

Chapter Title: What is a philosophical  $\pi\epsilon\tilde{\iota}\rho\alpha$ ? Some reflections on Plato's Seventh Letter 340b-341b

Chapter Author(s): Filippo Foreignanò

Book Title: Plato at Syracuse

Book Subtitle: Essays on Plato in Western Greece with a new translation of the Seventh Letter by Jonah Radding

Book Editor(s): Heather L. Reid, Mark Ralkowski

Published by: Parnassos Press — Fonte Aretusa. (2019)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcmxptk.12>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



JSTOR

*Parnassos Press — Fonte Aretusa* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Plato at Syracuse*

Filippo Forcignanò<sup>1</sup>  
**What is a philosophical πείρα?**  
**Some reflections on Plato's *Seventh Letter* 340b-341b**

The aim of this chapter is to discuss lines 340b-341b of Plato's *Seventh Letter*, which describe the meeting between the philosopher and Dionysius II at the time of his last trip to Syracuse. Plato had good reasons to embark on this journey and to test Dionysius II's love of philosophy: several people worthy of esteem (Dion, Archytas, others from Tarentum, some Athenians) had attested to the fact that the young tyrant was sincerely passionate about philosophy. Plato himself was confident of the possibility that "a young man of native intelligence who has accidentally heard some talk of lofty matters should conceive a desire to live a better life" (see *Seventh Letter*, 339d-e). At any rate, by the time of his last trip Plato was sufficiently used to life's challenges to know that it is always good to test people's reputation and attitudes. Putting Dionysius II to the test was therefore an absolute priority. In this essay, I argue that (i) the πείρα had no theoretical content, but it was a test of Dionysius II's skills, attitude, and way of life; (ii) Dionysius II's book was in itself an indication of his ignorance and inadequacy as a philosopher; (iii) the *Protagoras* offers an interesting and similar use of the verb πειράζω.

The word πείρα, according to the *Lexique de Platon* by E. De Places, has two main meanings: *test* and *proof*. In the first meaning, it is used to say "give proof of one's own quality" (*Laches* 189b5: ἔδωκας σαυτοῦ πείραν ἀρετῆς ἣν χρὴ διδόναι μέλλοντα δικαίως δώσειν, "you have given the proof of your value that one who wants to do things the right way must give"). But the word πείρα also means "to test someone," or "to test one's qualities." It is used this way at *Euthydemus* 275b5, for instance, where Socrates asks his interlocutors to "test Clinias and to discuss with him" (λάβετε πείραν τοῦ μειρακίου καὶ διαλέχθητε ἐναντίον ἡμῶν). In this sense, the verb πειράσθαι is similar to βασανίζειν, in the way it is used in *Laches* 187e6 ff.: being tested by Socrates (ὑπὸ Σωκράτους

---

<sup>1</sup> Filippo Forcignanò teaches History of Ancient Philosophy at the State University of Milan (Italy).

βασανίζεσθαι) implies to account for one's present and past lifestyle. The philosophical *πειρα* is always also an examination of one's life, not only of one's opinions. But it is also possible to use the word to mean "to test something." For instance, in *Charmides* 171a3 we read that the *σώφρων* knows that the doctor has some science, but it is necessary to test what sort it is, because each science is defined as not just a science, but a science of some thing.

Upon his arrival in Syracuse, Plato met Dionysius II precisely in order to verify the young man's passion for philosophy (340a):

When I arrived, I thought my first task was to prove (*ἐλεγχον δεῖν λαβεῖν*) whether Dionysius was really on fire with philosophy (*ἐξημμένος ὑπὸ φιλοσοφίας*), or whether the many reports that came to Athens were false. Now there is a certain way of putting this to a test (*ἔστιν δὴ τις τρόπος τοῦ περὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα πείραν λαμβάνειν*), a dignified way and quite appropriate to tyrants, especially to those whose heads are full of philosophical commonplaces (and I saw at once, upon my arrival, that this was especially true of Dionysius) [transl. Morrow].

In this context *ἐλεγχος* has the same meaning as *πειρα*: test. The verb *πειράζω* with the personal accusative means "to try, tempt a person, put him to a test" (LSJ). In this sense, a *πειρα* is a sort of exam that someone gives to another to verify their skills and attitudes. For instance, when a person asks to join a sports team, the coach routinely asks them to display their abilities, skills, and techniques, in order to evaluate their future contribution to the team, their appropriate role in it and, more radically, whether they should join the team at all. Analogously, when a person asks for admission to a selective school, for instance a famous piano school, it is normal for the teacher to test the prospective pupil: do they have the right motivation? The right skills? Do they understand the tasks required by the school? Do they really have a sincere passion for the discipline? There are many tests and many situations in which it makes sense to be tested in this way. We learn from Plato's dialogues and the *Seventh Letter* that there is also a Platonic philosophical test.

The passages quoted above clarify that the test which Plato has in mind is a well-established test, not an impromptu one. It is a sort of customary evaluation that a philosopher should resort to when meeting a prospective new pupil. Before going into the details of the *πειρα* to which Plato subjected Dionysius II, we have to ask whether there are any similar situations to be found in the Platonic dialogues. We find a similar context and an analogous use of the verb *πειράζω* at the beginning of the *Protagoras*. Let me summarize the context. Hippocrates, son of Apollodorus, shows up at Socrates's home one night, shouting with joy: "Protagoras is in the city!" Socrates tries to downplay the matter: "What do you care? Protagoras hasn't done you a wrong, has he?" [transl. Allen]. Hippocrates answers: "Heavens no, Socrates. Except maybe that only he is wise (*γε μόνος ἐστὶ σοφός*) and doesn't make me so." Socrates replies that it's just a fact of money and persuasion: "If you give him money and persuade him he'll make you wise too" (310d). Of course, Socrates knows very well that this is false (being wise is not the result of having passively followed some lessons), but he teases Hippocrates, who does not understand his interlocutor's irony and indeed asks Socrates to intercede for him with Protagoras. Since the hour is very early, Socrates proposes to while the time away by chatting and taking a stroll in the courtyard. The way Socrates presents this conversation is of the utmost interest for the purpose of this paper:

καὶ ἐγὼ ἀποπειρώμενος τοῦ Ἱπποκράτους τῆς ὀρμῆς  
διεσκόπουν αὐτὸν καὶ ἠρώτων

and I examined Hippocrates, questioning him to test his mettle.

The verb *ἀποπειράομαι* is rather infrequent in Plato: it occurs just eight times in the dialogues, three of which are in the *Protagoras*. In no other passage is it used in relation to a potential pupil in order to test his intentions and skills. It is true that Hippocrates wants to be a pupil of Protagoras, and not Socrates, but this does not change the type of question Socrates submits to him. The most important thing to note is that this verb anticipates two very important occurrences of *πειραν λαμβάνειν* in a passage on the difference between the exegesis of poetry and philosophical discussions, 347c-348a:

Actually, I think discussing poetry is much like attending the drinking parties of worthless and vulgar people. They're unable to associate with each other through their own voice and words, due to their lack of education, so they run up the price of flute girls and spend a great deal for the alien voice of the flute, and associate with each other through such voices as that. But where the drinkers are gentlemen and properly educated, you'll see neither flute girls nor dancing nor harp girls; they're capable of associating with each other in their own voices without this childish nonsense, speaking and listening decorously each in his turn even when they've drunk a great deal of wine. So too a meeting like this, if it consists of men of the sort most of us claim to be, has no need of an alien voice, nor of poets who cannot be questioned about what they mean. The Many adduce them in argument, some claiming the poet means this, others that, arguing about something they cannot test. But those met in familiar intercourse among themselves dismiss this sort of meeting, and test each other by receiving and rendering accounts in discussions of their own (ἐν τοῖς ἑαυτῶν λόγοις πείραν ἀλλήλων λαμβάνοντες καὶ διδόντες). I think you and I should rather imitate people like that. We should set aside the poets and fashion accounts with one another, putting the truth and ourselves to test (δί' ἡμῶν αὐτῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλους τοὺς λόγους ποιεῖσθαι, τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν πείραν λαμβάνοντας).

Not everyone can philosophize. We can't talk philosophy at every social gathering. Philosophy implies testing each other to verify aptitude for participating in such discussions. The *πείρα* has, so to speak, a double value: firstly, it tests the attitude of those who intend to practice philosophy; secondly, it verifies the content of what they say. The *Seventh Letter* describes the Syracusans' way of life in a way that is reminiscent of the bad *synousiai* of *Protagoras* (326b6 ff.):

When I got there and saw the proverbial happy life of Sicilian and Italian tables, with men gorging themselves twice every day

and never sleeping alone at night and practicing all the other habits that go with these debaucheries, I was completely disgusted. For no man under heaven who has followed such practises from his youth could keep his head; so strange a temper is against nature. Nor would he ever learn self-control nor, indeed, acquire any other part of virtue. Nor can any city be at peace [...]

Parties, a lot of wine, the inversion of day and night: this is what the Sicilians call a “happy life.” There are, of course, quite a few differences between Sicilian feasts and Athenian *symposia*, and between the political situation in Greece (and Athens in particular) and that in Syracuse. But in both cases Plato links a dissolute lifestyle with the decline of the city. Plato does not mention poetry in the *Seventh Letter*, but we know that many important poets were invited to Syracuse by Dionysius I, as well as his son. Dionysius II, the scion of the most powerful family in Syracuse, stood, in Plato’s mind, as the embodiment of a non-philosophical city, exactly the opposite of the *kallipolis*.

As is well known, the *δυναστεία* of Dionysius II is described in many sources – by historians as well as Peripatetic philosophers – as being characterised by constant drunkenness.<sup>2</sup> Plutarch quotes<sup>3</sup> Aristotle’s claim that once Dionysius II was drunk for ninety days in a row.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle even defends the idea that Dion acted against the tyrant because he was moved by the Syracusans’ hatred of him; indeed, they hated him because he was always drunk.<sup>5</sup> This information should not be taken literally: the drunkenness of the tyrant is a *topos* in Greek literature. Plato never mentions this aspect in the *Letter*, but it is well known that he is particularly lenient towards Dionysius II and his vices.

---

<sup>2</sup> See [Arist.] *Probl.* XXVIII, 949a, 25-28; Theofr. F 548 Fortenbaugh; see also Athen., X, 435d-436b, Theopomp. *FGrHist* 115 FF 185-88.

<sup>3</sup> *Dio*, 7, 7.

<sup>4</sup> F 588 Rose = F 605, 2 Gigon.

<sup>5</sup> *Pol.* V, 1312a, 4-6.

## What did Plato and Dionysius II say during the *πειρα*?

It is very difficult to answer this question. The *Letter* doesn't give us this information *apertis verbis*. But Plato provides some clues:

1. 341b8-9: "You must present to such a man the whole of the philosophic undertaking, describing what its nature is, and how many difficulties must be surmounted, and how much labor is involved" (δεικνύναι δὴ δεῖ τοῖς τοιούτοις ὅτι ἔστι πᾶν τὸ προᾶγμα οἷόν τε καὶ δι' ὅσων προαγμάτων καὶ ὅσον πόνον ἔχει).
2. 341c2-4: "...marvellous journey which he must at once undertake with all his strength, or life is not worth living" (ὁδὸν τε ἡγεῖται θαυμαστὴν ἀκηκοέναι συντατέον τε εἶναι νῦν καὶ οὐ βιωτὸν ἄλλως ποιοῦντι);
3. d5-6: "while for the opposite kind of life he has a confirmed disgust" (τὴν δὲ ἐναντίαν ταύτῃ μισῶν διατελεῖ);
4. 341a8-b1: "I did not explain all of my philosophy to him" (πάντα μὲν οὖν οὐτ' ἐγὼ διεξήλθον).

Philosophy is a long, difficult, discouraging journey, but it is the best journey one can make. If you live philosophically, you will hate the opposite kind of life. Plato surely taught these things to Dionysius II, but he did not explain all of his philosophy during the first – and last! – conversation. Was the *πειρα* something like "an introductory lesson in Platonic philosophy"? I don't think so. It was just an *aperitivo* to his philosophy, as people say in Italy.

On a more serious note, Plato did not explain to Dionysius II the content of his philosophy, except for a few vague hints. But he clearly explained that philosophy is a serious and strenuous task; a task that concerns one's way of life and happiness, which is why a true philosopher must be ready to change her or his life. For this reason, I disagree with those<sup>6</sup> who think that the *πειρα* consisted in the

---

<sup>6</sup> See G. Pasquali, *Le lettere di Platone* (Pisa, 1938), 75 ff.; H. Gundert, "Zum philosophischen Exkurs im 7. Brief," in *Idee und Zahl. Studien zur platonischen*

philosophical *excursus*. As Paulo Butti de Lima has written, *πειρα* and *excursus* serve different purposes.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the *πειρα* was precisely an *ἔλεγχος*, and not the explanation of any philosophical doctrine or corpus of doctrines. In Plato's words, the function of the *πειρα* is to test people and unmask those "who are pampered and unable to work hard" τούς τρυφῶντάς τε καὶ ἀδυνάτους διαπονεῖν (341a).<sup>8</sup> This expression is a clear reference to 326b-d, where Plato describes the "happy life" of the Syracusans as a non-stop party. And this proves that the link between the bad *symposia* of the *Protagoras* and the *Letter* is not pie in the sky, as it may seem at first sight.

An aspiring philosopher must possess certain physical, mental and attitudinal skills. This is made clear by the selection of rulers in the *Republic*. Testing them is a fundamental moment of the selection. For instance, it is urgent to test who will be the best defender of his own decision to do what is best for the city in every situation (III 413c5-7). This test is both physical and mental: καὶ πόνους γε αὖ καὶ ἀλγηδόνας καὶ ἀγῶνας αὐτοῖς θετέον ("we must expose them to labors, pains, and agonies"). The analogy between the physical test of the *Republic* and the philosophical *πειρα* is possible because the *gymnastikē* of the *Republic* is not just physical training.<sup>9</sup> Both philosophical and physical training contribute to forming a man who lives in a correct way. In addition, both tests involve labors and pains. Being able to bear *πόνος* is a fundamental philosophical skill. In a very significant passage of Book VII, we read that

[the person we are looking for] must have penetration into their studies and ease of learning. For souls become discouraged in the difficulties of study more than in those of physical exercises,

---

*Philosophie*, hrgs. von H.-G. Gadamer and W. Schadewaldt (Heidelberg 1968), 103 ff.; H. Krämer, *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles: zum Wesen und zur Geschichte der platonischen Ontologie* (Amsterdam, 1959), 404-408.

<sup>7</sup> P. Butti de Lima, *Platone: L'utopia del potere (La Settima lettera)*, (Venezia, 2015), 163.

<sup>8</sup> Radding translation from this volume. See M. Tulli, *Dialettica e scrittura nella VII Lettera di Platone* (Pisa, 1989), 14.

<sup>9</sup> See H. Reid, "Sport and Moral Education in Plato's *Republic*", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 34:1 (2007): 160-75.

since the labor [of study], indeed, is more peculiar to them and not shared with the body. [...]

And, sure, a person who has a good memory, persistence, and in general who is a labor-lover is to be looked for. Or in what way do you suppose one will be willing to bear at the same time the labors of the body and to complete such hard study and practice?"<sup>10</sup>

Because the tests are so important, it is crucial to try to understand what Plato and Dionysius II told each other during their encounter. Indeed, to quote Tulli, "non v'è dubbio che il colloquio tra Dionigi e Platone si risolse nella *πειρα*."<sup>11</sup> Plato did not say anything else, but Dionysius II felt authorized to write a book on Platonic philosophy.<sup>12</sup> It is hard to believe that Plato explained to Dionysius II that it's impossible to write down the core of his philosophy. Therefore, Dionysius did not violate this prohibition. Nothing in the text authorizes us to assume the contrary. The link between Dionysius II's book and Plato's criticism of writing philosophy is an *escamotage* by which Plato introduces this new topic. But Dionysius didn't write a book on philosophy in order to transgress Plato's orders. Dionysius wrote a book on Platonic philosophy because he felt that Plato's belief that philosophy implies *πόνος* and steadfastness was absurd. Son of a tyrant and a tyrant himself,

---

<sup>10</sup> 535b5-c3: Δριμύτητα, ὧ μακάριε, ἔφην, δεῖ αὐτοῖς πρὸς τὰ μαθήματα ὑπάρχειν, καὶ μὴ χαλεπῶς μανθάνειν. πολὺ γάρ τοι μᾶλλον ἀποδειλιῶσι ψυχαὶ ἐν ἰσχυροῖς μαθήμασιν ἢ ἐν γυμνασίοις· οἰκειότερος γὰρ αὐταῖς ὁ πόνος, ἴδιος ἄλλ' οὐ κοινὸς ὢν μετὰ τοῦ σώματος.

Ἀληθῆ, ἔφη.

Καὶ μνήμονα δὴ καὶ ἄρρατον καὶ πάντη φιλόπονον ζητητέον. ἢ τίτι τρόπων οἶε τά τε τοῦ σώματος ἐθελήσειν τινὰ διαπονεῖν καὶ τοσαύτην μάθησίν τε καὶ μελέτην ἐπιτελεῖν;

<sup>11</sup> *Ivi*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> I write "Platonic" because the following protest of Plato's ("I heard that he wrote a book *on the things he had heard*, presenting it as his own work, different from the things he had heard") makes sense if and only if Dionysius's book was a *pamphlet* on Platonic philosophy, or somehow dependent on Plato's teachings (in Dionysius's intentions).

Dionysius was used to having everything right away. From his point of view, it was intolerable that a hobby (since that is precisely what philosophy amounted to for him) might require a lot of patience, considerable effort, and a moderate lifestyle<sup>13</sup>.

Dionysius was sure to know and to possess in adequate manner many of the *most important things* since he had heard them from others<sup>14</sup>. This passage should not be overinterpreted, as the trailblazers of the *ἄγραφα δόγματα* (Unwritten Doctrines) usually do. The word *μέγιστα* does not recall the *μέγιστον μάθημα* of the *Republic* (504e-505b) and does not allude to the “Theory of Principles” that Aristotle attributes to Plato in the *Metaphysics*.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, it makes no sense to explain this passage in relation to Plato’s alleged public speaking on the Good, as reported by Aristossenus.<sup>16</sup> Morrow’s translation has the merit of avoiding misunderstanding on this matter: “for he claimed to have already a sufficient knowledge of many of the most important points from his casual conversations with others.” With the arrogance typical of powerful men, Dionysius thought he could do whatever he wanted; since at that moment he wanted to be a philosopher, he wrote a book of philosophy. Any other esoteric explanation of this fact is over the top.

### How do people normally react to the *πειρα*?

As I have said, the *πειρα* has the purpose of distinguishing good and bad pupils. People’s reaction to the *πειρα* is therefore essential in order to select or turn down potential pupils. The *Letter*

---

<sup>13</sup> On the frugal eating habits at the Academy, see Helian. *Var. Hist.* 2, 18 and R.S. Bluck, *Plato’s Life and Thought* (London, Routledge & Paul, 1949), 81-82.

<sup>14</sup> 341b2-3: *πολλὰ καὶ μέγιστα εἰδέναι τε καὶ ἰκανῶς ἔχειν διὰ τὰς ὑπὸ τῶν ἄλλων παρκαοάς.*

<sup>15</sup> See Krämer, *Arete*, 141; Id., *Platone e i fondamenti della metafisica. Saggio sulla teoria dei principi e sulle dottrine non scritte di Platone, con una raccolta dei documenti fondamentali in edizione bilingue e bibliografia*, Milano 1982, 105 n. 82; T.A. Szlezák, *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie. Interpretationen zun den frühen und mittleren Dialogen* (Berlin-New York, 1985), 399 ff.; Gundert, *Exkurs*, 90.

<sup>16</sup> See Krämer, *Arete*, 404 ff; Gaiser, *Platons*, 6 f. and 452 nt. 7; *contra* H. Cherniss, *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1945), 1 ff.

distinguishes two kinds of reaction. A perspicuous discussion of this topic is provided by Tulli, who speaks about three (and not two) kinds of reaction<sup>17</sup>. On his interpretation, my ii. and iia are different reactions:

i. If the listener is a real philosopher and is worthy of doing philosophy because of his divine nature (ἐὰν μὲν ὄντως ἦ φιλόσοφος οἰκειῖός τε καὶ ἄξιός τοῦ πράγματος θεῖος ὤν: 340c1-4), he will think that the philosophical journey is terrific and the only possible way of life;

ii. Those who are not really philosophers (οἱ δὲ ὄντως μὲν μὴ φιλόσοφοι), but have only a veneer of δόξα, “when they see the full extent of the learning and labor required, and perceive that they must strictly regulate their daily lives if their quest is to be successful, conclude that the task is too difficult for their powers”

iia. Some of them persuade themselves that they have been sufficiently instructed in the whole topic and no longer require further effort (ἔνιοι δὲ αὐτῶν πείθουσιν αὐτοὺς ὡς ἱκανῶς ἀκηκοότες εἰσὶ τὸ ὅλον καὶ οὐδὲν ἔτι δέονταί τινων πραγμάτων). This is the case of Dionysius.

These reactions shed further light on the content of the *πειρα*. What I mean is that no one reacts to it by denying some thesis or showing himself perplexed by some aspects of the content. People react to the *πειρα* either by concluding that the long, complex and demanding work of doing philosophy is a game worth playing, or by refusing to face such a struggle, either out of laziness or out of arrogance. The first thing that Plato teaches to his potential pupils is that philosophy is the only way to attain a happy life, but it is a bone-crushing and often discouraging labour. “Are you able to bear it? Are you ready to make some sacrifices? Are you ready to change your life?” The *πειρα* does not go beyond these questions. But it is enough to discourage those unfit for the task.

---

<sup>17</sup> See Tulli, *Dialettica*, 12 ff.

## The contents of the book

I wish to briefly get back to Dionysius's II book. Someone could stress the fact that Dionysius reacted to the *πειρα* by writing a book, denying what I have said about the purpose of his writing. Indeed, a book (any book) has some contents. It is of course possible that Plato and Dionysius discussed some philosophical content, but Plato's judgment of this book denies that the problem was its content. In this case, Morrow's translation is misleading: "Later, I hear, he wrote a book about what he had heard, putting it forward as an outline of his own philosophy, and not as a *doctrine* he had gotten from me." The Greek says something different: οὐδὲν τῶν αὐτῶν ὧν ἀκούοι (341b5). This clearly recalls the previous *περὶ ὧν τότε ἤκουσε* (b4). What the text says is that "Later, I heard that he wrote a book on the things he had heard, presenting it as his own work, different from the things he had heard." Plato does not know anything about this book: there is no other way to translate οἶδα δὲ οὐδὲν τούτων. Morrow's proposal (i.e. "whether this is true or not I do not know") is again rather misleading. Plato has absolutely no idea of the content of Dionysius II's book (or at least that is what he wants the reader to think). But for the mere fact that the tyrant wrote it and did so before having adequately studied, he definitely made a mistake.

Plato now introduces his criticism of writing philosophy. Even in this case, however, I would like to dispel the idea that the real problem is merely the fact that Dionysius II wrote a book. If he had said the same things orally, nothing would have changed. The text itself clearly states this:

I do know that others have written on these same things,<sup>18</sup> but I don't know them and they do not even know themselves. And this much at least I can affirm with confidence about anyone who has written or proposes to write on these things,<sup>19</sup> pretending to a mastery of the problems with which I am occupied: it matters

---

<sup>18</sup> Morrow translates "on this subject" because he is thinking of a specific topic, such as the Good, but this is misleading.

<sup>19</sup> Again, Morrow translates "on this matter."

not whether he claims to have learned what he knows from me or some one else or to have discovered it for himself. It is not possible, at least in my opinion, that they understood something of the enquiry.<sup>20</sup> There is no book of mine that expounds these things, nor will there ever be one; for this knowledge is not a matter that can be transmitted<sup>21</sup> like other branches of knowledge. [...] And this too I know: if these matters are to be expounded at all *in writings or in oral discourses*, it is better that they should come from me. Certainly I am harmed more than anyone else if these things are misrepresented in a book.<sup>22</sup> If I thought they ought to be spread abroad *in writings or in oral discourses*, what nobler service could I render mankind during my life than to write a book on them? (341b6-e1).

I have heavily modified Morrow's translation. Indeed, it insists that Dionysius II wrote about something *specific*. This is also the position of many of those who defend the Unwritten Doctrines theory. But nothing in the text authorizes such a reading. Plato writes that he knows nothing about Dionysius II's book and that he does not even know the others who wrote about his philosophy. He ignores what they actually wrote. But the mere fact that they wrote his teachings down suggests that they have all gone astray.<sup>23</sup>

However, a connection between written and oral speeches is drawn twice in just a few lines: γραφέντα ἢ λεχθέντα (in writing and in oral discourses) and γραπτέα θ' ἰκανῶς εἶναι πρὸς τοὺς πολλοὺς καὶ ῥητά (if they ought to be spread abroad in writings and in oral discourses). The two participles of γράφω and λέγω, as well as γραπτέα and ῥητά, explain that the real problem is not that Dionysius II and other anonymous authors wrote books, but that

---

<sup>20</sup> For "of the enquiry" see Tulli, *Dialettica*, 51.

<sup>21</sup> Morrow adds "in writing," but this is not in the text.

<sup>22</sup> Morrow omits this, but γεγραμμένα has no other meaning.

<sup>23</sup> See 341b8-c1: τοσόνδε γε μὴν περὶ πάντων ἔχω φράζειν τῶν γεγραφότων καὶ γραψόντων, ὅσοι φασὶν εἰδέναι περὶ ὧν ἐγὼ σπουδάζω κτλ, "this is the only thing I have to say about who wrote and about who will write *saying to know what I care about*...." It is clear that Dionysius II and those anonymous writers wrote books on *Plato's* philosophy, not on philosophy in general.

they thought it was possible to express the core of Plato's philosophy once and for all in a systematic dissertation. They assumed it was possible to treat philosophy as the other branches of knowledge. In this respect, there is no difference between writing and speaking about philosophy. Philosophy is not a corpus of doctrines that someone can communicate through lectures; rather, "it requires long-continued intercourse between pupil and teacher in joint pursuit of the object they are seeking to apprehend; and then suddenly, just as light flashes forth when a fire is kindled, this knowledge is born in the soul and henceforth nourishes itself."

### **Which kind of knowledge is promoted by the *Seventh Letter*?**

In a recently published book, Myles Burnyeat stated that the author of the *Seventh Letter* (who is not Plato) is "philosophically incompetent." It follows that the letter "is not a trustworthy source of information either about Plato's philosophical development or about his biography. It sheds no light on the Academy or on Sicilian history."<sup>24</sup> It is not at all clear to me why the author's philosophical incompetence should invalidate his historical credibility (i.e. he could be a contemporary of Plato perfectly informed of the facts, but unfit to philosophize).<sup>25</sup> This is not the place for a detailed refutation of Burnyeat's proposal. What I intend to do in conclusion is to better specify why philosophy is not, according to Plato, similar to the other branches of knowledge.

At 341c5-d2, Plato explains that knowledge appears like a spark after a long communion with the thing itself, *περὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτό*. Philosophy, in other terms, does not proceed by accumulation, step by step, but through a long and laborious dialectical exercise that produces – assuming it produces something – a sudden

---

<sup>24</sup> M. Burnyeat- M. Frede, *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter*, ed. D. Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 122.

<sup>25</sup> The *Seventh Letter* does not contain any clear anachronism, does not contradict any other source, and it is rather trustworthy on the facts concerning Dionysius II's life. See F. Muccioli, *Dionisio II: storia e tradizione letteraria*, (Bologna, 1999), *passim*.

comprehension. This is the reason why the *πεῖρα* is fundamental: the teacher must verify that the pupil can bear this long preliminary work. There is a true discourse (*λόγος ἀληθῆς*) that condemns anyone who dares to write what cannot be written (341a3-6). This *λόγος* states that there are three gnoseological instruments with which we have to try to approach knowledge of the thing itself: name (*ὄνομα*), discourse (*λόγος*),<sup>26</sup> and image (*εἶδωλον*). The fourth thing involved in the process of knowing the “fifth” is a set of three kinds of knowledge: *ἐπιστήμη* (science), *νοῦς* (intellection) and *ἀληθῆς δόξα* (true opinion).<sup>27</sup> We must pass through the four elements to reach the fifth (i.e. the thing itself), but “these elements tend to show as much the quality of each object as its essence, because of the weakness of the discourses.” Anyone who wants to fully (*τελέως*) grasp the fifth must somehow (*ἀμῶς γέ πως*) get the first four (342e3-5). Nevertheless, they remain irremediably obscure. The reason is explained in a more technical way at 343b6 ff: “being two terms, the essence and the quality (*τοῦ τε ὄντος καὶ τοῦ ποιοῦ τινος*), while the soul tries to know not the quality, but the essence, each of the four offers the soul, in words and deeds, that which is not sought.” In other words, the soul wants to know the *τι* in itself, the nature of the thing, its essence, but our gnoseological tools mix it with the *ποιῖόν τι* (the quality). Whoever dares to say the thing itself is therefore easily refuted.

How to get out of this situation? How to try to reach the fifth? At 343e-344c1, Plato explains that

only being guided through them [i.e. the first four], going back and back, produces with effort, in he who has a good nature, the knowledge of what has good nature [...] If each of these elements – names, discourses, visual images, and perceptions – is rubbed with others, with great effort, in benevolent confutations and in discussions conducted without hostility, then the knowledge

---

<sup>26</sup> In this context – and in Plato in general – *λόγος* does not mean “definition,” but “discourse”: see Tulli, *Dialettica*, 27-28.

<sup>27</sup> The fact that science, intellection and true opinion are linked together in a single set is not problematic: see *Resp.* 585b14-c1, *Phil.* 11b4-c1, 60d4-5, *Leg.* 688a-b.

and the intellection around each thing suddenly flashes, with the greatest possible intensity within the limit of human abilities (ἐξέλαμψε φρόνησις περὶ ἕκαστον καὶ νοῦς, συντείνων ὅτι μάλιστα εἰς δύναμιν ἀνθρωπίνην).

Some scholars think that what Plato means here is that there is a peculiar faculty, i.e. intellection, which is able to overcome the limits of human nature and to grab the thing itself in its purity. The intellection of the fifth (i.e. the Form) would therefore not be a linguistic form of knowledge. This interpretation can be declined in two ways: (i) a mystic and (ii) a non-propositional (but rational) one. According to (i), the intellection of the fifth is an illogical *unio mystica* with the thing itself; according to (ii), this kind of enlightenment is not irrational (in Julius Stenzel's lexicon, it is a rational *Erleuchtung*<sup>28</sup>), but it is not verbal.

In my opinion, it is easy to reject (i). At 340d1-5, where Plato is speaking of the *philo-sophers*, we read that the good pupil is able to λογίζεσθαι, which is beyond suspicion a rational act. Pasquali has masterfully clarified that at 341c5-d2, where Plato alludes to a knowledge that flashes as a spark, he uses the present tense (ἐκ πολλῆς συνουσίας γιγνομένης περὶ τὰ προᾶγμα αὐτὸ καὶ τοῦ συζῆν), as if to say that the communion and the living together will continue (unlike a mystical union).<sup>29</sup> There's a fundamental difference between knowing (μαθεῖν) and experiencing something (παθεῖν), as in Aristotle's *De phil.* fr. 15 -- Ross explains: the initiates do not have to know (οὐ μαθεῖν τι δεῖν), but to experience something and to be in a certain disposition (ἀλλὰ παθεῖν καὶ διατεθῆναι). Quoting the fragment, Michael Psellos is more explicit: the initiates do not hear something; their mind passively experiences the enlightenment (αὐτοῦ παθόντος τοῦ νοῦ τὴν ἔλλαμψιν)<sup>30</sup>. Nothing like that is described in the *Seventh Letter*.

---

<sup>28</sup> See J. Stenzel, *Plato der Erzieher*, (Leipzig, 1928), 270-96, quoted from the Italian translation, Bari 1936.

<sup>29</sup> G. Pasquali, *Lettere*, 86.

<sup>30</sup> *Schol. ad Joh. Clim.* 6, 171.

More interesting and philosophically promising is (ii). On this view, defended by Wilhelm Wieland and Francisco Gonzalez (among others), the kind of knowledge of which the *Seventh Letter* speaks is rational, but non-propositional.<sup>31</sup> This means, to use Gonzalez's very perspicuous summary, that "something can be manifest without being describable." Non-propositional knowledge is beyond true-false opposition and admits gradation (i.e. it can be more or less clear). According to the Wieland-Gonzalez interpretation of the *Seventh Letter*, it is true that the *logos* says both the essence and the quality, but it is false that this is the only kind of knowledge: there is a non-logical understanding of the thing in itself. The difference between my view and the non-propositional view is therefore that both consider the *logos* a diaphragm, but I think that there is no hope of overcoming the diaphragm.<sup>32</sup> And this is exactly the reason why the *Seventh Letter* places in the same set *episteme*, *nous* and *true opinion*: the *nous* is higher than *episteme* and true opinion, but it is not able to bridge the distance between us and the "fifth." The "spark" that flares up is not a non-propositional form of knowledge, but the precise moment in which the soul understands what the "rubbing" of our gnoseological tools shows. The best comment on this is Hegel's *Enzyklopädie*, § 66:

immediate knowing is to be taken as a *fact*. With this, however, the consideration is directed towards the field of *experience*, to a *psychological* phenomenon. - In this respect, it should be noted that it is one of the most common experiences that truths (which one knows very well to be the result of the most intricate and highly mediated considerations) present themselves *immediately* in the consciousness of someone conversant with such

---

<sup>31</sup> See W. Wieland, *Plato und die Formen des Wissens*, (Göttingen, 1982), esp. 224-36; F.J. Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue. Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*, (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1998), esp. ch. 9.. See also F.J. Gonzales., "Nonpropositional knowledge in Plato," *Apeiron*, 21 (1998): 235-84.

<sup>32</sup> For my general interpretation of the *excursus*, see F. Forcignanò, "La debolezza strutturale del linguaggio nella *Settima Lettera* di Platone," in *Ètica e Filosofia Política*, XIX/2 (2016); also "Poder e limite da linguagem na Filosofia Antiga," 153-79.

*What is a philosophical πείρα?*

knowledge. Like everybody else who has been trained in a science, the mathematician immediately has at his fingertips solutions to which a very complicated analysis has led. (transl. Brinkmann-Dahlstrom).

Dialectic is not a preparation for illumination. The distinction between a mediate work and an immediate comprehension is not the distinction between two kinds of knowledge. The long and laborious work of philosophy can also produce nothing, or take a lifetime. And this is the reason why not everyone can philosophize.

