discussion of Heraclitus at *Met.* 1078b14. This passage has certainly been a matter of much debate, and the debate is important here since this entire thesis relies on developing an account of Plato's metaphysics with which to compare the Digression. Irwin (1977) has advanced the view that Aristotle's testimony on Plato is right, but "we [need to] reject the most common interpretation of his remarks on flux" (1). Among other arguments, he specifically rejects the view that Plato believed that the sensible world was always changing and therefore unknowable, a position of Irwin's I express skepticism towards given the preponderance of evidence including *Crty.* 439c-440d (esp. 440a-b), *Phil.* 58a-59d, *Rep.* 477e-480a, *Tht.* 155d-157c, *Tim.* 45b-d, 51b-52c (esp. 52a). I specifically reject his interpretation of *Timaeus*. He rightfully outlines the argument: Knowledge comes from what is exempt from becoming (27d5-28a4); Sensibles are not exempt from becoming, so there can be no knowledge of them (52a4-7) and thus any knowledge must be from the forms. But then he follows this up with a strange remark, "But there is no extreme Heracliteanism [in the *Timaeus*]. Particular sensible objects need not suffer change in every respect all the time; only sensible fire and certain other constituents suffer change in some respects all the time." Besides Cherniss' (1957 p.358) own powerful arguments on this, this would seem to go against any sensible reading of 52a4-7. Irwin attaches far too much significance to the choice of fire as an example as well. He should instead also look to 50b1 where the example of a lump of gold is used. Unlike fire, this is certainly a solid object, but it still changes as well. Irwin gives a strange interpretation of Heraclitus in which he says all things change in all respects all the time, an interpretation that I think oversimplifies the fragments (and would exclude the property that the *logos* guides that thing, since all attributes are changing, a guidance the fragments undeniably support). In fact, if we take Irwin literally and believe that everything about an object was changing, then that means even the idea that all properties about an object change all the time is itself changing. That this position leads to absurd conclusions is obvious enough. Aristotle does not make such an extreme interpretation of Plato or Heraclitus, nor does anybody else who believes Plato has Heraclitean influences. Irwin at times in his article falls in danger of attacking a straw man, and I believe he does so here. The principle reason for this unintentional tilting at windmills is that Irwin never provides a clear account of either his view of Heraclitus nor spells out the opposing view that he is actually critiquing. It seems clear to me that Plato is saying all sensible objects are unknowable because they change their attributes. He does not say changing "all their attributes" is enough to exempt them. Changing even one property makes them not like the Ideas, thus subject to opinion, and also unknowable.



devoid of any sure knowledge? He arrives at the solution that these universals must not be in the perceptible realm and are in some way more existent than the physical objects that participate in them.<sup>68</sup> This is of course a rough outline of Plato's philosophic development, but it is a synopsis of Aristotle's own account.<sup>69</sup> One may quibble with exactly how to interpret Aristotle's accounts, but one thing is clear: Aristotle does ascribe to Plato the same basic metaphysical beliefs that we find in the *Timaeus*, *Republic*, and elsewhere.

However, while this may initially seem quite simple and obviously, there is one passage of Aristotle that presents a monumental roadblock to this interpretation. Indeed, it is so difficult that esoteric authors often times point to it as the definitive evidence that Plato possessed a substantial oral doctrine that goes well beyond the dialogues. At *Met.* 987b10-988a17, Aristotle makes several statements, all quite significant and worthy of discussion:

First, Plato argues that mathematical ideas are an intermediary between sensibles and the One.

Second, the elements of the Ideas are the elements of all things, "and consequently he took as matter the Great and the Small for principles, and as essence the One," (Cherniss 7).

Third, it is from the participation of the Great and the Small with the One that numbers are born.

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<sup>68</sup> This is not to say that Plato held this theory on purely ethical questions, but it seems that he was principally motivated by his discussions on ethics with Socrates. However, it would seem elsewhere in Aristotle that Plato was also quite aware of their ontological importance, too (*Met.* 1033b16-29; 1040b30-1041a3; 1071b14-20). Plato was first driven to this idea by Socrates, but he realizes the Ideas are applicable as a solution to Heraclitus' theory as well.

<sup>69</sup> There are other accounts of Plato's intellectual development in Aristotle (*Met.* 1078b9-32; 1086a37-b11), though Aristotle does not explicitly say "Plato" in either passage. Indeed, the slight ambiguity present in 1078b9-32 will become quite important later as several passages esoteric writers point to as examples of extra-dialogue teachings may be in fact referring to others in the Academy and not Plato himself.

Fourth, Plato uses only the essence and material causes (Aristotle's own terminology).<sup>70</sup>

The Ideas are the cause of the essence of the other things and the One is the cause of the essence of the Ideas. The Ideas are the source of Plato's version of the essence cause, according to Aristotle.

Fifth, the material cause is the "Dyad," the Great and the Small. It is the underlying matter which the Ideas are predicated in and the One in the Ideas.

Sixth, and finally, Plato assigns the causes of good and evil to the elements, one to each.

An attentive freshman in an introductory philosophy class will immediately recognize that these propositions seem quite outside the conventional view of Plato gained from the dialogues. The esoterics seem to have found their silver bullet, for who could argue with a philosopher equal to Plato in stature and who spent about 20 years in the Academy, learning from the master himself?

It may be tempting to simply say Aristotle is mistaken and deny his testimony. But at first that seems extreme. Yes, one may doubt Aristotle when he tries to interpret what Plato means by an argument, but he at least appears unimpeachable when it comes to giving a dry account of what a philosopher says. However, as good a reporter as Aristotle is, he seems woefully outmatched by the full weight of the dialogues. Cherniss (9) provides some teaching anecdotes for this, saying that a student's memory of a teacher's arguments can often times be quite poor and that one should consider the written word of the teacher much more credible. A fair argument, and one that should be kept in mind always when it comes to analyzing classical sources, many of whom reported from memory. But even if Aristotle mistook Plato somewhat, can we actually accuse the "Il maestro di color che sanno" of simply getting Plato wrong? Yes,

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<sup>70</sup> I generally do not like the translation "essence cause" due to its awkwardness in English (a translation used by Barnes and Cherniss, among others). I much prefer "formal cause," but for this specific case "essence cause" works better due to the uniqueness of Plato's ideas.

as a matter of fact, it is possible to say Aristotle completely mistakes Plato's metaphysics. This is quite a claim to make, but I believe it is possible to establish this. Other brilliant thinkers have utterly mistaken each other's philosophies before.<sup>71</sup> And Aristotle misinterprets other philosophers besides Plato on a regular basis.<sup>72</sup>

The strangeness of these remarks by Aristotle have led some scholars to quite ridiculous conclusions indeed. Instead of denying Aristotle's testimony Burnet (178, 214) excludes Plato's writings, saying they are actually reporting the philosophy of Socrates and that Aristotle is the one who recounts Platonism. It is unfortunate that Burnet has become something of a philosophic whipping boy in this paper, but he is the extreme example of those who believe the esoteric argument. Several arguments immediately come to mind with the solution. The first is the bizarre place this leaves dialogues like the *Laws* and the *Philebus*, where neither Socrates appears nor, according to Burnet earlier (1.155), the theory of the Ideas, since the *Parmenides* destroyed that

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<sup>71</sup> One need only read Russell's introduction to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to have an example of this. Russell was at the height of his philosophic abilities and would eventually win the Nobel Prize, while Wittgenstein wrote two of the most important works in analytic philosophy. However, it appears Russell completely missed the point and main argument behind the *Tractatus*, a mistake Wittgenstein took great exception to, insisting at first that it not be published with Russell's introduction. Even the most brilliant thinkers make sometimes egregious mistakes.

<sup>72</sup> One example that comes to mind is Aristotle's mishandling of Anaxagoras' physical theory. Anaxagoras advances the innovative theory that everything is a boundless (my reading of *ὑπεῖρα* see *Simp. Phys.* 155.26 and *De Heav.* 608.21-23 = B2 and B3) substance that is spurred on by the *νοῦς*. He further argues that everything is immobile because everything is rested in it and surrounded by nothing. Aristotle feels compelled to argue that the world could not be a homogeneous infinitude. He asserts that rest and motion can only be explained as a specific characteristic of matter and that, since everything is at rest, the potentiality of such rest manifests itself as natural motion (*Phys.* 205b1-24). Furthermore, the "resting in itself" assumes the position of a body is its natural place, which is false because it could be restrained there. Ultimately, to Aristotle he believes that motion to a specific place is a truly fundamental property of any body, something so axiomatic not even the obtuse *Parmenides* or Anaxagoras could deny it. The first foul Aristotle commits here is his assumption that Anaxagoras' mixture was homogeneous as if all of one kind, which is clearly false (*Simp. Phys.* 34.21-26; 156.4-9 = B4b and esp. 164.26-28, "καὶ ἀλλαχοῦ δὲ οὕτως φησί· καὶ ὅτε δὲ ἴσαι μοῖραί εἰσι τοῦ τε μεγάλου καὶ τοῦ μικροῦ πλῆθος, καὶ οὕτως ἂν εἴη ἐν παντὶ πάντα· οὐδὲ χωρὶς ἔστιν εἶναι, ἀλλὰ πάντα παντὸς μοῖραν μετέχει." See also Cherniss 193 18n.72). Aristotle never explains also why motion could not have originated externally, which Anaxagoras clearly does with the *νοῦς* (see though Aristotle's *Met.* 985a18-21 where he disparages the use of this force, but only because he thinks it is arbitrary and he wraps his criticism in a healthy dose of vitriol). His reasoning may be that he assumes (see *Phys.* 251a26-27, *Topics* 148a3-9 and *Met.* 1072a-5, the last of which he also discusses Anaxagoras) motion comes prior to rest. However, it can be seen that Aristotle, as usual, interprets Anaxagoras through his own philosophic system instead of dealing with it on its own terms. This sadly leads to Aristotle repeatedly mixing up doctrines and conflating them with his own, a natural mistake for any thinker, but that is my point, that it is natural and he does this to Plato as well.

theory if Burnet is to be believed. If Aristotle is the great measure of Platonic evidence, however, then Burnet's thesis is doubly absurd because Aristotle points out Plato by name and states that he created the Theory of Ideas (*Met.* A.6). However, while Burnet's position may seem ridiculous and easily dismissed, many who support an oral doctrine of Plato follow similar lines. If Plato did have some radically different metaphysics than the one in the dialogues, then the dialogues, as evidence for discovering Platonism, are practically worthless. Their detailed accounts of Platonism rely almost entirely on the report of Aristoxenus and the short account of Aristotle. In terms of evidence, this seems entirely backwards, that we believe the memory of a student more than the writings of the teacher (notice that esoteric scholars do not necessarily reject at all that the dialogues were written by Plato).

This evidence from Aristotle becomes especially troubling when paired with the lecture account given by Aristoxenus. Notice there that Plato promises to talk about the Good, but eventually launches into a discussion of mathematics. These two pieces work quite well together, and it is understandable that people use this to make a lot of speculations on Plato's management of the Academy and his teachings. Does Aristotle himself reference the lectures in any of his works? Taylor argues that Aristotle "commonly" references Plato's lectures and calls them "unwritten" (503). However, in the entire Aristotle corpus, only two passages, *De Anima* 404b8-30 and a short passage in *Physics* 209b13-16, make anything even resembling such a reference. Unfortunately for Taylor, this is far from "commonly" referencing oral doctrine. Let us look specifically at these two passages. If neither of these say what Taylor would like them to say, then the anti-esoterics may have a chance to argue that Aristotle did not consider the Idea-numbers doctrine unwritten.

### § 3 – The So-called “Common” allusions in Aristotle to Plato’s “Unwritten” Doctrine

First up is *De Anima* 404b8-30. The passage actually starts as a recounting of doctrines on the soul by the Pythagoreans (404a17-21), Democritus (403b31; 404a27), Leucippus (404a5), and Anaxagoras (404a25), noting that the soul is identified in all of these thinkers as being the source of all movement. After that, he discusses those who identify the soul with nature in some way. After quoting Empedocles (404b12-15 = DK 31 B109),<sup>73</sup> Aristotle then mentions Plato’s *Timaeus* where he says Plato fashioned the soul out of the elements as another example of those who pair the soul with nature (404b16; cf. *Tim* 35aff). 19-27 is the most important passage for the esoterics, however. Here Aristotle says that Plato believed animals came about from the interaction of the One and length, width, and depth. He says that the number of the mind is one, that of the line two, and the number of the solid is four. This all seems quite bizarre and Burnet argues that it alludes to Plato’s unwritten lecture. But does it? Look at the seemingly innocuous phrase “ἐν τοῖς περὶ φιλοσοφίας λεγομένοις” at line 19. The most tempting reading of this passage is that it is referring to Plato’s lectures. Barnes seems to take it like this in his index, and one can see why. Who else could it be referring to? For one, it could actually mean Aristotle’s own dialogue entitled *περὶ φιλοσοφίας*. We have numerous fragments attesting to this work from very reliable sources including Plutarch and Simplicius, so its existence is undeniable. I will supply here the most salient information about the work (Barnes includes all of the fragments discussing it in his complete collection V. 2.2389-2399):

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<sup>73</sup> Also found in *Met.* 1000b6-9; *Sex. Emp. Adv. Prof.* 1.303, 7.92, 121; *Hipp. Ref.* 6.11.1

Aristotle expands on the first principles discussed in the *Physics* and *Metaphysics* (Asclepius *Comm. Met.* 112.16-19).

Aristotle truly parts with Plato's metaphysics and does not even care if people think he is only doing so from professional envy (Proclus in Philoponus *de aeternitate mundi* 2.2).

Aristotle critiques the position that the Ideas may be a certain kind of number by arguing that the only sort of number is a mathematical number (Syrianus *Comm. Met.* 159.35-160.3).

Aristotle relays somebody's views who said that first principles are the Great and Small, the first principles of the length were short and long and of the plane narrow and wide. This is about Platonists in general it sounds from the grammar (Alexander *Comm. Met.* 117.23-118.1).

Aristotle applies the name *On Philosophy* to his work *On the Good* in *de Anima* when discussing Pythagorean and Platonic views. (Simpl. *Comm. De Anima* 28.7-9).

Aristotle expands on the compressed remarks in the *Metaphysics* in *On Philosophy* and apparently discusses the views of other Platonists like ones who introduce the Ideas into magnitudes, for instance that the number 2 is a line and 3 a plane. Other Platonists, however, say that magnitudes come about by participation with the One (Pseudo-Alexander *Comm. Met.* 777.16-21).

Aristotle reports on Plato's lectures and seminars, discussing both Platonic and Pythagorean theories on what exists (Philoponus *Comm. de Anima* 75.34-76.1).

Aristotle attended lectures of Plato in which Plato contended that the One and the indefinite dyad were the first principles of sensible things. The dyad belonged among the objects of thought and was unlimited. The great and the small were also first principles

and were also unlimited (*Simpl. Comm. Phys.* 453.25-30).

Aristotle says in his book *On the Good* that Platonists believed all contraries extend from the One and plurality. This idea is also brought up in his, now lost, *Selection of Contraries*. (*Alexander Comm. Met.* 250.17-20).

These are not the only passages that mention this work of Aristotle, but these were ones that specifically mention either Plato by name or refer to Platonic-sounding doctrine. As can be seen above, Aristotle could very well be referring to his own work on Platonic philosophy, not Plato's lecture. One could respond that this is only a guess and that a simpler reading is that it refers to Plato's lecture itself. However, Cherniss (15) provides a strong argument against this rebuttal. He mentions that Themistius takes this passage as referring to Aristotle's work (see also Cherniss 1944, n.77 and 95). Themistius also notes that this theory found “ἐν τοῖς περὶ φιλοσοφίας λεγομένοις” could also be found in Xenocrates work *On Nature* (see also Cherniss 1944 p.567 and n.325).

However, Aristotle is the one who truly nails the door shut on the interpretation that he is referring to Plato's lecture here. At *Met.* 1036b13-15 and 1090b20-32, Aristotle again recounts the interaction between Ideas and numbers. But in these passages he quite explicitly asserts that this theory differs from but Plato and his associates.<sup>74</sup> This is most easily seen in the second of the two passages. He says at 21, “τοῖς δὲ τὰς ιδέας τιθεμένοις τοῦτο μὲν ἐκφεύγει [difficulty in believing in truly existent “lines” and other pure geometric objects sc. 1090a31]—ποιοῦσι γὰρ τὰ μεγέθη ἐκ τῆς ὕλης καὶ ἀριθμοῦ.” Two philosophies are introduced right away here. The Pythagoreans who believe geometric objects exist and “τοῖς [...] τὰς ιδέας τιθεμένοις” who think numbers create geometric forms. Specifically, the Platonists argue that the Ideas create

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<sup>74</sup> “But those who believe in the Ideas escape this difficulty, for they create magnitudes out of matter and number.”

mathematical objects out of matter and number. Aristotle critiques them on this by asking what the ontology of these “magnitudes” (i.e. line, plane, solid, etc) are. He presses the Platonists on whether these magnitudes are Ideas, numbers, or something else. Pay attention to the concluding-sounding remark at 31, “οὗτοι μὲν οὖν ταύτη προσγλιχόμενοι...”<sup>75</sup> which then he follows up by saying they are wrong in wanting to unite mathematical objects with the Ideas. At 32, he then introduces the third, distinctly separate view, “οἱ δὲ πρῶτοι δύο τοὺς ἀριθμοὺς ποιήσαντες, τόν τε τῶν εἰδῶν καὶ τὸν μαθηματικόν, οὐτ’ εἰρήκασιν οὐτ’ ἔχοιεν ἂν εἰπεῖν πῶς καὶ ἐκ τίνος ἔσται ὁ μαθηματικός.”<sup>76</sup> This third view is elaborated further until 1091a5 and includes the Indefinite Dyad and the One. Notice that the second view, which he attributes to the Platonists, differs quite significantly with 404b8-30 because 404b says that they believed the Idea of the line was the number 2, but this is not at all what 1090b20-32 attributes to them.<sup>77</sup>

So one passage possesses an ambiguous reference but is not referring to a Platonic belief at all. What about *Phys* 209b13-16? This passage is small enough so as to be repeated here, “ἄλλον δὲ τρόπον ἐκεῖ τε λέγων τὸ μεταληπτικὸν καὶ ἐν τοῖς λεγομένοις ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν, ὅμως τὸν τόπον καὶ τὴν χώραν τὸ αὐτὸ ἀπεφήνατο.”<sup>78</sup> This passage is an interesting one because, as will be seen, it not only does not say what Burnet and others would like it to say but in fact helps refute their idea of a secret doctrine. Here is why: “ἀγράφοις δόγμασιν” is ambiguous as it could refer to either Plato’s famed lecture or it can refer to Plato’s private conversations with students. He can give no reason why we should prefer one of those interpretations over the other

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<sup>75</sup> The Greek is compressed here but I read it as, “These [thinkers], then, are wrong in this way...” making my best attempt at capturing the meaning of “οὗτοι μὲν οὖν.”

<sup>76</sup> “Those who believe in two types of numbers, the one of Ideas and one of mathematics, neither have said nor can [say] in the least how mathematical numbers are and what are they made out of.”

<sup>77</sup> I have to admit that the ταύτη is ambiguous at 1090b31 as it could be referring to just the Platonists but it could also be directed to both them and the Pythagoreans. However, the point I am making still stands, that the view found in the *De Anima* is alien to Plato.

<sup>78</sup> “But what is said there [the *Timaeus*] on the “participant” is different from what he says in his unwritten teachings. However, he does identify place and space.”



as both are quite natural. Taylor is faced with one passage not even about Plato and one that is hopelessly ambiguous. The “common” citations of Plato’s “Unwritten Doctrine” are neither common nor citations.

#### § 4 – The *Timaeus* and the Value of Misinterpretation

However, it seems as though I am still completely on the defensive with what Aristotle has to say about Plato’s metaphysics. I may have definitely refuted one citation, but my argument above on the *Physics* does not seem as strong. Can those who believe Plato did not have secret teachings enlist Aristotle as an aid at all? I believe so, and in fact *Phys* 209b13-16 provides just the support we anti-esoterics need. Notice the actual point of this passage. He mentions these “unwritten teachings” only to assert that they are in agreement with what the *Timaeus* says.<sup>79</sup> I also posit that he implies that difference between the “Participants” is only a difference of terminology. Aristotle’s larger point is to show that the participant, whether it be called the material principle or the Great and Small, is spatial position. However, the Idea from which spatial position draws is not Place and it is Plato’s job to explain why not, something he fails at, Aristotle contends. If these two possessed any other differences except terminology then Aristotle’s mention of the unwritten doctrines would in fact be utterly pointless and would make the statement “ὅμως τὸν τόπον καὶ τὴν χώραν τὸ αὐτὸ ἀπεφήνατο” completely bizarre. Also, at 209b35-210a1 we find Aristotle writes exactly that. He says there that Plato should explain why form and numbers are not in Place, if what participates is “place.” He then says, quite importantly, that Plato needs to explain this to us if what participates is Place, “εἴτε τοῦ μεγάλου

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<sup>79</sup> This statement of Aristotle’s is extremely important, and it also directly contradicts what Kramer says, “Aristotle always distinguishes very clearly between Plato and his followers (according to the fixed order, Plato, Speusippus, Xenocrates), without referring, in this respect, to the Platonic dialogues,” (51).

καὶ τοῦ μικροῦ ὄντος τοῦ μεθεκτικοῦ εἴτε τῆς ὕλης, ὥσπερ ἐν τῷ Τιμαίῳ γέγραφεν.”<sup>80</sup>

It seems Aristotle gets the *Timaeus* wrong on this account, and there is good evidence to support this as he seems to equate Plato’s conception of space with his own. Not everybody agrees with this interpretation such as Claghorn (13-19), but while she admits that *Phys.* 209b15-6 conflates matter and space her arguments that “there are many ways in which place and space are like each other” are actually just previously undermined by the “obvious” objections that place is about displacement while space emphasizes volume. Also, place “is that which surrounds, while space is what is surrounded. There is no place of the whole, but there is a space of the whole. A place describes an existing thing, but cannot bring it about. A space is more than the thing existing in it at the moment; it has the ability to bring forth a new body where the old ceases to be,” (16-17). Ignoring the nearly Hegelian obscurity of differentiating place and space that sometimes occurs in these discussions, Claghorn seems to admit that there are quite big differences between the two. Whether there are similarities (and there are similarities that Claghorn points out convincingly) is somewhat irrelevant, as there are big differences, which means Aristotle misinterprets Plato and thus we cannot always take his testimony at first sight, something esoteric proponents enjoy doing.

The argument that the participant of space is the “material principle” is certainly debatable too, since that is an Aristotelian phrase. His statement that Plato writes in the *Timaeus* that space and matter are the same is also similarly a misinterpretation, as Simplicius points out (*Comm. Phys.* 151.12-19). Stenzel has a real problem with this passage of Simplicius (86-89), saying that Simplicius is either unwilling or unable to understand Plato’s secret and complex philosophic meanings. He argues that the dyad was not meant to be identical with space in the *Timaeus* but was instead the most abstract principle of extension. The participant in the *Timaeus*

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<sup>80</sup> “Whether what participates is the Great and Small or matter, as he has written in the *Timaeus*.”

is just a particular example. But Stenzel gives no proof of this whatsoever, from Aristotle or Plato. Indeed, his construction of Plato flatly contradicts what Aristotle himself says, despite his use of Aristotle's testimony elsewhere when pursuing the esoteric thesis or, as Cherniss sarcastically calls it, the "higher Platonic" thesis. If Stenzel is, inadvertently or not, saying Aristotle is mistaken in his account of Plato's metaphysics, then, given how few references there are to "extra-dialogue" teachings, he would seem to cast grave doubt on the fundamental source for esoterics.

Also, Aristotle's comments on void in the *Timaeus* is similarly a misinterpretation, I believe. At both 58a and 80c the *Timaeus* makes it quite blunt that there is no void in Plato's universe. At first, Aristotle seems to agree with this (*De Gen. et Corr.* 325b24-33). He says that the ability of a projectile to move is good enough proof (*Phys.* 214b29-215a1, 14-23; *De Caelo* 309a12), which matches up well with *Tim.* 79b. But then at *De Caelo* 306b3-9 Aristotle says that there is indeed a void in Plato's cosmos because particles will never fit perfectly into each other, despite 58a and 60c's fairly straight forward statements to the contrary.

These misinterpretations, however, are valuable and this passage raises several critical points. The first is that this passage does establish that the *Timaeus*, at least, does have at least some connection to these unwritten teachings. Thus, this refutes the common thesis that for Plato's real beliefs one cannot look to the dialogues and that Aristotle's accounts of Plato's metaphysics solely make use of his unwritten lectures and discussions. This passage, and its surrounding material, establishes the precedent that it is in fact acceptable to use the dialogues and compare them with this unwritten doctrine. If there is an unwritten doctrine, there are at least clues for it in the *Timaeus*. Aristotle refers to the *Timaeus* again at 210a1, similarly challenging Plato to clarify his teachings and explain where what participates is the Great and the Small or

matter. He seems to hold the “unwritten teachings” and the dialogues to equal account here which is surprising if, given Aristotle’s 20 year long tenure at the Academy, he knew the dialogues were useless for discovering Plato’s thoughts. The *Timaeus* at least has some sort of value, but if there is one dialogue that shows clues, why not others? There is nothing in the *Timaeus* to suggest immediately that it is somehow privileged. Dialogues like the *Parmenides*, *Philebus*, and *Sophist* are also similarly dense and complex. Might these offer important clues to the “real” metaphysics of Plato as well?

Another important point can also be made. If Aristotle misunderstands Plato so badly on the *Timaeus*, but he establishes that there is a connection between it and the unwritten teachings, might it be that Aristotle is misrepresenting the unwritten teachings as well? The dialogues are no longer just useless scraps for discovering Plato’s teachings. They can in fact act as something of a control against the esoteric hypothesis. There is finally a crack of light for the anti-esoteric, that he may be able to reconstruct the doctrine of Idea-numbers, the Great and the Small, and the One from the dialogues, even if they are not explicitly stated as such. This *Physics* passage was just the start needed. There is a certain luxury, however, that anti-esotericists also possess now that Aristotle definitely makes use of the dialogues: We do not have to reconstruct the doctrine precisely as Aristotle relays it. If we can prove that the basic components of the Idea-numbers are in the dialogues, that will be enough to establish the thesis that any unwritten teachings are just elaborations or more technical descriptions of what is said in the dialogues. However, even failing that, we are justified in adopting Aristotle’s methods, and that includes using the dialogues to compare against Aristotle’s testimony. We are in a position to declare Aristotle mistaken if necessary and we know that Aristotle and modern day scholars have at least some shared evidence to draw from, namely the dialogues. I contend that the doctrine that Aristotle

ascribes to Plato has some roots in the Platonic dialogues. However, Aristotle gets Plato seriously wrong. The larger point I make, beyond even how much the “Unwritten teaching” relate to the dialogues, however, is that the dialogues can be used as a control and that, contra the esoterics, they have something to do with Plato’s “real” teachings, whatever those are.

#### § 5 – The Dialogues: An Attempt at Reconstructing the Idea-Numbers

Our new mission is to find clues to Plato’s reported metaphysics in the dialogues. The concept of the Idea-Numbers seems to be an elaboration on more fundamental teachings, so it would probably be best to look for references to the Great and the Small, or maybe also the One.

The dialogue that seems to be our best candidate initially is the *Philebus*, particularly 23c-27c. Starting at 23c, Plato postulates that there exists four classes: The Limited, the Unlimited, the Mixture of these two, and the Cause of that mixture. Stenzel (68-69) and others point to the *Philebus* for proof that Aristotle’s testimony is believable and is, in some way, verifiable. Indeed, this seems very conclusive as Aristotle states at *Met.* 987b25-27 that the Great and the Small make up the Unlimited. But if this identification holds, what do we make of the One? It would make sense to identify it with the Limited and the Ideas as the Mixture, but that still leaves out the Cause of the mixture. Unfortunately, this identification does not strike me as particularly feasible and believable. For one, Plato himself says that sensible objects are this Mixture in fact (27a11-12). Secondly, the Ideas are referenced elsewhere as monads (15a-b) and are quite clearly said to be unmixed and “pure.” What about 16d8-e1, however, where Plato asks us to find “τὸν ἀριθμὸν αὐτοῦ πάντα... τὸν μεταξύ τοῦ ἀπείρου τε καὶ τοῦ ἑνός.”<sup>81</sup> This seems a clear and distinct reference to the Idea-numbers that Aristotle talks about. But this line, when

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<sup>81</sup> “All the numbers between the Unlimited and the One.”

placed in proper context, does not say as much as we would like it to. Instead of talking about The One, it is meaning any given form (e.g. The one chair = The form of a chair). The unlimited here are the sensible chairs. As Cherniss explains (18), the number referred to is not an idea-number but literally how many ideas there are between a higher Idea and the sensible realm. The *Philebus*, at many points, is obscure in its meaning, but that is what the passage means when all of 16 and 17 is viewed. Also, in the *Timaeus* Plato argues that space never enters into the Ideas nor do the Ideas enter into it (52a-c). Pair this with Aristotle's statement that the Great and the Small are identical with space and it becomes clear that the Unlimited mentioned in 23c cannot be identified with the Great and the Small.<sup>82</sup>

What else might the Great and the Small be identified with or alluded to in the dialogues, since apparently the *Philebus* is not feasible? At *Phys.* 192a6-8 (see also Cherniss 1.84-96) Aristotle writes that “οἱ δὲ τὸ μὴ ὄν τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ μικρὸν ὁμοίως, ἢ τὸ συναμφοτέρων ἢ τὸ χωρὶς ἐκάτερον.”<sup>83</sup> It is noted at 191b35-192a3 that this initially comes about because of Parmenides' own discussion on existence, that “absolute nonbeing” is quite impossible along with multiple objects in the universe (see also *Met.* 1089a1-6). But note what exactly Aristotle says in the passage of the *Metaphysics* that Platonists are driven to refute. It is fragment B7.1<sup>84</sup> from Parmenides, which is, sure enough, the exact same line that Plato says must be refuted in *Sophist* 237a7 plus the purely intensive line, “ἀλλὰ σὺ τῆσδ' ἀφ' ὁδοῦ διζήμενος εἶργε νόημα.”

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<sup>82</sup> However, this is not to say that the *Philebus* has no connection whatever with metaphysics attributed to Plato from other sources. Simplicius (*Phys.* 151.6-8, 454.19-455.11) and Alexander (*Met.* 55.20-56) both say that the Great and the Small and the One were the principles of all things in Plato's lecture. Cherniss (167) cites the fragment of Porphyry (found in *Simp. Phys.* 453.25-454.19) and notes that here the Great and the Small are one aspect of the Infinite. Cherniss notes here that the Great and the Small “represents the unlimited divisibility and concomitant inverse additive infinity of continuous quanta,” (167). 2, the first even number, is unlimited but since it is still just a lone number it participates in the One. The Dyad and the One are then the elements of number as well. This interpretation of Porphyry works well with *Phil.* 24a-26d I think, but this is quite different from identifying the Dyad or the One with the Unlimited discussed in the *Philebus* which is supposed to undergird all things.

<sup>83</sup> “But they identify the things which are not with the great and the small, whether they are together or are separate.”

<sup>84</sup> “οὐ γὰρ μήποτε τοῦτο δαμῆτι εἶναι μὴ ἔόντα.” “For this [thesis] will never prevail, that things that are not are.”

Here the Eleatic Stranger points out the need to refute Parmenides and establish that nonbeing exists (see also 241d5-7). However, it is exactly here that Aristotle's report runs into deep trouble. The Stranger emphasizes that this nonbeing is not the opposite of being but rather something simply different, "Ὅποταν τὸ μὴ ὄν λέγωμεν, ὡς ἔοικεν, οὐκ ἐναντίον τι λέγομεν τοῦ ὄντος ἀλλ' ἕτερον μόνον," (257b3-4).<sup>85</sup> What is more, absolute nonbeing is condemned as rather meaningless at 238c and 258e.<sup>86</sup> At 1089a Aristotle is arguing that the Platonists attempt to refute Parmenides, and Aristotle seems to take Plato very much to mean absolute nonbeing (esp. 1089a8-10) and identifies the Great and Small with this union of being and absolute non-being (1089a5). Let us assume for the moment, that Aristotle is right in identifying the Great and Small with being and not-being. This would imply that the Great and the Small do not underpin sensible objects, since at 258c and 259a-b it is said that nonbeing is a part of all the Ideas, including even the Idea of being.

To me, besides the *Timaeus*, the *Sophist* and the *Philebus* are the main dialogues where this notion of the interplay between the Great and the Small finds any sort of reference. The esoteric could say that this proves the dialogues are useless and that Aristotle is referring to something else, but as I hope to have proven above, it is extremely unlikely that Aristotle was not referring to the dialogues. Indeed, his passage where he expressly references the *Timaeus* is proof enough of that. The other almost undisputable reference to the *Sophist* and the *Philebus* allow us to draw two conclusions: that Aristotle does refer to the dialogues when relaying his version of Platonism and that he misunderstands them. What are we to do with Aristotle at this

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<sup>85</sup> "It appears that when we say that which is not, we do not say what is contrary to what exists but only something different."

<sup>86</sup> In both of these passages it would seem that Plato does at least agree with Parmenides that, "οὔτε... ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἔδν (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν) οὔτε φράσαις," (B2.7-8 = Proc. *Tim.* 1.345.26-27; Simp. *Phys.* 116.28-117.1). Indeed, 238c8-10 is so reminiscent of this fragment that I think it extremely probable that Plato had it in mind when he was writing it.

point, then? First, it seems we must generally be suspicious of his comments on Plato in the *Metaphysics*, if only because he identifies the Great and the Small with both the participant in the *Timaeus* and nonbeing in the *Sophist*. None of these are like each other, and that Aristotle seems to think they are is quite troubling. Simplicius (*Met.* 151.12-19) seems to also realize the difficulty of Aristotle's conception of the Great and Small when he says that it is inconsistent to identify it with both the *Timaeus* participant (inherently confined to the phenomenal) and also make it an inherent principle of the Ideas like Nonbeing is in the *Sophist*.

#### § 6 – The Demise of Aristotle's Testimony in the Face of Mounting Inconsistencies

There are other problems with Aristotle's testimony. Notice what he says immediately before his account at *Met.* 987b10. After recounting the influence of Cratylus, the philosophy of "the Italians," and Socrates, Aristotle notes that Plato accepted Socrates' teaching about the idea of universal definition but said this definition could not be a definition of any sensible thing, since sensible things are always changing (and thus importing his Heraclitean influence). He called these nonsensible things to which the definitions refer as "the Ideas," and sensible things are separate from these and "participate" in them by attempting to imitate an Idea. A physical chair attempts to imitate the Idea of a chair. All of this is a garden variety account of Plato's metaphysics that we find easily enough in the dialogues. However, the issue comes when Aristotle says, "κατὰ μέθεξιν γὰρ εἶναι τὰ πολλὰ ὁμώνυμα τοῖς εἶδεσιν. τὴν δὲ μέθεξιν τοῦνομα μόνον μετέβαλεν," (987b9-11). In the first half of this we find Aristotle saying that in Platonism the many imitate the Idea and exist because of μέθεξιν. The independent clause, however, "τὴν δὲ μέθεξιν τοῦνομα μόνον μετέβαλεν" is the most interesting part here. Aristotle is noting that the argument of the Ideas is precisely the same as somebody else's and that Plato merely changes



the name. And whose doctrine does he copy? The Pythagoreans, “οἱ μὲν γὰρ Πυθαγόρειοι μιμήσει τὰ ὄντα φασὶν εἶναι τῶν ἀριθμῶν, Πλάτων δὲ μεθέξει, τοῦνομα μεταβαλὼν,” (987b11-13). This is important, because right here Aristotle is saying that the Ideas and Number are actually the same exact thing, and that Plato only changed the terminology. This initially looks fair enough (Plato’s affinity for Pythagorean thought is certainly well known enough and unsurprising), but the difficulties come when Aristotle’s evidence is compared to other sources proffered by the esoterics as showing an unwritten doctrine. The first is Sextus Empiricus *Adv. Math.* 10.248-88. I deal with this passage much more below and I find its use by those of the Tübingen school to be a misreading of it, but there is one passage that is critical to my present point. At 258 Sextus makes the single substantial reference (excluding the use of his name as a variable in one of his examples) to Plato in this entire passage. I will quote the entirety of the relevant passage here, for ease of reading and verification:

ἰδοὺ γὰρ καὶ αἱ ἰδέαι ἀσώματοι οὔσαι κατὰ τὸν Πλάτωνα προῦφραστοῦσι τῶν σωμάτων, καὶ ἕκαστον τῶν γινομένων πρὸς αὐτὰς γίνεται· ἀλλ’ οὐκ εἰσι τῶν ὄντων ἀρχαί, ἐπεὶ ἕκαστη ἰδέα κατ’ ἰδίαν μὲν λαμβανομένη ἓν εἶναι λέγεται, κατὰ σύλληψιν δὲ ἑτέρας ἢ ἄλλων δύο καὶ τρεῖς καὶ τέσσαρες, ὥστε εἶναί τι ἐπαναβεβηκὸς αὐτῶν τῆς ὑποστάσεως, τὸν ἀριθμὸν, οὗ κατὰ μετοχὴν τὸ ἓν ἢ τὰ δύο ἢ τὰ τρία ἢ τὰ τούτων ἔτι πλείονα ἐπικατηγορεῖται αὐτῶν (10.258.4-259.1).

“For observe how the Ideas which are without a body, according to Plato, exist prior to corporate bodies, and each thing which becomes because of them, but yet they are not the first principles of things which are, since each Idea taken separately is said to be one [or a unit], but two and three and four when taken together with one or more more other Ideas, so that there is something which transcends their substance, the Number, by way of participation in which the terms one or two or three or the numbers higher than these is predicated of them.”

There is quite a bit to unpack here, but one point is particularly important. Sextus expressly denies that the Ideas of Plato can in any way be associated with Number. Indeed, number outranks the Ideas ontologically, as they are the Idea of a multitude of Ideas.

It gets worse for Aristotle. Theophrastus (*Met.* 6b11) writes this, “Πλάτων μὲν οὖν ἐν τῷ

ἀνάγειν εἰς τὰς ἀρχὰς δόξειεν ἂν ἄπτεσθαι τῶν ἄλλων εἰς τὰς ἰδέας ἀνάπτων, ταύτας δ' εἰς τοὺς ἀριθμούς, ἐκ δὲ τούτων εἰς τὰς ἀρχάς, εἶτα κατὰ τὴν γένεσιν μέχρι τῶν εἰρημένων,” (6b11-15). I translate this as, “Plato as well, in reducing things to first beliefs, would seem to be treating other things by relating them to the Ideas, these to the numbers, and then from these first principles, and then, according the order of becoming, down to the things mentioned.” Again, we have another source that contradicts Aristotle. Theophrastus is saying that the relation of “ἄπτεσθαι τῶν ἄλλων [e.g. the sensibles] εἰς τὰς ἰδέας” is the same relation as the Ideas to the Numbers. Number outranks Ideas. What is more, Theophrastus can claim almost as much authority on Plato as Aristotle can since all three were contemporaries, studied at the Academy, and Theophrastus succeeded Aristotle as head of the Peripatetic school at the Lyceum.

Aristotle himself presents difficulties for this passage. At *Met.* 1080b11-14,<sup>87</sup> he argues that Plato posits both ideal numbers and mathematical numbers, saying that Plato saw the latter as being intermediate between Ideas and sensibles but the former equivalent to the Ideas. The question, however, is whether these ideal, “non-mathematical” numbers that Aristotle criticizes in 1080b are the same as those numbers he ascribes to Plato at 987b. Cherniss (26-28, 40, 47-8, 59)<sup>88</sup> argues that Aristotle actually invented Plato’s association between the Ideas and the numbers described in 987b, and I think this is a rather compelling solution given other contradictions in Aristotle’s report. For instance, Aristotle at *Met.* 1084a10-17 criticizes the

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<sup>87</sup> “καὶ τοῦτο συμβέβηκεν εὐλόγως· οὐ γὰρ ἐνδέχεται ἔτι ἄλλον τρόπον εἶναι παρὰ τοὺς εἰρημένους. οἱ μὲν οὖν ἀμφοτέρους φασὶν εἶναι τοὺς ἀριθμούς, τὸν μὲν ἔχοντα τὸ πρότερον καὶ ὕστερον τὰς ἰδέας, τὸν δὲ μαθηματικὸν παρὰ τὰς ἰδέας καὶ τὰ αἰσθητά, καὶ χωριστοὺς ἀμφοτέρους τῶν αἰσθητῶν,” “And this has occurred for good reason, for here can be no other way except the ones mentioned. Some say both kinds of number exist, that what has a before and after being identical with the Ideas, and numbers that are beside the Ideas and from sensible things, and both being separated from the sensibles.”

<sup>88</sup> Cherniss notes that he was not the first to come up with this idea, citing Robin in his *La Theorie platonicienne* (454-458). What is especially intriguing about Robin is that he comes to this conclusion after adopting as one of his basic methodological principles not to use any dialogues of Plato and to reconstruct the doctrine from Aristotle’s testimony alone. He adopts as extreme a methodology as an esoteric like Kramer or Gaiser, but he still sides with Cherniss!

theory of idea-numbers because it appears to arbitrarily limit these numbers to ten. However, at *Met.* 1073a14-22 he criticizes the theory for containing no statement concerning the number of entities and seems to switch back and forth between treating these idea-numbers as both unlimited and limited to ten. Even worse, he then says at *Met.* 1070a18-19 that there are as many ideas as there are natural classes.

So it seems as though the evidence Aristotle gives on the Idea-Numbers is inconsistent. This is not even pointing out the contradictory way in which he criticizes the theory as well. Look, for instance, at *Met.* 997b5-10. Here Aristotle makes an argument against Plato by saying that the only difference between sensibles and the Ideas is that the Ideas are eternal. This is analogous to saying the gods are the “man-in-himself” because the gods are eternal. What other difference is there between the Idea of a man and a god?<sup>89</sup> Aristotle notes repeatedly (*De Caelo* 278b18-24, *Phys.* 203a8-9, *Met.* 990a18-22, 1080b16-20) that the Platonists believed the Ideas existed apart from the world and differed only in that they are eternal while the phenomenal is temporal. Aristotle says they believe this rather ridiculous theory because, “αὐτὸ γὰρ ἄνθρωπὸν φασιν εἶναι καὶ ἵππον καὶ ὑγίειαν, ἄλλο δ’ οὐδέν.”<sup>90</sup> The last clause, “ἄλλο δ’ οὐδέν” is particularly odious and cuts so clearly against the impression of Plato’s metaphysics that we have been laboring under, the picture Aristotle painted for us in other passages. If there are “no other reasons,” then what relevance at all does the identification of numbers with the Ideas have? We would not say an average man is “5” or whatever number, but if Aristotle is right that the only difference is that the sensible “man” is perishable while the “man-in-himself” is eternal, then we might as well start identifying sensible objects with numbers given the previous descriptions of

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<sup>89</sup> *Met.* 997b5-10 is not the only place where Aristotle makes similar criticism. He also states this at *Met.* 1040b30-1041a3, 1059a10-14; *NE* 1096a34-b5; *Phys.* 193b34-194a7. Cherniss (1944 p.201 ff.) provides valuable analysis on these passages.

<sup>90</sup> “For they say that there is a human, horse, and health in itself, without any other [qualifications].”

the theory analyzed above. We want to reject this criticism as nonsense, and perhaps it is. But why do we reject this criticism instead of the other passages about the idea-numbers? After all, as shown in the note above, Aristotle seems to be working under this impression of the ideas throughout books as diverse as the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Physics*, to say nothing of more subtle discussions that assume this position found in *Met.* 105910-14 and elsewhere (see Cherniss 1944 p. 202 n.120 on this last particular passage).

### § 7 – Aristotle’s Partial Redemption and the Trouble it causes for Esoterics

Aristotle seems fundamentally mistaken and confused on the Ideas, but that does not mean his testimony is completely worthless. For instance, his attributing of the notion of separation to the Ideas, that the phenomenal requires a transcendent entity from which to participate in, is supported quite well.<sup>91</sup> He attributes this position to Speusippus (*Met.* 1080b14-16, 1086a2-5, 1090a35-b1),<sup>92</sup> Xenocrates (*Met.* 1083b1-8, 1086a5-11), and Plato (*Met.* 1069a33-36, 1076a19-22). These last two citations to Plato are especially interesting because Aristotle says all three of the first three leaders of the Academy support the separation of the Ideas from

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<sup>91</sup> Friedlander (*ap.* Edelstein 98 n.65) makes the claim that Plato believed the Ideas resided in the Soul and in fact were not separate at all. It should be conceded that Aristotle does make references to some Platonists and discusses how they saw the Ideas not as transcending this plane of existence (as per *Phdr.* 247c1 “ὑπερουράνιον τόπον”) but instead, “καὶ εὖ δὴ οἱ λέγοντες τὴν ψυχὴν εἶναι τόπον εἰδῶν,” “And it was a good thought that the soul is the place of the Ideas,” (*De Anim.* 429a27). Friedlander seems to think this passage is referring to Plato and attempts to back up this speculation by referring to *Meno* 86b. However, to read this passage, particularly the protasis phrase “Οὐκοῦν εἰ ἀεὶ ἢ ἀλήθεια ἡμῖν τῶν ὄντων ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ” (86b1) as saying the Ideas are actually in the Soul would be the height of inappropriately reading a passage in a vacuum. Plato is making the point (echoed elsewhere in the dialogues like the Chariot analogy in the *Phaedrus* 246a-254e) that the soul has some engrained knowledge that it achieved before we were born. Notice that the apodosis says, “ἀθάνατος ἂν ἢ ψυχῇ εἴη, ὥστε θαρροῦντα χρῆ ὁ μὴ τυγχάνεις ἐπιστάμενος νῦν.” In the *Phaedrus*, the Soul is indeed immortal and achieves knowledge through seeing the Ideas (254b) before the black horse (appetite) drags it down to Earth. The amount the soul saw before being dragged down is how much it knows and also dictates its personality somewhat ranging from a natural philosopher or statesman (248d3-5) down to a tyrant or sophist (248e1-3). As will be shown later, I believe the writer of the Digression may have a similar concept of the Ideas as the Platonists Aristotle is referring to. However, I believe it is clear that Plato himself certainly did not think the Ideas resided in the Soul. They were separate and were beyond even time.

<sup>92</sup> See also Speusippus Fr. 30 (Lang).

the sensibles, without (to borrow Aristotle's words from before) any other qualifications. There is plenty of evidence elsewhere that supports Aristotle's testimony on this too. But the conclusive evidence, the writing that actually expressly informs us that Plato believed the Ideas were separate from the sensibles, comes from the *Timaeus*.<sup>93</sup> This proof can be found at 51b-52c. Nowhere, perhaps, in the Platonic corpus do we find such an explicit description of this separation. At 51b-c we find all of the key phrases that Aristotle says Plato uses when positing this separation, and at 52a-c we find the absolutely strongest language for this separation. We have Plato, his dialogues, and the early and most distinguished leaders of the Academy coming to bat for Aristotle on this point. What is more, Xenocrates uses the *Timaeus* as well. If Aristotle's usage of the *Timaeus* earlier is not enough to show that the dialogues are acceptable as evidence to which to compare Aristotle's criticism, what about the fact that the successors of Plato use them as well?

The esotericist is left with two options here: reject Aristotle's inconsistent criticism while preserving his account of the Idea-numbers or attempt to reconcile the two by saying that Aristotle is trustworthy and Plato's idea is just rather complex. The first option would be completely arbitrary as I could say just the opposite and that the discussion of the "man-in-itself" found in the *Metaphysics* is the correct interpretation. The second option would not work either for several reasons. Besides the considerable philosophic incompatibility between these two descriptions, the esotericist would have to admit Platonic dialogues as evidence since they are

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<sup>93</sup> Xenocrates (fr. 54) responds to Aristotle's criticism of Plato's creation myth and asserts that the separation between the Ideas and sensibles contained in the *Timaeus* should be taken quite literally. There are other passages too that assert this separation in Plato including *Phdo.* 103b, *Prm.* 132d-133c, and *Rep.* 501b. However, *Prm.* 134e-135a contains probably one of the best proofs of this separation because why else would this section contain "the greatest difficulty," as Parmenides in the dialogue describes it in the dialogue, unless there was this radical ontological separation between the two? While the *Timaeus* contains one of the best descriptions of this separation and serves as a flashpoint between Aristotle and the Platonists, the *Parmenides* passage contains one of the most straightforward signs that Plato believed this and also that there are arguments against it. See also Cherniss 1944 p.210 n. 125.

the proof that Aristotle is right on the separation. He cannot bring up Speusippus or Xenocrates either since they also use the dialogues in their response to Aristotle's criticism.<sup>94</sup> If they deny the dialogues, then they deny any even closely contemporaneous evidence to corroborate Aristotle's discussion. Also, the esoterics have to actively defend Aristotle's conception of separation because if they do not then they acknowledge that Aristotle misunderstood one of the fundamental aspects of the Ideas which incriminates his entire project. Subsequently, the so-called unimpeachable testimony of Aristotle loses its luster.<sup>95</sup>

#### §8 – A Note on Alexander and Partial Disclaimer

In my discussion of Aristotle, I used Alexander's commentary several times, demonstrating substantial inconsistency in Plato's metaphysics. It is tempting to take this testimony at face value and believe that it provides us with important and valuable information. However, I am suspicious of its veracity as well due to both internal and external evidence. We have discussed above how Alexander says Plato taught that number was prior to anything else since the point was a monad with position and lines are just the distance between two points (*Met.* 55.20-26), and yet this contradicts Aristotle (*Met.* 992a20-24).

Alexander also seems to have a rather confused interpretation of the number two in Plato. Simplicius notes that the number two possesses as its principles the Great and the Small (454.28-36). But Alexander (56.17-33) in fact identifies the number two with the Great and the Small. He

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<sup>94</sup> It seems as though Xenocrates at least also tried to respond to Aristotle's criticism in some instances such as criticism about the material substrate in the *Timaeus*. Compare for instance Xen. Fr. 54 and *De Caelo* 279b32-280a10. Aristotle as well tries to respond to him at *Met.* 1091a280-29 as does Alexander (*Met.* 819.37-820.7).

<sup>95</sup> A final example of inconsistency in testimony on Plato's doctrine comes from Alexander. Alexander says that Aristotle's report on Plato's lecture the "One" and "the Great and the Small" were represented as principles of number and principles of all entities (56.33-35; Cherniss 1945 p.28). But in this passage he derives this position from the doctrine that points are ontologically prior to lines and are "ones" or "monads" with position (55.20-56). Simplicius (454.23-26) also takes this same line. And yet at *Met.* 992a2-24 Aristotle denies precisely this position. If we choose to privilege Aristotle's testimony in the way esotericists like to, this leads us to conclude that Plato's lecture did not give any identification of the Ideas and numbers.

specifically says that the Dyad is “the first number” (56.23). I should acknowledge here that the concept of what the “first number” is in Greek philosophy is a somewhat convoluted and difficult issue. Plato seems to contradict himself multiple times on this. At *Laws* 818c and *Soph.* 238b “One” is the first number but *Rep.* 524d suggests “Two” is the first number while *Phd.* 103 ff says “One” is not even a number but rather the “foundation” of number. The *Epinomis* is even worse (cf. 977c and 978b-c). However, Aristotle seems much more consistent on this account as he says multiple times that the first number is 2 (*Met.* 1056b25, 1085b10, *Phys.* 220a27-32).<sup>96</sup>

The third criticism of Alexander is that he provides a poor explanation of the creation of the Ideas. He says the numbers are the product of the One and the Great and the Small, but claims Plato does not show how to get from this to the Ideas. We might presume that Plato identifies the Ideas with numbers, but Aristotle seems to differentiate the two and critiques Plato on this regard, saying that Plato never explained how numbers come about, meaning, according to Aristotle, Plato never said the numbers came from the One, the Great, and the Small. Aristotle directly contradicts Alexander in this regard. Given the nonexistent evidence to corroborate this account, Alexander’s credibility is harmed here.

The last reason not to trust Alexander appears at 55.20 where Alexander writes, “Ἀρχὰς μὲν τῶν ὄντων τοὺς ἀριθμοὺς Πλάτων τε καὶ οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι ὑπετίθεντο.”<sup>97</sup> This looks relatively innocuous at first sight, but it becomes more troubling when the Greek does not name Plato again until 40 lines later (56.34). In his translation Dooley provides Plato’s name throughout the text where he thinks it is appropriate (1.84 see n.177), but, while this gesture is appreciated, he has no right to do so. The text starts with saying “Plato and the Pythagoreans” believe a doctrine which Alexander then elaborates on. At no point does he differentiate the two and he only names

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<sup>96</sup> To examine how the Greeks saw this question would be beyond the scope of my present objective, Pritchard (70-78) provides a valuable account.

<sup>97</sup> “Both Plato and the Pythagoreans believed that numbers were the principles of the things that are.”

Plato at the very end, saying Plato, during his lecture, made the One and the Dyad the principles of all things. I get the strong sense that Alexander conflates Pythagorean and Platonic doctrines throughout this text. At the very least, his text is hopelessly ambiguous on this matter and thus is not worth as much as Alexander usually is on examining metaphysics.

## §9 – Sextus Empiricus

With all of this, it would seem as though Aristotle’s account of Plato’s “Unwritten Doctrine” is quite suspect and worth very little. However, this does not preclude the existence of an unwritten doctrine entirely. The esotericists could say that Aristotle’s reconstruction of it is bankrupt without conceding the existence of one. Specifically, they point to other passages in Plato and other authors that suggest that Plato held a very low opinion of the written word. Plato obviously did not trust his dialogues to convey his true philosophy, they contend, and so he must have had some substantial doctrine that went beyond them. It may not be number-ideas, but there is something far beyond the dialogues. This seems to be the thought behind Kramer’s book.<sup>98</sup> Examining especially the concept of the One, Kramer argues that Plato is very close to Parmenides in his metaphysics, but Plato, unlike Parmenides, realized that with only the One there is no world. It is the pairing of this One with the “Indeterminate Dyad,” the Great and the Small as I usually call it, that produce the “concrete fullness of appearances: kosmos [sic], organism, soul, state, and the products of the fine arts and of all τέχνηαι,” (537). To support this, he cites *Prm.* 157c-158c but acknowledges that, overall, barely a word of this ultimate doctrine is mentioned in the dialogues. This is because the concept cannot be adequately described and it is

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<sup>98</sup> For an excellent and thorough review of Kramer’s book see Vlastos 379-403. 380 is in fact where I get the list of other sources that attest to Plato’s esoteric teachings. Without Vlastos, I would have almost certainly not have found Hermodorus, for instance.



the task of the philosophic life to constantly work towards discovering the fundamental unity of the plurality created by the Dyad.<sup>99</sup>

As can be seen from Kramer's work, there are multiple sources, besides Plato and Aristotle, that allude to esoteric teachings, and Kramer points especially to a passage from Sextus Empiricus (*Adv. Math.* 10.248-80). This source is particularly important, if only to judge from the considerable debate on it (see Vlastos 1981 p.384 n.3 for a small bibliography on this). As with the *Metaphysics* passage before it, I am providing a quick schematic of the passage:<sup>100</sup>

1. The true physicist must be more demanding than those who are content with the reduction of perceptible bodies to imperceptibles like atoms (248).
2. The ones who are the most learned on this matter are the Pythagoreans, who, just like the philologist who examines the syllables of word, examine the first principles the universe is composed of (249-251)
3. Those who assert the fundamental-ness of atoms are right in that they consider that principle to be non-evident, but are wrong since they think the principle is physical (252-256).
4. The principle of perceptible bodies must be incorporeals. But just because they exist before physical bodies does not imply they are the primary principles (257-258).
5. It is for this reason that Plato's Ideas fail to be the primary principle because Ideas can be grouped together and the size of that group has a dominant form. Thus, numbers ontologically precede the Ideas (258).
6. Mathematical solids are not fundamental either because planes are prior to solids,

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<sup>99</sup> Vlastos (384) and Kramer (516) both recognize here that it is with this esotericism that Plato stands rather in between Plotinus and Parmenides.

<sup>100</sup> This passage is fairly long and at times awfully dense. For this reason, I am indebted to Ackrill for his most helpful outline of the argument (110-111). While I give somewhat more detail than he does, his was invaluable for giving a general framing for more specific points.

- lines prior to planes, and a line presupposes the number two since it is defined as the distance between two points. (259-260).
7. Numbers derive in fact from the interplay of the One and the Indefinite Dyad (261-262).
  8. This is what the Pythagoreans teach, though granted in different styles (262).
  9. Classes (car, plant, house, etc.), contraries (evil, good, positive, negative, etc.), and relatives (big, small, half, double, etc.) also extend from the relation of the One and the Indefinite Dyad (263-266).
  10. All substances and their classes fall under the One (263)
  11. Contraries are more complex. One half of the contrary falls under the "Equal," One, while the other half falls under the "Unequal," part of the Indefinite Dyad (266).
  12. Relatives fall under the Indefinite Dyad because they have the property of co-existence since one always implies the other. "There is no left without a right," thus the fundamental property of a relative is two (267-268)
  13. The One and the Indefinite are the supreme genus under which everything falls. (269-275).
  14. The Pythagoreans furthermore say that the number one comes from One and the number two comes from the Indefinite Dyad (276).
  15. It is from the interplay of one and two that the rest of the numbers are created (276-277).
  16. Geometry also comes from the relationship between the Dyad and the One. The point belongs to the One, the line to the Dyad, the plane to the Triad and the solid to the Tetrad (278-280).

17. It is in this way that the perceptible universe is created after the creation of geometric solids, which all physical beings rely on. Pythagoreans did not always totally agree on this process for the creation of solids, but later ones generally do (280-283).

What esotericists would like to see in this somewhat extended passage is a detailed and informative account of Plato's unwritten doctrine. What they would like to see is a clear account of the interplay between the One and the Dyad, the role of Equality, and other concepts behind what they imagine is Plato's secret metaphysics. Furthermore, they would like to see this as the transcript (see Wilpert) of Plato's lecture that Aristoxenus relays. Unfortunately, this passage is none of those things, which is a true tragedy for Kramer as he himself acknowledges that this passage is the lynchpin of his rather ingenious reconstruction of Plato's doctrine. What does the Sextus passage tell us? It certainly gives us a detailed account of somebody's doctrine; unfortunately Sextus makes it abundantly clear that it is Pythagoras or the Pythagoreans.<sup>101</sup> This is a fatal point for those who see so much in the Sextus account. There is, I suppose, the solution that Sextus received this information from some late Neopythagorean middleman who compiled Platonic material and gave it to him. What Sextus would be reporting is said to be Pythagorean, but it is "really" Plato's. This is what Kramer seems to think (251, 284 n.90). But one argument suffices to prove how absurd this solution is. If there is substantial doctrine that Sextus is relaying under some other thinkers name, then this necessarily includes anything not explicitly attributed to Plato. Almost the entirety of Sextus Empiricus' works become suspicious with this

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<sup>101</sup> Just to show how much Sextus makes sure to point out he is not talking about Plato, I have included all the passages where he mentions Pythagoras. He says these are the beliefs of the Pythagoreans at 249.1, 250.2, 255.5, 261.1, 263.1, 270.3, 282.2, 288.1, and 291.3. In contrast, there is but a single substantial reference to Plato exactly once, at 258.4-6, "ἰδὸν γὰρ καὶ αἱ ἰδέαι ἀσώματοι οὐσαὶ κατὰ τὸν Πλάτωνα προὔφεσται τῶν σωμάτων, καὶ ἕκαστον τῶν γινομένων πρὸς αὐτὰς γίνεται." Notice, however, that here it is just Sextus giving his own analysis on the thoughts of the Pythagoreans and he is invoking Plato's authority to assert that the Ideas exist before the sensibles, a doctrine that has so much support in the dialogues it would be obnoxious to list all of the places Plato says this. There are 4 other uses of the word "Plato" (288.6, 289.2, 289.3, and 289.5), but all of these use his name only in an example to explain Pythagorean metaphysics. Sextus also uses Socrates, Dion, and Theon as well. They are but "dummy variables" in his argument.

conspiratorial solution Kramer and other esotericists propose. In an attempt to make “Pythagoras” say “Plato” they destroy the trustworthiness of Sextus entirely because at any point in *Against the Physicists* we may say, “This is a piece of Platonism; Sextus is just calling it by something else. It is really Plato saying this secretly.” Even if it were true that a particular passage came from the Academy, that would hardly mean that it was actually from Plato himself. Sextus is writing in the Late Imperial period of Roman history, far removed from the original Platonic doctrine, so this hypothetical Academic source could have contaminated his testimony with either his own brand of Platonism or whatever was current in the school he associated with. All of these possibilities make the Sextus piece, if Kramer’s hypothesis is to be believed, a complete wash and utterly impenetrable for historians and philosophers.

Vlastos, in his review of Kramer’s book, calls attention to 10.269 of this passage. This passage, if about Plato, as Kramer’s solution would contend, seems to establish that Plato postulated the ontological priority of the genus of given any two Forms. To explain, consider the Form “Dog” and the Form “Cat” and think about a specific attribute these two share: Both are animals, specifically mammals. According to this passage and Kramer’s interpretation, the Form “Mammal,” which is the genus under which “Dog” and “Cat” would presumably fall, existed beforehand and the existence of “Dog” and “Cat” depends on the existence of “Mammal.” Did Plato really believe this? If so, then Kramer will have effortlessly discovered definitive proof of one of the greatest Platonic mysteries, the details of any ontological hierarchy to the Ideas. Cherniss, in a short but very compelling passage (44-48), argues conclusively that he did not subscribe ontological priority to the genus. The first reason is that there is not a single passage in any of the dialogues that suggest this view. Look for instance at *Sophist* 254b-257a where he discusses the “intercommunication” (tr. Cherniss 46) of Ideas. This intercommunication would

seem to exclude ontological priority. “The relation of the ideas to one another is that of implication or compatibility and its opposite, not that of principle and derivative or of whole and part,” (Cherniss 46).<sup>102</sup> Secondly, this position seems to be much more Aristotelian, and there are several passages that corroborate this. The “natural priority” of the genus is used by Aristotle in *Topics* 141b28-34, 123a14-19, and *Met.* 1059b38-1060a1. This is not to say that Plato did not at all have the logical concept of something being prior by nature and existence,<sup>103</sup> but there is virtually zero proof that he said anything of the kind about the Ideas and genus.<sup>104</sup> I hate to make it look like I am simply piling on Kramer and his misuse of the Sextus passage, but this passage is presented as the strongest testimony outside of the previously discussed Aristotle passage and thus should be dispatched very carefully and thoroughly.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> This is certainly not the only passage that shows Plato actually excludes such ontological hierarchy. See also *Polit.* 258c, 261e-262a, and *Soph.* 235b-c.

<sup>103</sup> Aristotle at *Met.* 1019a2-4 (and also *De Part. Anim.* 642b10-12 and *De Gen.* 330b15-17) argues that Plato used this distinction to refer to things as “are not dependent on others for their being, while these others cannot be without them,” (Cherniss 44 n.33) This seems to be quite similar to the relationship between sensibles and the Ideas. However, strangely there is no single passage that definitively points to this concept, though I think *Tim* 35a gets very close because it talks about a third class of things made out of Being and the Different, thus implying that this mixed class relies on the prior existence of Being and Different. However, this passage is perhaps “the most perplexing and difficult passage of the whole dialogue, a passage of which the meaning was a matter of disagreement between Xenocrates and his pupil Crantor, the author of the first commentaries on the dialogue [see also Cherniss 1945, p.44-48],” (Taylor *ad* 35a1). I emphasize that 35a only seems, from my perspective more that 2300 years removed from the early Academy, to allude to this concept. As Taylor points out, this passage seems incredibly obscure to us and probably only the Early Academics truly knew what it meant as it is a genuinely mystifying creation myth.

<sup>104</sup> Curiously, Kramer says we should compare this idea with *Met.* 1059b38, promising us that we will find Plato’s doctrine. But nothing in this line or anything even remotely close to it attributes this doctrine to Plato. There are other passages Kramer brings up too like *Protrepticus*, which Vlastos (388) dispatches quite handily by showing it says absolutely nothing on Plato and is actually quite Aristotelian.

<sup>105</sup> There are other problems with this passage as a path into Plato’s thought. As Ackrill, in his review of *Zwei Aristotelische Frühschriften über die Ideenlehre* by Wilpert, points out, there are several passages (esp. 255, 258, and 263) that use quite late sounding terminology (112). I do not put too much emphasis on this argument, however, since it could be Sextus trying to reshape his testimony in terms he feels comfortable with and which can better reach his audience who would be much more familiar with Leucretian atomism, peripatetic philosophy, and other post-Plato philosophic schools. Wisely, Ackrill gives this only a passing mention. More seriously, however, 262-276 seems to go quite contrary to Aristotle’s testimony and also Alexander’s. Specifically, 265’s discussion of how “contraries” (e.g. good and evil) compare to “relatives,” (like half and double) goes completely against 56.26 in Alexander’s *Metaphysics*. Of course, this difficulty is completely removed if we just think that perhaps we should take Sextus at his word and interpret this passage as expressing the thoughts of Pythagoreans.

## Ch. 4 – The Platonic Evidence Offered In Support of an Esoteric Doctrine

### § 1 – *Phaedrus* 274b-278e

These are two of the greatest pieces of evidence proffered as showing Plato possessed a substantial unwritten doctrine that he only teases at in his dialogues. However, might there be signs in the dialogues themselves that Plato distrusted the ability of language to transmit philosophic truth so much that he refused to write them down or lecture on them? If so, then the Digression, and the esotericist doctrine, may have at least something in its favor.<sup>106</sup> In particular, scholars point to *Phaedrus* 274b-278e, a passage Kramer considers important to his thesis, a passage that proves the existence of an oral doctrine even if we take the radically skeptical role of rejecting the Seventh Epistle's words on the matter. Let us break down this passage, as I find this to be quite helpful in cases of the Sextus passage and Aristotle's testimony:

1. Consider a composer of speeches, poems, or treatises
2. If this man composed with "knowledge of the truth," he can
  - a. Withstand cross-examination on these truths,
  - b. And is able to illustrate the inferiority of his written word through speech,
3. Then this man should not be called a composer of speeches, poems, or treatises;
4. He should be called something that refers to the truths he is writing about, not the medium of his writing.
5. If all he has is what he has put in writing, then he would be called a poet or some sort of writer.

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<sup>106</sup> I find it ironic that the esoteric thesis has now come full circle in a way. Gaiser, Kramer, and other scholars in support of the thesis contend at first that the Platonic dialogues tell us nothing about his teachings. However, with this argument, they strenuously maintain that the dialogues are riddled with signs that Plato is pointing to the existence of a secret doctrine. The dialogues go from philosophically useless to definitive primary evidence for a crucially important point on the philosophic interpretation of Plato in the span of but a few pages!

6. If he writes in the way described in 2 above, we should call him something that reflects that wisdom
  - a. “Wise” is something only the gods can be.
  - b. A “Lover of Wisdom” or a “Philosopher,” however, will do.

First, despite what some may wish to believe, this passage does not say all writings are false. If so, then that would make this passage false as well and Plato will have just introduced the Liar’s Paradox. Secondly, there is nothing in here to suggest that even most writings are false. As Vlastos briefly points out (1981 p. 395), there is a strong positive connotation to the word βοηθεῖν generally in Plato<sup>107</sup> and, I argue, elsewhere.<sup>108</sup> Expanding on Vlastos’ suggestion, this connotation is implied at 278c5 when seen in connection with the conditional clause, “εἰ μὲν...ἔχων βοηθεῖν...οὐ τι τῶνδε ἐπωνυμίαν ἔχοντα δεῖ λέγεσθαι τὸν τοιοῦτον.”<sup>109</sup> If writings were generally lies and negative things, why would being able to defend and vindicate them from criticism be one of the crucial factors in becoming a philosopher? That implies one of two things. Either this “philosopher” is able to defend them despite holding no truth, or the writings do possess truth and the philosopher is able to defend it. If it is the former, then what separates him from the sophist that Plato previously resigned to being an inferior soul, above only the tyrant, the basest soul of all (248e)? It must be the latter, but that would seem to suggest Plato does acknowledge that writings can hold a great deal of truth. However, this is in no way to suggest that Plato believes that writings are a perfect window to the truth. Indeed, failure to recognize this fact is what stops one from being called a philosopher as well. So it would seem that this passage, far from what Kramer would like to argue, does not so much condemn written works

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<sup>107</sup> The word is found elsewhere in the dialogue at 276c9 with “λόγῳ βοηθεῖν” being complementary (Vlastos 395 n. 25) to “ικανῶς τὰληθῆ διδάξαί.” See also *Phaedo* 88e2, “ἐβοήθει τῷ λόγῳ...”

<sup>108</sup> It often refers to therapeutic or medical care (Plu. *Alex.* 19) and is also found in Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1383a29).

<sup>109</sup> “If...he is able to come to [his writing’s] aid...then he should not be called by the former name [i.e. writer, poet, etc.]”

but rather praises their ability to transmit truth but is measured in its praise and stresses the need to recognize the limits of writing in relaying truth, a solution that seems relatively uncontroversial to all but perhaps a die-hard mathematical formalist. As another argument, let us assume for the second that Plato did say that the topics he treats in the dialogues are φαῦλα (“false,” as Kramer takes it). Considering how much time Plato spends discussing and praising the souls and the Ideas, can we honestly say that Plato thought all of that was a lie and that he did not care about the Ideas and the soul at all? Of course not, but this is the path we take when we believe this passage of the *Phaedrus* offers proof of the uselessness of the written word and the existence of a separate oral doctrine.

But, somebody could respond to this interpretation, could it not be that the amount of truth a piece of writing contains depends largely on its subject matter? A piece of writing on politics can probably get closer to the truth on a political matter than a piece of metaphysics can to metaphysical truth. Does this not sound like a very reasonable argument? I heartily agree that this is a reasonable position,<sup>110</sup> but Plato says. Secondly, Plato never says that the philosopher must in some way change subjects in order to get past the title of just being a writer. In fact, a philosopher should be prepared to enter into an elenchus on whatever subject he has written about, “εἰς ἔλεγχον ἰὼν περὶ ὧν ἔγραψε,” (278c5) a line that holds the exact same logical importance as the previous phrase (indeed, this and ἔχων βοηθεῖν are just part of a series of conditions required, each as important as the next). If political texts were somehow less privileged to the truth than metaphysical writings, or the reverse, then it would seem that engaging in elenchus would most likely harm, not help, their texts because their bankruptcy would be revealed. Plato is implying here that it is possible for any writing to make legitimate

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<sup>110</sup> My interest in logical positivism (and potentially resultant bias towards) being acknowledged, I actually have much sympathy for this view personally. I do question the ability of dry words, even in a dramatic setting like a dialogue, to convey meaning on matters that may be inherently irrational like aesthetics or metaphysics.



claims for truth and this truth can be reasonably defended by a philosopher. He will not win every point, since that would imply he put everything on the page and thus all that is in his mind is his writing, making him a writer according to Plato. However, he will admirably defend it.

## §2 – *Timaeus* 53c-d7

Vlastos (399-403) mentions a curious passage from Plato's *Timaeus* and explains that this is also often given as evidence for the oral doctrine. His arguments are quite powerful in refuting this view, but I would like, where possible, to expand. This passage is *Tim.* 53c8-d7, and it is sometimes argued that this passage says that the cosmological doctrine of the *Timaeus* is only a "likely account" precisely because it is in written form. This interpretation, however, falls apart quite immediately at 29b3-c3 where it is said quite explicitly that the reason this is only a likely account is because the entire thing is about "process," "becoming." Timaeus is trying to describe how the universe came into being, a task that is utterly impossible because it is not eternal Being and thus no certain knowledge can be had about it. If, in Aristoxenus' account of Plato's lecture, Plato decided to talk about what Timaeus is describing in this dialogue he would still be cursed with presenting only a likely account. The *Timaeus* passage has absolutely nothing to do with writing at all; it has everything to do with the general difficulty of knowing anything about Becoming.

The *Timaeus* passage, however, is not the worst example of careless scholarship in an attempt to establish an oral doctrine. Another example of this is Kramer's (199) use of *Prt.* 356e8-c1, which he claims to be a reference to Plato's unwritten doctrine. He specifically italicizes b1-3, "Ἄρα πρῶτον μὲν οὐ μετρητικὴ φαίνεται, ὑπερβολῆς τε καὶ ἐνδείας οὖσα καὶ

ισότητος πρὸς ἀλλήλας σκέψις,”<sup>111</sup> and b5-6, “Ἦτις μὲν τοίνυν τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη ἐστὶν αὕτη, εἰς αὐτὴς σκεψόμεθα,”<sup>112</sup> presumably because the first has phrases associated with Plato’s unwritten doctrine and the other sounds vaguely mysterious. However, this is not very much of an allusion to the unwritten doctrine. Besides the fact that the relationship between a good soul and geometry is already alluded to in the *Republic*, this passage in fact only confirms the anti-esoteric view that I, Vlastos, Cherniss, and others hold, that any “unwritten doctrine” is just a refinement of what is already in the dialogues. It may be tempting to relate this to the Aristoxenus testimony, and that is a fair comparison because you find there a relation between the Good and mathematics established (though the precise connection is unclear). For Kramer to make this evidence advance his thesis in any way at all he would have to broaden his project to the point of saying the truism that extended conversations with an author or teacher will usually yield more answers than reading their writings alone.

I would also like to look at Kramer’s specific offering of *Tim.* 53c4-d7. Here Timaeus the Pythagorean states that all triangles derive their origin from two right triangles. He elaborates, saying that these right triangles may be either both scalene or both isosceles. Kramer seems to find in this an allusion to Plato’s “real” metaphysics. However, Timaeus’ discussion on this is really just a recitation of basic geometry, and what he says here is proven in the *Elements* (Bk.1 Prop 6)<sup>113</sup>. Timaeus specifically seems to pick the triangle that creates two isosceles right triangles as the ones that fire is built out of. The passage, however, that is truly interesting says, “τὰς δ’ ἔτι τούτων ἀρχὰς ἄνωθεν θεὸς οἶδεν καὶ ἀνδρῶν ὃς ἂν ἐκείνῳ φίλος ᾖ.” Taylor (*ad* 53d4) translates ἀρχὰς as “property,” but I prefer principle, so my translation runs as follows, “But the

<sup>111</sup> Kramer translates this as, “Is it not evident, in the first place, that it is a measurement because it is a study of excess and defect and equality in relation to each other?” I think this works as a translation and follow it.

<sup>112</sup> Kramer translates this as, “Well, the nature of this art or science we shall consider some other time.”

<sup>113</sup> For a fantastic commentary on this demonstration see Heath 1.255-258 where he also includes Proclus’ proof of the converse.

principles higher than these God knows and men whom God loves.” This passage should be viewed in the light of what was said on *Tim.* 48c2-e1. This is a likely account, and Timaeus is fully ready to say that. Besides that, Timaeus is a Pythagorean so it may not even be Plato giving his thoughts here but rather a Pythagorean who enjoyed concealing their teachings anyway. Taylor (*ad* 53d6-7) gives a great commentary on Pythagorean teachings and how they may relate to Timaeus’ postulation of the triangles as ἀρχαί. He speculates, after delving into geometry that eventually leads to irrational square roots, that Plato may have had Timaeus abstain here because it would involve touching on the quite dangerous topic of “incommensurables” or irrational numbers as we would call them today. This concept proved extremely controversial in Pythagorean circles, so it makes sense for Timaeus to shy away from it. Taylor also does not see in this passage an allusion to Plato’s metaphysics, and neither do I.

### § 3 – *Meno* 76e-77b and *Phaedo* 107b4-10

Another passage included by Kramer in his book is *Meno* 76e-77b1. Kramer wishes to alert us to the allusion to “the mysteries” at e8, the mention of geometric figures at e3, and Socrates fearing that he may fulfill Meno’s request that he give Meno many answers on metaphysics. First, Kramer puts far too much emphasis on Socrates’ reference to the mysteries. Instead, I take it as just stating how difficult learning metaphysics is. If the dialogue ended right here, then Kramer would have a claim to this passage professing the existence of mystery teachings. But considering this comes near the beginning of the dialogue and Plato then goes on and tries to explain precisely the significance of shapes I do not see much here that would help Kramer in any way. Socrates expressing doubt about his ability to explain his ideas can either be taken as Socrates being his usual self-deprecating self, always aware that he is no expert, or it

can be taken similarly to *Prm.* 133a where Parmenides discusses how difficult it is for anybody to talk precisely on metaphysics, especially on the Ideas.<sup>114</sup> Either of these interpretations work, but Kramer's does not.

The next passage in line is *Phaedo* 107b4-10. Here Kramer translates b3-4, “Οὐ μόνον γ', ἔφη, ὦ Σιμμία, ὁ Σωκράτης, ἀλλὰ ταῦτά τε εὖ λέγεις καὶ τάς γε ὑποθέσεις τὰς πρώτας καὶ εἰ πισταὶ ὑμῖν εἰσιν, ὅμως ἐπισκεπτέαι σαφέστερον,” as “‘not only that, Simmias,’ said Socrates, ‘but our first assumptions ought to be more carefully examined, even though they seem to you to be certain.’” However, I believe Kramer runs astray here in his interpretation, and I think it comes from his mistranslation of ὑποθέσεις. He translates it, together with πρώτας as “[first] assumptions,” but this misses the mark and a better translation would be “proposals” or just the Anglicization of the Greek, “hypotheses.” “Assumptions” sounds too certain and doctrinal, which is exactly what Socrates is saying we should avoid at the moment, since even he has “private misgivings.” These hypotheses discussed, however, are not the mysterious ones Kramer speculates on. 107a says quite clearly that it is about the immortality of the soul. If that were not enough to convince him that these hypotheses have nothing to do with the idea-numbers, he can simply look at c1 which begins, “Ἀλλὰ τόδε γ', ἔφη, ὦ ἄνδρες, δίκαιον διανοηθῆναι,” “‘It is right then,’ he said, ‘men, to think [that if the soul is immortal]...’” which leads into a much more thorough defense of Plato's conception of the soul. This is another passage that has nothing to do with the oral doctrine and which Kramer proffers because it has certain “buzzwords” like ὑποθέσεις which he associates with the esoteric thesis.

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<sup>114</sup> With this interpretation of the *Parmenides*, Parmenides includes all metaphysical conversation, not just the Ideas. The philosophic gymnastics performed are exactly an attempt to sharpen our abilities so that we may speak more precisely on metaphysics.

§ 4 – *Republic* 506d-507a and 509c9-11

Kramer cites two passages from the *Republic*, 506d2-507a2 and 509c9-11. Now, the first passage is indeed somewhat interesting and poses something of a challenge. Glaucon here appears quite disappointed since Socrates does not want to describe what the Good actually is. He says that it is too ambitious a task for the *Republic*. However, there are several problems with Kramer’s interpretation. First, notice what Glaucon says at e6-7, “Ἄλλ’, ἔφη, λέγε· εἰς αὐθις γὰρ τοῦ πατρὸς ἀποτείσεις τὴν διήγησιν.”<sup>115</sup> Socrates is not saying that it would be truly impossible for him to give an account of the Good, but rather it would be tremendously difficult and he does not feel prepared for that yet. This is similar to the sentiments expressed in *Prm.* 133, but it does contradict the Digression, especially 343d where it takes quite a harsh tone toward any attempt to describe the Ideas (or “Fifth”), much less the Good. This is in fact an argument that helps discredit the Digression because even the *Republic* implies an account is doable, if a herculean task.<sup>116</sup> Secondly, Socrates says (and Kramer conveniently does not italicize this) that he is willing to discuss “an offspring of the Good, and extremely like it,” (e4). How else are we supposed to interpret this, except to conclude that the *Republic* gives us a starting point for understanding Plato’s metaphysics and that the true nature of the Good is not far from what we get in the *Republic*?<sup>117</sup> The other *Republic* passage can be dispatched quite easily. Kramer forgets that this passage is said in Book 6, only a bit more than halfway through the dialogue and before the Divided Line analogy is even brought up. Of course Socrates has much more to say! Secondly, where Socrates says he may forget things but he will try his best, he misinterprets the

<sup>115</sup> Translating quite literally here, “But,’ he said, “explain [the thing extremely like the Good], for you can give an account of the parent [aka the Good] later.” What follows is a play on “ἀποτείσεις τὴν διήγησιν.”

<sup>116</sup> “ἄλλ’, ὦ μακάριοι, αὐτὸ μὲν τί ποτ’ ἐστὶ τὰγαθὸν ἐάσωμεν τὸ νῦν εἶναι—πλέον γὰρ μοι φαίνεται ἢ κατὰ τὴν παροῦσαν ὀρμὴν ἐφικέσθαι τοῦ γε δοκοῦντος ἐμοὶ τὰ νῦν.” Notice that Socrates says that to arrive to his account of it is too big a task. His response to Glaucon is merely pragmatic (that it would not be practical to give a satisfactory account of the Good) and not really philosophic at all.

<sup>117</sup> Of course, the last leg of the journey to discovering the Good is the longest, something Socrates makes clear in the *Republic*. However, the point is that the *Republic* gives one a solid base for pursuing the Good.

humility of Socrates for the sign of a substantial oral doctrine.

§5 – *Parmenides* 136d-e

The next passage comes from *Prm.* 136d4-e3. Here Zeno says Socrates should ask Parmenides to make the deductions instead, but said that it is lucky they are in a more intimate environment, because otherwise it would not be appropriate. I have a difficult time believing Kramer would even offer this passage, as his emphasis on the phrases used in the passage is flagrantly reckless. He italicizes this passage, “For it is not suitable for him to speak on such subjects before many...for the many do not know that except by this devious passage through all things the mind cannot attain to the truth.” The passage in the ellipses that he did not italicize just says, “especially at his age.” I could point out that this side comment on his age suggests that his hesitancy to talk about “such subjects” has nothing to do with them being particularly esoteric but rather because it may be stressful on Parmenides, who is indeed quite old. I could also point out that Proclus (*Comm. Prm.* 5.1023-1024) disagrees with Kramer on this and does not think Plato has a separate esoteric doctrine outside the dialogues but rather that philosophy in general can look quite bizarre and ridiculous to the many.<sup>118</sup> However, for the best refutation of this use of the passage one can just look at the protasis of this contrary to fact conditional, something Kramer forgot to italicize, “εἰ μὲν οὖν πλείους ἦμεν, οὐκ ἂν ἄξιον ἦν δεῖσθαι,” “If there were

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<sup>118</sup> Proclus writes on this, “Οὕτω δὲ καὶ οἱ Πυθαγόρειοι τῶν λόγων τοὺς μὲν ἔφασκον εἶναι μυστικοὺς, τοὺς δὲ ὑπαιθρίους· καὶ οἱ ἐκ τοῦ Περιπάτου τοὺς μὲν ἐσωτερικοὺς, τοὺς δὲ ἐξωτερικοὺς· καὶ αὐτὸς Παρμενίδης τὰ μὲν Πρὸς ἀλήθειαν ἔγραψε, τὰ δὲ Πρὸς δόξαν· καὶ ὁ Ζήνων δὲ τοὺς μὲν ἀληθεῖς ἐκάλει τῶν λόγων, τοὺς δὲ χρειώδεις,” (5.1024.6-13). “Even the Pythagoreans said that some of their discourses were mystical, but others “open air” [following Morrow 372], and the Peripatetics had some esoteric doctrines, but others exoteric. And Parmenides himself wrote one According to the Truth, but the other According to Opinion, and Zeno as well said some of his arguments to be true, but others χρειώδεις.” All of these but Zeno are supported in other sources. See Iamb. *Vit. Pyth.* 245-247 for the Pythagoreans. For Parmenides see Diog. Laer. 9.22 and Parm. B1.28-30. I leave χρειώδεις untranslated. Morrow translates it as “tactical,” but it is generally found to mean “needful” (see LSJ entry). I leave the reader to translate it as he or she likes. Morrow (372 n.44) speculates this comment about Zeno may be a reference to his *Forty Logoi*, which is a reasonable theory I think.

more of us, it would not be fair to ask him,” (136d6-7).<sup>119</sup> What follows is a colon and then “ἀπρεπῆ γὰρ...” which is the start of Kramer’s italicized section. This shows that there are not too many people here to have Parmenides give the deductions, a comment Zeno expands on by pointing out Parmenides’ old age and that philosophy looks strange to many people. Parmenides does relent and lets Aristotle answer the questions instead, after which a bizarre and very difficult series of deductions begin about the One and the Many. This is the point Kramer forgets, that the dialogue actually does perform discussion that would strike most people as exceedingly odd. His italicizing suggests that because there are more people these more difficult teachings are not covered in the dialogue when in fact he ignores that it is a counterfactual and that they actually do attempt these more difficult studies. The *Parmenides* is often remarked on for how bewildering its second half is as it reaches the height of compression and austerity. It does indeed look strange to us, just as Zeno said it would. Once again, a passage is offered as proof of an esoteric doctrine beyond normal argumentation and writing when in fact the passage, if studied in its context, leads to the opposite conclusion.

#### § 6 – *Statesman* 284a-e

Kramer also proffers *Polit.* 284a1-e8. The passage is quite abstract, with a discussion of the relationship between excess, deficiency, and the “standard of the mean.” This discussion between a young Socrates and the Eleatic is a puzzling one, but what is even more puzzling is what Kramer actually sees in this passage as he sees the phrase “standard of the mean” to be esoteric and alluding to another doctrine. In particular, the sentence, “Ὡς ποτε δεήσει τοῦ νῦν

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<sup>119</sup> I translate ἄξιον as “fair” because it better emphasizes Zeno’s point that it is not right to make the “old race horse” Parmenides go through the deductions again due to his age. A more literal translation would be “worthy,” but I think in this context, with Zeno trying to get Socrates to be less demanding on Parmenides, “fair” would be somewhat more appropriate.

λεχθέντος πρὸς τὴν περὶ αὐτὸ τὰκριβὲς ἀπόδειξιν,” which Kramer translates as “That sometime we shall need this principle of the mean for the demonstration of the exact itself,” is particularly intriguing to him. Coupling this with the italicized phrase “ὅτι δὲ πρὸς τὰ νῦν καλῶς καὶ ἰκανῶς δείκνυται, δοκεῖ μοι βοηθεῖν μεγαλοπρεπῶς ἡμῖν οὗτος ὁ λόγος,” which Kramer translates as “But our belief that the demonstration is for our present purpose good and sufficient is, in my opinion, magnificently supported by this argument.” The italicized parts of the sentence reads, “[The demonstration is] for our present purpose...sufficient.” The way Kramer renders it sounds as though Plato is trivializing the dialogue and that there is a whole other demonstration that is much better. Besides the fact that Plato uses the word καλῶς to describe the demonstration, which suggests it is more than just a throw away argument for the *hoi polloi*, this passage is echoed elsewhere, especially *I Alc.* 130d. As Campbell (105 ad 284d2) points out, the *Philebus* seems to make it quite clear that the absolute standard is allied with Reason and the Idea of the Good. However, even if we take Kramer’s tone that the demonstration is only just enough we find illustrations elsewhere that show Plato complains about the dialectic but confesses to not having much else (e.g. *Gorg.* 508d ff.). Plato is commenting on the connection between ethics, the arts, and their connection to the Good, if one reads this passage in light of the *Philebus*. He professes, however, that his methodology is not the best. Kramer it seems would assume that, because the dialogue’s method is admitted to not be the greatest, he must have a secret one that is stronger. That does not follow, however.



### § 7 – *Laws* 894a1-5

The last passage Kramer offers is *Laws* 894a1-5. This passage, if read in the truncated and decontextualized way Kramer presents it, seems to be quite obscure and metaphysical. Unfortunately, the passage is clearly placed in the context of discussing motion, specifically delineating the different sorts of motion. If the generally accepted theory that Plato wrote the *Laws* at the end of his life and did not finish it, then Plato most likely knew that Aristotle denied the ability of the soul to move in space (*De Anim.* 408a30 ff.). The first stage is the initial movement of the soul in the body, the second is the soul’s communication with the body, and the third is the body’s actual movement in space. The language here is certainly rather odd, but as England (*ad* 894a1) notes it is actually somewhat geometrical and coincides with Aristotle’s discussion of Plato’s metaphysics at *Met.* 992a21 where he says geometry postulates a thing “without parts or magnitude.” The connection between intangible, invisible movement of the soul and sensation remains quite obscure, and one is advised to read England’s commentary on this passage, which goes into much detail. Suffice to say, however, this refers to quite clearly the soul and makes perfect sense within the *Laws* without speculating that it refers to something else.<sup>120</sup>

### § 8 – Closing Remarks on the Esoteric Doctrine Hypothesis

When it comes to the question “Did Plato possess a secret oral doctrine that he considered simply beyond the bounds of writing,” I believe, based on the discussion above of all the significant evidence supposedly attesting to such a thing, that the answer is a firm “no.” If this is true, however, then the Digression would seem to suffer a quite terrible blow to its

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<sup>120</sup> For an excellent discussion of *Laws* 894a, see Skemp (99, 104).

credibility. I am, however, not finished with the Digression. The claim to oral teachings is perhaps the most famous and philosophically significant part of the whole passage. However, there are other interesting philosophic aspects to the Digression I will be analyzing some of these other issues, with the next most important topic being the epistemology espoused in the Seventh Letter, particularly the way the writer describes “The Fifth.” After that, I hope I will have established that the Digression is almost certainly an interpolation, which will lead me to my last subject, determining the culprit, or at least discovering the general origin of the Digression.

## Ch. 5 – The Digression’s Unplatonic Philosophy

### § 1 – A Brief Schematic of the Digression’s Epistemology

Before launching into an extended discussion of the epistemology of the Digression, it would be prudent to give a cursory guide through the Digression’s argument. The Digression argues that there are five main levels of knowledge. The lowest level is the name (343a). The author provides “circle” as an example and continues with it throughout the whole passage. The word “circle,” even when taking into account etymology, is at its heart just a word, a series of formations by the tongue and mouth that has no intrinsic meaning. However, words are still quite important because they construct language.<sup>121</sup> However, when discussing a name, it is important not to apply it to the visible object but the ideal because the physical object is always inferior to the model.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> This discussion of names is reminiscent of Hermogenes in *Crty.* 435d. The importance of names for knowledge can be seen in *Soph.* 263e.

<sup>122</sup> The writer explains in the instance of the circle because, “ὄν ἔνεκα νοῦν ἔχων οὐδείς τολμήσει ποτὲ εἰς αὐτὸ τιθέναι τὰ νενοημένα ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ταῦτα εἰς ἀμετακίνητον, ὃ δὴ πάσχει τὰ γεγραμμένα τύποις. τοῦτο δὲ πάλιν αὖ τὸ νῦν λεγόμενον δεῖ μαθεῖν,” (343a1-5). i.e. any drawn circle will have straight edges, no matter how small they may be. A circle is a shape where every point around its circumference is the same distance from the center. When lines are introduced, this is no longer the case. Guthrie (3.267) speculates that the writer was probably thinking of Protagoras’ denial that a circle touches a straight line at only one point (see Guthrie 2.486 as well).

After name comes the second level of knowledge, definition. Definitions are basically a compound of names along with other parts of speech. The point of a definition is to state the essential attributes of an ideal. When one hears the word “circle” one recalls the definition of a circle: A shape whose extremities are always equidistant from the center. Guthrie notes at 405, “For Socrates, the ability to define was itself proof of knowledge, but in Plato... this was not enough, let alone the mere names which satisfied Cratylus and his neo-Heraclitean friends.”<sup>123</sup>

After definition comes the third level of knowledge, image. In the example of the circle, the image is a drawn circle on the ground. The image may work for rudimentary visualization, but it is vastly inferior to the original model. The image is still hindered by the imperfections of the physical world and there is actually a better image out there. For an example of this see *Rep.* 510d where Plato discusses the activities of true mathematicians. The digression writer’s use of a circle here is especially appropriate and recalls the mathematical flavor of Plato’s thought that runs throughout his dialogues, most of all in the *Timaeus*.

Fourth comes, “ἐπιστήμη καὶ νοῦς ἀληθῆς τε δόξα περὶ ταῦτ’ ἐστίν,” or “awareness, true knowledge and belief on these existing things,” (342c5).<sup>124</sup> The Digression stresses that these all must be grouped together because they are neither knowable through the spoken word or through

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<sup>123</sup> The Greek that introduces the concept of definition is this, “λόγος δ’ [ἔστιν τῶν ὄντων ἐκάστου] τὸ δεύτερον, ἐξ ὀνομάτων καὶ ῥημάτων συγκείμενος.” “Secondly, [each object which exists] has a definition, which is made out of names and predicative phrases.” The Greek is somewhat ambiguous on this point because initially it seems ῥήματα in *Soph.* 262b is restricted only to verbs. However Guthrie (3.405 n.1) and von Fritz (443 n.18 see Guthrie 405) suggest that it includes all other types of words except adjectives and nouns which are comprehended under ὀνόματα. Two points on this: First, I do not think that 262b should be read so strictly as to preclude other predicative phrases except for simple verbs. Predicate nominatives like “is the king” could also be included for instance and Socrates point would remain the same. Secondly, I think any attempt to narrow down which words are allowed puts us in danger of importing anachronistic conceptions of logic and language into Attic Greek which has its own important logic (Reading fr. B8 of Parmenides and discovering the uses of *esti* in Greek can be offered proof enough on this point). Because of this, I think the much broader phrase “predicative phrases” works better and is, philosophically and philologically, a safer bet.

<sup>124</sup> I totally acknowledge that this is hardly an ideal translation because ἐπιστήμη and νοῦς have very similar translations in English and I was attempting to differentiate them somewhat. Guthrie seems to make it a general policy to keep νοῦς in its original Greek because of its complexity. He stresses that, “[Νοῦς] is not the ability to reason things out to a conclusion; it is... what gives an immediate and intuitive grasp of reality, a direct contact between mind and truth,” (4.253; see also Guthrie 4.421, 425, 514, and 5.406 n.2).

physical shapes. Instead, they are found in the mind which clearly distinguish them from the other three. This seems remarkably strange at first since the *Republic* (e.g. 477b) goes to great lengths to separate knowledge and true belief out, with the first concerning the Forms and the second the physical world. Guthrie comments on this that, “One could not wish for a clearer proof that to the end of his life Plato thought of the Forms not as concepts or universals but as independently existing realities,” (5.406) I will say much more on this fourth level, but we shall see how well Guthrie’s claim stands up.

Lastly comes the “Fifth,” highest level of knowledge, “ὃ δὴ γνωστόν τε καὶ ἀληθῶς ἔστιν ὄν,” “The object which is knowable and is truly existent,” (342a8-b1). The Digression writer later enumerates (342e1) the things we should attempt to acquire before we can have knowledge of this Fifth. The list is fairly lengthy and includes shapes, colors (cf. *Crty.* 423e), virtues, elements like fire and water (*Tim.* 49a-51c), all physical objects regardless of origin, living creatures, actions, and events. These things, if one recalls the model the Demiurge uses in the *Timaeus* (30c-31a), are all existent in that model and thus exist now. However, while our mind seeks what the object is, words can only convey what it is like. One of the most strikingly terse phrases that sound straight out of German Idealism occurs here. The writer argues that words can only explain ποιόν τι, not τί (343b8-c1). This inadequacy of language is fairly negligible when conversing on the level of the Fourth (343c7), but we encounter danger when we try to lift words to the Fifth.<sup>125</sup> However, it is not through just discussion and hard work that one gets to this

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<sup>125</sup> This reminds us of the cave in the *Republic*. Specifically, Socrates says that the ones who come down from the sunlight, full of enlightened knowledge, will look ridiculous and sound bizarre to those still in the cave (517d). Simple words and propositions cannot explain what the escapee has seen, only through “experience” can one comprehend what truly is. This reminds me of Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* when he gives a definition of language (prop. 6 ff.) that is seemingly extremely paltry and restrictive (e.g. observe what he says on logic 6.1 ff. esp. 6.1251) but says that things which escape our senses are inherently unverifiable in that way (4.002, 4.003, 4.01) and consequently are beyond the narrow reach of language (4.003, 7). One must “see” the mystical; you cannot “tell” it. In fact, it is a bad idea to speak on these matters as one will be inherently unclear. I do not want to suggest Wittgenstein is some sort of Platonist (the two fundamentally disagree on what to do with philosophy now

highest level of knowledge. The traveler has to have a good nature as well; he must have a natural affinity for his subject (343e7) or else “not even Lynceus himself could make such people see,” (344a1). Also, even if one does have a good nature one must also be intelligent enough to reach these great truths. As Guthrie keenly points out, this has both Empedoclean<sup>126</sup> and Pythagorean<sup>127</sup> overtones. Philosophy, then, is not just a slate of truths one should learn. It is a lifelong exercise and process and only the privileged elect can accomplish it. Working together through conversation and hypothesis-testing is the way to cause the truth to flash on the soul like a flame (341c-d; 344b). This last point sounds awfully exclusionary as a philosophy, but it is not totally without precedent in Plato. However, later I will be taking issue with specifics of its methodology.

Now, immediately there are several aspects of the epistemology espoused in the letter that are quite different from the dialogues. For one, the Digression calls the Ideas the “Fifth.” It is used five times in total: 342a8, 342d2, 342e2, 343a7, and 343d2. However, it is not used even once in the rest of Plato to refer to the Ideas. This is an obvious difference, but perhaps not one with any deeper, more significant deviation.

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that it is not entirely in the grasp of verbal exposition), but there is an interesting affinity here between the two on this point.

<sup>126</sup> Guthrie does not cite any specific examples of what he means by this statement, but perhaps I can. There are several fragments that show Empedocles believed one must have the right nature to learn. The first and most salient parallel is B110 (DK31 B110 = Hily. *Ref.* 7.29.26), especially lines 17-18, “αὐτὰ γὰρ αὐξεῖ ταῦτ’ εἰς ἦθος ἕκαστον, ὅπη φύσις ἐστὶν ἐκάστωι,” “for these will grow grow in each character, according to what is each one’s nature.” The Empedoclean connection between soul and knowledge is captured succinctly with B4.4-6 (Clem. *Misc.* 5.18), “ἀλλὰ κακοῖς μὲν κάρτα μέλει κρατέουσιν ἀπιστεῖν· ὡς δὲ παρ’ ἡμετέρης κέλεται πιστώματα Μούσης, γνῶθι διασσηθέντος ἐνὶ σπλάγγνοισι λόγιοι.” “Also, bad men very much do not respect authority, but as the promise of our Muse bids, know, analyzing the reason in your heart.” The word λόγιοι is as usual problematic here due to its many meanings, but I hope I did a decent job rendering it.

<sup>127</sup> Similar to my note on Empedocles above, I will attempt to provide fragments that support this. The unique lifestyle Pythagoreans were famous for leading (DK14 10 = Plato *Rep.* 600a8-b4) speaks to this along with Pin. *Olym. Odes* 2.57-77. Unlike with Empedocles, the reliable evidence on Pythagoras is so lacking that any attempts to find more evidence to support finer questions (especially of ones on method or epistemology) is tough and can easily lead to importing what you want to see into the text.

## § 2 – A Fair Attempt at Defending the Digression’s Epistemology

However, while I do ultimately think that the Digression is an unplatonic interpolation, not all criticism of it is correct and there are numerous things in support of it. To mention some examples, especially in the realm of terminology, Boas (456), who is the main source of these criticisms, says “ἐπιχείρησιν” (341e1), which I define as either “undertaking” or “task,” is Aristotelian because it appears in *Topics* 111b16, 139b10. But he misses an earlier reference to it in Plato, specifically at *Laws* 631a2.<sup>128</sup> The use of name, definition, and essence can be found in *Laws* 895d4-5 and *Prm.* 142a.<sup>129</sup> Also, the use of the sensual representation has a very similar description at *Rep.* 534c.<sup>130</sup> The Digression would not have had a chance at being taken seriously if it did not possess even passing resemblances to “standard” Platonic doctrine found in the dialogues. The author of it is far more careful than that. The difficulty of knowing the Ideas (342b ff.), that neither name, definition, image, or intellect lead to it, does remind one of *Prm.* 133b where Parmenides mentions this as “the worst difficulty” with the young Socrates’ theory. The entire exchange that occurs in the *Parmenides* on this topic is encapsulated quite admirably in this passage<sup>131</sup> and it does set up the rest of the letter’s epistemology.<sup>132</sup> Another thing about

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<sup>128</sup> I also (obviously) part with his curt dismissal of the Digression in a single paragraph. While I think it is certainly an interpolation, I would hardly say it is “meaningless,” (456). Regardless of whether one accepts my thesis or not, I believe it is obvious that there is a seasoned philosophic hand behind this Digression.

<sup>129</sup> The passage from the *Laws* read as follows, “Ἐν μὲν τὴν οὐσίαν, ἐν δὲ τῆς οὐσίας τὸν λόγον, ἐν δὲ ὄνομα,” “The first is the thing which [the object] is, second what we say it is [the definition], and third is the name.” I do not agree with Edelstein’s (87) translation of “οὐσίαν” as essence as it sounds rather Aristotelian. However, I acknowledge that the phrase is compact and something like the more Kantian “thing-in-itself” is plausible, if anachronistic as well. The second passage is 142a1-3 and takes the form of the complex deductions between Parmenides and Aristotle’s.

<sup>130</sup> “ἀλλ’ εἴ πη εἰδώλου τινὸς ἐφάπτεται, δόξῃ, οὐκ ἐπιστήμῃ ἐφάπτεσθαι, καὶ τὸν νῦν βίον ὄνειροπολοῦντα καὶ ὑπνώττοντα, πρὶν ἐνθάδ’ ἐξεγρέσθαι, εἰς Ἅιδου πρότερον ἀφικόμενον τελέως ἐπικαταδαρθεῖν,” (534c5-d1). “But if he obtains some image of it, you will say it is through belief, not knowledge, because he is now dreaming and sleeping during his current life, before he comes out of sleep, he will have arrived in Hades and go to sleep completely.” Beside the allusion to Hades, this does admittedly look like what is said at 342b2.

<sup>131</sup> Is it any wonder that Proclus (4.924.27-30) cites the Seventh Letter to explain this passage of the *Parmenides*, “Πῶς δὲ οὐχὶ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Πλάτων ἐν Ἐπιστολαῖς, τὸ νοητὸν εἶδος λέγων δι’ ἐπιστήμης μὲν μὴ εἶναι γνωστὸν, διὰ γνώσεως δὲ, δίδωσιν ἡμῖν ἐννοεῖν ὅπως καὶ γνωστὸν ἐστὶ τὸ εἶδος καὶ οὐκ ἐπιστητὸν ἡμῖν.” “After all [following Morrow for Πῶς δὲ οὐχὶ] Plato himself in the Epistles, saying that the knowable Ideas is

the Digression that does give it some credibility is the use of the mathematical object, namely the circle, at 343a-d as an illustration of the inaccuracy of the Four. This is not exactly echoed, and seems to recall Protagoras in ways,<sup>133</sup> but its choice of subject matter and its main point is found easily enough in *Crtl.* 384b-e and *Tht.* 208a. Also, Edelstein (102 n.72) provides a very helpful list of other words in the Digression that find themselves used in very similar ways in the dialogues.<sup>134</sup>

These are all aspects of the Digression that bolster its credibility, and it would be dishonest of me to suggest that these do not make my job of proving its spuriousness much harder. However, as we have seen above, the idea of an oral doctrine is one thing that the Digression most certainly fails on. But there are other, smaller matters of epistemology that also raise suspicion about the Digression.

### §3 – Philosophic Elitism and Obscurantism

The first is the letter's description of the Fifth's relationship to the thinker. At 343d the letter seems to acknowledge that this description of a mystical "Fifth" that cannot be defined,

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known not by knowledge but rather by understanding, stimulates us to realize that an Idea is an object of understanding and is not of our knowledge." He also offers an interesting guess on the strange use of terminology of calling the Ideas the Fifth by saying the simple numbering of something does not name it or make any claim to knowledge about it.

<sup>132</sup> However, as will be seen below, while the letter shares a similarity with the *Parmenides* on this, the letter's solution to the *aporia* is quite unplatonic.

<sup>133</sup> See mainly *Prt.* B7 for a similar argument against absolute knowledge. B3 and 4 are more minor fragments on this, but they are worth comparing too. Edelstein (89n.44) also provides other helpful thoughts on this matter.

<sup>134</sup> What I place here is a condensed version of Edelstein's list. One should look at his actual footnote for more extensive documentation including helpful further readings from Shorey, Cherniss, and others. Here is the list with relevant parallels in the dialogues: ἐξαίφνης (341c cf. *Symp.* 210e, 341d, 344d), φύσις (344d cf. *Rep.* 597b, 598a, *Phdo.* 103b), τὸ τί (343b cf. *Prt.* 164a), τριβόμενα (344b cf. *Rep.* 435a, *Gorg.* 484b), μόγις (cf. *Phdr.* 248a), εὐμένεσι ἐλέγχοις ἐλεγγόμενα ἄνευ φθόνου (*Phil.* 16a, *Symp.* 210d), πρῶτα καὶ ἄκρα (344d cf. *Tht.* 210e, 202a-b, *Pol.* 268e, *Laws* 892b-c). Πρᾶγμα (which appears at 340c, 341a, 341c, and 344a in the Digression) has different meanings depending on its context. 344a almost certainly is referring to the Fifth, but the other three, with Edelstein, most likely means just the "subject" at hand. For parallels see *Soph.* 262d8-e1 and *Prt.* 330c. I personally think finding a reference to the Ideas in the *Prt.* passage to be a stretch, contra Cherniss (*ap.* Edelstein *ibid.*), so the use of it at 344a may be unique.

seen, or really even discussed or written about is quite perplexing to the reader. In its defense, again, *Prm.* 135a says almost precisely the same thing, admitting that it is understandable for the reader to be bewildered or potentially reject the Ideas as unknowable. However, the letter is nowhere near as optimistic as the *Parmenides*. In 135a, Parmenides says that there are arguments that can convince a skeptic, but they are rather hard to follow.<sup>135</sup> So too in the *Philebus*, where Socrates discusses complications with the Ideas, Socrates says, “ταῦτ’ ἔστι τὰ περὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐν καὶ πολλά... ἀπάσης ἀπορίας αἴτια μὴ καλῶς ὁμολογηθέντα καὶ εὐπορίας ἂν αὐτὸ καλῶς” (15b8-c3),<sup>136</sup> suggesting that they are solvable, even if one is a skeptic. However, look at the letter’s quite negative reaction to any person who tries to give a rational argument about the Fifth, arguments similar to the ones both the *Philebus* and *Parmenides* say are totally acceptable and doable:

“Ἐν οἷς δ’ ἂν τὸ πέμπτον ἀποκρίνασθαι καὶ δηλοῦν ἀναγκάζωμεν, ὁ βουλόμενος τῶν δυναμένων ἀνατρέπει κρατεῖ. καὶ ποιεῖ τὸν ἐξηγούμενον ἐν λόγοις ἢ γράμμασιν ἢ ἀποκρίσεσιν τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν ἀκούοντων δοκεῖν μηδὲν γινώσκειν ὧν ἂν ἐπιχειρῇ γράφειν ἢ λέγειν, ἀγνοούντων ἐνίοτε ὡς οὐχ ἢ ψυχὴ τοῦ γράψαντος ἢ λέξαντος ἐλέγχεται, ἀλλ’ ἢ τῶν τεττάρων φύσις ἐκάστου, πεφυκυῖα φαύλως.”

“In a case where we compel a man to give the Fifth as his answer and explain it, a man who wishes to and is able to upset the argument rules and makes the man who is discussing his view by writing or by speech look to many of his viewers to be without knowledge of the subjects about which he was trying to speak; they are ignorant sometimes of the fact that it is not the soul of the writer or talker that is being refuted but rather the nature of the four, which is naturally false.”

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<sup>135</sup> Proclus (*ad* 135a = 4.975) notes here that one must have a great soul to truly understand the Forms and a greater one still to be able to explain it. However, this again assumes that it is possible to give a *logos* of the Ideas and it is also praiseworthy to be able to do this, an assumption bolstered by Plato when Parmenides say, “καὶ ἀνδρὸς πᾶν μὲν εὐφυοῦς τοῦ δυνασομένου μαθεῖν ὡς ἔστι γένος τι ἐκάστου καὶ οὐσία αὐτὴ καθ’ αὐτήν, ἔτι δὲ θαυμαστοτέρου τοῦ εὐρήσοντος καὶ ἄλλον δυνασομένου διδάξει ταῦτα πάντα ἰκανῶς διευκρινησάμενον.” “Only a man of great advantages will be able to understand that there is a genus and a being by itself in each case, but it will require someone with even greater advantages to discover it and instruct another who has thoroughly examined all of these difficulties,” (*Prm.* 135a7-b2).

<sup>136</sup> “It is these problems concerning the one and the many... that cause great difficulty if not well solved and prosperity if they are well solved.” I prefer “prosperity” or “advantage” to Frede’s “progress.” It is also good to remember that “one and the many” is a circumlocution for the existence of the Ideas.



This is a quite different view all together and smacks of a certain elitism as well that one does not find in the *Philebus* or *Parmenides*. However, for an even more stark contrast with the dialogues one only need to look at *Tht.* 202b8-c3:

“Ὅταν μὲν οὖν ἄνευ λόγου τὴν ἀληθῆ δόξαν τινός τις λάβῃ, ἀληθεύειν μὲν αὐτοῦ τὴν ψυχὴν περὶ αὐτό, γινώσκειν δ’ οὐ· τὸν γὰρ μὴ δυνάμενον δοῦναί τε καὶ δέξασθαι λόγον ἀνεπιστήμονα εἶναι περὶ τούτου.”

“When one gets a hold of a true belief without an explanation, his mind thinks truly about it, but he does not realize it. For if one is unable to give and receive an explanation of a thing one has no knowledge about that thing.”

The contradiction is quite obvious here. The Socrates of the *Theaetetus* says that anybody who has knowledge of a thing should be able to discuss it and defend it. If you receive knowledge of something without being able to give an account of that knowledge, your soul may think correctly about it but you do not know it at all. The letter, however, says that if you even try to give an account of the “Fifth” you should be ridiculed because anybody who knows about the Fifth knows that you cannot discuss it.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> With all this distrust of language in the Digression, one must wonder what this writer even thinks about his own words on this passage. The writer says that, “Τούτῳ δὴ τῷ μύθῳ τε καὶ πλάνῳ” and πλάνῳ is often translated as “Digression,” but is that actually the case? Are these few pages, purporting to be the first and only personal explanation of Plato’s epistemology, actually a digression at all or does he perhaps mean something else here? Guthrie translates the word as *mythos*, parting with the LSJ. I agree with Guthrie that the LSJ does not entirely capture the sense of the “Digression,” but I do not believe *mythos* works either. Neither “Digression” nor “mythos” finds support in contemporary Attic authors (see for instance Soph. *OC* 1114, *OT* 67; Eur. *Alc.* 482). However, if I could make my own suggestion I believe “wandering” works because it much better implies a certain meaninglessness. This rendering also has some support in other writers, especially as it pertains to thoughts (esp. Soph. *OT* 67 and Eur. *Hipp.* 283). This is not to disparage the section at all. Rather, it is a direct consequence of what the passage actually contends, that the written word fails utterly at expressing philosophic truths. But, of course, this means that the Digression’s discussion on this regard is also meaningless because, if I truly understand what it is trying to say, then I will have known something about the Fifth, that it is ineffable. The word can also have more negative connotations as well like “to lead astray” (Theoc. 21.43 and 1st Tim. 4:1). This may add another layer of meaning; one should not put total faith in what is said in this section as to do so would be to fall into the very danger the writer is warning against, believing philosophic truths can be accurately conveyed through writing. He writes it as a best attempt, but is aware of its dangers in being taken too seriously. If the Digression has any substantial philosophic meaning, then that contradicts its conclusion that the written word gets us nowhere to the Fifth. This is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s famous statement at the end of the *Tractatus* where he says those who truly understand what he says will throw his book away and pronounce it meaningless (6.53). “Plato” and the Early

Besides the tone of the Digression on this point, the actual solution the letter offers to the problem raised in the *Parmenides* is quite unlike Plato. The letter says that one should study the first Four intensely, “ἡ δὲ διὰ πάντων αὐτῶν διαγωγὴ, ἄνω καὶ κάτω μεταβαίνουσα ἐφ’ ἕκαστον,” (343e1-2).<sup>138</sup> As Edelstein (91) points out, διαγωγὴ makes no appearance in the Platonic corpus. There are similarities with other words that appear, but none of them quite match what is said here. The closest that either Edelstein or I (using TLG’s Simple Textual Search) could find was *Prm.* 136e, “...γὰρ οἱ πολλοὶ ὅτι ἄνευ ταύτης τῆς διὰ πάντων διεξόδου τε καὶ πλάνης,” (136e1-2). But even then 343e1 has a remarkably different tone from 136e and following, primarily because the latter seems much more methodological and rigorous. In the *Parmenides*, Antiphon remembers that Zeno makes the appeal to Parmenides to teach and engage in a “διεξόδου τε καὶ πλάνης” treatment of the truth. What follows are the famous and quite challenging “deductions.” These deductions reach the height of logical austerity and rigor. However, we get no such hints of rigor from the Digression. Instead, we are merely told that we gain knowledge of the Fifth once we grasp the Four “ἀμῶς γέ πως,” in some way. While at 344b we learn that we should rub “each of these objects together,” and “refute them,” we are given absolutely no information on any particular hierarchy or procedure in which we “rub” the Four together.

Frank in his article (esp. 38-40) attempts to identify the teaching method of the Seventh’s

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Wittgenstein would both see their works as a ladder, to borrow Wittgenstein’s imagery. It is useful in so far as it helps you climb towards your goal. After that it is fine to toss it away because “he must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.” (Trans. Pears and McGuinness). What the Digression is trying to express is beyond even the very considerable skills of Plato, or at least the skills of the writer claiming to be Plato. The ineffable nature of the soul is the same way it seems (*Phdr.* 246a). What is often called the Digression is the writer’s best attempt at conveying these truths, but when faced with the crippling failings of the written word, he is reduced to intellectual wandering. Just how mystical is Plato? Howald (34) claims that the writer borders on the poetic in the Digression, but Guthrie disagrees. While I believe the term “Wandering” is more accurate and has more philosophic import, I will stick to convention and refer to it as the “Digression” as it is a rather deeply engrained term and even the LSJ translates it as digression.

<sup>138</sup> The whole clause reads, “But it is the rigorous study of all these, passing in turn from one to another, up and down, which with difficulty implants knowledge...”

Digression with the Platonic dialectic. He argues that the method advocated in the Seventh is the precise same one Socrates uses in Plato's early dialogues. Philosophy is the pursuit of the *arête* (344a), and this is what Socrates aims for as well. Moreover, Frank argues that the Seventh does not say we can learn philosophy through just pure theory, *logoi*, and that the soul is also required. He also says (41 n.9) that the pathway to knowledge discussed in the letter also leads through mathematics, just like in the *Republic*. First, I can find no definitive passage in the Seventh Letter that necessitates the involvement of mathematics, nor does Frank provide one. The use of the "circle" was merely as an example of the Four and the Fifth and Frank may have attached more significance to its usage than was warranted. Secondly, notice that one of the Four is the image, or reproduction, of the Fifth. As we see above, the Digression openly advocates its usage in reaching the Fifth by rubbing the Fourth with the other levels of knowledge. While this process only serves to reveal the inadequacy of the Four, it still is seen as a vital component of the spiritual ascent to the Fifth. This viewpoint contrasts quite sharply with Plato elsewhere including the *Republic* (510b ff, 531d ff.) and *Statesman* (285e). The *Statesman* is even stronger on this point by saying that the Ideas are only reachable by reason alone (286a).<sup>139</sup>

However, much more is required to reach the Fifth than just proper instruction. 343e-344b argues that the personal qualities of the student are important as well. Neither receptivity nor memory will ever produce true knowledge if the student does not have any sort of natural affinity for the truth (344a). This section of the letter, at first, seems quite Platonic. Compare the sentiments of this passage with *Phdo.* 82a-b or *Rep.* 581d and they seem quite alike. 344b, meanwhile, is reminiscent of *Tht.* 87c ff. It appears that there might be at least one solid point of contact between the letter and the dialogues, but the Digression differs on one, truly crucial

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<sup>139</sup> Specifically this line, "τὰ γὰρ ἀσώματα, κάλλιστα ὄντα καὶ μέγιστα, λόγῳ μόνον ἄλλῳ δὲ οὐδενὶ σαφῶς δείκνυται..." "For the things which are without a body, and which are the best and greatest, can be revealed clearly through only reasoning and nothing else," (286a5-7)

point: It contends that there are some people who are alien to the truth. See especially 343e3-344a2, “κακῶς δὲ ἂν φυῆ... οὐδ’ ἂν ὁ Λυγκεὺς ἰδεῖν ποιήσειεν τοὺς τοιοῦτους,” which I translate to, “but if his nature is bad...then not even Lynceus could make such people see these things.” Not only does this passage say that there are some people who simply are not good enough for the truth, it actually goes even farther and declares that most are like this, “ὡς ἡ τῶν πολλῶν ἕξις τῆς ψυχῆς εἰς τε τὸ μαθεῖν εἰς τε τὰ λεγόμενα ἤθη πέφυκεν, τὰ δὲ διέφθαρται,” “And actually the state of many men’s souls with respect to understanding and what is called morals are either by nature bad or corrupted.” (343e3-344a1). Right here we find an elitism like nothing else in Plato. The *Phaedo* (66a, 67b) does talk about the idea of a pure soul, but it makes it clear that it is possible to achieve this purity by cleaning oneself of distracting and hindering elements. If somebody’s nature is bad, the dialogues say that you can at least do something about it and thus nobody is irreversibly alienated to the truth, the Ideas.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Nobody understands this striking difference better than Kant who, while usually a famously mild-mannered person, uses some of his harshest language against the writer of the Digression (he assumes the entire letter is written by the same hand, so his critique is against the letter, indeed perhaps all of the letters judging from the language). He says in his article “Von Einem Neuerdings Erhobenen Vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie” (In English “On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy” see Allison et al. 425-450. All subsequent translations of Kant in this thesis are from these authors) that Plato was an impressive philosopher but “through no fault of his own” became the father of “all enthusiasm by way of philosophy,” a thought Kant explains by saying that Plato did epistemology backwards by postulating the Ideas and using them to derive synthetic *a priori* knowledge instead of starting with *a priori* knowledge and deriving the Ideas from synthetic knowledge (438 = 8:398). Kant seems to credit this mainly to Pythagorean influence and seems to be rather understanding to Plato, given his monumental contributions to Western thought. However, he emphasizes that we should not confuse this Plato with “Plato the letter-writer” whom he accuses of “mystagogue[ry],” saying “who can fail to see here the mystagogue, who not only raves on his own behalf, but is simultaneously the founder of a club, and in speaking to his adepts, rather than to the people (meaning all the uninitiated), plays the superior with his alleged philosophy!” (439 = 8:398). Kant is able to find a certain kinship with Plato, even if he disagrees with his process. However, Kant cannot abide even an ounce of respect for the Digression writer’s petty elitism. This is best shown when he enumerates the “Four” for the Digression writer and then says, “The [writer]...would add ‘yet a fifth’ (wheel to the coach); ‘namely the very object itself and its true being [sc: 342a8-b1],” (438 = 8:398). While it is important to take this sarcastic writing in the context of his feud with Schlosser (see Allison et al. 427), it is obvious what Kant thinks about this self-styled philosopher who feels the need to hide away his doctrine so that it may not become “prey to the envy and stupidity of the public” (344c2-3).

#### § 4 – Plato’s Devotion to the Ideas

Now, throughout all of this discussion of how I find the Digression’s conception of the Ideas to be unplatonic, I have neglected an important counter-argument: Plato could have simply changed his mind very late in his life. Edelstein (101) provides a few examples of this sort of change here, and I will attempt to expand on them in fairness to show that it is a compelling argument that needs to be dealt with. The *Philebus*, *Statesman*, *Sophist*, and *Theaetetus* are probably the primary dialogues to use for discovering any potential substantial change. While I believe I have established well enough that these dialogues do not support the hypothesis of an unwritten metaphysical doctrine, they could well support that Plato altered his theory of the Ideas. Let us first look at *Tht.* 184d, where Plato seems to argue that knowledge is the converging of sensory information into some sort of single nature or “soul.” We receive information, but it is through the active consolidation of this information that our mind comes to grasp that something exists (186b). This soul is even likened to passive wax (191c) where sensory information is etched on it (196d). Ignoring the extraordinary resemblance to Locke’s epistemology here, it is clear that Plato develops a “subjective approach to knowledge in these dialogues,” and it is form of knowledge that does not have much parallel earlier in the dialogues (Edelstein 103). This language of a passive soul where information is written in is also found in the *Philebus* (38e-39b).

In the *Theaetetus* and the *Philebus* we have a reorientation of Plato’s conception of knowledge. However, his readjustment of how the soul achieves knowledge may be passed off as a relatively benign refinement as it is not entirely examined beforehand in other dialogues. However, it is in the *Sophist* and *Statesman* that we find a potential retooling of the Ideas. Specifically, the dialogues focus on the usefulness of naming and defining things and seem to

give empirical observations much more credibility than beforehand. We find this better appreciation at 285e where Plato writes that, “ἀλλ’ οἶμαι... ὅτι τοῖς μὲν τῶν ὄντων ῥαδίως καταμαθεῖν αἰσθηταί τινες ὁμοιότητες πεφύκασιν,” (*Pol.* 285d9-e1).<sup>141</sup> This recognition of the value of “αἰσθηταί ὁμοιότητες” is found elsewhere like *Phil.* 62a where Socrates seems to imply the converse of his usual proposition that we cannot have true knowledge until we ascertain the Forms. In this passage, he says we obviously cannot know the Ideas if we cannot tell when something is imitating it. We may actually know the “divine sphere,” but if we cannot see a human sphere and say “That is a sphere” then we do not possess full knowledge. Sensible objects here are not like Wittgenstein’s ladder where it is useful in so far as you reach the Ideas and then can be safely tossed away. Knowledge of sensible objects is absolutely for gaining true knowledge. Perhaps faint echoes of this can be found in the *Republic* as well. The Philosopher-king will know when the Good is being displayed in the physical Kallipolis. If he cannot practically govern, then he is not a true philosopher, even if he knows the Good.

However, while sensibles seem to gain greater value in these later dialogues, this does not at all imply that the dialectic loses its value. The reference to the “skill of the gods” at *Sophist* 266a and the use of “divisions” at *Statesman* 262c attest this well enough. I do not believe, contra Stenzel (27 ff.), that Plato shows any “Aristotelian” influence in these later dialogues. According to Stenzel, it is in these dialogues where Plato tries to make the Ideas applicable to more things, to the point where “Form” becomes a part of all material objects. Stenzel argues that initially the Ideas were not originally concepts but “[were] confined to such things as accommodate themselves to ethico-teleological consideration, things which have ἀρετή, and that the extension of the ideas to all things so as to approach the notion of ‘concept’ came as the end

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<sup>141</sup> “But I think that for somethings which are there are perceptible likenesses which are there to be easily ascertained.”

of Plato's development of the theory," (Cherniss 1944 v.1 214 n.128). Stenzel especially cites *Prm.* 130b-d as what he sees as proof of this interpretation of the theory since the Young Socrates here does not extend the Ideas to more "vulgar" things like hair and mud (an answer Parmenides scolds him for at 130e). But, if it is kept in mind that it is a young Socrates here, not the aged one in the early dialogues, then it would seem that the alteration could be the reverse, that actually Plato may have thought the Ideas only applied to ethical matters but then he realized he should expand them out, which we then see in the old Socrates of all the later dialogues. If taken this way, Plato's goal in the *Parmenides* was to tackle a naïve, premature theory, not the ones of his actual dialogues.<sup>142</sup> As can be seen from many passages in the dialogues,<sup>143</sup> Socrates saw finding absolute ethical ideas to be extremely important, but that in no way implies he thought they were the only things that possessed any sort of absolute, eternal ontology. *Rep.* 596a is nearly all the proof needed for this matter as the "usual method" is to find the Ideas in different objects, after which he starts discussing the Ideas of beds and tables. The *Phaedo* is similarly universal (75c-d)<sup>144</sup> where, not only does Socrates provide a wide-ranging list of objects that

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<sup>142</sup>See Cherniss (1936 p.446 ff.) a plausible account of why Plato does seem to at first focus on ethical matters. As we already know from *Met.* 987b1, Socrates himself was most interested in ethical matters. Socrates and Plato cared quite deeply about finding absolute ethical standards, especially in the troubling growth of relativist sophists like Antiphon (*Oxy.* 9.1364 = DK 87 B44; also in Graham v. 2 812-813). One need only survey Democritus' ethical fragments to see the appeal of relativism at the time. At DK 68 B156 (= Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1108f – 1109a) Democritus vehemently disagrees with Protagoras. However, in the Stobaeus document (4.1.33 = DK 68 B248) Democritus seems to slip right back into relativism when he says, "ὁ νόμος βούλεται μὲν εὐεργετεῖν βίον ἀνθρώπων· δύναται δέ, ὅταν αὐτοὶ βούλωνται πάσχειν εὖ· τοῖσι γὰρ πειθομένοισι τὴν ἰδίην ἀρετὴν ἐνδείκνυται." The reference in the last sentence seems to be not to a special, ultimate law but to any sort of law in a society. The phrase "δύναται δέ, ὅταν [ἀνθρώποι] βούλωνται πάσχειν εὖ," "And it can [improve the lives of men], when men desire their own welfare" especially shows the control of the subject over the law. I disagree with Cherniss that we see similar relativism at B56 ("Democrates" 22), "τὰ καλὰ γνωρίζουσι καὶ ζηλοῦσιν οἱ εὐφύεες πρὸς αὐτά," "Those who have the nobility to do so understand and pursue good things," and I think Graham gets the interpretation of this fragment more right in his commentary. However, I think the point is clear that it was quite easy to fall into the trap of relativism at this point and Plato was focused on proving some sort of transcendent, absolute ethical standard.

<sup>143</sup> *Laches* 189e, *Prt.* 330c, 349b, 360e, 361a, 361c, *Euthyp.* 5c-d, 6e, 11a, 15c-d, *Meno* 71a-b, 86c-d. Thanks to Cherniss (1944 p.214) for this helpful and nearly exhaustive list substantiating how important this was to Plato.

<sup>144</sup> "οὐ γὰρ περὶ τοῦ ἴσου νῦν ὁ λόγος ἡμῖν μᾶλλον τι ἢ καὶ περὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ καὶ δικαίου καὶ ὀσίου καί, ὅπερ λέγω, περὶ ἀπάντων οἷς ἐπισφραγίζομεθα τὸ 'αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστι' καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἐρωτήσεσιν ἐρωτῶντες καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἀποκρίσεσιν ἀποκρινόμενοι," "For our current argument is no more about the Equal than about the

have Ideas, he also includes Ideas of size, health, strength, hot, and cold (65d-e; 103c-e. cf. 103b). However, for the clearest proof that the dialectic (by which I mean the systematic testing of hypothesis and definitions with other people) never loses its importance, it can also apply to discovering the Idea of any material thing one only need to look at *Philebus* 59c. Stenzel (97 ff.) leaves this passage out but it is clearly corroborated by *Rep.* 477a, *Phdo.* 66a, and *Sym.* 211a-e. I believe it is clear here that the Ideas, even if they are retooled in some way later on, are never fundamentally altered and that the dialectic is kept at the forefront as the best way to discover this ultimate knowledge.

What potential alterations do the *Sophist* and *Statesman* make to the Ideas? The primary one is that the Stranger seems to imply that the Ideas can have some sort of a soul as he personifies them quite clearly at 248c, and at 250b it seems that Plato is actually endorsing the view that “That which is” resides in the soul and is beyond rest and movement, a view Friedlander would like very much. But in the next passage, the Stranger disputes this theory and general confusion occurs (250e). These retoolings are thought experiments that Plato is conducting. I have found absolutely no passage in any later dialogue that he changed his mind substantially on the Ideas. Aristotle’s testimony, for what it is worth, supports this only further. Aristotle clearly shows that the Ideas were held to the entirety of Plato’s life. The Ideas are independent of the state of the soul and can be discussed since the knowledge is not predicated on the soul’s intrinsic worthiness. As we have seen, the Digression writer holds no such position. He in fact says quite straightforwardly at 341c that learning about the Fifth is a mere experience and not a knowledge that can be communicated in any sort of way. Contrast this, however, with

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Beautiful itself and the Good itself and the Just and the Pious and, as I saw, about all of those things which we mark with the seal of ‘what it is’ both when we are positing questions and in answering them,” (c10-d3). Notice that the phrase “ἀπάντων ὅς ἐπισηραγίζόμεθα τὸ ‘αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστι’” has no real limits at all and the items in the list previous do not necessarily have anything to do with ethical matters, particularly the “ὀσίον” or “Beautiful.”



*Rep.* 519c, 505a, and *Symp.* 211c where the Ideas are seen as the greatest sort of knowledge. As Edelstein writes, “Plato...does not become silent before the vision of the realm of the Ideas” (105). If you gain knowledge of the Ideas, you want to discuss them and continue learning and not be dogmatically satisfied with some mystical experience.<sup>145</sup>

#### Ch. 7 – Philo of Larissa: The Culprit?

With all of this, I hope to have demonstrated that the epistemology and metaphysics espoused in the Digression are quite alien to Plato. At last, I believe we can now proclaim that the Digression is not from Plato’s hand. It is indeed an interpolation. However, this raises one last question: Who is the culprit? This is a question that I do not have as many answers on. There are certainly many candidates to choose from and more than a few writers have tried their hands at advancing one. I find determining who actually wrote something to be a much more difficult and inherently more precarious task than proving forgery. However, I would like to present my own candidate. In contrast to authors like Tarrant who place the letter in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD, I instead place mine farther back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC, to a former head of the Academy: Philo of Larissa. This is hardly an expected answer. Indeed, Tarrant in his article in *Dionysius* (70 n.16), while making an off-hand comment about Philonian thought’s similarity to the Seventh Letter, exclaims somewhat facetiously, “One is even forced to consider the possibility that the digression was forged to suit Philo’s purposes!” Tarrant leaves it at that and obviously does not think Philo forged the letter, but I believe may have actually stumbled upon the truth of the matter.

Our principal source on this matter, other than the letter, will be Cicero. There are three

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<sup>145</sup> Edelstein reminds me of Fr. 95 (Rose) of Aristotle where Aristotle says that those who are inducted into the mysteries do not actually learn anything as such. Rather, they possess a certain frame of mind. This depiction of mystical experiences is further supported by Plutarch (*Eclip. Orac.* 422c) and Plotinus (6.9.3).

reasons for this. The first is that we have definitive proof that he was quite aware of the *Seventh Letter*. Secondly, while we do not find Cicero engaging in the deep Platonic scholarship of Plutarch, we do see that he is not afraid to discuss Plato's epistemology at decent length as can be seen in the *Academica*. The third reason is that the *Academica* is a fascinating text that relays a fictional debate between Philo of Larissa and Antiochus of Ascalon, a rival Platonist and a member of the "dogmatic school."

Before a proper exposition of why Philo could well be the mysterious author of the Digression, a brief historical account would be beneficial. As we learn from Philodemus, Philo became head of the "Third" or "New Academy" in about 110 BC. However, with the outbreak of the Mithradatic Wars, Philo left Athens and travelled to Rome where he counted amongst his students Cicero (*Cic. Ad Fam.* 13.1, *Ac.* 1.4, *Brut.* 89, *Tusc.* 2.3). The Academy at the time of Philo's ascension was one that had taken a quite stridently skeptical line under its previous head Clitomachus, who really just extended the skepticism of Carneades (*Sex. Emp. Adv. Math.* 7.159). This skepticism was mostly directed towards the Stoics, Epicureans, and the Pyrrhonian school of skeptics. As Tarrant (1981 p.67) notes, this sort of skepticism would prove to be quite unpopular with the Romans. The primary reason for this is that, particularly in the case of Carneades, while he used the dialectic of Plato, he used it only to discredit the Stoic philosophy (*Numenius fr.* 27, *Sex. Emp. Adv. Math.* 7.159-64). He had no intention of constructing any positive system, which the more practically-minded Romans desired. Since the Academy had been destroyed by Sulla in the Mithradatic Wars, Platonism needed to recruit others to survive. It is here that Philo comes into his own as a thinker and as the last scholar of the "Late Academy."

Philo, while not a total skeptic (see *Ac.* 2.60), did possess an esotericism and idealism that would have been much served by the Digression.<sup>146</sup> For instance, he could safely dispatch any theories of “mechanical theories of the acquisition of certain knowledge” by just appealing to 342e2-343e1 (Tarrant 78). The idea that Academic teachers had esoteric teachings while being publicly skeptics was quite common. We possess a work from Numenius (found in *Eus. Pr. Eu.* 13.5) that discusses this matter along with *Contra Academicos* (esp. 3.41,43) where we find the Academic Metrodorus saying that Academics really did possess only an outwardly skeptical attitude to conceal their esoteric teachings.<sup>147</sup> The Digression, particularly around 343c5-8 would have allowed Philo and others to maintain a skeptical appearing attitude (343c4-5 helps on this) while also maintaining that there is at least some accessible knowledge and also a hidden way of “thinking” for the truth-seeker (343c5-8). This last passage is especially important, because we have plenty of evidence (including multiple citations from Cicero)<sup>148</sup> showing that the Philonians saw themselves as “truth-seekers.” On more specific matters, Philo and the Digression have an extraordinary kinship. Note the line at 343c4-5, “ἀπορίας τε καὶ ἀσαφείας ἐμπύμπλησι πάσης ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν πάντ’ ἄνδρα.”<sup>149</sup> In context of the letter, the Digression writer is actually precisely framing the “Fourth,” which is knowledge of the thing. Its inaccuracy may be limitless and confusing, but it is still a knowledge of some sort and thus allows us to answer at least basic, practical questions. This fallibilism is precisely the type ascribed to Philo, who claimed even the

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<sup>146</sup> For proof of this see *Ac.* 2.60, particularly this part of the exchange (2.60.1-2), “Volo igitur videre quid invenerint. ‘Non solemus,’ inquit, ‘ostendere.’” “Well then, I should like to see what they have discovered. ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘it is not our practice to give an exposition,’” (tr. Rackham). This shows that they probably did have some sort of positive doctrine, but were quite secretive about it.

<sup>147</sup> For much more helpful history on the relationship between skepticism and dogmatism in the Academy see Reid *ad* 2.60.2. There is far more evidence to show that Philo had esoteric teachings. See for instance *Stob. Ecl.* 2.39.20 ff. for his moral philosophy, *Cic. De Or.* 1.84-93 and *Ac.* 2.7-9, 35 (esp. 7.4-11 where “Philo” attempts to defend the Academy against the charge of dogmatism). All of this is to say nothing of Aetius’ reports on Academic doctrine that can be found in Diels’ *Dox.* (396b5-7, 17-19, 398b24, 403b8-11).

<sup>148</sup> 1.46, 2.7, 2.9 and fr. 33.

<sup>149</sup> “...To fill all men with all sorts of unclarity and confusion.”

radical skeptic Carneades would concede on matters not related to philosophy but concerned with mundane matters like “Is it Tuesday today?” (Tarrant 1983 p. 94 n.19).<sup>150</sup> However, because they did not believe all knowledge was rationally accessible they subsequently reject all “mechanical” theories of knowledge, just like the Digression (342e1 ff.).<sup>151</sup>

Tarrant (94 n.20) provides helpful information on the obscure but illuminating Anonymous commentary on the *Theaetetus* which corroborates this evidence.<sup>152</sup> In particular, the commentary approves of the Socratic method quite strongly (58.23 ff.) and that its emotional effects are significant (2.9, 58.33-36). If Tarrant’s argument (see n.124) about the date of the commentary is correct and this work is associated with the Philonians, then it seems that the Philonians certainly saw themselves as in the general legacy of Socrates and Plato. They were not Pyrrhonian skeptics, defeating any claims to truth, but rather attempted to find positive knowledge. Also, as can be seen above, the Philonians would have liked the Digression’s denial of writing down ultimate teachings and the elitist, exclusionary attitude towards the student (cf. Pl. Seventh 341c5-e3 and *Ac.* 2.60) along with criticizing any attempt to give an account of what you have learned (341a8-c4).

This fused notion of knowledge, as positive knowledge actually existing but with the impossibility of discovering it through investigation and reason alone, finds a good blend

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<sup>150</sup> There are several citations to collaborate this including Aug. *Cont. Acad.* 2.11 and Num. Fr. 27.57-59 (= Eus. *Prep. Ev.* 14.738d). As Tarrant notes, Philonians were “willing to appeal to general agreement and to the self-evident character of certain truths.” They apparently believed in at least certain axioms of knowledge, most likely ones axioms on things like truth, contradiction, and identity, though I acknowledge I do not have any evidence to support that they did appeal to these axioms of ours. However, see Num. Fr. 28 (= Eus. *Prep. Ev.* 14.739b) for proof of their willingness to appeal to certain obvious truths.

<sup>151</sup> I use mechanical in the sense that there is a predictable, intelligible process by which knowledge is implanted in the brain. It may be through the senses inscribing information on “passive wax” (ala Locke) or through the active translation and orientation of the information in the brain through mechanisms like what Kant presents in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. There are many examples, but I use the word “mechanical” to express a distinctly scientific, intelligible, and “rational” character to knowledge acquisition.

<sup>152</sup> Tarrant has essentially written the book on the Anonymous commentary on the *Theaetetus*, publishing several articles on it. The include the commentator’s discussion of Zeno (*Phronesis* 29.1 1984 p.96-99) and an article on the date of the commentary (*CQ N.S.* 33.1 1983 p.161-187). Thanks to Tarrant’s work, when it comes to discussing Middle Platonism, all roads go through Tarrant and the anonymous commentary on the *Theaetetus*.

between the two rival camps of the Academy, the skeptical and the dogmatic. What is more, Philo's claim to represent the true thought of Plato allows him to respond to Antiochus' radically skeptical critique of Philo. Citing rumors of secret doctrine (*Sex. Emp. Adv. Phy.* 1.234; *Aug. Cont. Acad.* 3.43), Philo can claim that the true teachings of the Academy can only be discovered by somebody old and experienced enough. His former pupil Antiochus is simply not old enough to understand yet. The parallels between this and Plato's relationship with Dionysius is extraordinary. The writer of the Digression calls Dionysius too young (cf. *Aug. Cont. Acad.* 3.43 = *Cic. Ac. Fr.* 21) and ambitious to know better (cf. *Ac.* 2.70; *Plut. Cic.* 4).

I contend that Philo, based on motivations for a wider audience for his brand of Platonism, and his desire to fight off the skepticism of Antiochus, most likely forged the Digression. I admit that this is but a best guess and I am not as certain of it as I am of other conclusions in this essay. I acknowledge as well that I in fact come up with an at least compelling argument against my own thesis: The absence of the Digression from Plutarch. However, I believe that a proper understanding of the state of Platonic thought between Philo and Plutarch (and actually even after him until Plotinus) will help alleviate this problem. Novotny is precisely right in his description of Platonism before Plotinus as a "complex of miscellaneous and heterogenous content, perhaps like the Sophism of Socrates' time," (97). While the Academy, after its initial destruction, tried to resume its activities, its authority had been shattered and the propagation of Platonic and other Greek thought throughout the Roman world only contributed to this as these different doctrines mixed freely with each other. While there was certainly great interest in Platonic thought at this time, the centralization and relative organization of the Academy was nowhere to be found. Subsequently, Platonism became quite

isolated and suffered a sort of philosophic balkanization.<sup>153</sup> What is worse, because many of these Platonists were quite esoteric, they never communicated with each other many times and thus we are forced to rely on secondary info that may in fact be somewhat questionable. Even worse than that, Plutarch and others would not have had too much better information since one usually had to be initiated into these different factions (Tarrant 85).<sup>154</sup> Plutarch would be living in a rather wild intellectual world with no central authorities or common references including which documents were genuinely from Plato, and thus there would be no guarantee that he possessed Philo's forged copy of the Seventh Letter. From the analysis of his silence on the Digression, I think he probably did possess the original. In advancing Philo as a possible candidate, I am thus forced to slightly alter my theory. The nonexistence of the Digression at the time is not why Plutarch is silent on it. Instead, it had not become sufficiently propagated enough and was restricted to a specific school of Platonic thought where it may not have been a major text even there. There were two versions of the Seventh and the more philosophically interesting, if not authentic, version won out. I believe that Philo is quite possibly the writer of the Seventh Epistle's "Philosophic Digression" based on the similarities between the two, his motivation to forge such a passage, and the elegant solution he presents to the distinct silence of Plutarch and other Middle Platonists on it.

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<sup>153</sup> The Philonians hardly helped this sort of intellectual fragmentation. Several passages (Cic. *De Or.* 1.84, *Ac.* 2.60, Fr. 35; Num. Fr. 27.57-59 and 70-72) show how esoteric they really were. Their view on education is completely contrary to Plato's educational methods. Numenius (24.57-64) seems to be aware of the dangers of this esotericism, noting the connection between Plato's perceived unwillingness to clearly express doctrine and New Academic "heresy." I argue that, based on this evidence and others discussed above, the Academy was already splitting up, and the destruction of the physical Academy only accelerated an already inevitable shattering.

<sup>154</sup> Tarrant provides the archetypal Middle Platonist in the form of Eudorus of Alexandria. We have him discussing Plato (Alex. *ad Arist. Met.* 988a10-11), Socrates (Stob. *Ecl.* 2.45.7 ff.), Pythagoreans (Simp. *In Phys.* 181.10 ff.), and Aristotle (Simp. *In Categ.*). The passages on Pythagoras and Plato may give us some clues on his doctrine, but sadly we have absolutely nothing on his actual philosophy. He almost certainly adhered to the typical Platonic esotericism (Cic. *De Or.* 1.84, *ND* 1.11, *Ac.* 2.60) of his day. However, Tarrant (101 n. 70) provides a plausible theory about some of Eudorus. For instance, he seems to be the one responsible for saying that Plato had many voices, but only one opinion (Stob. *Ecl.* 2.49.25-50.1; I find this idea echoed at Diog. Laer. 3.63 as well).

Ch. 8 – “Now that we have come to know this wisdom well enough and have tested it...”

I hope to have provided a convincing case for the spuriousness of the Digression. It is indeed a most fascinating piece of the Platonic corpus, and excising it from the rest of Plato has taken a monumental effort. The letter itself, I believe, is most likely authentic, and I posit that I present several compelling reasons for its authenticity along with criticisms of arguments against it. However, proving the authenticity of the rest of the letter is somewhat secondary to the task of removing the Digression. Only the Digression carries with it a epistemological system so radically different from Plato that its presence in the rest of the corpus dangerously distorts the philosopher’s vision. The esotericism of the Digression is nowhere to be found in Plato, and I find all evidence, including the extraordinarily difficult testimony from Aristotle, contending otherwise to be woefully unreliable and inadequate. However, while the Digression is a forgery, I believe I may have identified its writer: Philo of Larissa. His philosophy and association with the Academy makes him a prime candidate for forging this passage. The Digression is a fake, and Philo of Larissa wrote it.

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