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The Proper Use of the Seventh Letter as an Interpretive Tool for Plato's Works

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Contents

Abstract

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Plato's Seventh Letter has been used by scholars in various ways as an intrepretive tool for Plato's other works. This use of the Seventh Letter (as an interpretive tool), however, is determined by the particular interpretations given of the Letter. These interpretations, in turn, are too frequently determined by, and restricted to, issues which do not arise from the content of the Seventh Letter.

Towards a solution of this problem, three significant features of the Seventh Letter need to be addressed: what the Letter actually says, the indirect character of its communication, and its paradoxical nature.

These three features indicate what attitude the reader should adopt in regards to Plato's works and, more generally, to anything written. This attitude is that the works are an opportunity for learning, and are not that learning itself.

Introduction

At first glance, the Seventh Letter[1] does not seem overly problematic. It is not difficult to sum the whole letter up by saying that serious things cannot be spoken of seriously but that serious things can be spoken of un-seriously. One could then go on to interpret dialogue to be an un-serious way of speaking about serious things, which is supposed to help one come to know the serious things.

But, as shall be shown in chapter one of this thesis, the Seventh Letter, and also the relationship between the Seventh Letter and the dialogues, are much more complicated than this initial sketch suggests. The first question that is usually addressed has to do with the authenticity of the Seventh Letter. The secondary sources are at a dead-lock on the issue. There does not seem to be any way of knowing for sure. For the purposes of this paper I simply assume that the Letter is genuine, and examine the implications of the fact that it is genuine.

Typically, the next question after that of the authenticity of the Letter, is the question or issue of Plato's unwritten or oral doctrine. And actually, most of the recent significance of the Seventh Letter, and therefore the question of authenticity, is generated directly out of this debate. The esoterists are those who hold that Plato did have a secret doctrine, that was communicated orally,

but not through writing, and the exoterists are those who think that Plato did not have any secret doctrine apart from the one communicated through the works that are attributed to Plato. The esoterists interpret the Seventh Letter to say that the doctrine that Plato is interested in cannot be put into any form of written language but that it can be communicated orally. According to the esoterists, Plato's doctrine may be hinted at in the dialogues, but is not contained in the dialogues. The opponents of this thesis, the exoterists, claim that the Letter implies that what Plato is interested in cannot be put into language at all. Or, in some cases, an exoterist will admit that the Letter says that Plato's doctrine cannot be put into writing but that it can be spoken, but then deny that the Letter is authentic.

It is only at a point beyond all these issues that an in-depth analysis of the Seventh Letter is possible. Chapter two of this these is an attempt at such an in-depth analysis. The second chapter starts with the issue, not of whether spoken language can be differentiated from written language, but rather whether dialogue, either spoken or written, can be differentiated from all other types of communication. For example, the rough sketch given above of the dialogues as un-serious talk about serious things assumes that dialogue is somehow different from normal language, i.e., that normal language cannot be un-serious talk of serious things. This assumption is unjustified.

There is no special case being made for dialogue, as a means of communication, in the Seventh Letter.

Also, from the objections to the esoterist position, there is a further issue that can be developed. This further development accepts that there is no special case for dialogue or for the spoken word as opposed to the written word, but as a question of interpretation in the dialogues asks whether the Seventh Letter implies that Plato's dialogues can somehow, perhaps indirectly, lead us to an understanding of Plato's doctrine. In other words, if Plato had a doctrine, then he must have been able to express it somehow through the dialogues. So, the issue here is really whether or not the Seventh Letter confirms or denies the fact that Plato had a doctrine of his own. The question is significant because in effect to say that there is no doctrine means that no matter what the dialogues indirectly imply, it cannot be taken to be platonic doctrine. That this is an issue is surprising since it seems obvious that the Seventh Letter is denying precisely the possibility of there being a Platonic doctrine, but most commentators do try to find a way of interpreting the Seventh Letter in such a way that would allow this possibility. For the most part, then, the first two chapters of this paper are an attempt to show that, in fact, the Seventh Letter does deny the possibility of there being a Platonic doctrine.

Chapter three of this paper attempts to explore the implications of this fact on the activity of interpreting

the dialogues. There have been many Plato commentators who have used the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool. But very few have recognized the indirect way in which it is presented, nor has there been any recognition of the difficulties involved in determining a methodology of interpretation caused by the Seventh Letter being presented indirectly. The fact that the Seventh Letter is an indirect communication is suggested by the fact that the Seventh Letter cannot be straightforwardly interpreted.

Most of the time what use the Seventh letter is put to will be within the context of the issues that have been outlined above. But some commentators use the Seventh Letter for other purposes like trying to clarify the relationship between logos and myth in Plato's works[2] or in an attempt to argue for or against the claim that Plato's philosophy changed radically over the years.

And finally, chapter four attempts to show that, if the Seventh Letter states that Plato's deepest thoughts about serious things can in no way be put into language because language is naturally defective, then it follows that what is in language cannot be the proper object of philosophic investigation. Propositions or statements cannot, strictly speaking, be true. A proposition can be factual but this factuality does not add any value to the statement, so the factuality of a proposition is in itself insignificant to the philosophic value that the statement might have. The value of what is in language lies in its usefulness in focusing

the person's attention in the direction of what is real.

For the interpreters of Plato's works this means that if they use the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool, then they cannot call the interpretation of the works a philosophically significant activity unless the act of interpretation provides the opportunity to direct their attention towards the realm of true being. The reader can not benefit, philosophically, directly by reading some interpretation of Plato's works any more then the reader could by reading Plato's works themselves.

Chapter 1 Various uses and interpretations of the Seventh Letter

The Seventh Letter has not received as much attention as a significant factor in the interpretation of Plato's dialogues as it, perhaps, ought to have had. Yet, the Seventh Letter has had some effect, and it will be useful to investigate how the Seventh Letter has influenced the interpretation of the rest of Plato's works for several reasons. The first is simply to demonstrate that the Seventh Letter is in fact being used as an interpretive tool, and that it is being so used incorrectly. This presentation of how the Seventh Letter has been used as an interpretive tool will also be useful to establish a context in which a correct usage of the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool can be suggested. Lastly, the presentation of how the Seventh Letter has been used as an interpretive tool serves as an effective introduction to the issue of how to correctly interpret the Seventh Letter.

If someone claims to be using the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool for the rest of Plato's works, then there ought to be a necessary or at least a direct connection between the Seventh Letter and the person's interpretation of Plato's works. At the basis of any interpretation of either the Seventh Letter or the dialogues in general, is an attitude that the reader brings to the text. This connection

between the Seventh Letter and the person's interpretation is accomplished when the attitude that the reader brings to the works embodies the position advanced in the Seventh Letter itself. In other words, to properly use the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool the reader must have a Platonic attitude, and specifically, Platonic as characterized by the Seventh Letter itself. If the Seventh Letter is not interpreted correctly one's attitude towards the rest of the works will not really be determined by the Seventh Letter, in which case it will no longer be true that the Seventh Letter is being used as an interpretive tool. As will be shown to be the case, the letter does not determine the attitude of the commentators who do claim to be using the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool. And therefore, the Letter does not, in these cases, determine the interpretation of the rest of the works.

There seem to be two main themes by which the various positions on the interpretation of Plato's works can be characterized. The first has to do with the interpretation of Plato's works other than the Seventh Letter. And this theme involves placing emphasis on one of two things, either determining which, if any, of the opinions found in the works, can be ascribed to Plato, or emphasizing the question of what the opinions are or mean, regardless of whose they are.

The second general theme has to do with developing a model of linguistic communication with reference to the

interpretation of the Seventh Letter. This theme involves three stages. The first stage involves the putting of some message or meaning into the medium; the second stage is a subsistence of that message in the medium; the final stage is a taking of the message out of the medium. In the case where language is supposed to express reality, the latter stage concerns the intellectual skill and natural affinity that the person must have in order to grasp the reality that is contained in the language. The middle stage involves the nature of language, in particular, the ability of language to express what is not sensual. And the first stage involves the non-sensual nature of reality, and in particular, the impossibility of it being imagined.

Most of the interpretations of the Seventh Letter can be characterized according to which and how many of these three stages the commentator thinks that Plato is denying in the Seventh Letter.[3] Also, there are certain basic assumptions that should be kept in mind and that all commentators seem to agree upon. The first is that the problem of putting the message into language has nothing to do with a lack of skill on the part of the one who would try, but rather it has to do with the nature of the message itself. Thus, it is not an issue whether or not everything is incapable of being put into language, but only that which is real. Furthermore, they assume that language is perfectly capable of sustaining any message that is imaginable; any message which means or refers to something sensual can be

sustained by the language. And the person extracting the message requires only as much intellectual skill and affinity to the subject as is appropriate to the particular subject.

Crombie

I.M.Crombie (1962) uses the Seventh Letter to determine what limit can be set to the acceptance of the dialogues, or of some position represented in a dialogue, as Plato's philosophy. He says that "anybody who sets out to report Plato's opinions can properly be asked to tell us on what principles he interprets the evidence at his disposal."[4] According to Crombie, it is because the Seventh Letter portrays Plato disowning the opinions expressed in the dialogues, that it is necessary for anyone who wishes to ascribe any of those opinions to Plato, to somehow justify doing so.

Crombie tries to point out the difficulties involved in determining which, if any, of the opinions expressed in the dialogues can justly be called Plato's own. He says; "The chief speaker is often a historical personage."[5]Therefore, the doubt arises "did Plato use them, and in particular Socrates, as ventriloquist dummies, or did he rather put into their mouths opinions which he believed them to have held?"[6] Crombie could have made his position stronger by pointing out that even if we knew

whether Plato was putting into their mouths views which he believed them to have held, or if these views were no more than Plato's version of the historical personage's view, we still could not say whether or not any of the opinions, in either case, were held by Plato as his very own conviction.

Crombie adds that very often there is no victor in a dialogue[7]. This factor works against the inclination to identify Plato's position on an issue, with that of whichever character wins the argument.

Moreover, most of the time there is no predominant view.

> If, for example, we suppose that in the Lysis Plato's main purpose is to pose theoretical puzzles so as to induce the reader to reflect on certain problems, then we are distinguishing between what Plato is doing and what the chief speaker is doing; and if we feel bound to make this distinction in an enigmatic dialogue or passage, then why should we not make it in a destructive dialogue or passage?[8]

Or, if the dialogue is intended to produce a state of aporia, it is the result that is relevant, not what brought it about; and the result is not an opinion.

Also, even where there is a predominant view, the possibility of an ironical attitude casts a shadow on the predominant view, making it unlikely that it is Plato's.

Moreover, once we get a firm hold on the idea that

> Plato may sometimes suggest thoughts which are not identical with, and may even contradict, those which Socrates (or whoever it may be) expresses, we cannot help going on to wonder how far we are justified in regarding Plato as committing himself to the opinions of the chief speaker even in the constructive dialogues.[9]

Irony is also a problematic factor in determining not only whose an opinion is, but also what the opinion is, since irony can indirectly imply something that is not directly said. It is often difficult, however, to determine the force of the irony and exactly what it implies.

By far the vast majority of what Crombie finds problematic about ascribing opinions to Plato has to do only with what opinions are to be so ascribed. The reason why the endeavor is so problematic has to do with Plato's attitude towards language, and towards writing philosophy. The points of difficulty which Crombie mentions result from Plato's attempt to write philosophy, while being aware that straightforward communication is unlikely. Plato resorted, for example, to the use of characters to dramatize the truth which he wanted to get across.

Crombie refers to the Seventh Letter, along with the Phaedrus 275-6 and Sophist 228-30, in order to support his position, by interpreting them to be saying that the insight into reality cannot be communicated with certainty through language. The reality experienced can be put into language,

but the communication is not usually achieved.

> He [Plato] is not saying that the truest statements we can make are only partially true, so much as that there is no true statement but can be misunderstood. The truth is in a sense ineffable, not in the sense that there is something non-rational about it, but in that we cannot with certainty communicate it.[10]

Or,

> there is little reasonable doubt that there is also a good deal of positive teaching [in the dialogues]. What we ought perhaps to say is not that Plato thought it positively wrong to attempt to communicate philosophical doctrine in writing, but rather that he thought it unlikely to be very successful.[11]

It is only the last stage, of the three stage model of communication, that Crombie interprets Plato to be denying. This explains Crombie's concentration on the issue of ascribing the opinions to Plato rather than on determining what the opinions are. With the reader's attention on the issue of which opinions can be ascribed to Plato, Crombie is able to insert a solution to the question of how to interpret Plato's works, within the context of the issue of how to determine what the opinions really are.

His interpretation of the Seventh Letter implies that what the opinions are is clear since there is no problem

involved in putting them into language. This interpretation involves the assumption that Plato knew that we would not understand what he wrote, so he presented the intended message through characters within a dramatic context, which presumably enables a reader to get the message.

Alen C.Bowen (1988) says much the same thing. According to Bowen[12], the present interpretive impasse is based on the traditional assumption that the meaning of the text consists in what the author meant by it. Bowen suggests that we make no assumption about whose opinions the text represents, but rather find out simply what the dialogues say. Finding out what they say is supposed to be easier when there is no assumption about who wrote them, and the author's intention. But one might argue that without consideration of the author's intention, and thus who the author is, finding out what the texts say is impossible.

It is in reference to what the opinions are, rather than whose they are and , subsequently, the claim that Plato found them true, that Crombie affirms the existence of a positive doctrine that can be found in the dialogues. He then tries to get around the whole question (which he spent so much effort setting up) of determining which opinions are Plato's own by an 'ad hoc' strategy:

> The only principle that one can follow if one tries, against his expressed warnings, to extract Plato's beliefs from his writings, is the principle that the interpretation of particular passages which

> attributes to Plato the most plausible intellectual development is to be preferred.[13]

This unjustified principle presupposes that what could most plausibly be an opinion held by Plato is the most plausible interpretation of what Plato wrote. Crombie does not discuss how the reader is supposed to decide what is the most plausible intellectual developement for Plato to have had. And without some such method it is impossible to decide which interpretation is correct.

Sayre

Out of all the commentators on Plato's Seventh Letter, Kenneth M. Sayre (1988) offers the best analysis of the Seventh Letter. For example, in opposition to the usage of the Seventh Letter to support the thesis of an unwritten or spoken doctrine Sayre says that:

> [f]ar from extolling vocal over written speech, the primary burden of these passages in the Phaedrus, like those of the Seventh Letter examined previously, is to draw attention to a kind of intellectual awareness that eludes expression in speech and writing.[14]

Admitting that the Seventh Letter implies that "Plato in fact never did commit his properly philosophic thoughts to writing"[15], Sayre asks what is to be made of the written dialogues.

> While being explicit in its insistence that

> philosophy cannot be put into words like other subjects, it is equally explicit in its description of how philosophy does come into fruition.[16]

Sayre interprets the Seventh Letter, at 341C-D, to be saying that insight is generated in the soul through immersion in the topic, in the course of frequent conversations about it. Philosophy lives in the soul of the learner, not in written or spoken arguments. Therefore, Sayre concludes, the dialogues serve to remove false opinion which is the other side of the process of recollection.

Although Sayre likes this solution, he admits that the theory of recollection is found in only three dialogues (Meno, Phaedo and the Phaedrus), and it seems to have been dropped in the later works; but " what apparently is not jettisoned is the view of philosophic understanding as a mental discernment of true existence."[17]

Sayre interprets the Seventh Letter as implying that there are two types of knowledge.[18] There is a sort of scientific knowledge which is a true judgement with a definitional logos. Examples of this type of knowledge are found in the Sophist, for example of the angler (219-221C), or in the definition of surds at the beginning of the Theaetetus. But the "knowledge that guides the formation of a definition is more than true judgement accompanied by the definition itself."[19]

The other sort of knowledge is a philosophic grasp of being. The type of knowledge that is a definitional logos

with true judgement is a linguistic knowledge. But according to Sayre, the knowledge of being is non discursive. It is the knowledge which exists within the sphere of the legitimate kind of discourse identified at Phaedrus 276A8. Sayre associates this knowledge with " the logos of the Republic 532A7, that seeks out the essence of each thing, the good included".[20] Similar instances can be found in Philebus 16D-17B, Sophist 253E1-2, 254A and Meno 98A.

Sayre sees a possible objection to this theory in the Phaedo, near the end, where the philosophic method is described as existing within the sphere of propositions. The first stage of this method is to suggest a proposition, axiom or hypotheses from which the "truth of the things"[Phaedo 99E3] in question can be proven consistently. If the proof is inconsistent, then a more general principle is suggested in the place of the original one, and so on, until the proof is consistent.

Sayre, however, points out that the divided line of the Republic would place this method alongside mathematics, and not philosophy. Sayre also points out that at Republic 532A-B, dialectic is described as a process "prescinding all things sensible" through which one sets out to discover the essence of each entity, and does not desist until one has grasped by reason the Good itself.[21] At Republic 533C-D, dialectic is described as "a method that does away with hypotheses" and proceeds "to the principle itself in which it finds certainty". Sayre concludes that this principle

itself is the non-hypothetical principle of Republic 510B7 & 511B6-7. And thus, the Good is the non-hypothetical principle at which dialectic aims. Furthermore, the Good is definitely not propositional in character.

Not only does this show that the propositional or discursive conception of the aim of philosophy, found in the Phaedo, is not compatible with the Republic, it also shows that the Republic, along with the Phaedrus and the Symposium, is essentially in agreement with the Seventh Letter.

Sayre concludes that "the logos attending knowledge is in some fashion an intellectual grasp of being." This, he says, is "Plato's conception of philosophic understanding".[22] Sayre then claims that the dialogues were written because they can guide one to such a non-discursive grasp of reality. By this he means that the dialogues provide the opportunity for being in community with the subject which is said to be required.[23]

Sayre is able to attribute a philosophic value to Plato's writing because he interprets the Seventh Letter to imply that there is an everyday knowledge and a properly philosophic knowledge. The philosophic knowledge provides the truth of which the discursive knowledge can then be a representation.

As long as we think that Plato's conception of philosophy is understood by us, we can see his writings as a doctrine that expresses the basic truth that Plato must have

apprehended, i.e. the works of Plato are seen as the logos and the true judgement that can be expressed in language, and which is known to be true through Plato's supposed non-discursive grasp of reality. In other words, if the philosophic grasp is the grasping of the truth of some definition, then the writing will be equivalent to an expression of the truth, since the one with knowledge will know the doctrine in order to know its truth.

This interpretation no longer seems to fit with the Seventh Letter's denial of the capacity of language to contain what is true, and a writer's ability to put into writing what he knows to be true.

Friedlaender

With reference to the whole of Plato's works, Paul Friedlaender (1958) says that although there is some direct and indirect mention of the ideas, the frequency of such is much less than that which the secondary literature would lead one to expect. According to Friedlaender, not only are the ideas not mentioned as much as one might expect, but also what mention there does happen to be, is not as systematic as one might expect from reading the secondary literature on Plato. "Nowhere do we find a 'doctrine' as such, or a system comprising the order of these forms, communicating their knowledge, or clarifying their relationship to the world of appearance."[24]

In order to account for this infrequency and unsystematic presentation, Friedlaender quotes from the Seventh Letter where it says that there is a subject which, cannot be put into language like other studies. Friedlaender says that this mysterious subject which Plato mentions is really the ideas, which would explain why the ideas are not mentioned more frequently or more systematically.

Friedlaender does go on to give reasons why the realm of ideas cannot be written about or expressed. But these reasons clearly show that he does not take the 'cannot' very seriously. Friedlaender says that the realm of ideas is not intended for everyone since a person needs both the intellectual skills and also an innate affinity to that realm in order to achieve knowledge of that realm. But it does not make sense to say that the ideas are intended for anyone at all. Friedlaender does not explain how the necessity for skill and affinity on the part of the learner can account for the impossibility of expressing what is real in language by one who has the knowledge and therefore also these qualities.

Friedlaender seems to be akin to Crombie on this point. It is a lack of success in the communication at the last stage, due to the deficiencies in the receiver, that Friedlaender invokes. But he also suggests that there is a difficulty at the first stage. Continuing to discourse about the realm of ideas, Friedlaender says

> speech has often aimed at it before as the origin

> and goal of philosophical discourse. Yet it was not known, not even discussed; for, while we may be able to name it, we cannot describe it [25].

This seems to suggest that even an initial putting of the subject into language is not possible. Thus, according to Friedlaender, the dialogues represent Plato's attempt to describe the indescribable and to lead his readers to where they cannot be led. "To lead to a vision of the Idea and a hint of the good is Plato's task."[26]

Friedlaender goes on to discuss the various ways in which Plato describes the dialectical path in different dialogues. But, Plato's description of this ascent to knowledge, could not lead one up that path even if it were a true description. In order to make sense of Plato's task of taking us up the right road, one has to determine the effect that the dialogue has on the reader. What sort of dynamic must exist between the written dialogue and the reader in order for the dialogue to have the edifying effect on the reader that Friedlaender thinks it can have? Friedlaender answers that this is possible because the dialogues "are philosophical life, appealing to the reader to share its experience, to enter into the conversation of the dialogue"[27]. Friedlaender does not explain how the dialogues can be philosophical life. Some such explanation does seem to be required because he has, in the case of what is really real, denied the first and last stages of the three stage model of communication. If the so called

philosophical life that we enter into, through dialogue, does not contain what is really real, then that cannot be philosophical life in what seems to be Plato's description.

Rosen

Stanley Rosen (1968) sees in the Seventh Letter the disowning of the other works. This means that the other works do not contain or represent Plato's real teaching or thought. Moreover,

> If the letters are genuine expressions of Plato's thought then as the author of the dialogues he must have practised an extreme form of ironic dissimulation. But if this is so, why should we assume that the letters are not ironical? On the face of things, we seem to be in the presence of another version of the Cretan paradox.[28]

Rosen makes an excellent point against Findley's thesis of an 'unwritten doctrine', and at the same time expresses his own belief that the works of Plato do contain a positive teaching.

> By the same token, there is no real justification for regarding the dialogues as an irrelevant or even secondary source in the pursuit of Plato's authentic teaching. If there is any part of that teaching which altogether transcends human speech, it can no more have been communicated orally than by

writing.[29]

Rosen makes use of what is said in the Seventh Letter mainly to give strength to his fundamental claim that:

> only by recognition of irony as the problem in the interpretation of Plato, do we honor the demands of rigorous and sober philosophical analysis. For only if we successfully penetrate Plato's irony will the genuine character of his arguments become accessible to our techniques of analysis.[30]

Rosen does not explicitly say what he means by platonic irony, but from the way that he uses the word, he seems to mean by irony, a way of implying something by saying something else. What is said will be recognized as false only by someone who knows the truth. In this way the person in the know will recognize the falsity of what is said by thinking of what is in fact the case. And it will be what is in fact the case that is really meant.

According to Rosen, the Seventh Letter serves to deny the possibility of any interpretation of the other works, since any interpretation presupposes that the end product of the interpretation is what someone intended to say. And since the works seem to be intended to say something about the real reality, and the Seventh Letter denies that anything can be said about the real reality, the works cannot really say anything about the real reality and therefore no intended message can be interpreted out of the works. But if the works are not really meant to imply some

message about the real reality but rather are only meant to seem to imply such a message, then these works must be ironical. And if the works can be seen to be ironical then so to can the Seventh Letter. From this Rosen can conclude that the Seventh Letter denies only the straightforward interpretation of the main works which vindicates his method.

Rosen interprets the Seventh Letter to be saying that the highest subject cannot be put into language in the same way as other subjects, not that it cannot be put into language at all. Rosen refers this claim to Plato saying,

> Plato carefully says that his teaching on the highest or most serious matters cannot be stated like other kinds of knowledge. It does not follow from this that such a teaching cannot be stated at all.[31]

This would mean, as Rosen wants it to, that the dialogues do contain Plato's teachings on the highest subjects if the dialogues are not language functioning in the way that language normally functions but, rather, language functioning the way it would have to function in order to express some teachings on the highest sujects.

Rosen might find support for this thesis, that the way in which the teachings on the highest subjects can be put into language turns out to be the dialogue form, from David Ross(1951) and E.N.Tigerstedt(1977). Ross has very little use for the Seventh Letter since he takes it that the impossibility of expression refers only to treatises or to

speeches, and not to dialogues[32]. And as E. Tigerstedt says:"the Logos is alive only as dialogos"[33]. Rosen, Ross and Tigerstedt all agree that only dialogue can manifest truth of the highest things. This position implies that there is no significant difference between actual dialogue and represented dialogue since the truth of the highest reality is captured in the dialogue and, according to this position, is not the exclusive possession of soul or nous. In other words, if the participant souls are excluded from an actual dialogue, what is left is a representation of the actual dialogue, a written or spoken literary work in a dialogue style. The capacity of actual dialogue to capture truth is in no way diminished for the purely literary dialogue.

This position which Rosen shares with Ross and Tigerstedt runs against what is said in the Seventh Letter. For example, in one of the descriptions of actual dialogue Plato says:

> Hardly after practising detailed comparisons of names and definitions and visual and other sense perceptions, after scrutinizing them in benevolent disputation by the use of question and answer without jealousy, at last in a flash...[344B][34]

Thus, according to this quotation from the Seventh Letter, the spoken word is alive only when the soul of the learner has grasped the reality to which the logos is now able to refer. And this happens only after much (very much)

'dialogos'. In other words, only souls can supply life to the Logos, not lectures or treatises or, even, dialogues.

Morrow

In his book Plato's Epistles, Glen R.Morrow (1962) takes what is in general the esoterist's stance, with respect to the significance of the Seventh Letter, for the interpretation of Plato's other works. With reference to the Seventh Letter, which states that Plato never wrote about the highest realities, Morrow says that the highest reality must refer to more than the ideas; this seems obvious since the ideas are dealt with in the dialogues. "The ultimate principles here referred to are more ultimate even than the ideas."[35]

Morrow goes on to explain why these highest realities were kept secret. It was not because they were "regarded as a corporate possession"[36], but because of

> the intrinsic difficulty of putting them into writing, and of learning them in any other way than by close association between Plato and his pupils that prevailed in the Academy.[37]

Morrow allows these ultimates to be learned only by an association in lecturing rather that in dialogue, since he, like most esoterists, places more emphasis on Plato's unwritten doctrine referred to by Aristotle [Physics 209B 13-16]. This esoterist stance will mean that none of the

opinions expressed in the dialogues will be ascribed to Plato. On the whole, however, this position will say nothing about the difficulty of understanding the opinions that are in the dialogues.

In this way, Morrow's position is akin to Crombie's. Where Morrow's position differs, however, is that for him the dialogues, although they are not inaccessible, are not all that interesting to someone who wants to uncover Plato's real teaching.

The main difficulty with Morrow's position is his interpretation of the Seventh Letter. It is crucial to his position that the impossibility of expression refered to in the Seventh Letter, does not apply to oral expression as well as written expression. Nevertheless, the Seventh Letter does refer to oral as well as written expression as being insufficient.

Sallis

John Sallis (1975) wants to get away from 'free-floating' considerations of Plato's philosophy, such as Crombie's, because he feels that such a treatment moves away from what Plato says, and creates an artificial platonic philosophy; this necessarily becomes dogma. He wants, rather, simply to read the dialogues in the sense of 'listening carefully' to them. For him this means being able to 'hear' with the ears of someone in the dialogue itself.

Sallis is convinced that any treatment of Plato's

writings in the form of a treatise or lecture results from a lack of 'care' in answering the important question of how Plato should be read. The most serious problem associated with reading Plato is that Plato never speaks in his own voice.

> [W]here we would expect to hear Plato speaking in his own name about the most important matters, what we actually hear is that philosophy cannot be put into a written work and that Plato himself has certainly composed no work containing his really serious thoughts (Letter VII,341c). We can hardly help reflecting that this letter is itself something written; the result is that self-reference of what is said in the letter denies it the status of a simple straightforward document.[38]

Sallis has a twofold use for the Seventh Letter. First, it is used to distinguish between philosophy and doctrine. Second, it is used (negatively) to establish the fact that nowhere does Plato speak with his own voice. Since a doctrine is some opinion-based theory held by someone, we have no grounds for listening to Plato's works as though we could hear Plato's doctrine.

There is nothing wrong with what Sallis says about the Seventh Letter but he stops short. Sallis does not go on to investigate what implication the fact that the Seventh Letter cannot be taken straightforwardly has on determining the right attitude to be taken with respect to interpreting

Plato. Listening carefully is supposed to come automatically once all the wrong ways are avoided; but that in fact there is such a thing as this automatic development of the right way to listen needs demonstration.

Von Fritz

Although in his article, "The Philosophical Passage in the Seventh Letter and the Problem of Plato's 'Esoteric' Philosophy", Kurt von Fritz (1965) does not address the question directly, it is clear what influence the Seventh Letter has on his interpretation of the rest of Plato's works. In defending the authenticity of the Seventh Letter, von Fritz exhibits what he takes to be the main point of that Letter.

> To me the very opposite appears to be true, namely that these objections and, in general, most of the arguments commonly set forth against the authenticity of the philosophic passage present in fact a prime illustration of what the author of the letter says about the inevitable weaknesses of every written account of certain things. If this should be true, the most urgent task is obviously to 'come to the help' of the 'logos' of the Seventh Letter, i.e. to interpret it most carefully with a view to the objections raised, and thus to clear away, so far as possible, the whole complex of misunderstandings

> that have recently arisen concerning it - though, if what the author of the letter says is true, it will inevitably remain possible that, after these objections have been refuted, new misundertandings and new objections based on them may arise in the future.[39]

Von Fritz holds that the main point of the Seventh Letter is that anything written or spoken is necessarily open to misunderstanding. This is especially so when it is an essence, as opposed to some particularity, that is referred to. The 'purpose of living dialectics' is to guide one through the misunderstandings in an attempt to get at the true understanding.

In his article, he tries to achieve just such a clarification of the Seventh Letter. But, it is this method of interpretation which is called for in trying to get at the rest of the works as well.

> Kramer's book points to a very important road of inquiry, one all too much neglected for many decades: the road of an interpretation of Plato's dialogues, which is not content with remaining within the compass of each individual dialogue, but tries to transcend it, since the dialogues everywhere imply more than is expressly elaborated within them.[40]

Von Fritz assumes there is an intentionality mysteriously present in the writings, that cannot be captured in a statement, but rather, can only be captured in

the act of interpreting. A theory could be constructed which is in accordance with Von Fritz's position, and which may help illustrate what it means for there to be a hidden intentionality that can only be captured in the interpretation. The theory states that the dialogues all represent possible attempts to achieve knowledge. Each attempt is one possible way of striving towards knowledge, regardless of whether or not some particular effort is successful. According to this theory, since there are particular examples of striving after knowledge, there must be a form; a striving for knowledge in itself. And it is this form that Plato is trying to communicate to us. But of course, since the form is a striving we can come to know it only by insight into what all the possible strivings after knowledge have in common. And the achievement of insight into what all possible strivings after knowledge have in common, itself implies active striving on our part.

It is unnecessary to decide whether this position is right or wrong, since it is not an interpretation of Plato. It is, rather, an attempt to adopt a genuinely Platonic attitude towards interpreting Plato. The attempt succeeds or fails depending upon whether or not the person developing the position knows what is genuinely Platonic and what is not. The problem with this is that one could not give an example of a striving after knowledge and the dialogues are not such examples. From this point of view, the dialogues are portrayals of people who seem to be seeking after

knowledge i.e. the characters are depicted as saying what would be typical for people who were seeking after knowledge to say. In other words, it does not seem to be possible for some intention to subsist in writing, but rather, all that is possible, is that we look at the writing as if it contained an intentionality in and of itself.

Fisher

John Fisher's article, "Plato on Writing and Doing Philosophy", (1966) is primarily about the Phaedrus, which Fisher takes to be Plato's conception of the activity of philosophy. He begins with a straightforward exposition of the Phaedrus, quoting also from the Seventh Letter, to show that Plato held that there is a distinction between living and dead words, or what Fisher calls winged and wingless words. Winged words are words that lift one up; that speak to the soul of the hearer.

Recognizing the paradoxical nature of his own investigation, which lies in the fact that the sources for the distinction are by their own criteria wingless, Fisher takes comfort in the very fact the Plato did write. So Plato, at perhaps a deeper, more personal level than that of what he wrote, must have thought the things he wrote to be useful.

> Socrates...did not write. Yet Plato, who understood Socrates perhaps better than any other man, did. If

> the true philosopher, having thought out these things, is conscious of his own constitutional antipathy towards the written word, the problem of Plato's writings looms large. There is a temptation, in reading the Phaedrus, to make of Plato ...a totally literary figure. Surely he is arguing that not even Socrates' philosophy can be mastered by reading Plato's books...Motives aside, the dialogues are, of course, about Plato's thought. The question, however, is how Plato understood them and what he intended them to be.[41]

Fisher's solution is to say that, although the dialogues are mere playthings, "serious things cannot be understood without laughable things nor opposites at all without opposites."[Laws 816D][42] Thus, the dialogues, while not themselves philosophy, present an image of philosophy. Plato did not write dialogues. He wrote literary portrayals of dialogues. The purpose of Plato's writings is to teach us what philosophy is, in a way that can outlive the example of the author.

Fisher's theory implies that a real or actual dialogue is itself philosophy. But he does not explain why Plato, since he was so compelled to write something, did not just say that the dialogues are examples of philosophy, and philosophy itself is actual dialogue. Socrates is constantly trying to stop people in the dialogues from giving examples of things. Why should the reader spend so much effort on an

example of a dialogue when having an actual dialogue is always a readily available alternative. If working through the literary dialogues is not philosophic activity, then why bother with it when actual dialogue, which presumably is philosophic activity, is always an alternative?

And if working through literary dialogue is philosophic activity, then Fisher is left with no grounds for distinguishing between actual and literary dialogue. In this context, to say that serious things cannot be understood without laughable things, implies that Plato's written dialogues are laughable things and yet, as such, these laughable dialogues help us understand the serious things. And since the literary dialogues are examples of actual ones, what seems to be implied is that these serious things are actual dialogues. However, according to Plato, the aim of philosophic inquiry is to understand reality and not to understand actual dialogue.

If, on the other hand, literary dialogue, as a play-thing, leads the reader to understand reality, as the serious thing, then Fisher is left with no grounds for a distinction between literary dialogue and actual dialogue, since presumably to understand reality is also the aim of actual dialogue. And without grounds for the distinction between actual and literary dialogue, Fisher cannot explain why Plato wrote dialogues and without some explanation of why Plato wrote dialogues, Fisher has no way of formulating a principle of interpretation of Plato's works.

Sinaiko

Herman L.Sinaiko (1965) starts off his book Love, Knowledge and Discourse in Plato with this quotation from the Seventh Letter: "concerning these things there is no written work of mine, nor will there ever be; for they cannot be expressed in words like other studies."[Sinaiko's own trans.] He goes on to say that

> this remark poses a puzzling and ironical problem for the interpretation of the dialogues; although they serve as one of the greatest sources of philosophical education and speculation in the whole tradition of Western thought, according to their author they do not express his philosophy.[43]

The Seventh Letter justifies a distinction which Sinaiko wants to establish as fundamental. The distinction is between what is written, and what exists in the soul of someone who grasps something. Sinaiko compares minds to word symbols or sounds, and claims that a mind can contain meaning but language cannot. His position seems to come down to this: the words in the sentence 'John knows beauty' are different from the person (John) who actually knows Beauty. This position has to do only with the intermediary stage in the three stage model of communication. His analysis suffers from the total absence of any discussion of what would correspond to the first and last stages of the model.

Sinaiko interprets 'the things' which cannot be put

into words, as the Seventh Letter says, to be philosophy. He concludes that Plato's philosophy is not to be found in the dialogues. He questions "If the dialogues are not philosophy, because that cannot be written, what then are they, and what is their relation to Plato's thought?"[44]

In response to the Seventh Letter, Sinaiko wants to hold that Plato's dialogues can only represent truly philosophic discourse, and can never be actual discourse. The truly philosophic discourse can only take place amongst "real men living in an actual society"[45]. Philosophical opinions, as distinct from all other types of opinions, are restricted to the real life situation in which there is discourse. Philosophical opinions depend on that real life context to maintain the existential concreteness that makes them real. This is said with reference to Plato's distinction between living words and dead words.

Philosophical activity and a person's philosophy, i.e. his philosophical opinions, are not the same but are held by Sinaiko to be inseparable from each other. Because of the connection between them, Sinaiko concludes that if the dialogues are not Plato's philosophical opinions, then the dialogues are not real philosophical activity, but only represent truly philosophical activity.

Furthermore, Sinaiko holds that Plato's works establish what they are intended to through this distinction between real philosophical discourse, and so called works of

philosophy, that are not works of philosophy but rather represent philosophy."The distinction is of critical philosophical importance and must be kept constantly in mind if the character of Plato's thought is to be accurately grasped."[46]

"Only when the dialogues are viewed in relation to the reader--that is, in terms of the varied responses they invoke--does Plato's motive for writing as he did, begin to be intelligible."[47] Quite simply, being deeply concerned with what is said in the dialogue, brings what is said to life in the reader who is concerned. What was said is transformed from being a representation of philosophical discourse to being real philosophical discourse.

According to Sinaiko, the concern which a dialogue evokes in the reader becomes true philosophical discourse when the concern takes the form of dialectical reflection. To find out what philosophy meant for Plato, we must discover what dialectic meant for Plato. Sinaiko thinks that we can do this by examining the dialogues. Sinaiko admits that while "Plato unquestionably considered dialectic of paramount importance in his written works he never explicitly presents us with a genuine example of the activity or an adequate account of it."[48] Sinainko nevertheless maintains that the dialogues are intended to convey some message about dialectic which can be extracted from the written works.

Each dialogue is both integral and holistic;

> integral because each of its parts take its meaning and importance both from its relation to the other parts and from the unifying structure of the drama; holistic in that every dialogue presents, at least potentially, a complete picture of the whole of human life as seen from their perspective of a concrete, existential problem. Until both these aspects of a dialogue are clearly understood, its true philosophical significance, as well as the meaning it had for Plato, will necessarily remain uncertain and unclear.[49]

The difficulty of all this is that Sinaiko claims that Plato is communicating, however indirectly, yet he also acknowledges that these things cannot be put into words.Indirect communication is nevertheless still communication and does involve a putting of what one intends to say into words in some way or other. Sinaiko's position is inconsistent.

In conclusion these tables may help characterize the commentators with respect to the relevant issues.

table#1

	which stage is denied out of the three stages	whether emphasis is placed on determining what the opinions are or whose they are
Crombie	last stage	whose then shift to what
Sayre	second and last	what
Friedlaender	first & last	whose
Rosen	none	whose & what
Morrow	first	what (spoken)
Sallis	not discussed	what
Von Fritz	second	what
Fisher	all three	Whose
Sinaiko	second	what

table #2

	/ yes	/ no	/inappropriate
distinction between actual & literary copy	Fisher Sinaiko	Crombie Sayre Von Fritz Friedlaender	Rosen Morrow
distinction between what Plato intended the text to express & his philosophy	Friedlaender Morrow Fisher	Rosen Crombie Sayre Von Fritz	Sallis Sinainko
distinction between what Plato wrote & his philosophy	Morrow Crombie Sayre Rosen Von Fritz Sinaiko Friedlaender		Sallis Fisher
Plato's philosophy can be extracted from the works	Sallis Crombie Sayre Sinaiko Von Fritz Rosen	Morrow	Friedlaender Fisher
significance of dialogue to ultimate philosophy	Sallis Crombie Friedlaender Sinaiko Rosen Von Fritz	Sayre Morrow	
significance of anonymity	Fisher Crombie Sallis Von Fritz		Friedlaender Sayre Rosen Morrow Sinaiko

Chapter 2 Inexpressibility in the Text of The Seventh Letter

Some of the ways in which the Seventh Letter has been used as an interpretive tool have been examined, and have been found lacking. What follows is a presentation of the relevant passages of the Seventh Letter itself and an examination of what these passages imply. They are presented in their textual order and each passage is followed by an interpretation of the meaning and significance of the passage.

What becomes apparent in going through all the different passages, is that they do not seem to accord with each other. There are three possible ways of making all the passages accord with one another. The three possible ways in which the passages can be made to accord with each other are really three possible general interpretations of all the passages. The first interpretation is that there is a subject that Plato studies, about which nothing can be expressed in language. The second interpretation is that it is politically unwise to make public any doctrine that anyone might have, yet not impossible. And the third interpretation, is that it is ethically wrong to express one's doctrine, and anyone who knows that it is wrong will find it impossible to do.

The first passage quoted is from the Second Letter.

This passage is of considerable interest to the larger context of this thesis in general, but says nothing concrete on the issue of inexpressibility. The second and third quotations imply the first interpretation. The fourth and sixth quotations imply the third interpretation. The fifth quotation implies the second interpretation. And the seventh quotation seems to imply the third interpretation but really implies none of them.

1) That is the reason why I have never written anything about these things, and why there is not and will not be any written works (suggramma) of Plato's own. What are now called his are the works (legomena) of a Socrates embellished and modernized (Letter II, 314C)[50]

The reason that the above quotation refers to is that one's views might change and it is undesirable to have published something which one is now uncertain about. Although this would, perhaps, be an undesirable situation, it is a risk that would not really deter very many people from publishing. There is also some indication at 314A that the warning against publishing is due to a fear of public misunderstanding and perhaps criticism resulting from that misunderstanding. But this also seems unlikely to be the real reason since writing in riddle, as Plato advises at

312D-E, is bound to create even more misunderstanding.

The subject that Plato says that we should not write about publicly is referred to as "the first principle", and in riddle, "the king of all". In this Letter Plato seems to have a full fledged doctrine which he could express in language if he liked [312D]. Therefore, if the Seventh Letter implies that Plato does not have such a doctrine and could not have one, the two letters contradict one another. If this is in fact the case then either one of the letters, or both, is not written by Plato, or he contradicted himself, either accidentally or purposely.

The first of the two sentences, from the above quotation, indicates that nothing which Plato wrote contains opinions about the subject. Plato also says that there will never be any written works of his own, which presumably includes works on lesser subjects. But, of course, there are works by Plato. So it seems that Plato felt that if he could not safely express any of his opinions about the mysterious things, then he could not safely express any of his opinions about anything.

If, by the term 'work' in the above quotation, the author means anything written that is intended for public view, then the second sentence means that even this Second Letter does not contain opinions which Plato held as his own. That this letter was so intended is clear for two reasons. The first is that the author states that "it is impossible for what is written not to be disclosed."[314C]

The author must have known that this letter would become public. The second reason for thinking that the author knew or at least suspected that this letter would become public is the fact that he wrote the doctrine in code so that if it fell into other hands it would not be understood. Thus, the author said whatever he said knowing that it would become public, and also, the author would have known that the people who read the letter would attribute it to Plato. And therefore, if by work Plato meant anything written that was intended for the public, Plato, the author, could not fail to consider this letter as one of the works referred to in the above quotation.

If we interpret the Second Letter as if Plato considered it a work, then the second sentence of the above quotation will mean that the letter is a work of Socrates which Plato revised. In a sense, then, the question of why Plato wrote the works when they do not express any of his opinions at all, is answered i.e. that Plato did not write them and the fact that Socrates composed them would explain why the works do not contain Plato's opinions. But now the question is how much, of the works in general, and this letter in particular, is by Socrates and how much is revision added by Plato.

Furthermore, the "I" in the first sentence of the quotation could refer to Socrates since it is true that Socrates did not compose any works and yet neither did Plato since he simply revised what Socrates said. Who, then, is

speaking here? And to whom belongs the extremely conspicuous doctrine of the King? Socrates, of the Apology, would respond saying 'I have never developed any theories or doctrines, I have just questioned other people and their doctrines.' And Plato could not have developed the doctrine of the King, because that would be much more than a revision of what Socrates had said.

If the second sentence is interpreted to mean that Plato wrote the the works attributed to him but was not expressing what he thought, but rather what Socrates thought, and if Plato felt reason to refrain from expressing his own thoughts, how is it that these reasons do not apply to what Socrates said, i.e. how can he justify publishing what Socrates has said while thinking it wrong to publish his own writing.

So, if this above quotation is not the expression of what Plato thought, nor what Socrates thought, nor presumably what any other person thought, what is it? It must be what someone really thought, or else it could not even be a representation of what is true, since truth, if grasped, must be grasped by a mind, a real mind, not a fictional one. It could not be what a fictional character really thought, since a fictional character cannot really think anything.

It is my claim, as concerns this doctrine of the king and any other opinion expressed in the works, that Plato purposely presented what he wrote in the way that he

did knowing that if it was presented in this way then people could not consistently think that it is true.

2) I certainly have composed no work (suggramma) in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it into words like other studies (rhēton gar oudamōs estin hōs alla mathēmata).[Letter VII,341C]

The above translation by Post has it that there is no work in which the highest subject has been expounded. Instead of work, Morrow's translation has writing and both Hamilton and Harward have treatise. The difference is significant since treatise excludes dialogues whereas work or writing do not. It is difficult to tell which is to be preferred because just a few lines further down, in the text, Plato says "If I thought it possible to deal adequately with the subject in a treatise or a lecture for the general public...". The two sentences refer to the same thing and the word in the first quotation should at least be compatible with the words used in the second quotation. But Post, who translates the first sentence using the word work then translates graptea...kai rhēta in the second sentence using the phrase if there were to be a treatise or a lecture, whereas Hamilton and Harward who use treatise in the first sentence use any oral or written teaching, and

were written or put into words, respectively. Morrow's translation is the most consistent on this point. He uses no writing of mine in the first sentence and in books or lectures in the second sentence.

The only thing that is clear is that in the first sentence Plato makes reference only to what is written and in the second sentence he refers to both what is written and what is spoken. There is no reason why reference to what is said orally should be excluded from the first reference if it is present in the second sentence. In other words, if reference to the spoken is purposefully excluded from the first sentence then reference to the spoken must be included in the second by mistake. But it seems more likely that the first sentence, which mentions only what is written, can justifiably be read as also including reference to what is spoken orally.

This quotation does seem to be saying that there are some things which are inexpressible, or at least one type of thing which is inexpressible. Nonethelessh, some Plato commentators interpret this passage to mean that the subject can be expressed, except not in the same way as other subjects. But this is not a coherent position. If it is taken seriously it implies that there is some mode of expression through which it would be impossible to express the more mundane subjects, because if there were no such mode then there would not be any mode of expression that was not like the mode in which the mundane subjects are put into

language. The point of arguing this impossible position is to be able to say that dialogue is a special way in which the special subjects can be expressed. But so long as more mundane subjects can also be expressed in dialogue form, dialogue cannot be the special mode in which the highest subjects can be expressed.

But what does it mean for there to be something which is inexpressible in language? Nowhere do we get an analysis of what it would mean to express something in writing or orally. The translations provide us with the image of 'putting' something into something else. Presumably, this is possible for most things, but is impossible for the highest subject. But the impossibility in the case of the highest things will have as much to do with the nature of the thing as with the nature of writing or speaking.

However, Plato's philosophic analysis of language, from 342B to 343C6, cannot be examined until it is decided whether that analysis is even possible. For, if the analysis is an explanation of why something, taken seriously, is inexpressible, in order for it adequately to explain why 'something' is inexpressible the analysis would have to be about language but also about the nature of that 'something'. This is because the point of analysis is to show that only the highest subject is inexpressible. In other words, the analysis will have to explain what it is about mundane subjects that makes them expressible and what it is about Plato's special subject that makes it

inexpressible. And because the analysis has to be both about language and about the nature of that something, the analysis itself would have to be extralinguistic. If the analysis was in language and it was true that that subject cannot be expressed in language, then the analysis could not even begin to examine the nature of that something. Thus there could not possibly be any such analysis, let alone a successful one.

In other words, if language is shown to have some essential flaw, characterized by its inability to get at an essence apart from particularity [342E4-5 & 343B9-C3], then this flaw could not be expressed in the analysis itself. Within the context of Plato's philosophy, a flaw is a lacking of some perfection, and is apparent only by the absence of that perfection. And the absence of perfection can only be recognized in contrast to the presence of perfection. In other words, if a person knows some essence then, if the essence is inexpressible in language, the person will know that language is flawed. But if there is no knowledge of what is essential, then there is no awareness of the deficiencies of language. And if there is no knowledge of some essence already in the person, the analysis cannot proceed. The analysis cannot provide the person with the knowledge. It can however state that there is this flaw, but at best the words will describe the situation, rather than being an analysis of it.

The flaw must be defined for the analysis to be

successful, since the analysis aims at an understanding of how exactly language is flawed. But, if being successful means being able to define the flaw, then the analysis cannot be successful because if the flaw can be defined it is not just a lack of perfection, but rather, has an identity of its own. At best, the analysis itself could be an example of the flawed nature of language.

3) If I thought it possible to deal adequately with the subject in a treatise or a lecture (graptea...kai rhēta) for the general public...(ibid., 341D)

In accordance with the first two quotations, this third one seems to imply that there is nothing <u>at all</u> in the works attributed to Plato which contain his doctrine pertaining to this mysterious 'subject'. Plato says "what nobler work could I do in my life than to compose something of such great benefit to mankind", but if it was impossible to do adequately, one wonders why Plato did not settle for doing it inadequately, since it was such a noble thing. But the second quotation makes it clear that there is <u>nothing</u> about the subject that can be put into words. Maybe if something of the subject could be put into words then one could express the subject inadequately and perhaps that would do some good for mankind. But it is quite clear that Plato could not settle for putting the subject into words

inadequately and that the works are not such inadequate expressions.

Therefore, to look at the dramatic context of the work in an attempt to shed light on the text is only worthwhile if the text contains at least something of what Plato thought to be true. For example, if one wanted to say that the content of these works are not important in themselves, but only as an exercise in dialectic, then we must take seriously what is said about dialectic in other (or the same) dialogues. If we take seriously the claim that there is nothing in the dialogues of Plato that contains what he really thinks, then we are left with no way of looking to the dialogues to see what he really did think.

But what does it mean to say that there is nothing of what Plato believed in the dialogues? These quotations show that the dialogues do not contain Plato's teaching on the highest subject. It is <u>not</u> self-evident that this necessarily means there is nothing of what Plato thought or believed in the dialogues. For, perhaps the works contain what Plato thought about some philosophically significant subjects, while leaving out only what he thought about this one mysterious subject. But as the next few quotations will show, the scope of what Plato could have written about is smaller than suggested. The dialogues could not contain any teaching on anything that Plato grasped with <u>nous</u>, anything with which he was seriously concerned. These restrictions do not leave much which could be of philosophical interest in

the dialogues to someone interested in Plato's philosophy. Even if we were to try to escape this situation by saying that the dialogues do not contain Plato's teachings, but rather Socrates' teachings reported by Plato, in order to look to the dialogues seriously trying to find out Socrates' philosophy, we would have to assume that Plato did not take Socrates' teachings seriously.

4) Hence no intelligent man (noûn echón) will ever be so bold as to put into language (logōn, from previous sentence) those things which his reason has contemplated (ta nenoēmena) [ibid., 343A].[51]

This seems to mean that what is grasped by nous could be put into language, but that this would be unwise. It might, however, mean that while there is no linguistic impossibility, when the person has grasped something, he will actually find it impossible to express it for ethical reasons. Knowing "what is false and true of existence in general" (344B), it will then be impossible for the person to do what he knows is false. This latter interpretation implies that there is some actual inexpressible element of reality that is known. The interdiction lies upon the attempt to express what is grasped, because the attempt will always fail, and therefore the attempt will result in the misunderstanding of what does get expressed.

To claim that a person cannot express what he has

grasped, simply because it might be misunderstood, is to assume that the inexpressibility of what is grasped is due to an inability on the part of the reader or listener. And since misunderstanding is possible in any sphere of discourse, i.e. other subjects besides Plato's special subject, the inexpressibility would extend over any subject in which there might be a misunderstanding. Since this is contrary to the first quotation from the Seventh Letter, the claim that according to Plato the inexpressibility is due to a lack on the part of the reader or listener must be rejected.

It is more likely that the reader or listener misunderstands an attempt to express Plato's special subject because no such expression is possible in the first place. The misunderstanding that might arise in other cases can be accounted for either by a lack of skill on the part of the writer or on the part of the reader or listener. So, to say that there is an ethical interdiction on the expression of Plato's special subject, due to a likely misunderstanding, implies that there is an impossibility of expression on the part of the writer or speaker.

5) For this reason no serious man will ever think of writing about serious realities for the general public so as to make them a prey to envy and perplexity. In a word, it is an inevitable conclusion

> from this that when anyone sees anywhere the written work (suggrammata gegrammena) of anyone...this subject cannot have been his most serious concern. (ibid., 344C)

Quotation #4 is stronger than this one. It applies to language in general, whereas this one only applies to written words .

The first sentence in this quotation seems to imply that the man could write about these serious realities, but not for the general public. But Plato says elsewhere that "It is impossible for what is written not to be disclosed" (Letter II, 314B-C). So he probably means that one should not write about them at all, although they could be written about.

But the second sentence seems to support the interpretation which holds that there is an impossibility in expressing (at least in writing) a serious reality, not a linguistic impossibility, but rather an ethical one. This interpretation is further supported when Plato says that "there is a true doctrine [...] that stands in the way of the man who would dare to write even the least thing on such matters." (Letter VII, 342A)

The truth of this interpretation is confirmed by the sentence almost immediately after the above quotation:"If, however, he really was seriously concerned with these matters and put them in writing, then surely not the gods, but mortals 'have utterly blasted his wits'." (344C-D) And

this is as good as to say that if they do express their most serious interests, then they must be mad! But why mortals instead of gods? Perhaps 'mortals' because the insanity is caused by bad teachers or the approval of the public and their acceptance of such writing as philosophy; 'gods' because the gods could not cause such a radical chaos of the psyche.

We are left, then, with the possibility that if one is serious about something, then one cannot commit it to writing <u>except</u> if one is crazed.

6) One who has followed my account [...] will be assured of the fact that, [anyone who] has written anything on the first and highest principles of nature [...] that man in my opinion has neither received any sound instruction nor profited by it in the subjects of which he wrote. For if he had, he would not boldly have cast it out unbecomingly and unfittingly. (344D)

This quotation is explicitly about someone who is not serious, i.e., someone who has not grasped anything.[52] A person could write about something without knowing anything about it. But they would not be really writing about a serious reality, so they would not necessarily be crazy.

Although it might have seemed that the man was really serious, if he did, in fact, write about what he claimed to

be serious about, then he "has neither received any sound instruction nor profited by it in the subjects of which he wrote" and, consequently, could not really have been serious. But there is still the possibility that a serious person tried to write about the subject, but was crazy.

7) For on that occasion I described my doctrine to him in the way I have mentioned and once only. (345A)

There seems to be a running confusion in the text between Plato actually having some inexpressible doctrine or theory and an inexpressible grasp of the real reality, that anyone might have, that is not theoretical. In the Second Letter, from where the first quotation comes, it is quite clear that Plato has some doctrine of the king that he wants to put into code. In that Letter there is no mention of an inexpressible grasp of the real reality. Then, in the Seventh Letter, there is mention of some subject that is not at all expressible in language. Yet, at the same time, Plato asks who better than he to express some truth about this subject, which seems to imply that the subject is a doctrine of Plato's. Plato gives no reason to think that he has a greater claim upon reality than anyone else. Then Plato writes that the inexpressibility applies to anything anyone grasps with nous and anything that anyone studies seriously. Then in this last quotation Plato mentions his doctrine again.

There are several possible interpretations which can explain this ongoing confusion. The first holds that there is some supreme reality of which one could have an intellectual grasp which could not be put into language. Any doctrine that one might have is best kept secret from the public " lest thereby he may possibly cast them as a prey to the envy and stupidity of the public".[344C] The doctrine need not be related to a grasp of the supreme reality. And the inexpressibility of such a grasp of reality is unrelated to the reasons for keeping the doctrine secret.

This theory, seems unable to account for Plato's claim that, if there could be some expression of the real reality, then he would be best fit for the task. If Plato is unable, then no one else could be able. For, even if one denies the distinction between a) a grasp of the real reality and b) a more terrestrial doctrine, on the grounds that the former is just a doctrine of Plato's, nevertheless the doctrine assumes such a reality to be real. Plato would have no more claim to knowledge of it as real than anyone else.

Another possible interpretation is that there is no real reality that is inexpressible. All there is, is a theory or doctrine that Plato has developed which he thinks unwise to express publicly. He also warns anyone else who might have some doctrine of their own, that they are better off not making their doctrine public either.

This second interpretation fails to account for the explanation given in the Seventh Letter, of why it is

impossible to put what one has grasped of the highest reality into language; this explanation implies that there is a highest reality. In general, this second interpretation fails to account for why it is unwise to make public one's doctrine. If it is because the language used to express the doctrine will be in a constant state of changing meaning, then it must be admitted that the doctrine has a meaning apart from the meaning of the words used to express it. But this means that the doctrine is really inexpressible in language, regardless of the pragmatic pros and cons involved in making the doctrine public.

A third interpretation is that there is no doctrine of Plato's own. The Second Letter seems to imply that there is some doctrine, but at the same time, the Second Letter denies anything that the Second Letter states. The Seventh Letter depicts Plato raging against anyone who claims that he, Plato, has a philosophy and then explains why he could not have a philosophy let alone express it. He explains that a philosophy is necessarily in language, and Plato is interested in reality that cannot be put into language. In this way, anyone who studies seriously, studies things which could not be put into language. If Plato had a philosophy then he would be best able to express it, but he says that he does not. The last quotation (#7 above), could mean that Plato gave Dionysius a lesson in philosophy, taking 'doctrine' to mean something like what goes on in the dialogues. In fact, when the mind grasps the subject "it is

contained in the very briefest statements" (344E). This implies that, if one has this true grasp on the subject, then there would be no sense in writing a book on it, since a true grasp is contained within a few statements.

The main problem with this last interpretation is that there is, of course, what seems to be a doctrine. While it is true that Plato says that there is not one, and this interpretation best fits what Plato says, it might still seem that Plato gives a doctrine, especially in his Letters, to explain why he does not have a doctrine of the highest things. This difficulty does not disappear by trying to make the distinction between the impossibility of having a doctrine of the highest things, and at the same time having a doctrine about what is not so high. The explanation of why there cannot be a doctrine of the highest reality is itself possible because the explanation is not about the highest reality but rather about the expression of the highest reality.This distinction does not hold because the explanation is about the nature of the highest realities as well as about language. For example,
about the circle, Plato says:

> Every circle that is drawn or turned on a lathe in actual operations abounds in the opposite of the fifth entity, for it everywhere touches the straight, while the real circle, I maintain, contains in itself neither much nor little of the opposite character.[343A]

This interpretation does not, therefore, resolve the difficulty that exists in the text itself, which is a good thing if the difficulty is meant to be there, which claim is part of the present thesis.

The greatest difficulty with trying to get clear about what it is that is supposed to be inexpressible is that there are so many names given of it: 'this subject', 'these things', 'it', 'nousings', 'serious realities', 'first principles of nature', 'the doctrine', and 'essence'. When we look at these names, the problem of expression appears and stands in our way, for, it makes sense that, if the really real is inexpressible in language, then one could not really say what it is. There are many names that point to it, but no words to define it.

But here we come to another problem. The text is ambiguous on whether what is grasped is what is inexpressible or whether it is the grasp that is inexpressible. For example, the statement that when the mind grasps the subject, "it is contained in the very briefest statements.", implies either that, when the mind grasps some principle, the grasping is in the form of statements, or implies that the truth which is grasped can be expressed in a few statements. The latter of these two possibilities would contradict what has been said about the evils of language and the former of the two possibilities would indicate the natural deficiency of even nous in showing its necessary connection with language. Since the grasp occurs

in language, it must be the thing that is grasped that is inexpressible.

After taking this look at what the Seventh Letter says about language and the real reality, we are now better able to understand a little of what it means, that the real reality cannot be put into language like other studies. First of all, this type of inexpressibility advocated in the Seventh Letter, must be distinguished from a general inexpressibility that applies to everything in the sense that the thing, whether it be an object or something like the cold weather, can be referred to and described but not actually contained in the language. According to this general type of inexpressibility, it is true that if someone has never had some experience or any other experience comparable to it then the person would not be able to understand a description of the experience. Since the experience is not contained in the description and the person has never had a similar experience, there is nothing in the hearer to which the words can refer. Some things, like the smell of coffee, are so unique that if a person has never smelt coffee then the person will not understand the words used to refer to the smell of coffee, except in a general sense, that it is a smell that is considered to be enjoyable by most people.

Apart from this general inexpressibility, that applies no less to essences than to other things, the Seventh Letter implies that there is another type of inexpressibility that

applies only to essences. According to this second type of inexpressibility, that is pointed to in the Seventh Letter, someone who did grasp the essence could not even express it, in language, to oneself. In the general type of inexpressibility, to express something in language meant that the language had to, somehow, be that thing. In the second type of inexpressibility, however, expression means that words refer to the thing to which they are meant to refer. This means that, no name, no definition and no example can ever be of an essence, but rather, these three can only refer to our understanding of the essence. And because our understanding of the essence is restricted by language, our knowledge is always distorted. So for example, instead of the name being the name of the essence, it can, at best, only be the name of our understanding of some essence. A definition will be a description of our understanding rather than an expression of the essence itself. An example is not an example of the essence, but is an instance of the definition.

Plato never explicitly says why the essence cannot be put into language, but he does say a great deal about why the essence cannot be learned from language, which comes to the same thing. The essence cannot be learned from language because the essence cannot be referred to by the words. It is important in the next paragraph to show that Plato does, in fact, say that the essence cannot be learned through language, because the fact that he does say this will imply

that, according to Plato, there must be some way of learning other than through language. It is possible to learn, he says, and therefore there must be a way of knowing which is not restricted by language.

Against the claim that learning does not occur through language is the unambiguous statement that "[for] every real being, there are three things that are necessary if knowledge of it is to be acquired: first, the name; second, the definition; third, the image..."[342-A, Morrow] The nature of the first two instruments mentioned, implies that language is going to play a major part in any learning that goes on. But just a little further on [343-B] Plato also says:

> the most important point is what I said earlier: that of the two objects of search- the particular quality and the being of an object- the soul seeks to know not the quality but the essence, whereas each of the four instruments [the name, definition, example and knowledge][53] presents to the soul, in discourse and in examples, what it is not seeking... [Morrow]

This implies that one could not learn what truly is through language, and seems to contradict the quotation from 342-A.

Furthermore, at 341B-D, Plato rebukes the people who claim to have learned the subject from speaking to him or from reading books. They could not have learned it from anything that Plato wrote because he says that he has never

written anything about it. Nor could they have learned it from anything that anyone else has ever written or said because this subject, unlike other subjects, cannot be put into language at all. Instead of actively learning the subject through language, one must, patiently wait for enlightenment:

> as a result of continued application to the subject itself and a communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden,[341D Bury's trans.]

In this quotation, notice that, although the subject is sought through language, in the form of discourse, the knowledge, which one seeks after, is not achieved through language. Plato says "at last" or "finally" after much discourse one understands, as if to say that there is no direct connection between the discourse and the achievement of understanding. One might wonder why the seeking must be in the mode of discourse, when it is not possible to learn anything about the true being through language.

This problem runs deep in the Seventh Letter. Plato starts off his analysis by saying[342-A] that for every real being there are three things through which knowledge of it must come: the name, the definition and the example. But for some real beings, like justice, there does not seem to be any possibility of an example, since in this case, justice is an order in the soul. And although it seems that a name and a definition are always possible, what if by chance the wrong name is given to the right definition? What possible

significance can the name have as a condition of knowledge? In the Cratylus there seems to be some indication that a name is a useful instrument for teaching [388-A,B] because [390-D] " things have names by nature, and ... an artificer of names...looks to the name which each thing has by nature, and is able to express the true forms of things in letters and syllables." But this thesis is latter rejected by the end of the dialogue, where Socrates ends up saying:

> How real existence is to be studied or discovered is, I suspect, beyond you and me. But we may admit so much, that the knowledge of things is not to be derived from names. No, they must be studied and investigated in themselves.

This does not mean that the name cannot have something to do with the study and investigation which leads to knowledge. For example, in the Seventh Letter [341-E] Plato says that "[a]cquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself..." just two paragraphs before saying [342] that knowledge must come through the three instruments.

The most likely source for an answer to these questions are the similar passages 341-C and 344-B, because it is in these passages that Plato implies that the seeking after knowledge must be in the form of language, and yet, that the understanding achieved is not a part of that seeking, but rather is something altogether different which nevertheless in some way results from that process. There seem to be two

divergent directions in which these passages can be interpreted. The first has it that the rubbing of the name, definition and example off one another in discourse between teacher and student allows for the required communion between the subject and the student which then causes a fire of understanding to start burning in the student. The main feature of this interpretation is that the understanding in the student is occasioned by the interaction with the teacher through discourse. So, according to this interpretation, the virtue of this method of education has more to do with the interaction it allows between student and master than with the particulars of some discourse actually engaged upon i.e. with what is said that allows for the opportunity to interact.

The second general line of interpretation has it that the rubbing of the three instruments together, as discourse between the teacher and student, creates a spark of understanding in the student which then grows, but crucially, the spark of understanding comes from the teacher and not the subject itself, as in the former interpretation. This interpretation makes better use of the imagery of rubbing some things together to cause a spark. Another implication of this interpretation is that, because thinking is in language, presumably the better that a person is at discussion the better the person will be at thinking. And the better that one is at thinking the more likely the person will be to understand. But this implies that there is

no great difference between thinking and understanding, except perhaps that one is a process and the other is the end result.

Despite the other differences, these two interpretations provide the same answer to the question of the significance of language. In both cases, language plays an anonymous role. In the first interpretation it did not matter what the particulars of the discourse were, but only that discourse is an exercise which , if practiced, allows for the opportunity for the student to be together with the subject. And in the second interpretation it also does not matter what the particulars of the discourse are since the discourse is only significant as intellectual exercise which brings the student into contact with the knowledge that the teacher has.

There seems to be only one way in which discourse could be significant as an exercise. And this is as the way in which the intellectual memory is clarified. With analogy to this use that language has, in the dialogues like Phaedo, Republic and Theaetetus,[54] sensation was at the same time a curse and a necessary tool to freedom from the curse. Sensation is bad because the mind craves after knowledge but sensation provides only appearance of truth. And although this situation is caused because the person is forced into a body, the person cannot escape by killing the body because then the person will be reborn into an even more sensually oriented body. The only way out is to break

free from the pull of one's desires and to seek beyond sensation through thought. In order to do this one is dependent upon sensation because perception is the awareness of an image that springs up at the point where the ray from the eye meets the ray from the object, and this awareness results from the ideal memory being activated by the image. As one scholar puts it:

> One may well note the schema: on the one hand a collection of "appearances", no more in themselves than the lines of a sketch, and on the other a mysterious "something", seemingly devoid of all perceptual characteristics, which presents itself as that of which this "appearance" is the appearance. Were no such "something" to come forth from the "memory", the "appearance" would be meaningless. The observable would mean nothing. One will note the assumption that in actual ordinary practice more than the given of perception is involved, although this is not noticed by the ordinary man. The more, of course, is the recollected Form which alone can give identity and meaning.[55]

As the Symposium would have it, one must start with perceptual beauty because only after many instances of perception is the memory clear enough to begin to think of beauty apart from the particulars of any one instance.

The case of discourse is analogous to that of sensation in that discourse is incapable of expressing the truth just

as sensation is incapable of presenting true being to the senses. Yet discourse is necessary for the same reason that sensation is necessary.

For example, in Phaedo [72E & 73 A-B] Cebes says that, what we normally call learning, is really recollection. And " when people are asked questions, if the question is put in the right way they can give a perfectly correct answer" [trans. by Tredennick]. They give the correct answer because the question triggers recollection of true being.

Discourse mirrors true being like a painting mirrors a landscape, says Socrates in The Republic 472-D&E. The words are able to clarify the ideal memory, because words are empty signs which have some conventional meaning derived in some cases from the ideal memory [Cratylus; 389, 390D, 414C]. Those cases in which the meaning of a word, although conventional, is derived from the memory are those cases where the thing which the word is supposed to mean is something that is not given in sensation, and is not an aspect of sensation. For example the word 'justice' might have a conventional meaning, but at some point the development of that culturally relative meaning must have been influenced by the ideal memory of Justice. So for learning about things that can be experienced through sensation, sensation will itself be a better teacher than discourse. For these things words only copy sensation, in which case the words are twice removed from the memory, as for example, in the case of beauty [Phaedrus 250D]. But when

it comes to things that cannot be experienced through the senses, discourse is the best way to teach because the words in these cases do not simply mirror sensual experience, since there is none, and are, therefore, only once removed from the memory.[56]

The teacher can use words to try to get the student to question the conventional definition of some word that does not simply mirror sensual experience. The aim of the questioning will be to see how much of the definition is essential and how much is conventional or culturally particular. To see this involves the clarification of one's memory and the recovery of knowledge.

Chapter 3 The Seventh Letter as an Indirect Communication

The Seventh Letter has been seen to imply a method of philosophic seeking based on the imagery of getting at what is essential. It also implies that although language is the way in which this is carried on, language could never be the way in which that essence exists.

The Seventh Letter says, of anything written, that it is not what it seems. What is written seems to abide; as if it were a truth that could remain forever unchanging; also, what is written seems to be completely knowable; the words falsely seem transparent to the reader. Plato, however, seems to have found a way around the falsity, inherent in language, by using indirect communication.

That the Seventh Letter is indirect implies that the other works should still be taken as indirect, but not just because the Seventh Letter says they should. The reader should take the works as being indirect only if the reader believes that what is in language is incapable of expressing the knowledge that the author had. In this way, for the reader to take the works as being indirectly communicated, means that the works are known by the reader to be incapable of expressing any truth that the author may have knowledge of. It is only in this way that the reader adopts the correct relationship to the works.

In many places, throughout his works, Plato says that if one has an understanding of something, then that person should be able to give an account of it.[57] This requirement implies that since one must always be able to express knowledge that one has, it must already be in language. The only other thesis that one could hold is that knowledge is not already linguistic, but that it can readily be put into language. But this thesis would be inconsistent with what is said in the Seventh Letter, that the mind searches after the essence but always only achieves knowledge of essence that is contaminated with particularity because of the linguistic way in which our knowledge exists. Such a thesis would also contradict what Plato says in the Theaetetus and the Sophist (see also Philebus 38D-E):

> [Thinking is] a discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering. You must take this explanation as coming from an ignoramus, but I have a notion that, when the mind is thinking, it is simply talking to itself, asking questions and answering them, and saying yes or no. [Theaet. 189 E, trans. by Cornford][58]

> Well, thinking and discourse are the same thing, except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound...Whereas the stream which flows from the mind through the lips with sound is called

discourse.[Sophist: 263E, trans. by Cornford][59]

According to these statements, it is not quite right to say that thinking is in language, any more than it would be right to say that language is in thought. Rather, they seem to be equated, differing only in mode of appearance. The connection between thinking and knowledge, and thus language and knowledge, is provided by thought being the way in which knowledge exists in people.

> But to the highest and most important class of existents there are no corresponding visible resemblances, no work of nature clear for all to look upon. In these cases nothing visible can be pointed out to satisfy the inquiring mind; the instructor cannot cause the inquirer to perceive something with one or other of his senses and so make him really satisfied that he understands the thing under discussion. Therefore we must train ourselves to give and to understand a rational account of every existent thing. For the existents which have no visible embodiment, the existents which are of highest value and chief importance, are demonstrable only by reason and are not to be apprehended by any other means.[Statesman 286A, trans. by Skemp (see also Phaedrus 247C-D)]

The person who has knowledge has to be able to give an account of that knowledge. For example, if a person knows the way to Ottawa, then he ought to be able to tell another

person how to get to Ottawa. To give an account is simply to express to other people the knowledge which exists internally in language. But, as expressed, the account is no longer knowledge.

The person who only has true opinion has only an account given by someone else. Even though the account that the person has may exist internally, it is still not knowledge. Having knowledge implies a relation between the grasp and what the grasp is of. And this relation does not exist simply by having an account. Someone could still be said to know, while admitting that his knowledge is only an approximate grasp. But the one who has only an account can only believe the account if the account itself is taken to be the truth. The person who has knowledge, as well, knows his knowledge to be a true account, but not that it is itself true. In other words, the one who knows might say of the account, that the account has some truth to it. But the person who opines only, would say that the account is truth.

The fact that knowledge is always in language, and can never be true in itself, suggests the general principle that only the object of knowledge can really be true. Anything in language can be said to be true only in a secondary sense to the extent that what is said in language mirrors or represents what is true.

There are two key premises at work here. The first is from the Republic[509] and states that it is the idea of the Good that

> gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower [...] and you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge, and of truth in so far as known. [trans. by Shorey]

From this it can be inferred that only what is knowable is true, since knowledge and the truth of the object known seem to be two sides of the same thing. The second key premise at work is from the Seventh Letter [343-C] and states that language is not knowable because it always contains what is not essential. From this it follows that language cannot be true in the way that an object of knowledge is true. Language cannot express or represent the object of knowledge. What is expressed in language cannot be an object of knowledge. That is why in the Seventh Letter [343-D] Plato says that, when there is a refutation of what someone says, only the language is refuted but not the truth of the thing known. Such refutation only exposes the fact that language in which knowledge exists cannot fully refer to the thing known.

This could explain why Plato presented the dialogues in an indirect manner[60], since presenting them indirectly allowed the works to imply and provoke thoughts in the reader that the reader would have to deal with and pass judgement upon as the reader's own. In other words, the reader will have to take responsibility for these thoughts which are suggested by the text because a literary character can only speak and cannot imply. An author can imply

directly but then the implication will remain the author's own. In this case, what is implied by the text is as invalid as anything that the author wrote, if what he wrote is false.

The point is that the reader consider the implied thought to be his own, so that he can see the thought as a representation of what is known, rather than being restricted to accepting the implication itself as being knowledge. The reader will only come to see the implication as a representation of reality when he has taken responsibility for the thought and passed the correct judgement upon it. If the author implies and provokes through a literary character, then the reader can neither attach what is implied or provoked onto either the author, since in a very real sense the author did not imply what was implied, or the literary character, since also in a very real sense the literary character could not have implied anything to the reader or provoked the reader in any way.

So in the case of his works Plato was able to get around the inherent falsity of language by presenting his thoughts indirectly. Ronna Burger (1980), has investigated the relevance of indirect communication to the problems Plato thought (according to Burger) to be inherent in language.

> But the condemnation of this monument of living thought conceals the ambiguity of its twofold nature, for the imitation which deceives when taken as an

> original may fulfill an indispensable function when recognized as an imitation: only the written word which points to its illusory appearance as a replacement of memory is able to uncover its own potential as a reminder to the knower.[61]

That Plato presented his thoughts indirectly means that he used characters, some historical and some perhaps fictional or at least mysterious as in the case of the Stranger who appears in the Sophist, for example, and Plato portrayed these characters as having their own opinions. Nothing further can be said, for certain, about whether Plato himself believed what some character says or what some dialogue as a whole might mean or imply. In fact, it is a crucial aspect of indirect communication that the reader not be able to tell whether the author believed what he wrote. Thus even if an author spoke through characters it is not necessarily an indirect communication, as in the case of a dialogue of Berkeley's where it is apparent that Berkeley himself is speaking through the character of Philonous.

But this tactic only makes sense as a solution if one accepts that the falsity of language, as implied by the Seventh Letter, is a problem in the way that it has been portrayed to be. The fact of the falsity of language is based on the statement made in the Seventh Letter that language is unknowable because it cannot but portray what is inessential about an object as well as what is essential.

But in a different way, the fact of the falsity of language is also based on the assumption that this statement made in the Seventh Letter and the Seventh Letter as a whole, can correctly be taken as a direct communication.

Within a Platonic context, for the author to communicate directly, would mean that what is written is a public expression of some knowledge that Plato has. If the writing itself were to be accepted as being true then the written statements will be incorrectly accepted as knowledge. So long as a reader does not have knowledge but rather, deals only with statements made by others, he cannot distinguish an account, that is given by someone with knowledge, from statements made by people without knowledge. For example, in the case of a work of art, the author might know that his work is good because it is a fair image of the original, beautiful object or idea that inspired the work. But the observer who has no experience of the object will be led to think that it is the work itself which is beautiful.

The reason why this sounds so impossible is that a reader will very rarely take a person's writing directly. The characteristic of being direct refers to the way that the author intended the writing and not to the way the reader accepts what is written. Usually a reader will recognize that when an author communicates directly he communicates what he believes to be knowledge. But the reader also recognizes that the author might be wrong. So the reader accepts what is written on a conditional basis,

as something that the author believes.

So, if a reader were to take the Seventh Letter as being presented directly, by Plato, then a paradoxical situation would result. For example, if it is true that language is false, then this statement, that language is false, must also be false, but only if it is true. If it is false then there is no paradox. But as the Seventh Letter has it, Plato holds as true (a) that what is true cannot be written, (b) that Plato can write (a), and, therefore, (c), that (a) is false, and truth can be written. In other words, if there is any statement made in the Seventh Letter that the reader takes as a truth held by Plato, then the whole letter must be seen as false. If the reader thinks it false that language is false, then the reader must also think it false that the real reality cannot be referred to through language. If, on the other hand, it is thought true, by the reader, that language is false, then the reader must also think that it true that language cannot refer to the real reality. But by virtue of being thought true, this statement must be thought to refer to that real reality. And therefore it must be thought to be false that the real reality cannot be put into words like other subjects.

One might attempt to avoid this paradoxical situation by objecting that, although language is false, it is sufficient to communicate within the sphere of sensual experience which is itself the realm of falsity. In other words, 'language' is not an essence in the way that 'circle'

is.It might therefore consistently be held that the only parts of the Seventh Letter that need to be true are those that represent Plato's knowledge of the real reality. And it is only these parts, that need to be true, which can possibly be paradoxical in the way laid out above. If, therefore, we take the statement that language is false, and ask if this statement is not false by virtue of being a statement in language, one might think that it is only self-referentially false if it is necessarily true that language is false. But being a statement in language, it need not be true since it does not refer to the real reality. In this case no paradox arises.

Yet, while it is true that language is not a real reality, and therefore statements about language do not have to be false due to the inability to refer to that reality in language, nevertheless the above objection, in the preceding paragraph, attempts to establish that the statement is false, without being necessarily false, since if it were necessarily false then it would be true. A statement about the sensual realm is said to be true when it correctly depicts some state of affairs. The statement could always be wrong since the state of affairs is essentially indeterminate. And since language is part of that indeterminate state of affairs, any statement about language could be false. It would, therefore, accurately depict this state of affairs to say that any statement in language could be false. But if this statement, that any statement could be

false, is ever false, then in that case it would be true that some statement cannot be false. But this is paradoxical, since if it is true that any statement in language can be false, then this statement is false, and if it is false that any statement in language can be false, then no statement in language can be false, therefore it is true that any statement in language can be false. This shows that language can still be self-referentially paradoxical even if it is admitted that the statements are not about the real reality.

When the Seventh Letter is taken as a direct communication it is paradoxical. As paradoxical, the Seventh Letter cannot have any significant use as an interpretive tool. Not only is it useless in better understanding the other works, the Seventh Letter itself also blocks any attempt at being understood. In fact, if the Seventh Letter is taken straightforwardly, then, because it is something written, it is a doctrine. But, further, it is a doctrine that has been found to be self contradictory, which is accepted as true by Plato. It is the fact that Plato is thought to accept this doctrine as true, that makes the situation paradoxical, and it is because we take the Letter to be presented straightforwardly that we think that Plato accepted this doctrine as true. But the situation is different if the Seventh Letter is not considered as directly presented by Plato.

It is not paradoxical for the doctrine to say of itself

that it is not true. As long as no one accepts the doctrine to be true, it is contradictory but not paradoxical. If a person were to say, " what I am saying is not true", then this would be paradoxical. If the Letters were not accepted by Plato as true and are not accepted by anyone else as true then they are not paradoxical. In this way, if we accept the Letters to have been presented indirectly by Plato, then we can indirectly accept them as true by affirming what they say to be true as a conclusion of our own. For example, I am saying that the Letters should not be accepted as true because they are written doctrine. I say this because I believe this to be true independently from what the Letters say. It happens to be what the letters say of themselves. If there were a direct link between what I believed to be true and what I believed Plato to hold as true, and what the Letters said, as could be concluded if the Letters were taken to be presented straightforwardly, then there would occur the paradoxical situation in which the Letters would be saying of themselves that they are false. But, because I take the doctrine as indirect, there is no such direct link between what I conclude Plato to believe from reading the Letters and what the Letters say.[62]

Further proof that the Seventh Letter is presented indirectly is, first of all, the fact that most of the so called philosophical digression of the Seventh Letter, roughly from 340 to 345C, is itself a real digression, referred to at 342A as a logos and at 344D as mythos. And

secondly, the letter itself is to a large extent a criticism of people calling what has been written by Plato " his Philosophy". Plato expresses anger at any attempt to formulate a 'Platonic Doctrine'. In fact, Plato is so angry that he says that these people who try to do this could never succeed because Plato has never and could never put into language what he thought was true. Therefore, not only could these people never learn of a Platonic philosophy, there could never be a 'Platonic philosophy'.

Plato was very upset at people presenting doctrine and calling it Plato's. But presumably this refers to the doctrine of the dialogues, which Plato had himself presented publicly and there is no indication that the anger is due to some factual errors that these people were making in its presentation. The only conceivable reason for Plato's anger is that these doctrines were not presented indirectly by these other people, but rather were presented as 'Plato's Doctrine'.

But when a straightforward demand, by Plato, that what he has written be taken indirectly, by the reader, is itself taken indirectly, it is still a demand that what the person has written be taken indirectly, yet it is no longer a demand made by Plato and is perhaps not what Plato would want us to do to his writings. We are left with no way of knowing from the text what attitude to take towards the works of Plato, including the Letters. It seems that whenever we take some position, based on the text, it turns

out to be logically impossible.

The reader must believe for himself that what is written cannot express anyone's knowledge. In this way the person will stand to Plato's writings as he should stand to his own, and that is indirectly. Only by looking at the writing as if it were one's own can a reader take the writing as indirect, otherwise the only two possibilities are: a) taking the writing as believed by the author or b) taking the writing as not believed by the author; being indirect is neither of these possibilities.

Chapter 4 A Paradoxical Relationship

The second chapter was an investigation into what the Seventh Letter says. The third chapter was an attempt to show that the Seventh Letter is presented indirectly and to draw out the implications of the effect that this indirect presentation has upon what is said in the Seventh Letter. It now remains to be shown, in the forth chapter, that the Seventh Letter is paradoxical and to investigate what effect this paradoxical aspect of the Seventh Letter has on what the Seventh Letter says indirectly, as determined in chapter three.

The Seventh Letter is commonly taken to be the straightforward statement, that the other works by Plato, do not express his real philosophy or what he really thinks is true. But we have seen that the Seventh Letter refers to anything written or spoken and therefore what it says applies to the Letter itself. And because of this the Seventh Letter is not at a different level of communication from the rest of Plato's works, since the Seventh Letter also does not express what Plato really thought to be true.

However, even though the Seventh Letter is at the same level of communication as the rest of Plato's works, it still says of the other works that they do not, and could not present Plato's philosophy. And this, according to the Seventh Letter, is because when the mind searches for what is essential, language always refers to a mixture of what is particular as well as what is

essential. This implies that if one were to try to express what is essential, the expression would unavoidably present to the mind what is not essential along with what is essential. It is not enough that the statements are such a mixture. In order for language to refer to that which is known the language must present only what is essential, and this is said to be impossible.

In the Seventh Letter Plato does not explicitly say why language presents what is particular as well as what is essential. It is not too difficult to understand why an example presents what is particular, since, regardless of what it is supposed to be an example of, it is still a purely sensual object. But it is not so easy in the case of language, since language is not straightforwardly a sensual object and will not particularize for the same reasons as do examples.

According to the Cratylus, that language presents what is particular, means that words are all either made up of other root words or are themselves root words. [c.f.Cratylus: especially 414C, 422A-D] And these root words are basic sensual images [Cratylus 431A], which are incapable of representing things which are not part of that sensual realm [Cratylus 436E, 439B].

That this sort of theory does in fact underlie what is being said in the Seventh Letter can be shown to be hinted at in the analysis of language found in the Seventh Letter itself. Just after Plato says that the circle that is drawn, unlike the real circle, is unable to maintain a constant identity, Plato says

that names,

> are in no case stable. Nothing prevents the things that are now called round from being called straight and the straight round...[343B]

Taken by itself, this statement about names seems to mean that, because the name means nothing apart from the way it is used, there is no reason why any thing should be called by one name rather than by some other name. The reason why this is not what Plato is saying is that this interpretation presupposes that the names do in fact refer to the object. And if the names did in fact refer to the object it would not be problematic that the name changes.

If, on the other hand, this statement about names is considered in respect to the statement which immediately precedes it, i.e.;

> [e]very circle that is drawn or turned on a lathe in actual operations abounds in the opposite of the fifth entity, for it everywhere touches the straight, while the real circle, I maintain, contains in itself neither much nor little of the opposite character.[Seventh Letter 343A]

there is another meaning that becomes apparent. The reason why it is possible for the things now called straight to be called circular is that the meaning of the word is not really the unchanging idea. The meaning of the word is the sensual imagery which is at the root of the word. And because it is possible to take any created circle and make it square, so too is it possible

that the imagery which gives meaning to the name 'circle', change from being the image of circularity to being the image of squareness. This would mean that the name circle is now supposed to be the name of the idea squareness, because it has for its root meaning the image of squareness. But, of course, since the name has as its meaning sensual imagery, it cannot actually refer to the idea in an abiding way and is therefore not really the name of the unchanging idea.

As inexpressibility is formulated in the Seventh Letter, any statement in language is within the sensual world of constant change, whereas the object of knowledge belongs to the unchanging reality. This means that a statement could never achieve an abiding reference to an object of knowledge.

This formulation of inexpressibility, in the Seventh Letter, not only presupposes the theory of language from the Cratylus, but also presupposes the theory of a realm of true being and the theory that the sensual world is unknowable because it is not eternally unchanging. Reference to the realm of true being is made in many places throughout Plato's works. For example, one could refer to Phaedo 65, 74, 75, 78, Meno 81C, 85C, Phaedrus 249C, 251, Symposium 211, Republic 476, 510B, 508, 517B. There are also the references to the position which holds that the world which we experience through our senses cannot be the object of knowledge because it is always in change, which can be found mostly in the Phaedo, Republic and in the Theaetetus. These include, for example, Phaeado 65, 83A, 75, Republic, 524B, 523B, 602C, cf.Philebus 38C, 42A, Theaetetus 152A, 157E, 160-163, 171E;

also relevant here is Republic 509 which states that the Good is the source of the intelligibility of the forms.

To say that the Seventh Letter presupposes these theories[63] that are found in the other works means that if these theories, found in the other works, are discredited and disowned by Plato, in the Seventh Letter, then the Seventh Letter is also discredited and disowned. And this is because it is these theories that the Seventh Letter disowns and discredits which give support to the arguments made in the Seventh Letter that do the discrediting and disowning of the other works.

That the works are disowned, means that Plato did not think of what he had written in those works as expressive of what he really thought. But that the works were discredited means that what was written or said does not refer to or mean anything that is truly real.

To say that a theory is discredited, is in some sense to say that it is not true. For Plato, a true theory is supposed to be a mental model of the way things are. A theory of some aspect of the sensual realm could not be true because there is no abiding, or real, way in which that aspect is. And a theory of the realm of true being could never be a true model because what is fully real is only what it is and nothing else. The only way for a model to be a model of what is fully real is for it also to be fully real [Republic 504C]. However, for Plato, to be a model of something else implies not being fully real, as is apparent from Cratylus 432B where Plato says: "the image, if expressing in every point the entire reality, would no longer be an image"

[trans. by Jowett]. At Republic 533 Plato says: "if I could, I would show you, no longer an image and symbol of my meaning, but the very truth as it appears to me". This indicates that the best that theory can do is resemble the knowledge that someone might have, but not resemble the reality that the knowledge concerns.

In order to explain what is implied by saying that some theory is discredited, it was necessary to assume the theory of a realm of true being. True being is the only type of thing that can be the object of knowledge. The assumption of the realm of true being is necessary in order to say that the discredited theory does not refer to that realm. This is an illustration of the fact that one must assume that what the Seventh Letter says is true in order for it to discredit the other works. In other words, then, the Seventh Letter cannot be discredited on the same grounds upon which the other works were discredited. Yet, at the same time, the Seventh Letter is discredited because it does depend on these other theories.

This paradoxical situation involves the Seventh Letter as a whole. But the analysis of language, in the Seventh Letter, which gave rise to this situation, was meant to be a support for the theory of learning which is the main point of the Seventh Letter. We must see what effect this paradoxical situation has on the theory of learning.

The objective of the analysis of language, in the Seventh Letter, is to show that a student cannot gain knowledge from language. The relevant passages have already been quoted [341D on p.62 and 344B on p.23] and it has already been

explained that although the seeking after knowledge is in language, the actual achievement of understanding is a grasp of something which is not given in language. The seeking in language consists of rubbing the name, definition and image off one another in discussion with someone else. This process was described as an attempt to get beyond the par'icular elements in a definition so that only what is essential will be left [cf.Republic 486D]. But of course it is still a mystery as to how one can get beyond what is particular when this is said to be impossible, except by the understanding which cannot be caused by the discussion itself. In other words, the relation between the seeking and the end achievement is still a mystery.

Perhaps what Plato says [344A] about the requirements of gaining understanding may shed light upon this question.

> In short, neither quickness of learning nor a good memory can make a man see when his nature is not akin (zuggene) to the object, for this knowledge never takes root (eggignetai) in an alien (allotriais) nature; so that no man who is not naturally (prosphueis) inclined and akin (zuggeneis) to justice and all other forms of excellence, even though he may be quick at learning and remembering this and that and other things, nor any man who, though akin (zuggeneis) to justice, is slow at learning and forgetful, will ever attain the truth that is attainable about virtue.[64]

According to this passage, a person's nature must be akin to whatever it is that he might gain knowledge of. If kinship is

being used in this passage to mean a similarity or resemblance, then to have a kinship to justice, for example, would imply being just, at least to some degree. To continue with this example, then, the person would presumably be just before he had knowledge of justice. That Plato does in fact use kinship to imply similarity or resemblance is suggested by Republic 503 and 487A.

> Facility in learning, memory, sagacity, quickness of apprehension ... are rarely combined in human nature with a disposition to live orderly, quiet, and stable lives.[Republic 503]

And;

> Is there any fault, then, that you can find with a pursuit which a man could not properly practice unless he were by nature of a good memory, quick apprehension, magnificent, gracious, friendly, and akin to truth, justice, bravery, and sobriety? [Republic 487A]

But the requirement of kinship cannot imply that the person have the quality or be the thing in question, because the requirement of kinship only makes sense in the case of the virtues. For example, it makes no sense in a Platonic context, to say that the person must be circular in order to have knowledge of circle. And also, a little further on [344B], Plato says that vice must be learned alongside of virtue, which would then imply that people ought to be vicious in order that they have knowledge of virtue. So, it now seems that kinship does not mean similarity or resemblance to the particular object of knowledge.

At 340C of the Seventh Letter Plato speaks of "the divine

quality that makes him akin to it", which seems to suggest that the kinship is some mysterious divine element which the person's soul has in common with the object of knowledge, yet which is not the object of knowledge itself. One could argue that the divine element is the idea of the good. Republic 508E-509 states,

> [this] reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea of the good, and you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge, and of truth in so far as known [emphasis added].

The kinship which the soul of the learner has with the thing learned is referred to as the power of knowing also at Republic 490B.

> [The] edge of his passion would not be blunted nor would his desire fail till he came into touch with the nature of each thing in itself by that part of his soul to which it belongs to lay hold on that kind of reality--the part akin to it, namely--and through that approaching it, and consorting with reality really, he would beget intelligence and truth, attain to knowledge [emphasis added].

This suggestion is supported by the Seventh Letter at 343E, where Plato says that, "it is barely possible for knowledge to be engendered of an object naturally good, in a man naturally good". So, the requirement, on the part of the learner, is that he be naturally good, and this is the learner's natural kinship with the object to be known. It is the good which enables the learner

to know. This suggestion solves the problem that arose with kinship being taken as a resemblance, because the thing that the person has in common with the object of knowledge is something beyond both of them and is not, for example, the circularity that the person must share with circularity itself, in order to have knowledge of it.

An increase in a person's level of intellectual skill or kinship might account for the occurrence of understanding. And if discourse could somehow account for some such increase, then this would provide for the significance of discourse as the way in which one must seek after understanding. But no amount of discourse can remedy a person's lack of good. However, it seems that discourse can increase a person's intellectual skill, since at 344B Plato says that only

> when all these things...have been...tested, pupil and teacher asking answering questions in good will without envy--only then, when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort...[see also Statesman 285C- 286]

This implies that it is discourse which developes the intellectual capacities. Also there is support for this thesis from 340B to 441A, where, for example, Plato says

> he braces himself and his guide to the task and does not relax his efforts until he either crowns them with final accomplishment or acquires the faculty of tracing his own way...such a man passes his life in whatever occupations he may engage in, but throughout it all never ceases to

> practice philosophy and such habits of daily life as will be most effective in making him an intelligent and retentive student, able to reason soberly by himself.[65]

But it is not the perfection of skill which gives one the ability to understand. It is one's kinship which is one's ability to see. And so an increase in intellectual skill cannot directly account for the understanding. Yet, while the intellectual skill does not provide the ability to see or the object to be seen, both of which are already present, it does provide the occasion for understanding by directing the ability to understand towards something that can be understood i.e. something knowable. At Republic 518D, Plato says

> there might be an art, an art of the speediest and most effective shifting or conversion of the soul, not an art of producing vision in it, but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it. [cf 518C&D in general and also 521C]

The affinity is already there, in a soul, and the object of knowledge is always available to be known. But in order for the soul to have an understanding of that object it must be directed towards that object by discourse. For the soul to be directed towards the real reality by discourse means trying to get at what is essential about something. For example, in trying to find out what knowledge itself is, that one is able to say what is not essential to knowledge itself implies that one understands what is essential to knowledge. But that one is unable to say what is essential is not surprising since it cannot be put into words.

Also, the fact that discourse directs the soul towards the reality that is under discussion, might explain why it is that in discussion about justice one does not get an understanding of something which is unrelated to justice. Discourse about justice in a sense implies that the soul is with or close to justice. But without the affinity this being together of the soul with the real reality would not give rise to understanding.

This is the theory of learning that Plato tries to support with the analysis of language mentioned above, which presupposes doctrines of the real reality and the unintelligibility of the sensual realm. Although an understanding is inescapably limited by language, it is still the aim of study. This theory of learning, along with the preceding theory of language, serve to deny that anyone could arrive at some understanding from reading what someone else has written or listening to what someone else has said. Reading or listening are unable to yield understanding because a long period of attendance upon the subject and being together with it is necessary before one's affinity to the object will cause the person to understand.

The theory of language discredits doctrines found in other works. But the theory of learning discredits any judgement that we could make about these other doctrines. To discredit our judgements about the doctrines found in the other works does not mean that the judgements are false but only that the judgements are not based on the right criterion. The right criterion of judgement, according to the theory of learning, would presumably be the extent to which a particular doctrine did in fact direct

the reader or listener towards the realm of true being. And, as we can see, the theory of learning falls into the same problems that the analysis of language fell into; that is, just as the theory of language required that one accept the theory of a real reality in order to discredit the rest of the works, so too does the theory of learning require that one accept the theory of a real reality in order to discredit our judgements as to the value or truth of the doctrine of learning itself. And just as this led to a paradoxical situation in the case of the analysis of language, so to it leads to a paradoxical situation in the case of the theory of learning, because we must assume that the criterion is correct in order to inquire as to the value of the theory of learning itself. And in order to accept the criterion as correct, we would have to accept the theory of a real reality, otherwise it would not make sense to judge a doctrine according to whether or nct the doctrine directs one's soul towards the realm of true being. But if the acceptance of the doctrine of a real reality is justifiable in a way other than by accordance with the criterion of directing one toward the real reality, then there must be some other criterion of judgement; but if there is, then there is some other way of learning besides the way which is laid out in the theory of learning. And if this were the case, then there would no longer be any need to use the doctrine of a real reality to support the theory of learning advanced in the Seventh Letter.

When the criteria implied by the theory of learning is used, in order to determine the value of that very same theory of

learning, it is hard to tell what value should be placed on that theory of learning. The theory of learning, and the Seventh Letter in general, serves more to limit the significance of what value there might be in other doctrines, like that of justice in the Republic. If the theory of justice in the Republic, for example, has a certain value, for example of the direction that it provides the person, then what further value is there in the person's being aware that the only value which the theory of justice has is in its directional function? Perhaps more than one might initially think. Even though some doctrine might have an inherent directional value, if the prospective student mistook the value of the doctrine to lie in its truth, rather than in the direction it provided the person, then this mistake would detract from that inherent directional value. Mistaking some doctrine to be true detracts from whatever directional value a doctrine might have because one's soul is directed towards the doctrine, that is in itself nothing but an image, rather than one's soul being directed, by the doctrine, to whatever the doctrine is an image of. To illustrate this point assume that there is a real being that is called the meter. Imagine what folly is involved in taking great pains to protect some piece of metal and thinking that such a changeble thing could be the measure of the meterness of other things. Now, imagine also, that there is some good that a soul can gain by coming to know the meter itself. One could be aided in coming to know the meter itself by the changeble instances of meter, but not if these instances were taken to be actual meters themselves. In the same way, a doctrine can be an

image of some reality, and can help one to come to know that reality, but not if the doctrine itself is taken to be the reality itself.

In the Second Letter, Plato says that the works that "are now called his [Plato's] are the work of a Socrates embellished and modernized."[314C][66] But what would the works of Socrates be? What works could be attributed to someone who had no opinion, let alone knowledge? They would have to be works which were not meant to be, and which in fact were not, the opinions of anyone. Just as what Socrates said was not supposed to be accepted as the truth, so too Plato's doctrine was not supposed to be accepted as the truth. The doctrine, as a whole, was meant to function in the same maieutic way as Socrates was portrayed as functioning. The doctrine being barren, can not give birth to any knowledge itself, but can only help others gain knowledge.

Conclusion

In respect to the effect that the Seventh Letter has on the interpretation of Plato's other works, the Seventh Letter is relevant to more than just the question of whether or not Plato accepted what he wrote in the dialogues, and what is implied by what he wrote. The relevance of the Seventh Letter also involves the implication that the works of Plato are not worthy of being accepted or believed. Plato did not accept the opinions found in the works, not because they were wrong or inadequate as opinions, but because they were written expressions and therefore could not be the object of a truly philosophical seeking. Therefore, as may be inferred from the Seventh Letter, nothing expressed in language is worthy of belief. In other words, there is no possibility that, after much inquiry and striving, nous finally grasps any true being which turns out to resemble in any way what is in language. One could never have knowledge of something in language. But, of course, this does not mean that language in general, and Plato's works in particular, has no value. The point is, simply, that if language is used in a certain way then it can be a means of acquiring knowledge. In fact, in this respect as a means, language is for most people a necessary means.

It could not even be argued that the writings of Plato are true opinion without the argument being circular,

because the hierarchical schema of knowledge and opinion is laid out in these very writings that are suspect. There is no valid way of characterizing Plato's works, with a characterization which is itself Platonic, except according to the Seventh Letter. And, as we have seen in chapter four, this characterization in accordance with the Seventh Letter also comes dangerously close to being circular due to the Seventh Letter's dependence upon the doctrines found in various other works. A characterization based on the Seventh Letter would not, however, become circular because at the same time that the Seventh Letter is dependent upon those doctrines found in the other works, it also discredits those doctrines as not worthy of belief by Plato or anyone else.

Any use of the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool for the rest of the works that does not take into account the full significance of the Seventh Letter is inadequate. Yet none of the commentators on Plato, mentioned in chapter one, have examined the impact of Plato's refusal to accept what are called his writings as his own upon the attitude of acceptance or denial which a reader ought to take. Not only should an examination of the impact of the Seventh Letter on the interpretation of Plato include consideration of the implications that the Letter has on how the reader ought to relate himself to the works, but also, such an examination should include consideration of what the reader ought to achieve as a result of interpreting Plato's writings. Even if it is granted that such an investigation

is not aimed at discovering what Plato himself thought, it still remains suspect to settle for aiming at exposition of what the works are really saying. To simply aim at uncovering what the works of Plato really say tends to side-step the issue of the usefulness of such information. If one is doing doxography then this would be enough. But if one wants to claim to be doing philosophy then finding out what the words really mean is useless, since having this information does not amount to knowing anything. The reason is that the words could not mean anything real in Plato's sense of being real.

Of course, one could deny that there is any truth to Plato's theory of a real reality, and thus defend oneself against the attack of not doing philosophy in the sense of striving after knowledge of what is real. But in this case, the person could no longer maintain that he is using the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool. The person could no longer be using the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool, because the Seventh Letter is not straightforwardly about the rest of the works. Because of the Seventh Letter's paradoxical relationship of denial and dependence on the rest of the works, to use the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool, of the dialogues, means that one uses the dialogues as an occasion to seek after what is essential. If one is not using the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool, then there is no reason why the characterization of what is written should be platonic. One could, for example, do a

Marxist critique of Plato's works which would not be intrinsically open to a platonic criticism.

The Plato commentators mentioned in this paper, however, all do claim to be using the Seventh Letter as an interpretive tool. Yet, none of them seem to recognize the full significance of the Letter. Crombie, for example, correctly uses the Seventh Letter to question the practice which assumes that the position or opinion of some character in a dialogue must be Plato's position. But Crombie fails to see that the Seventh Letter inhibits any assumption of Plato's position in principle and not simply because it is difficult to tell for certain which opinions stated in the dialogues are Plato's. The Seventh Letter states that no opinions found in the dialogues could be Plato's because his opinions could never be put into language. It would be consistent with Crombie's position, however, that some opinions found in the dialogues are Plato's, but that we have difficulty telling which opinions are Plato's.

Crombie could not make good use of the Seventh Letter because he did not interpret it correctly. Friedlaender, on the other hand, does interpret the Seventh Letter better than Crombie, in that he recognizes all three stages of inexpressibility whereas Crombie recognizes only the first. However, Friedlaender fails to make good use of his interpretation of the Seventh Letter because he uses what he takes to be the meaning of the Seventh Letter to support his theory of dialogue, Friedlaender's main tool for

interpreting the other works. Friedlaender does not allow the Seventh Letter to stand on its own as an interpretive tool, and therefore, the full impact of the Seventh Letter is stifled.

As long as the Seventh Letter is used as an interpretive tool, its effect will be, not only to deny that Plato believed what he wrote, but also, to assert that what he wrote is not worth believing. This, in effect, is to assert that, as something in language, it is not the proper object of philosophic striving. It does not even matter that Plato did not believe what he wrote in the Seventh Letter either. In fact, Plato could not, consistently, believe what he wrote in the Seventh Letter, any more than he could have believed the other writings.

This makes the Seventh Letter, as something written, not worthy of belief. But this does not mean that the Seventh Letter is false and therefore that Plato did believe what he wrote in the dialogues. The fact that Plato could not, consistently believe the Seventh Letter, implies that the Seventh Letter is of value. The Seventh Letter is valuable in the same way that the other works are valuable.

The way in which the other works are valuable is in their capacity of directing the learner's attention to what is essential. The Seventh Letter is valuable, because it reveals the way in which the works are valuable to the reader. As an interpretive tool, the Seventh Letter serves to distinguish between the means to an end and a description

of some such means to an end. The works of Plato are only a description of a means to an end. The end which is sought after is knowledge.

NOTES

[1]Throughout, reference to the Seventh Letter is to the so called philosophic digression from 340 to 345C. One might, however, object that taking the designated passage out of context needs some justification, since it might be that what is said in that passage receives meaning from the context of the letter in general and therefore the significance of what the passage implies is limited to the letter itself. Furthermore, it might be suggested that just by virtue of being a letter, as opposed to a philosophic text, the Seventh Letter cannot be interpreted as rigorously as a text.

There are two reasons why it is justifiable to consider the designated passage on its own. The first is that the passage is set apart in the Letter itself as a philosophic digression, and so it is already set apart. The second reason why a consideration of the designated passage is justifiable is that what it says is very similar to what is said elsewhere in the works of Plato. The second objection, that by virtue of being a letter, the Seventh Letter should not be subjected to the same standards of interpretation as a text that was written with such analysis in mind, is answered by this theses in chapter three where it is argued that the Seventh Letter is intended in the same indirect way as the rest of the works.

[2]c.f.Robert Vaslavesky, Platonic Myth and Platonic Writing (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981).

[3]It is a contention of this thesis that Plato denies all three.

[4]I.M.Crombie, An Examination of Plato's Doctrines, 2 vols. (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962) 1: 14.

[5]Crombie 16.

[6]Crombie 16.

[7]Crombie 16.

[8]Crombie 18.

[9]Crombie 18.

[10]Crombie Vol. 2: 125.

[11]Crombie Vol.1: 20.

[12]Alan C. Bowen, "On Interpreting Plato", in Platonic writings / Platonic Readings, ed. Charles Griswold,JR.(New York: Routledge, 1988)

[13]Bowen 23.

[14]Kenneth M. Sayre, "Plato's Dialogues in Light of the Seventh Letter", in Platonic Writings / Platonic Readings, ed. by Charles Griswold, (New York: Routledge, 1988) 98.

[15]Sayre 101.

[16]Sayre 102.

[17]Sayre 104.

[18]There is a genuine confusion in the text of the Seventh Letter. As far as I know the only other commentator to address the problem is Crombie, who happens to come to the same conclusions as Sayre. The problem exists within the structure introduced at 342A8, where it is said that there are three things, the name, definition and example (onoma, logos and

eidolon), that are required to yield knowledge of any reality (ta onta; then: peri taûta, and later: to pempton). Knowledge is referred to as the fourth thing. Then, at 342C4-5, the fourth thing is referred to first as knowledge (epistēmē), and later as correct opinion, knowledge and understanding (epistēmē, kai noûs, alēthēs te doxa). And at 342D, the fourth thing is referred to as just understanding. So, already there is a confusion as to what the fourth thing is. But now the real confusion sets in. At 342E the first four things, are said to be required in order to get knowledge of the reality itself. At 343B-C, each of the four is said to be defective because they each present to the mind what is particular and thus cannot provide knowledge. At 343D, it is implied that knowledge that a person has is not refuted when the person's arguments are refuted, only the four are refuted. And also at 343D the text says " consideration of all four, barely begets knowledge". But in opposition to all of these cases, at 344B only the first three are mentioned as leading to knowledge. Either knowledge is different from the fourth thing, in which case the knowledge mentioned as part of the fourth thing is a different kind of knowledge, or Plato just made these mistakes.

[19]Sayre 106.

[20]Sayre 107.

[21]Sayre 101.

[22]Sayre 108.

[23]This is basically the position of this thesis, on the question of the usefulness of dialogue, according to the Seventh Letter.

[24]Paul Friedlaender, Plato: An Introduction, trans. by Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Bollingen, 1958) 60.

[25]Friedlaender 63.

[26]Friedlaender 64.

[27]Friedlaender 235.

[28]S. Rosen, Plato's Symposium (New Haven: Yale UP, 1968) xiii.

[29]Rosen xv.

[30]Rosen xiv-xv.

[31]Rosen xv.

[32]cf. D. Ross, Plato's Theory of Ideas,(West Port: Greenwood Press, 1976) 158.

[33]E. Tigerstedt, Interpreting Plato,(Stockholm: Almguiste Wiksell International, 1977) 70.

[34]Plato, "Seventh Letter", trans. L.A.Post, in: The Collected Dialogues of Plato, ed.Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1925) 1591. Except as otherwise noted, all quotations from Plato's letters and dialogues are from this work. Henceforth, only the translator's name will be given.

[35]G.R.Morrow, Plato's Epistles (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962) 66.

[36]Morrow 67.

[37]Morrow 67.

[38]J. Sallis, Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1975) 2.

[39]K. Von Fritz, "The philosophical Passage in the Seventh

Letter and the Problem of Plato's 'Esoteric' Philosophy", in: Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy, ed. by J.Anton, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1971) 409.

[40]Von Fritz 441.

[41]J. Fisher, "Plato on Writing and Doing Philosophy", Journal of the History of Ideas 27 (1966): 169-170.

[42]Plato, "Laws", trans. by A.E.Taylor, in: The Collected Dialogues of Plato 1386.

[43]H.L.Sinaiko, Love, Knowledge, and Discourse in Plato, (Chicago: University of Chicogo Press, 1965) 4.

[44]Sinaiko 5.

[45]Sinaiko 6.

[46]Sinaiko 6.

[47]Sinaiko 12.

[48]Sinaiko 19.

[49]Sinaiko 18.

[50]Although the Second Letter is generally held to be a bad copy of the Seventh Letter, it is included here in case it is genuine. At any rate, I do not find the Second Letter less interesting or at odds with the Seventh Letter. In fact, there is much the same argument in the Second Letter as in the Seventh Letter.

> Instead of remaining fixed it darts to and fro, taking now one form, now another, never getting away from the appearances of things. The truth, though, has no such variability.

A lack of the right demonstration caused the truth to dart this

way and that[313B7-8]. All that would have to be added in order to make the Second Letter say exactly what the Seventh Letter says, is that it is impossible to have a demonstration that is not tied down to appearances. Such a claim is nowhere denied in the Second Letter, and the fact that the demonstration that Plato does offer at 312D is in a riddle, beset with imagery, seems to lend some plausibility to the claim that the Second Letter implies or hints that no demonstration can exist devoid of sensual imagery.

[51]A more literal translation would be :'no man possessing nous will ever be so bold as to put into language those things nous has noused.'

[52]There is an implication from being serious to grasping something of reality, in the text, at 344C-D.

[53]For an explanation of the discrepancy in the number or instruments see note 15 from ch.1.

[54]That the body and sensation hinder the soul see: Phaedrus 250-A&C, Phaedo 65A-C, Theaetetus 186, 154-B, 157-E, Republic 524B-D, Cratylus 400C. That the senses help the soul achieve knowledge see: Laws 870-B, Protagoras 326-B, Phaedo 73-C, Theaetetus 186, Republic 524B-D

[55]J. Doyle, Did Something Go Wrong, unpublished course notes distributed in Phil. 630/2/01.,p.3.

[56]That words mirror the soul see: Republic 382-B, "the falsehood in words is a copy of the affection in the soul, an after rising image of it..."

[57]Laches 190C, Alcibiades I 108E-109A, 117A, Gorgias 465A,

510A, Republic 543C, 582A & D, Symposium 202A, Phaedrus 276A, Phaedo 76B, Ion 532B-C, 541E-542A, Laws 966A-B

[58]Theatetus 189E:

Soc. Lógon hòn aùtò prὸs hautὲn hē psychὲ diexérchetai perì hôn ἂn skopêi. Hós ge mὲ eidὸs soi ἀpophaínomai. Toûto gár moi indálletai dianoouménē oùk állo ἢ dialégesthai, aὐtὲ heautὲn erōtôsa kaì ἀpokrinoménē, kai pháskousa kaì oὐ pháskousa.

[59] Sophist 263E:

Str. Oὐkoûn diánoia mὲn kaì lógos taὐtón; plὴn ho mὲn ἔntos tês psychê prὸs hautὲn diálogos ἀneu phōnês gignómenos toùt' aὐtò hēmîn ἐpōnomásthē, diánoia;...Tò dé g'ἀp'ékeinēs rheûma dià toû stómatos iὸn phthóggou kéklētai lógos.

[60]This does not mean that the dialogues are indirect expressions of what is fully real, nor does it mean that what is expressed directly is necessarily one's knowledge. It is possible to express externally what one knows not to be , and this is called lying. It means, rather, that the dialogues are the way in which Plato expressed what he wanted to express, which is anonymously, but not just anonymously in a straightforword manner, as for example, an anonymous political slogan scribbled on a wall secretly at night. Rather, Plato expressed his thoughts through a multitude of diverse characters in a multitude of different situations. So, for example, in the Republic, what Thrasymachus says is just as much something set out by Plato as is what Socrates says. It has never been the intention of this theses to imply of Plato that whenever there is an external expression that it is an expression of knowledge, but only that

if there is to be an expression of knowledge, it will not be an expression of the object of knowledge.

[61]Ronna Burger, Plato's Phaedrus (Alabama:Alabama Press, 1980) 3.

[62]Burger 97:

[63]Apart from doctrines that are presupposed by the Seventh Letter, there are a number of doctrines that the Seventh Letter simply shares with other works. Such similarities create the same sort of paradox as those upon which the argumentation of the Seventh Letter depends. Since these instances are simply doctrines that the Seventh Letter has in common with the various other works, for the Seventh Letter to disown them is in effect for the Seventh Letter to disown itself. Instances of this kind which relate, for example, to expresibility are Symposium 211A7

> To someone who has achieved this final revelation, this beauty will not take the appearance of a face, or hands, or anything bodily, nor again that of discourse.

Also Phaedrus 275 until the end.

[64]The requirement of kinship is found throughout the Republic, for example, 487A, 494D and 501D.

[65]This is very similar to a description of the true philosopher at Republic 490A-B.

[66]That there would be some mention of Plato's activity made by Socrates would amount to Socrates having a knowledge of what is transcendent. Therefore it is altogether fitting that Plato remains anonymous, since Socrates claims to have no such knowledge.

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