

INTRODUCTION

This book is intended to introduce Plato's *Seventh Letter* to a wider audience. I have noticed that many people interested in Plato have never heard of Plato's *Seventh Letter*, that those who have heard of it have seldom read it, and that those who have read it have most often been puzzled by what to make of it. I shall begin by addressing myself to the first group with a brief description of the *Seventh Letter* (hereinafter simply the *Letter*).

The *Letter* is a text about the size of one book of the *Republic*. It is addressed by Plato to the Friends of Dion and purports to advise them as to their plans and aims after the death of Dion, which occurred in the course of the civil conflict at Syracuse during a period when the tyrant Dionysius the Younger was out of power and in exile. This violence at Syracuse was the indirect result of Plato's effort, in cooperation with Dion, to convert the young tyrant to philosophy and thus bring peace and happiness to Sicily.

The actual advice to Dion's friends takes up only a small part of the *Letter*; there is also much about politics at Syracuse, about Plato's involvement in that and his evolving attitude toward it, about his relations with Dion, and also about Plato's understanding of the method and aims of his kind of philosophy.¹

The text was composed in something very like Plato's late literary style. It is generally agreed to date to the late fourth century BCE, although a few scholars place it early in the third. It is an important source for our understanding of the politics of Syracuse and Plato's Academy during those years. (Those who do not know much about the Academy may be reassured to learn that very little is known. It follows that every scrap of evidence is valuable.²)

1. See, however, Knab's (2006, 44–50) argument that the entirety of the letter can be understood as contributing to the aim of bringing the friends of Dion to “die eigene Verständnisebene,” so that they can understand the counsel he gives in the relatively brief *sumboule*.

2. See Lombardini (2023, 7–18) for a discussion of the scholarly debates around the Academy with particular relevance to the narrative of the *Letter*.

The seventh is one of thirteen letters that have come down to us as part of the corpus of Plato's writings. The thirty-five dialogues (some of which are now generally thought not to be by Plato) were arranged by Thrasyllus in the first century CE into groups of four, with the letters filling out the last tetralogy. (After the letters is a curious text called *Definitions* and six dialogues that are classified as spurious.) The seventh is much the longest of the letters (longer than the other twelve put together) and the most interesting.

When I mention this document to people who have heard of it, the first question is usually "Do you think it is authentic?" They are not asking if it is a modern forgery; the question of authenticity is generally asked in the context of an assumption that it was composed during Plato's lifetime or shortly after his death. They want to know if these are Plato's authentic words rather than those of someone speaking for him. There is almost always a silent corollary: "If it is not, what reason is there to pay any attention to it?" That is a question with answers. Doing history, it is unwise to discard documents. The *Letter*, whatever it is, is authentically that. We have a text of uncertain authorship, not securely dated, but none the less worthy of study. If it is not by Plato, it might nevertheless tell some truth about him, his situation, and his work—and if it is by Plato, it is not necessarily completely truthful. Indeed we shall see that in some respects, the *Letter* falsifies the story, if only by excluding certain facts.

I believe the *Letter* is by Plato, and I shall say why. I shall also have a few things to say about the arguments on the other side. I do not find any of these arguments particularly strong; nevertheless, their conclusion may be right. Therefore it follows that we need to read the *Letter* twice, once on the assumption that these are Plato's words and that he had his own reasons for writing them, and then on the assumption that they are the words of someone who, for whatever reason, is speaking for Plato. In what follows, I shall speak of the author simply as "Plato." (This actually is, at worst, no more deceptive than saying "Socrates says," meaning the character in Plato or Xenophon.) In the conclusion, I shall briefly return to the alternative hypothesis and consider the difference it makes.

I find the *Letter* to be something like Abelard's *Story of My Misfortunes* or Wilde's *De Profundis*: it is a first-person account by someone who has made a terrible mistake—made it more than once, actually—and who takes responsibility but wants us to know that he was not really at fault,

or not as much as others.³ The key point, for me, is that there is nothing else like this in classical Greek. In the fourth century, we have a number of first-person accounts—by Xenophon, Isocrates, and Demosthenes; also, Aristophanes speaks in his own person in some of his plays—but none of those are like this. Theirs are stories of clear motives, of their failures or more often, their successes, and occasionally of damage done to them by others. Plato takes us into the subjective space where the errors were made, telling us of his conflicted motives and the inner debate they generated. As far as our information goes, writing like this was completely original with this author. So, we should have to hypothesize the existence of an exceptionally creative author about whose talent we otherwise know nothing. It is surely a simpler hypothesis to attribute the *Letter* to Plato, whom we know to have had such gifts.⁴ Occam's razor can be applied.

I do not expect this argument to end the dispute about the *Letter's* authorship. It has been going on for centuries and will probably never be settled. A crowd of scholars has written for and against.⁵ The most thoughtful and thorough defense of authenticity known to me is Pasquali's (1938), point by point refuted by Maddalena (1948); the refutation was, in turn,

3. Brisson (1993, sec.32) characterizes it in the following manner: “La Lettre VII est donc bien une autobiographie, mais une autobiographie qui se veut une apologie, une apologie de Platon par lui-même et, par la même occasion, une apologie de celui qui fut son disciple, Dion.”

4. Pappas and Momigliano, cited in Helfer (2023, 17), voice similar arguments.

5. Sanders (2008, 1n1) lists sixteen items against authenticity and fifty-one in favor; he himself is firmly against it. Since this accounting, notable arguments against authenticity include Burnyeat and Frede's 2015 book, discussed below; and Irwin (2009), who suggests Speusippus may have written the *Letter*. Arguments for authenticity include Liatsi (2008), who develops an extensive interpretation of the “philosophical digression,” which she calls the “erkenntnistheoretischer Teil,” on the assumption of authenticity; Notomi (2019), on the basis of a comparison with the history of fourth-century letter-writing; Politis (2020), who develops a reading of the “philosophical digression” compatible with authenticity; Helfer (2023), who goes so far as to revive the “literary unity thesis” of Dornseiff (1934), maintaining the authenticity of all thirteen letters; and Waterfield's biography of Plato takes the *Letter* to be authentic and reliable as a historical source, though he strangely claims that “scholarly consensus is that none of the Letters are genuine” and only “a significant minority of scholars [. . .] believe that some of the letters are genuine” (2023, xxxi).

carefully refuted by Isnardi Parente (1970)—with extensive reference to Pasquali. A lot turns on what one considers to be relevant evidence.

Ludwig Edelstein wrote a substantial and carefully written monograph (1966) to deny the *Letter's* authenticity. He has two main arguments: first, that the political program for Syracuse set forth in the *Letter* is inconsistent with the *Republic*; second, that the program for Sicily is that of Timoleon and, therefore, must have been composed after Timoleon's expedition. To these, I would respond that, first, the *Republic* does not in any ordinary sense set forth a political program; what is called within the dialogue "the *politeia*," the ideal state, is a thought experiment intended for the education of Glaucon—and to a lesser extent for Adeimantus. As such, it is throughout implicitly about the constitution of the soul, as is explicitly the case in the concluding tenth book. As to the second, it seems to me that the needs of Greek Sicily were sufficiently obvious long before Timoleon; the question was how to meet them. Plato seems to have imagined that philosophy would be the solution. He failed, as did Dion when he turned to the use of force. Eventually Timoleon arrived with sufficient forces and detachment from local political interests to enforce a settlement, which gave Syracuse sixty years of constitutional government until the next tyrant.

The most recurrent disqualification of the *Letter* on the basis of a comparison with Plato's works has to do with the so-called "philosophical digression" (342a–343b). Various writers find various ways to tell us that this passage is un-Platonic because it is not consistent with Plato's Theory of Ideas (never called a "theory" in the *Dialogues*, but a "way of speaking"). Here again it seems to be assumed that a careful reading of the *Dialogues* will give us a clear understanding of Plato's own metaphysics, so we can then argue that the digression differs from that. However, such passages as the analogy of the divided line in *Republic* VI and the myth of the soul in the *Phaedrus* are not presented as Platonic theories but as Socratic images. I know of no cogent explanation as to why, if these are Plato's views, he presented them in this indirect way.

Furthermore, the digression is not inserted in the *Letter* as a metaphysical explanation but to clarify the writer's assertion that his philosophy "cannot be put into words like other objects of study" (341c) because of the "weakness of language" (342e). It is to be expected that anyone trying to explain the inexplicable should express himself somewhat awkwardly; the passage does help us understand why Plato did not write treatises (as

other Socratics, in fact, did). There is a lot of discomfort in the *Letter*—throughout; Plato evidently was only comfortable in print when speaking with other voices.

To make a long story short, I would assert rejecting the *Letter* on the grounds that it is un-Platonic tends to ignore the point that if it is by Plato, writing it was in itself an un-Platonic thing to do. Plato, however, was not required to be Platonic all the time. Furthermore, it is, in my view, dangerous to assume that we already understand what Plato meant and what he was about and that because this *Letter* presents something different from that understanding, it is, therefore, not by him.⁶ The assumption may lose us something important, namely, a chance to see him differently.

The important question is not really about authorship, because someone other than Plato might be conveying a valid account of Plato's enterprise in this form. Those who reject the *Letter* as not by Plato generally take this to imply that it is not worth reading because it is not infused with something they recognize as Platonic philosophy. The *Letter*, I think, is most interesting when it puts "Platonic philosophy" into question.

This issue is sharply raised by the most recent attack on the *Letter's* authenticity: *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter* by Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (2015). These texts (Frede's was posthumously reconstructed from his seminar notes; Burnyeat's was freshly composed) share a common position: they know what a philosopher is; the *Letter* was clearly not composed by one; therefore the *Letter* is not by Plato. This is not a syllogism, nor do they think of an alternative solution: that Plato was not a philosopher as they understand the term.

Burnyeat's understanding of "philosophy" is foregrounded, for example, in his statement that the author of the philosophical digression "is philosophically incompetent" and, therefore (it is taken for granted that this follows), not Plato. He supports this statement with a careful analysis of the "philosophical digression," fully displaying Burnyeat's own competence.

6. Reale's criticism of doubters of the *Seventh Letter's* inauthenticity proceeds along similar lines, though in defense of a Tübinger School interpretation: "Die These von der Inauthentizität des 7. Briefes basiert auf einem regelrechten Zirkelschluß: Man lehnt die Authentizität dieser Schrift deswegen ab, weil man nicht akzeptiert, was sie über das Schriftliche sagt, da dies nicht in das hermeneutische Paradigma paßt, dem man Folge leistet" (Reale 1993, 105).

He goes on to a fine account of the *Letter's* literary structure and qualities—again with the implication that Plato could not have written thus. The subjectivity, the innerness of the narrative he repeatedly calls “psychodrama”—with this pejorative term suggesting that such conflicting emotions could not be felt, or at least would not be published, by a philosopher. I would respond that we do not have good evidence for Plato's competence as a philosopher in Burnyeat's sense (although some of his later work tends in that direction). However, we have plenty of evidence for Plato's gifts as an imaginative writer. That, as I said, is for me the main reason to believe that the *Letter* is by Plato.

Frede's understanding of “philosophy” is best displayed in his discussion of Dion's qualifications as a philosopher/ruler. He concludes: “Nothing in the evidence . . . even suggests . . . that Dion subjected himself to a serious course of study. . . . No source ever attributes any philosophical view or position to Dion” (Burnyeat and Frede 2015, 63). But I would suggest that for Plato philosophy is not a matter of views or positions—or competence; it is rather a matter of commitment, what Hellenistic Greek called a *haire-sis*, the choice to join a school or brand of philosophy. Of course, in the Platonic world, this commitment is to an *askēsis*, a way of life that involves certain kinds of self-denial and also certain *mathēmata*, studies that train the mind as it engages in philosophical discourse. The readiness to accept that *askēsis* is precisely the “test” described in the *Letter* (340b–341a). Evidently Dion passed that test when he and Plato first met; however, the evidence we have—from the *Letter* and other sources—must make us doubt the degree to which he was faithful to that commitment. There is a question as to why Plato was so tolerant of Dion's shortcomings, but that question does not touch on the authenticity of the *Letter*.

There is one place in the ancient literature where Dion speaks of the Academy. When Dion's friends urged him not to spare his enemies, Plutarch (*Dion* 47) tells us that he responded:

Other generals have mainly trained themselves in arms and war, but I in my long time in the Academy kept up the practice of overcoming anger and envy and every kind of contention. The proof of this is not in moderation to one's friends and allies, but rather when one is quick to pardon unfair treatment, and be gentle to wrongdoers. I would wish to be seen overcoming Heracleides [leader of the opposition to Dion at Syracuse] not so much by power and policy, but by decency and fairness.

True superiority is there. Military success, even if no man can dispute it with you, always owes something to the fortunes of war. If Heracleides was unfaithful and wicked out of envy, not for that should Dion corrupt his own virtue out of anger. To punish in revenge is held in law to be more just than striking the first blow, but both proceed from the same weakness in our nature. Human vice, however harsh it may be, is not so altogether savage and sour that it cannot be converted to grace by repeated good treatment.

That Plutarch quotes this does not, of course, mean that Dion was sincere or even authentically said it—although Timonides might well have heard and recorded something like this. We can say, however, that someone thought these remarks a plausible result of time spent in Plato’s Academy. Frede (quoted above) clearly did not think any of this constituted a “philosophical view or position.”

Frede makes other points against the *Letter*. He reminds us that writing letters to be attributed to famous persons was a favorite literary exercise in antiquity. He does admit that we recognize a few of these ancient letters as authentic. Frede says, however, that Plato’s letters “antedate any clearly authentic letters of philosophers by sixty or seventy years” (Burnyeat and Frede 2015, 11). He is able to say this because he classifies Isocrates’s letters—“at least some of which are genuine”—as “rhetoricians’ or orators’ letters” (4). Isocrates, however, frequently calls his own activity “philosophy.” In one place, he says that the point of philosophy is “to know how to foresee the advantageous” (*Speeches* 1.40). This is hardly consistent with Socrates in the *Gorgias*—it sounds more like Callicles—but in the fourth century BCE, philosophy was a highly contested term.

Isocrates’s antipathy to the Academy (especially in *Against the Sophists*) evidently turns on his implicit rejection of the Academy’s assertion of the difference between knowledge and opinion. Opinion is all there is, he seems to say; deal with it. This is a philosophical position. If Isocrates had written out his principles instead of taking them for granted, they might have looked much like those of, say, Richard Rorty. Rorty says somewhere, “If you ask a pragmatist, ‘What is truth?’ he changes the subject.”

We know what Isocrates thought because he tells us. If we want to know what Plato thought of philosophy, we need to look at his texts. However, Plato—as we well know—did not appear in his own texts either as a character or as the narrator. Furthermore, his chief protagonist, Socrates, is

written as a master ironist who does not necessarily exactly agree with what he himself is saying. The only place—if at all—where Plato speaks in his own voice is in the letters. In the last chapter, we shall return to considering how this atypical first-person voice could affect our understanding of Plato's work. The best reason to study this text, in my view, is that it can open before us a fresh understanding of the relation between Plato's *Dialogues* and his philosophy.

This little book consists of a text—in my translation—and an extended comment on it. The comment is not intended as a contribution to philosophy but, at best, as a contribution to the history of philosophy. The modern literature on the *Letter* has not, on the whole, made much of it as a historical source.⁷ The two best historical treatments known to me are in German: Berve (1957) and von Fritz (1968). (The latter incorporates, through reference and commentary, a great part of Berve.)

A historical treatment requires placing the text in context; here, we rely on the accounts we have of events before, during, and after Plato's visits to Syracuse, primarily in Plutarch's *Dion* but also in Diodorus Siculus and Cornelius Nepos. All three of these authors, of course, wrote centuries later, but they had access to earlier accounts now lost to us. Some of these were by actual participants and, therefore, eyewitnesses.⁸ Philistus, a leading, perhaps the leading, advisor and minister to the Syracusan tyrants, both father and son and consistently an adversary to Dion, wrote histories admired in antiquity as Thucydidean. He is credited with two books—which may in effect have been parts of one book: a history of Sicily which picked up where Antiochus left off, and another covering the career of Dionysius the Elder. This latter must have been an important source for Dion's earlier political career. Then (Diodorus Siculus tells us—15.89.2), he wrote a brief history of the first five years of the tyranny of the younger Dionysius. This included the period of Plato's first attempt to educate

7. Exceptions include: Brunt (1993); Westlake (1994); the edited volume *Plato at Syracuse* (2019), particularly pp. 77–126; Waterfield (2023); and Romm's (2025) excellent treatment of the historical material, which covers some of the same ground as my own and unfortunately appeared too late for me to make use of.

8. For an account of the ancient historians who wrote on Dion, see Berve (1956, 748–57). See also Schneider (2019, esp. 108–10), for an account of the relationship between Plutarch, Diodorus, Nepos, and their sources.

Dionysius, but there is actually no evidence that he ever mentioned Plato. He might have thought him irrelevant to a history concerned with war and politics. Plutarch, or at least one of his sources, seems to have this book since there is one mention in Plutarch's narrative of a fact that should have been known only to Philistus and the tyrant himself.

Then there was Timonides of Leucas, an Academic who accompanied Dion on his expedition to conquer Syracuse and wrote one or more letters to Plato's nephew Speusippus describing the events. His attitude to Dion, so far as we can reconstruct it, was (predictably) uniformly favorable.

We can thus identify two major sources for events before Plato's visits to Dionysius the Younger and for events following those visits: Dion's victories in Syracuse and his death. For the period of Plato's visits, we have no contemporary source except Plato—or perhaps we should include Athanis of Syracuse, who, we are told, completed the *History* of Philistus. Unfortunately, no fragment of Athanis survives. He has, however, been plausibly identified as the source of Cornelius Nepos's relatively unsympathetic account of Dion's final period in Syracuse leading up to his death.

Plutarch and Diodorus may well have had access to the eyewitness texts, but they no doubt often worked from intermediate historians, principally Timaeus and Ephorus. Plutarch evidently relied mainly on Timaeus, while Diodorus mainly relied on Ephorus. Diodorus does not seem to have had the *Letter*; he says nothing about Plato's interactions with Dionysius the Younger, but he does have a good deal to say about Dion. Plutarch wrote the *Life of Dion*, but also finds much to say about Plato and draws extensively on the *Letter*. The *Letter* fits smoothly into the accounts given by these later writers; for von Fritz this is the chief proof of the *Letter's* authenticity. Furthermore, he notes that the *Letter* provides explanations of a number of events which, while independently attested, are otherwise mysterious.

Here, I approach the text with a historian's questions: What is the story it tells? How truthful is it? How does it fit in with what else we know or think we know? What motivated its composition?

My suggestion to the reader is this: read the *Letter* first—in Greek if you can, or in translation, mine or another's. Then read my comment. Then read the *Letter* again and see if your sense of it has changed. My intention here is not to enforce conclusions but to open a discussion.

NOTE ON TEXT AND TRANSLATION

The basis for this volume's translation of Plato's *Seventh Letter* is John Burnet's 1907 text in the fifth volume of the Oxford Classical Texts edition of Plato's works. The Souilhé edition, which incorporates a limited number of variant readings from older manuscripts not included in the Burnet text, was also consulted; however, the variants were not deemed to bear upon the sense. The basis for this volume's translation of selections from Plutarch's *Life of Dion* is the Greek text provided by Porter's edition of 1918. The selections were based on direct relevance to the relationship between Plato and Dion. All translations of other ancient Greek material are by Redfield; their textual bases are indicated in the bibliography. All citations of Plato are to *Platonis Opera*. The aim of these translations is to render Plato and Plutarch into readable English while retaining the philosophical and stylistic rigor of the original.