

**Review of Rafael Ferber.
*The Ignorance of the
 Philosopher. Why Did
 Plato Not Write the
 "Unwritten Doctrine"?*
 Baden-Baden: Verlag
 Karl Alber, 2025, 171 pp.,
 ISBN 978-3-495-99183-1**

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In the German-speaking world, Rafael Ferber is well known for his contributions to the study of Plato's Idea of the Good and the *vexata quaestio* of Plato's *agrapha dogmata*. The question this monograph sets out to answer, however, is not what these 'unwritten teachings' consisted of—a topic he covered with a novel approach in (Ferber 1989, 154–211)—but why Plato never wrote them down. To answer this, Ferber turns to what Plato did write: the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Timaeus*, and the controversial *Seventh Letter*. His conclusion is that Plato was not in a sufficiently ideal epistemic state to commit them to writing. Where Plato is usually assumed to have held his own proposals with confidence, Ferber wagers on a Plato who was genuinely uncertain about them.

The first part of the book is devoted to the *Republic*. Ferber begins by ruling out the possibility that the unwritten teachings were secret—Socrates in *Rep.* 506–509 openly professes his wish to discuss them—and then turns to reject the hypotheses of Gadamer and Burnyeat. For Gadamer, they were left unwritten because they were still 'dry schematisms'; Ferber counters that Plato published material of precisely this kind, including the *diairesis* of the *Statesman* and the *Sophist* (*Plt.* 261a–266a; *Sph.* 219a–266a) and the mathematical schematism of the divided line (*Rep.* 510a8, 534a6). Burnyeat's suggestion that the reason was 'sheer technical difficulty' fares no better: Plato wrote the highly technical *Parmenides*; technical difficulty, as Cherniss observed, is if anything an invitation to write (p. 20); and those who advance this hypothesis implicitly assume that the dialogues may contain Plato's most profound teachings, thereby undermining their own position (following Schleiermacher, p. 21). Against both, Ferber proposes that the unsuitable recipient is not Glaucon but Socrates himself: Socrates offers his opinion

about the Good; he does not know it. Since the science that corresponds to the Good is dialectics and not mere opinion (*Rep.* 506b, c, e; p.22), Plato does not venture to fix any thesis about it in writing, resorting instead to sense-based analogies, for which opinion is the appropriate register. This is the interpretive crux: Plato had not attained Knowledge even with respect to his unwritten teachings. The epistemic ideal belongs to God alone, who does not desire wisdom but simply is wise and therefore does not philosophize (*Symp.* 204a1–2); it falls to human souls to pursue the Good without end (*Rep.* 534b8–c6).

The second part seeks confirmation in the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*. The *Phaedrus* is famous, among other things, for its so-called ‘critique of writing,’ and Ferber opens by noting that it is precisely here that Plato coins the term ‘philosopher,’ defining him as one who writes with things more valuable (*timiotera*) than anything he puts to paper (*Phdr.* 278d8–e1). Ferber is careful to distinguish: two of the objections raised in the *Phaedrus* target not writing as such but its publication. A published text cannot select its audience or defend itself in the absence of its author (*Phdr.* 275d9–e5). These, however, derive from a more fundamental objection that does bear on writing itself: that it is fixed and immutable (*Phdr.* 275d4–9), and therefore systematically deceptive to a human soul that is, at its core, self-moving (*Phdr.* 245c5–246a2; p. 34). This invariability coheres with what the *Republic* already suggested: Plato was unwilling to freeze his views on the Good in permanent form.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates appears to possess Knowledge (*epistēmē*) rather than mere opinion (*Phdr.* 276c3–5): knowledge not only of sensible things but of Ideas, arrived at through dialectic. Yet Ferber argues that the practitioner of dialectic does not yet know

the Ideas but only has a claim to such knowledge (pp. 36–7). Socrates speaks of the truth that dialectic yields in the conditional (*Phdr.* 278c4–d1), and he insists that the dialectician does not deserve the title ‘wise’—reserved for God alone—but only ‘philosopher’ (*Phdr.* 278d3–6). Even if the dialectician’s knowledge is in some sense true, it is not optimal: it falls short of maximum certainty. More than that, Socrates—and by extension Plato—would not even have completed the dialectical ascent, which is why Plato no more commits his views on the Soul to writing in the *Phaedrus* than he does his views on the Good in the *Republic*. The *Timaeus* reinforces the pattern: Timaeus himself acknowledges that his epistemic grip on first principles amounts to nothing more than opinion (*Tim.* 53d6–8, 48c2–7), while those principles would properly demand immutable and incorrigible theses (*Tim.* 29b4–8), foreclosing their explicit treatment in the text. Perfect Knowledge is God’s alone; the human soul is left to examine itself and its limits.

The *Seventh Letter*, whose authenticity Ferber declines to assume (p. 45, n. 80), provides further evidence. Its Author condemns those who, like Dionysius, have written as though they possessed the very knowledge the Author himself aspires to without having attained it (*Ep.* VII, 341b1–c4). The Author has not written about these matters and never will, not because they are ineffable (he would have no objection to discussing them or even writing about them imperfectly [*Ep.* VII, 341d2–4]), but because he does not consider it appropriate or timely. For most readers it would merely license the complacent satisfaction of having grasped something ‘profound’ (*Ep.* VII, 341e1–6). The most valuable teachings cannot be transmitted by formal means alone; they require oral transmission, lived proximity to the teacher, and the kindling of a ‘light in the

soul.' Ferber is careful to note that this light should not be read as Neoplatonic ecstasy but as the outcome of an inquiry conducted from below. The deeper difficulty is that any cognitive instrument: name (*onoma*), definition (*logos*), image (*eidōlon*), or knowledge (*epistēmē*, *logos alēthēs*, *nous*), by rendering the Idea into something knowable, already turns it into something other than itself (a quality), blocking direct access to what it is (pp. 73–85).

These arguments originally appeared in German as *Die Unwissenheit des Philosophen, oder, Warum hat Plato die "ungeschriebene Lehre" nicht geschrieben?* (Ferber 1991), now out of print. In preparing the English edition, Ferber not only updates the arguments but uses the occasion to address debates that emerged in response to the original publication. The 'Retraction' (pp. 91–135) opens with a masterly survey of scholarship on the unwritten teachings that will serve any reader wishing to enter the debate (pp. 91–6), before taking up the central question of whether Plato and his philosopher can ultimately access the Knowledge they pursue. Through sustained engagement with the *Seventh Letter* and a range of methodological issues, Ferber reinforces his central thesis: that Plato's most valuable speculations remain, for Plato himself, hypotheses rather than Knowledge; though ones to which a philosophical life may be dedicated in endless approximation.

Ferber's question is why Plato did not write down the *agrapha dogmata*, but his answer is built almost entirely on Plato's written texts and on the gap between the epistemic condition of Plato's characters and the ideal toward which they strain. As a result—setting aside the critique of writing—his arguments bear on a broader question of interest to readers with no particular stake in the unwritten teachings: what was Plato's own relation to his specula-

tions? The question has largely been forgotten, since it is generally assumed that Plato was a confident, systematic dogmatist. And yet the anonymous commentator on the *Theaetetus*, writing shortly after the Academy's dissolution, felt it necessary to defend the view that Plato did hold doctrines and advanced them with conviction, against the Academic tradition that had read Plato as fundamentally aporetic (Anon. in *Tht.* LIV–LV).

Ferber's work thus reopens a question that is not merely interpretive but substantive: what attitude, according to Plato, should the philosopher hold toward their own activity? The Plato Ferber gives us—ignorant, restlessly inquisitive to the last—may have been, at some remove, the Plato of the so-called Sceptics who led the Academy for much of its history, and whose interpretive legacy remains largely unabsorbed into Platonic scholarship.

The book is dense and presupposes genuine familiarity not only with the texts it directly examines but with the many others it invokes; in this respect it practices what it preaches, seeking out its own reader. Ferber's arguments are backed throughout by precise textual references that make his portrait of Plato as persuasive as the evidence allows. For those who accept the existence of the unwritten teachings, his arguments make it difficult to think it possible to reconstruct these without reckoning with the epistemic relationship Plato held toward them. For readers not specializing in the *agrapha dogmata*, the book raises fundamental questions about philosophical method and about what it means, on Plato's account, to be a philosopher, while also providing a reliable introduction to the debate. Any scholar of Ancient Philosophy would benefit from reading this provocative work, the result of decades of reflection that honors the very interpretation of Plato it defends.

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