

Plato, Isocrates and Epistolary Literature: Reconsidering the *Seventh Letter* in its contexts

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ABSTRACT

Working against the recent arguments against Plato's authorship of the *Seventh Letter* in the Anglophone scholarship, this paper demonstrates the historical possibility that Plato wrote his letters for philosophical purposes, most likely in competition with Isocrates, who skilfully used the literary genre of letters for his rhetorical and philosophical purposes. Because Isocrates and Plato experimented with various writing styles in response to each other, letters and autobiographies may well have been their common devices. The paper concludes that we should respect the tradition that had included and respected the *Seventh Letter* as Plato's own writing.

Keywords: Plato, Isocrates, Letter, Style, Autobiography

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1. ISSUES ABOUT THE SEVENTH LETTER

In understanding Plato's philosophy, it matters quite a great deal whether the so-called *Seventh Letter* was written by Plato or not. Indeed, still important is whether it represents Plato's ideas and experiences, whoever may have composed that letter, if not by Plato. This is so for the letter informs us of much about his thoughts and activities and, more importantly, about the relation between these, of which we know little from the dialogues. Therefore, it is one of the most important issues for Plato scholars to reconsider how to deal with the works transmitted to us in the name of Plato's *Letters*.

Recent attacks on the authenticity of this letter in the Anglophone scholarship seem to go too far and to have brought about unsound views of Platonic philosophy. In the current paper, I'll demonstrate that it is likely that Plato wrote letters, in particular the *Seventh Letter*, in addition to dialogues, as a form of competition with Isocrates; taking the letters into consideration will broaden our perspective of Plato's philosophical activities far beyond the dialogues.

Plato's *Seventh Letter*, addressed to the associates and friends of the late Dion, has long been a focus of scholarly controversy concerning its authenticity. Up until the late twentieth century, most scholars agreed that this letter, among the total thirteen letters that have been attributed to Plato, was genuine or, if not, had been written by a close follower of Plato who knew his Sicilian visits very well (Guthrie, 1975, p. 8). Over the last few decades, however, a new trend has appeared in Anglophone scholarship: Julia Annas and Malcolm Schofield have argued against Plato's authorship of this letter, suggesting that we should not take the *Seventh Letter*—including

the biographical implication of any commitment to Sicilian politics—into consideration when we interpret Plato's philosophy (Annas, 1997, p. 154-157; Annas, 1999, p. 74-77; Schofield, 2006, p. 13-30).

Annas tries to keep Plato out of political philosophy, and Schofield emphasises Socrates' quietist influence on Plato. Their claims are closely connected with the "unpolitical" reading of the *Republic*, which must be a reaction to Karl Popper's criticism of Plato's political philosophy. Mario Vegetti, editor of the monumental Italian commentary of the *Republic*, clearly analyses the rise and development of the "unpolitical" reading of that dialogue in the Anglophone scholarship in his De Vogel lecture given at the IX Symposium Platonicum in Tokyo (Vegetti, 2013). He sees the main cause of this trend as a strong reaction against Popper, who claims that the ideas of the ideal state in the *Republic* were a dangerous source of totalitarian ideology, which Plato attempted to put into practice in Sicily. Scholars of an "unpolitical" reading now turn to the *Seventh Letter*, which is believed to give strong support for the ordinary assumption that Plato conceived the idea of a philosopher-ruler and tried to put it into practice.

Vegetti concludes his lecture with a memorable message against the unpolitical reading: "The *Republic* is then a political dialogue, a dialogue in which Plato expounds his 'most striking ideas in political philosophy' (R. Bambrough). One may share or reject these ideas, and above all, one should try to understand them. But denying their existence and power in the attempt to protect Plato from himself even more than from his critics, is not a good historiographical strategy, and, as Bambrough had already warned, proves 'unprofitable' on the level of critical thought. It would be better to do without the *Republic* if it is regarded as unacceptable, than offer an

edifying and enfeebled image of it, one that is “normalised” from the point of view of the common sense of our times.” (Vegetti, 2013, p. 15) I wholeheartedly agree with Vegetti’s conclusion and believe that his suggestion can also be applied to the recent discussion on the *Seventh Letter*.

After Annas and Schofield, Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede have cast serious doubts on the attribution of the letter to Plato when they published *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter* in 2015, which is based on their joint seminar held at Oxford in 2001 (Burnyeat; Frede, 2015).¹ Their arguments are influential (for example, Nick Denyer, a former colleague of Burnyeat, reviews and supports their arguments in Denyer, 2016), but I find them unconvincing. Here, I put aside Burnyeat’s claim that the author was philosophically incompetent because I interpret the philosophical digression of the *Seventh Letter* differently so that we can avoid the difficulties he raised. Instead, the current paper will focus on one of Frede’s two primary claims: the strong claim that there are no existing philosophical letters from the fourth century BC. I’ll touch upon some other points of criticism that Frede and Burnyeat present, but a fuller examination of their arguments will be given at another occasion. The present paper aims not to cross-examine and reject my teachers’ views, but rather to make a constructive contribution to understanding Plato’s philosophy in response to their courageous challenge.

2. DID NOT PLATO USE THE FIRST PERSON IN HIS WRITINGS?

To consider Plato’s letters, we should consider the styles of writing in Plato as a whole.

Let us first compare two statements, in each of which the first person “I” puts forward his own idea:

Well, I’ve now come to what we likened to the greatest wave. But I shall say what I have to say, even if the wave is of a wave of laughter that will simply drown me in ridicule and contempt. (ἐπ’ αὐτῷ δὴ ... εἰμὶ ὁ τῷ μεγίστῳ προσηκάζομεν κύματι. εἰρήσεται δ’ οὖν, εἰ καὶ μέλλει γέλῳ τι τε ἀτεχνῶς ὥσπερ κύμα ἐκγελῶν καὶ ἀδοξία κατακλύσειν.)

So, in my praise of the right philosophy I was compelled to declare that by it one is enabled to discern all forms of justice, both political and individual. (λέγειν τε ἡναγκάσθην, ἐπαινῶν τὴν ὀρθὴν φιλοσοφίαν, ὥς ἐκ ταύτης ἔστιν τὰ τε πολιτικὰ δίκαια καὶ τὰ τῶν ιδιωτῶν πάντα κατιδεῖν.)

These statements introduce the same thesis pertaining to “philosopher-rulers”. Both statements also present this thesis in the first person, “I”, and the author of both statements is Plato. However, the speaker in each statement is not the same: in the first statement, the speaker is the dramatic character Socrates, who is the main speaker in the *Republic* (V. 473c, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve). The latter statement, however, is made (if we believe the tradition) by Plato himself in his *Seventh Letter* (326a, trans. R. G. Bury).

Some may assume that it matters little whether “I” is a dramatic persona or the author himself, so long as the same philosophical thesis is presented, but others may find a crucial difference. One might, for example, wonder whether the dramatic character in the first statement represents the author’s ideas. On the

one hand, we are almost sure from the other works of Socratic literature that the historical Socrates did not conceive of the idea of the “philosopher-rulers”. However, on the other hand, we have no licence to assume that the Socrates in the dialogue is a spokesman or “mask” of the author Plato.

In contrast, the second statement should not raise any difficulty because the author is purportedly speaking as himself. Strangely, however, scholars never doubt the attribution of the thesis in the former statement to Plato, but some scholars reject the attribution of the thesis in the latter statement to him. Why? It may be because they feel uneasy when they hear Plato speaking in the first person “I”. However, this uneasiness raises its own questions: Did Plato not have any ideas of his own? Did he always put his words into someone else’s mouth?

With reference to the specific statements cited above, Malcolm Schofield casts doubt on the authenticity of Plato’s *Seventh Letter* regarding this point; he writes, “For Plato now in the *Seventh Letter* to merge authorship with the authorial ‘I’, and imply that *he* made that remark, would constitute an abrupt lurch out of his own carefully constructed literary persona.” (Schofield, 2006, p. 17) Schofield, in other words, expresses scepticism about Plato’s use of the first person “I” in the letter because it contrasts with the careful statements delivered in the fictional voices in the dialogues.²

What, then, is the expected effect when using the first person in philosophical writings? Usually, when in the first person, a philosopher’s words are believed to be derived from his or her own thoughts, particularly in scientific treatises. The prose style, called Ionian inquiry (*historia*), was an innovative invention of early Greek philosophers (starting with Anaximander), allowing them to reject divine authority that relies on poetic utter-

ances and instead display their own process of inquiry (e.g. Hecataeus, *FGrH* 264, 1a, 1, F; Herodotus, I.1.0). This style of scientific treatise was developed in the sixth to fourth centuries BC, including in lectures, such as Aristotle’s. Plato, however, adopts a different style: all of his dialogues deliberately hide the author (cf. *Phd.* 59b). This style, though, was shared by the other pupils of Socrates. For in the Socratic literature, an author plays little role, as we can observe in Xenophon’s works.³ Close consideration of these problems raises the question whether scholars should focus on theses when reading philosophical texts, regardless of who the speaker might be. For example, the goddess in the poem of Parmenides speaks the Truth, in the form of “I’ll tell you (ἐγὼν ἐρέω)” (DK 28 B2.1). Can we treat the message as the author’s?

Here, we should widen our scope and consider a style other than dialogues. Although modern readers tend to believe that Plato wrote the dialogues only, this view comes from the history of our reception of Plato. The *Corpus Platonicum*, edited by Thrasyllus in the first century, contains thirty-five dialogues and a set of letters, of which medieval manuscripts transmitted his writings to our modern period. However, in his lifetime, Plato must have written more, most of which was not included in the Platonic discourse. Ancient Greek people already used letters for correspondence with those who lived far away, and Plato was no exception. In particular, the members of the Academy, including the earliest headmasters, Speusippus and Xenocrates, had a great deal of contact with statesmen in other countries, for example, Macedonia, Sicily, South Italy and Cyprus. The political interest was strong in the Academy, which was widely known in antiquity.⁴ Naturally, the communication was done by letter.

Plato may also have written other literary compositions. Although it is doubtful that he abandoned his goal of writing tragedies when he met Socrates and burned his works, it is not unlikely that Plato occasionally composed short poems: we have thirty-three pieces of love epigrams in the name of Plato (Diehl, 1949, p. 102-110). Even if many of them were later attributed to this famous philosopher, we have no reason, as John Cooper (1997, p. 1742) suggests, “to doubt that some of these poems ... are actually by him”.

Apart from private writings, philosophical thoughts must have been given in other forms than dialogue. In the Academy, Plato discussed a wide range of topics with his colleagues and pupils, and we can naturally expect that he presented some other ideas and raised questions not included in the written dialogues. What Aristotle called “the unwritten doctrines (ἀγράφα δόγματα)” testifies that at least he presented some other ideas to his colleagues. It is our modern prejudice (since Schleiermacher) that Plato’s philosophy was expressed solely by dialogues. In his lifetime, Plato pursued philosophy in many ways, of which the dialogue form was but one.

Now, we should ask whether Plato wrote letters for philosophical purposes as well, here by looking at the historical context of the fourth century BC.

3. DID NOT PLATO’S CONTEMPORARIES WRITE PHILOSOPHICAL LETTERS?

Michael Frede considers the *Seventh Letter* within its historical context and suggests that we should examine the whole collection of letters instead of examining each letter individually (Burnyeat; Frede 2015, p.6). To this end, he

critically examines a few letters purportedly written by Plato’s contemporary philosophers: Archytas and Speusippus.⁵ He concludes that “it is because all these collections of letters are spurious that *eo ipso* Plato’s letters are suspect, and this all the more so since they would antedate any clearly authentic letters of philosophers by sixty to seventy years. Also, they would constitute one of the earliest collections of letters of which at least some were genuine (Isocrates and Demosthenes).” (Burnyeat and Frede, 2015, 11) By “sixty to seventy years”, he refers to three letters of Epicurus written in the early third century BC.

This is the strongest of Frede’s arguments because it is free from any subjective judgments about the quality of the philosophical arguments, the style of the text or the political attitude toward the Sicilian situation. Nevertheless, it contains a crucial defect: Frede ignores the letters of Isocrates and Demosthenes, probably because he does not think of these writers as philosophers.⁶ Although many scholars assume (Trapp, 2003, p. 12; Ceccarelli, 2013, p. 286-287, n. 70), as Frede does, that we have no philosophical letter before Epicurus, this is not true, at least as far as Isocrates is concerned. Nine letters by Isocrates exist, most or all of which are regarded as genuine by modern commentators. Furthermore, Isocrates firmly considered himself to be a philosopher as well as an orator. Therefore, Isocrates is a decisive counterexample to Frede’s claim that we have no set of clearly authentic letters by philosophers from the fourth century BC, or the contemporaries of Plato. The burden of proof, therefore, lies with those who insist that the letters are not authentic⁷ because the tradition since antiquity has been *not* to doubt the authenticity of the Platonic letters.⁸

Taking the letters of Isocrates into consideration illuminates the Platonic letters. Isocrates’

letters were addressed to Dionysius I (*Ep. I*), to Philip II, King of Macedon (*Ep. II, III*), to Antipater (*Ep. IV*), to Alexander III (*Ep. V*), to the children of Jason (*Ep. VI*), to Timotheus (*Ep. VII*), to the rulers of the Mytilenaeans (*Ep. VIII*) and to Archidamus (*Ep. IX*).⁹ Although controversy over their authenticity arose in the nineteenth century, recent editors and commentators (Mathieu; Brémond, 1962, p. 166; Van Hook, 1945, p. 368; Papillon, 2004, p. 246) treat all the nine letters as genuine. In particular, a monograph of L. F. Smith (1940), which defends the authenticity of *Ep. IX* and *III*, concludes that all nine letters must be genuine.

In addition to the letters included in Isocrates' corpus, he also composed several rhetorical works similar to letters, that is, works addressed to specific persons. *To Demonicus* [1], *Evagoras* [9] and *To Nicocles* [2] are addressed to friends in Cyprus, and *To Philip* [5] is addressed to the Macedonian King. Also, *Busiris* [11] speaks to the sophist Polycrates. These five works are particularly important for understanding his letters as a genre available to philosophers at the time.

First, *To Demonicus* is a speech, written between 374 and 372 BC and that takes the form of advice offered to Demonicus, the son of his friend Hipponicus in Cyprus. The author starts with the personal address "Oh Demonicus" and declares that he has not invented a protreptic exercise but has instead written moral advice (5). The memorial service address, *Evagoras*, written around 370 BC, also starts with a call—this time to Nicocles, son of the Cyprian King Evagoras (1, 73)—and encourages the addressee to engage in philosophy, using his father as a model (76-81). *To Nicocles*, written around 370 BC, likewise starts with the address "Oh Nicocles".

This kind of personal address is typical in the style of his rhetorical speeches, in which

the author gives advice and persuades friends to undertake particular actions; when sent to the addressee, however, it is not substantially different from a letter. For example, his *Ninth Letter* starts with the address "Oh Archidamus", just like the opening call "Oh Philip" in the speech *To Philip*. These letters and speeches may not have been actually delivered to their addressees but may instead have circulated among the author's friends and pupils. *To Philip* was written in the style of an address to Philip II when Macedonia and Athens signed a peace treaty in 346 BC. The author clearly states that he is "sending an address" (17) to praise the king's past achievements (153). Therefore, we may take this as a letter (ἐπιστολή) even though the author explicitly calls it a "discourse (λόγος)" (*Phil.*, 1, 11, 16, 17, 18, 23) or "book (βιβλίον)" (*Phil.*, 21).¹⁰

In the middle of the speech (81), Isocrates mentions his *First Letter*, describing it as "my letter to Dionysius after he had made himself master of Sicily". The reference to *Ep. I* (9) guarantees the authenticity of the *First Letter*, which is addressed to Dionysius I,¹¹ and that clearly shows that there is no fundamental distinction between letters and rhetorical speeches (cf. Livingstone, 2001, p. 6, n. 5). The *First Letter* is treated in this speech as a document circulated in public (cf. Ceccarelli, 2013, p. 288).¹²

The scholion in *To Philip* tells us that Philip received and read the speech without being persuaded, although modern commentators (cf. Papillon, 2004, 16) suspect that the speech was never sent. Letters were important communicational tools for delivering messages to people at a distance and offered the advantage of allowing the sender to deliver timely advice without travelling in person (29). Isocrates often used old age as an excuse for sending letters (*Ep. I*, 1, 3.4, 5.1, 6.1-2). He also clari-

fied that this writing was intended to appeal to his associates and pupils, as well as to the addressee, Philip II (*Phil.*, 12).¹³

Similarly, the epideictic work *Busiris* pretends to be a letter sent to Polycrates, the author of *Defence of Busiris*.¹⁴ Isocrates skilfully uses the literary genre of the letter for rhetorical and philosophical purposes: in the guise of a private letter, he criticises Polycrates and presents his own piece of epideictic defence to show his superiority. In the beginning, Isocrates calls out “Oh Polycrates” (1) and speaks to the addressee in the second person. However, he writes in the style he uses when responding to someone he is acquainted with only in writing:

But since we have not yet met one another, we shall be able, if we ever do come together, to discuss the other topics at greater length; concerning those suggestions, however, by which at the present time I might be of service to you, I have thought I should advise you by letter, though concealing my views, to the best of my ability, from everyone else. (*Busiris*, 2, trans. G. Norlin)

Because a letter depends on the understanding that it is addressed to a particular person, it can, on the one hand, avoid uncertainties about the context, against which Plato raised critical points in *Phaedrus*. On the other hand, we do not have to take the messages to be the author’s ideas, even if expressed in the first person. Instead, the author can propose any idea more freely in the form of a private letter. According to Yun Lee Too, “Writing a letter, if only a fictional one, is one of the primary ways in which a Greek author dramatises a relationship with an individual in power”. (Too, 1995, p. 198)

In *On Style*, Demetrius introduces the idea that a letter is one of two sides of a dialogue (223)¹⁵ and adds his comment that “a dialogue reproduces an extemporary utterance, while a letter is committed to writing and is sent as a gift” (224). In antiquity, letters and dialogues were coupled and deemed to be relatives. In the age of Isocrates and Plato, using the letter form was probably much easier and more natural than we may suppose. His pupils at the Academy seem to have written some works in the form of letters.¹⁶

This consideration supports the authenticity of Plato’s *Seventh Letter*. Because letters and rhetorical works in the epistolary style are genuine in Isocrates, we can suppose that the letter form was also used by other contemporary philosophers as an effective method of expressing their ideas. The adoption of this style by Plato might also be explained in terms of his rivalry with Isocrates. Hence, Frede’s strong argument against the authenticity turns out to be invalid, and the denial of his claim, on the contrary, provides us with a plausible argument that Plato may well have written philosophical letters, just as Isocrates did.

If Plato’s *Seventh Letter* is genuine, it is neither an ordinary correspondence nor a work of a rhetorical exercise but must instead be considered a much refined and well-planned work of philosophy (if we understand philosophy as a way of living well, rather than systematic doctrines). Yet the intention behind the writing of the letter need not be simple; for example, we may suspect that the letter was never sent to Sicily but was intended for public circulation, just as Isocrates’ *Busiris* was.

Isocrates had a particular reason for adopting this style: it was said that his voice was so weak that to make a good performance of speeches in front of a large audience was difficult. Hence, whereas the main activity of

rhetoricians, such as Gorgias and Alcidas, was to give extempore speeches, Isocrates carefully composed written speeches over a long time. Therefore, it was natural that he adopted the epistolary style in *writing* speeches, for letters are sent to their recipients and read out by someone other than the writer. Isocrates was keen on trying various styles to create new speeches, but the epistolary style was particularly suitable for his writing. However, it is not certain whether this combination of rhetorical speech and letter was original to him or whether it was already in use by others at the time (cf. Sullivan, 2007, p. 16).

How does this lead back to Plato? I am suggesting that it is possible, or even likely, that Plato, like Isocrates, used letters (or at least the *Seventh Letter* and *Eighth Letter*) for philosophical purposes. We should surmise why these letters survived and were included in the *Corpus Platonicum*. Plato's letters must have been collected and carefully preserved, along with the other dialogues in the Academy, perhaps from Xenocrates on. The ancient tradition clearly shows that the letters were read as Plato's writings and respected as such.¹⁷

We must remember that later philosophers also used the style of letters effectively, from Cicero, Seneca and St. Paul in the Roman period, to modern thinkers, such as Descartes, Leibniz and Voltaire.

4. DID NOT PLATO WRITE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

The rivalry between Plato and Isocrates, in particular regarding the educational views of their schools, is normally assumed in modern scholarship, but we scarcely find a direct testimony. Diogenes Laertius reports one anecdote of their friendly relationship (3.1.8; cf. Riginos,

1976, p. 118, Anecdote 74). Plato mentioned Isocrates only once in his dialogues: in the closing conversation with Phaedrus, Socrates expresses a positive view and expectation of the future of young Isocrates, hoping that he will excel in rhetoric in the spirit of philosophy (*Phdr.* 279a-b). On the other hand, there is no explicit reference to Plato in Isocrates' works, though we may find many allusions in several works. This silence on both sides makes our objective judgements difficult, but we have to observe their relationship by using plausible evidence. Above all, it is often pointed out that Isocrates' main work, *Antidosis* [15], composed in 353 BC, is somehow related to the *Seventh Letter*.¹⁸ We find six points of correspondence between them.

First, Isocrates' *Antidosis* intends to defend the author against criticisms in the form of forensic speech. He needed to explain his lifelong activity of teaching rhetoric to remove the ungrounded prejudice and slanders of his opponent. The *Seventh Letter* is to explain Plato's thought and intention concerning the recent Sicilian issues but actually contains defences and apologies for Plato's political activities. Both writings are a self-defence of one's engagements.

Second, both *Antidosis* and the *Seventh Letter* were written when their authors were senior in age—*Antidosis* when Isocrates was eighty-two and the *Seventh Letter* when Plato was around seventy-four years old—and both reflect the authors' lives and activities. Therefore, they can be read as a form of autobiography (as discussed below).

Third, both works present the authors' philosophical ideas in the middle of long pieces. *Antidosis* inserts some arguments in praise of philosophy, which clarifies his own position in contrast to Plato and others (167–214, 243–309). Similarly, the *Seventh Letter* includes a famous digression focused on philosophical

discussion (342a-344d). The author initially explains how and why Dionysius failed to do philosophy as he had expected, but he then found it necessary to clarify some core ideas of his philosophy. In this way, both use long works to express their notions of philosophy.

Fourth, both authors justify their relationship with their closest friends in these works: Timotheus and Dion. For Isocrates, to defend the Athenian statesman and his pupil Timotheus was a main purpose of this speech (102-139). Also, for Plato, it was his main aim to defend Dion's political position by narrating the details of what happened between Dion, Dionysius and himself. Both friends were dead and were severely criticised by many.

Fifth, both transcend a particular genre by using different styles. *Antidosis* is a forensic speech, far longer than ordinary speeches, and contains many citations from Isocrates' own past works, as if it were a work of meta-rhetoric. The *Seventh Letter* is also far longer than an ordinary letter (about twenty-nine Stephanus pages, i.e., as large as the *Meno*) and can be considered a philosophical treatise or political pamphlet presenting a vision on how philosophers live. In other words, *Antidosis* is no ordinary oration, nor is the *Seventh Letter* a letter.

Sixth, it is well-known that *Antidosis* responded to Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and opposed the notion of the philosophy in the *Republic* (cf. Too, 2008, p. 24; Ober, 1998, p. 260-263). We should note that Isocrates was influenced by Socrates just as Plato was.¹⁹ In this respect, the relation between the two works is not symmetrical because I find no clear allusion to Isocrates in the *Seventh Letter*.

With these points in mind, it is natural to assume that Plato and Isocrates competed with each other in these literary and philosophical experiments. If Plato wrote the *Seventh Letter*, the date of composition would be somewhere

between 354 and 352 BC,²⁰ so we may assume some implicit responses between the two works (cf. Harward, 1928, p. 154; Post, 1930, p. 115), although it is uncertain which responded to which. It is usually supposed that Isocrates responded to Plato, but the suggested date of composition allows the reverse. They might even have been mutual responses.

To compare the *Seventh Letter* with *Antidosis* is particularly interesting for the history of autobiography. By examining the ancient tradition of biography, Arnaldo Momigliano (1993, p. 60-62) regards the *Seventh Letter* as "the greatest autobiographical letter of antiquity". The fourth century BC was "the century of biography", particularly because Socratic literature attempted various depictions of Socrates. In this context, Momigliano defends the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* and sees it as a forerunner of this new genre.

If this view is correct, what role do autobiographical works play in philosophy? Because we see no autobiography of Plato in the dialogues (except a few references in the *Apology* and *Phaedo*), it may look attractive to consider the *Letters* as counterparts to Isocrates' works. Here we should add that autobiographies need not be spoken in the first person: Xenophon, in the *Anabasis*, for example, reports his own experiences in the third person.²¹ Later, in the history of philosophy, there are many examples of philosophical ideas expressed through an author's autobiography: Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Kierkegaard are well-known examples.

5. PLATO'S EXPERIMENTS ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL STYLE

The assumption that Plato only wrote dialogues but never expressed his ideas in

the first person in his writings is too narrow and may prove wrong when we consider the various writing styles of his contemporaries. Indeed, Plato experimented with different styles within his dialogues.

The literary forms that Plato used include oratory ones. The *Apology of Socrates* is, strictly speaking, not a dialogue (though it contains a short dialogue with Meletus) but a forensic oratory, and the *Menexenus* presents a funeral oration within the dialogue. We know that speeches were a fashionable style exploited by the sophists: for example, Antiphon's *Tetralogies*, Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* and *Defense of Palamedes*, Antisthenes' *Ajax* and *Odysseus* and Alcidas' *Odysseus*. These fictional speeches indirectly deliver the author's ideas. In addition, the *Phaedrus* contains epideictic speeches, and the *Symposium* presents several extempore speeches. In addition, the main part of the *Timaeus* is a scientific treatise, and the *Laws* introduces preambles of laws. Various myths, stories and histories are included in the dialogues. Thus, Plato made full use of a range of different literary genres and sometimes combined them to advance philosophical discussions.

In the fourth century BC, writing was controversial, so when Plato wrote his criticism of writing both in the *Phaedrus* (274b-278b) and the *Seventh Letter* (341b-d), he must have had his contemporary critics, especially Isocrates and Alcidas, in mind. A prominent pupil of Gorgias, Alcidas wrote a treatise entitled *On those who Write Written Speeches, or the Sophists*, in which he severely criticised Isocrates' style of written speeches as a secondary activity. However, he also had to apologize and explain why he wrote this criticism (29-32). Probably Plato responded to this treatise in the argument against writing in the *Phaedrus*, but again he was obviously aware that this

dialogue itself was a writing. It is probably in response to the *Phaedrus* that Isocrates defended writing in *First Letter* (2-3) and *To Philip* (25-26).²² Particularly in this letter to Dionysius, he contrasted the written letter with the spoken advice, and emphasized the role of the former. Thus, without mentioning each other, they competed and collaborated with each other to develop philosophical styles in writing.

Although neither Alcidas nor Plato said anything about letters in their arguments, they might have thought that writing a letter can somehow avoid the flaws of normal writing in that it is addressed to a particular person and set in a particular context. If the fourth century philosophers and rhetoricians considered the epistolary form as effective style, it is likely that Plato also used it for philosophical activities. In each style, Plato's words were directed carefully at his colleagues and all the people of Greece, including his rivals: his aim was not so much to construct a system of doctrines as to discuss philosophical questions. Writing a letter was arguably one of the powerful methods to do it.

Coming back to the two statements quoted in Section 2, we can once more attempt to answer whether we should see any difference between the same idea presented as either a dialogue or a letter. In a sense, the answer is yes because the dramatic context of the *Republic* fixes the meaning of the philosopher-ruler thesis as the only possible answer to the realizability of the ideal state and is described in words alone. This can be interpreted as a purely theoretical proposal, and the speaker's mocking introduction might even hint at the implausibility of its application to real-life society. However, the autobiographical letter locates its thesis quite differently. It indicates that Plato conceived this idea in his youth

and eventually found a good chance to put it into practice later in his life. In this context, the thesis was taken to be a serious proposal for creating a just and happy society. The authorial “I” seems to indicate the original intention of the thesis.

However, we know well that autobiographies do not always represent historical facts or even the author’s own ideas. Authors often make apologetic excuses, ignore inconvenient truths or even distort memory, whether consciously or not. Even the *Seventh Letter*, written some forty years after his disappointing experiences of the Thirty and the trial of Socrates, may be unconsciously creating a story consistent with his later activities. He may equally have changed his ideas gradually. In this sense, we cannot take the autobiographical nature of the writing to be decisive evidence. This type of writing is, however, one of the most effective ways of presenting philosophical ideas; therefore, the ideas should be examined by themselves and alongside other works, although we often put too much emphasis on the biographical context.

I believe that the genius of the Greeks lay in inventing philosophical styles, and I consider it crucial to understand how ancient philosophers experimented with various styles, such as poetry, treatise, aphorism, dialogue, speech and letter, in their writings. Although we modern scholars take it for granted that philosophers write academic treatises (namely, articles, books and lectures), we can see in ancient philosophy that this was far from the only way of expressing philosophical ideas. Ancient writers scarcely believed that we could easily engage in philosophy without making conscious attempts at speaking and writing. It is far from obvious that speaking in the first person presents a sincere profession of one’s thoughts or that writing in the

third person guarantees an objective inquiry into truth. Instead, both methods of delivery are philosophical performances (speech acts), hence requiring hermeneutical skills to be understood and used philosophically. We can learn this from the epistolary literature produced by Isocrates and, most likely the case, by Plato.

By considering the historical and literary contexts of writing letters in the fourth century BC, I find no clear evidence or definitive argument against the authorship of Plato’s *Seventh Letter*. Therefore, the burden of proof still lies with those who deny authenticity. Now we should respect the long and ancient traditions that had included and respected the *Seventh Letter* as Plato’s own writing.

Finally, we must remember that Plato used to engage in dialogue with Socrates, who did not write anything but always directed questions at his friends: “Do say what *you* think”. Plato wrote down Socrates’ dialogue in his absence by making himself absent. We should try to solve the mystery of his philosophical styles to better practice philosophy ourselves. The *Seventh Letter* should be the basis of our understanding of Plato’s philosophy together with the dialogues.²³

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Burnyeat criticises the consensus of Guthrie, 1975, p. 8 (mentioned above), in p. 121-122.
- 2 For the relation between *Rep. V* and *Ep. VII*, 325d-326b, see Schofield, 2006, p. 15-17, 44, n. 20.
- 3 Xenophon, the author himself, participated in only one dialogue with Socrates in *Mem.* 1.3.9-13. He also suggested anachronistically that he was present at the symposium of Callias in *Symp.* 1.1. In this respect, Xenophon's style is different from Plato's. We can see that Plato paid more attention to hiding.
- 4 Cf. DL. 3.1.23, Plutarch, *Against Colotes*, 32, 1126C-D. Brunt (1993) directs a more cautious consideration against the alleged political activities but never denies that Plato engaged in political theory.
- 5 As for *Letter to Philip II* (*Socratic Epistle 30*, attributed to Speusippus), Frede does not consider the most recent study of Natoli (2004), which concludes that the letter is genuine. Hence, the controversy is still open.
- 6 The initial agenda of Frede's examination includes a reference to Isocrates: "The question of the authenticity of letters or letter-collections handed down from antiquity quite generally – philosophers' letters (Aristotle, Speusippus), rhetoricians' or orators' letters (Isocrates, Demosthenes) – all sorts of problems about ancient epistolography." (Burnyeat; Frede, 2015, p. 3-4) The editors of Frede's lectures, namely Carol Atack and Dominic

- Scott, add endnote 13 to this point and explain the scholarly discussion on the authenticity of the letters of Demosthenes and Isocrates (Burnyeat; Frede, 2015, p. 103), but they scarcely contest Frede's exclusion of them from the table of philosophical letters (p. 8). The six letters of Demosthenes tend to be regarded as spurious by modern commentators.
- 7 Pace Frede, who insists that the burden of proof lies with those who believe in the authenticity (Burnyeat; Frede, 2015, p. 33; cf. p. xiii, xiv). The same claim is made by Edelstein (1966, p. 2).
- 8 See note 17 below.
- 9 The *Tenth Letter to Dionysius* used to be included in the collection, but obviously, it is spurious and excluded from modern editions.
- 10 It is usually difficult to distinguish between letters and books: see Trapp, 2003, p. 1, n. 3.
- 11 Commentators assume Dionysius I (tyrant, 405–367 BC), who regained the power in 368 BC.
- 12 For how to understand the sudden lapse in the middle of *Ep. I*, see Too, 1995, p. 194–198. This letter became a forerunner to the later works addressed to Philip II; cf. Smith, 1940, p. 19–21.
- 13 Sullivan, 2007, p. 8, emphasises their role of display for pupils.
- 14 *Busiris* is a highly intertextual work. This speech was thought to respond to Plato's idea of the ideal city in the *Republic* and to the theory of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* and had some correspondence to the Atlantis story in *Tim.* and *Critias*: cf. Eucken, 1983, p. 183–195, 208–212; Livingstone, 2001, p. 48–73. In this period, competitive discourses were written by Xenophon, Plato and others concerning the ideal *politeia*, with both Persia and Sparta as models. Isocrates wrote this epideictic speech in the context of a controversy with Gorgias, Polycrates, Alcidas and Plato.
- 15 This idea is suggested by Artemon, who edited Aristotle's letters.
- 16 Cf. Speusippus: *A reply to Cephalus*, *A reply to Gryllus*, *A reply to the anonymous work* (DL. 4.1.4–5); Xenocrates: *To Arybas*, *To Hephaestion* (DL. 4.2.14).
- 17 Early references are found in Demetrius (*On Style*, 228, 234, 290) to *Ep. VII*, 349b, of the second century BC (?) and in Cicero (*Tusc.* V.100) to *Ep. VII* (326b) and *Fin.* II (92), of the first century BC. Aristoxenus' "wander (πλάνη)", in Fr. 64 (Wehrli) may be an allusion to *Ep. VII* (350d) and *XI* (358e). Given these early references, I wonder when and how the letter, if it was forged late by someone, came to be included in the *Platonic corpus*.
- 18 Even Burnyeat contrasts the *Seventh Letter* with *Antidosis* and suggests some intertextual relationship (Burnyeat; Frede, 2015, p. 140, 143, 148).
- 19 [Plutarch], *Lives of Ten Orators*, *Isocrates*, 838F; Photius, *Codex 260*, *Isocrates*, 487B; cf. Ober, 2004.
- 20 Hackforth, 1913, p. 84, suggests 353–352 BC; Nagasaka, 1975, p. 236–237, January of 352 BC.
- 21 Cf. Momigliano, 1993, p. 57: Xenophon's *Anabasis* is "a model both for its autobiographical character and for the effort to disguise it".
- 22 Cf. Sullivan, 2007, p. 9. See also, *Ep. VII*, 341a, 342a.
- 23 The earlier version of the paper was read at the 3rd International Conference on Classics: Texts, Thoughts, and the Self in the Ancient World, at the Department of Philosophy, Peking University, China, on 23 November, 2019. I thank Wu Tianyue for organizing the conference, and the participants, in particular Anna Marmodoro and Victor Caston, for their valuable comments. The section on Isocrates was revised and extended from my Japanese paper: *Reconsidering the Platonic Seventh Letter: In the context of Fourth Century BC Epistolary Literature. Journal of Classical Studies* 66, The Classical Society of Japan, 2018, p. 23–34.

