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PLATO'S SO - CALLED "UNWRITTEN DOCTRINES"

1. *Necessity of understanding the phrase that Plato has not left a written work on philosophy.* The meaning of philosophy in Plato presents a uniqueness and peculiarity compared to other philosophers, because only in Plato does the problem of unwritten doctrines appear. This does not, to my knowledge, arise in any other author in the history of philosophical thought from antiquity to the present day. The problem lies, on the one hand, in Plato's explicit statement that he has not left a treatise on philosophy, and on the other, in the singular way this is expressed. It is therefore by no means an easy undertaking to expound the meaning of philosophy according to Plato, much less understand it, as he himself states that it may not be spoken or told, unlike other studies.¹ This statement, in conjunction with other extracts from Plato, for example in *Phaedrus* (278d-e), and the testimony of ancient commentators, has given rise to the movement of the so-called unwritten doctrines (*synousia*)², of which his student Aristotle speaks.³

If one takes these declarations and hints by Plato seriously - and there is in my view insufficient reason to the contrary - then all interpretations and attempts to grasp the meaning of philosophy according to Plato remain empty and baseless, that is without real meaning, if the notional content of his unwritten teaching is not first fully resolved. Plato's mode of expression does not impede only the revelation of his conception of philosophy but its very content, as the former forms part of the latter. It therefore becomes necessary to define and elucidate the deeper meaning of Plato's words - as far as possible - in order to build cogently on a solid basis both the meaning and the

1. PLATO, *Ep. VII*, 341c. Cf. *Ep. II*, 314b-c.

2. See, *inter alia*, K. GAISER, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre*, Stuttgart 1963.

3. ARIST., *Ph.*, II 209b 11-16.



content of philosophy. As long as aspects of this issue remain obscure and unclear, one cannot be certain that the attempted interpretations of Plato's philosophy in general truly echo and reflect his convictions.

The true and clear philosophy on which Plato states he has not written, is dialectics.⁴ However its meaning forms and kinds, that is in how many ways it is composed and operates, remain an obscure and intractable problem in Platonic studies, despite the many detailed works extant on this subject.⁵ One would therefore be justified in supposing that whatever has been or remains to be said on the meaning or the content of Plato's philosophy goes no deeper than the surface, unless a penetrating overview of the issue under consideration is not first attempted, in order to apprehend or at least approach the deeper meaning of these enigmatic words of Plato's. This is an extremely difficult undertaking, as it presupposes the prior decoding and uncovering of the form and nature of his true and genuine philosophy. Until this has been achieved, we should not be indifferent to these words of Plato's.

The already extant and, on the whole, profound approaches to and analyses of the so-called unwritten teaching, which is dialectics - that is, the quintessence of Plato's philosophy - are not in my view able sufficiently to substantiate the view that Plato taught his true philosophy to a small circle of his pupils, and that this was lost as he did not write it down himself. This is because it is hard to support the view that a philosopher of Plato's stature and scientific range wrote down superficial and secondary material, which is incorporated in his extant works to remain a "possession for ever" (*κτῆμα ἑσαεῖ*) as Thucydides and Homer put it, while neglecting to record for posterity that which is valuable and substantial, the peak of his philosophy. A strong and well-documented case has in fact been made against the hypothesis on Plato's unwritten teaching as understood and expounded by his interpreters.⁶ However, it cannot be denied that Plato-like many other philosophers - said many things in his verbal teaching which for various reasons, often involuntary, were not written down. This is however different from saying that Plato supposedly recorded the insignificant and left the significant unrecorded.

4. PLATO, *Sph.*, 253e.

5. G. KOUMAKIS, "Plato on Dialectic and Democracy", in: *Dodoni*, vol. XXIX, Part 3, Ioannina 2000, pp. 23-60.

6. See for example H.G. GADAMER, "Platons ungeschriebene Dialektik" (1968), in his *Griechische Philosophie*, II, J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen 1985, pp.129-153.



2. *There is no real difference between oral and written language.*

Let us now examine more closely Plato's announcement, according to which there is not, nor will there ever be, a treatise of his on philosophy. At this point it must be noted that his pupil Aristotle left a partially-preserved work "*On philosophy*". Plato, however, gave a talk "*On the Good*", embodying basic principles of his philosophy. Ancient commentators bear witness that basic points of this talk were recorded by Aristotle, who, as we have seen, refers to the so-called unwritten teaching. In his reference, Aristotle clarifies that Plato says the same things on certain subjects that he has mentioned in his dialogues (for example *Timaeus*), but in a different way. Here Aristotle indirectly but clearly states that the notional content of unwritten and written philosophy is the same, differing only in means of expression. This means, furthermore, that there is no real difference between written and oral language.

More specifically, Aristotle says that in *Timaeus* Plato names matter *μεταληπτικόν*, meaning that which communes with and therefore participates in the idea. That is the place, while in the unwritten teaching, matter is defined in another way. Aristotle's commentators clarify more fully and define more precisely this different way of expressing philosophy in this context. Specifically, they say that *μεταληπτικόν* in the unwritten synousiae is called great (*μέγα*) and small (*μικρόν*)⁷ Plato nevertheless constantly uses the expression *μέγα* and *μικρόν* in his dialogues to signify matter, which is something tangible and subject to birth and corruption. It is an expression of *μᾶλλον* and *ἥττον*, more and less, which refer to the nature of infinity.⁸ From this fact the conclusion may be drawn that, in the final analysis, the difference between written and oral teaching is minuscule to negligible. Consequently the deeper meaning of Plato's words must be sought elsewhere. The fact that there is no unwritten teaching which differs significantly from the written is also apparent from Aristotle's mode of expression.

Specifically, the Stagirite, who was present at and therefore an ear-witness to Plato's talk, does not refer to unwritten doctrines, but to the "so-called unwritten doctrines" (*ἐν τοῖς λεγόμενοις ἀγράφοις δόγ-*

7. ARIST., "On the Good", in *Aristotelis fragmenta selecta*, rec. W.D. Ross. Oxford 1955, pp. 111-112.

8. PLATO, *Phlb.*, 21e, 24a-b, 25c-d, 32e, 33b. *R.*, C 402c. *Lg.*, X 900c-d. *Ap.*, 19c-d, 21b, 24a, 26a-b. *Chrm.*, 176b.



μασιν). The word "so-called" indicates that the speaker himself did not believe that there truly exists a self-contained teaching of Plato which diverges significantly from what he wrote⁹. The word "λεγόμενος" is used in Ancient Greek when the speaker does not give credence to what is said, as he himself holds a different or even opposing view on the same subject. Thus, for instance, Plato says that "those now called kings and rulers (οἱ βασιλεῖς τε νῦν λεγόμενοι καὶ δυνάσται) must take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately"¹⁰. In Plato's view, those who were called kings in his time were not literally kings. This is because, according to him, a king is not necessarily he who sits on a throne or wears a crown, but the scientific man,¹¹ he who has the virtue of *know thyself* (γνώθι σαυτόν), that is, moderation and self-restraint, as he can rule himself.¹²

Thus Aristotle's use of the word *λεγόμενα* in the phrase "in the so-called unwritten doctrines" of Plato, shows that he distances himself from what contemporary Athenian society called the unwritten doctrines. He was deeply convinced that what people considered unwritten was in fact written, but in a different way in certain places. Consequently the above phrase was in his view null and void, bearing no relation to reality. This conviction, however, must not be misinterpreted, leading one to conclude that Plato's oral teaching was identical to his written teaching. The Athenian philosopher, like every thinker and teacher not only says much more during his lessons than he writes down, but may also phrase many points in a different way. Thus Aristotle's words mean simply that Plato recorded at least the basic aspects of his oral teaching in his extant works, even if in a different way at certain points but without making substantial changes to the meaning. If this holds true, then there arise two basic questions, indissolubly interconnected.

The *first* of these is for what reason the issue of unwritten teaching has arisen specifically in Plato and - to my knowledge - no other philosopher. From Aristotle and other ancient commentators it appears that when reference is made to unwritten teaching or *synousia*, the talk "*On the Good*" is meant. This is clear from many parts of their

9. ARIST., "On philosophy", in *Aristotelis...*, *op. cit.*, Fr. 7, p. 75.

10. PLATO, *R.*, V 473c-d. Cf. *Lg.*, II 661c, *Ep. VII*, 343e.

11. PLATO, *Plt.*, 301b-c.

12. PLATO, *Grg.*, 491c-d. *Chrm.*, 164e.



remarks. Thus nearly all commentators mention that Plato called matter *μεταληπτικόν* in *Timaeus* and *μέγα* and *μικρόν* in his unwritten teaching, as we have seen. Simplicius, however, mentions the same fact with the difference that he refers to the talk "*On the Good*" instead of unwritten synousia.¹³ Consequently, when Aristotle refers to Plato's so-called unwritten views on philosophy, he means the talk "*On the Good*".¹⁴ The question, then, is if basic elements of Plato's philosophy are recorded in his extant works - even if they differ on certain points - or if what he said was different from what he wrote. There is no easy or brief answer to this question; it must constitute a lifetime's work.

The *second* question urgently requiring an answer is what led Plato to make his unexpected and enigmatic statement that he had left no treatise on philosophy, when it is undeniable that humanity is in possession of the valuable treasure of the whole of Plato's work. This statement, in conjunction with the testimony of ancient commentators, lead to the incubation, that is, the hatching and maturing, of the theory concerning Plato's unwritten teaching. Certain researchers suppose, as we have seen, that by this phrase in the *Seventh Letter* Plato means his oral teaching, which is largely contained in the talk "*On the Good*". If this were so, however, then Plato would not have justified this by the fact that philosophy may not be spoken (*οὐ ρητόν ἐστίν*), but by saying that it may not be written (*οὐ γραπτόν ἐστίν*). If philosophy may be told like other studies, then in the same way neither could there be oral teaching of philosophy, a statement leading to a dead end and logical contradictions. This would mean, in other words, that Plato could not express his philosophy verbally - nor, by extension, in writing. This leads us to the unavoidable conclusion that the meaning of Plato's words, if they are to be taken seriously, must be sought elsewhere, since the implicit difference is not that of oral from written language.

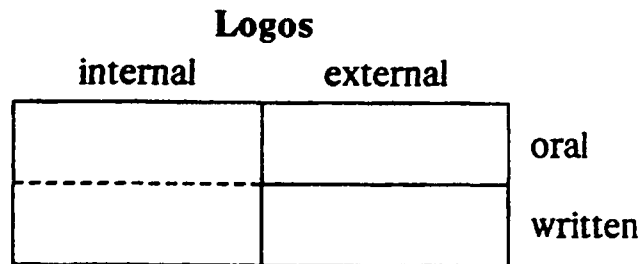
3. *The difference lies between internal logos, or that residing in the mind, and external logos.* From more careful observation and analysis of the text it emerges that the difference stressed here is that between what is meant or understood each time and what is externalised by the one expressing the concept, either verbally in the case

13. ARIST., "*On the Good*", *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112.

14. ARIST., "*On philosophy*", *op. cit.*, p. 79.



of oral language or through writing in the case of written language. In each case, therefore, language (*logos*) is the underlying factor. This is because what one understands is a result of *logos*, that is, logic. When one communicates something to us, he externalises it - orally or in writing - through *logos*, which thus has a double meaning: logic and language. *Logos* in the sense of intellect is also called *ἐνδιάθετος* (residing in the mind) or internal. *Logos* in the second sense of language is subdivided into written and oral in the usual way of Plato's divisions, which constitute the diaeretical form of dialectic; the other form is hypothesis. The diaeresis can be represented as follows:



Oral language can be seen as lending itself to the externalisation of concepts more than written language, as the latter is fixed and unalterable.¹⁵ When it is accused, it cannot defend itself. It is called an eidolon of living and animate language, as long as this proceeds from a person who understands (*τοῦ εἰδότος καὶ ἐπιστήμονος*).¹⁶ If living and animate language is oral language, itself the eidolon of internal *logos*, residing in the mind, then written language is the eidolon of oral, that is the eidolon of the eidolon, or the shadow of the image.¹⁷ The eidolon is inanimate¹⁸ and expresses falsehood, opinion¹⁹ and imposture.²⁰ On the contrary, the original expresses truth and knowledge.²¹ From another point of view, however, written language has the advantage of remaining and withstanding the ravages of time, so that it can in theory become the common property of all mankind.

15. PLATO, *Ep.* VII, 343a.

16. PLATO, *Phdr.*, 275d - 276a.

17. PLATO, *R.*, VII 532c.

18. PLATO, *Lg.*, VIII 830b.

19. PLATO, *Tht.*, 150c. *R.*, VII 534c.

20. PLATO, *R.*, X 599d, 601b.

21. PLATO, *Smp.*, 212a. *Tht.*, 150c.



Thus the distinction made in the *Seventh Letter* (341c) is not so much between oral and written language as between the things meant and those spoken or written, in other words between what one conceives and what one makes known through oral or written language. Behind externalised language lie concepts, far superior in value and importance.²² The fact that the main juxtaposition is between internal and external logos rather than oral and written language, is shown - apart from in the argument set out above (which Plato himself proposes to justify his statement that there is no treatise of his on philosophy, since it cannot be taught like other studies) - in Plato's conviction that words are innately unable to affect deeper meanings (343a: τὸ τῶν λόγων ἀσθενές - "the weakness innate in language"). Both of the above arguments refer to external rather internal logos, which, residing in the mind, constitutes concepts. The whole difficulty therefore lies in the way the meaning is expressed, a central problem in Wittgenstein.

It must however be made clear here that when Plato says that philosophy may not be spoken like other studies, he does not mean that it is not expressible in any way, and therefore completely inexpressible verbally, but that it is not expressible in the same way that other studies are. This means that philosophy is expressible but has a unique mode of expression in both speech and writing. The word *ρητὸν* refers to oral language. Thus, since philosophy may not be spoken, then neither can it be written, as written language imitates and expresses oral language, which precedes it. So if philosophy may not be spoken in the usual way, then it is all the more impossible that it should be written. That Plato means not only written but also oral language is demonstrated by the following excerpt from the *Seventh Letter* (341d, *Phdr.*, 271b-c, 277d), in which he says that he is well aware that, if he wrote or spoke on philosophy himself, that would be in the best possible way (*γραφέντα ἢ λεχθέντα ὑπ' ἐμοῦ*).

It must however be made clear that the word *οὐ ρητὸν* means both that which it is impossible and that which it is forbidden to say, equivalent to *οὐ ρητέον*, as mentioned in other passages.²³ Careful examination however shows that what Plato particularly wants to stress is more that it is forbidden than that it is impossible. This is clearly stated

22. PLATO, *Phdr.*, 278d-c. *Ep. VII*, 344c6.

23. See e.g. PLATO, *Ap.*, 22b6. *Cra.*, 410c5. *Tht.*, 160b9, 172c4. *Phdr.*, 236c1. *R.*, VIII 550d4. *Ti.*, 47a1.



when he says that if he thought that philosophy must be written (*γραπτά*) and spoken satisfactorily for the many, then that would be to the benefit of mankind. Philosophy is only permitted to be spoken or written for few people in a particular way, so that it can be discovered by them with little instruction (341d-e). Specifically, Plato does not use the word *γραπτά*, as he does elsewhere,²⁴ in which case it would have the double meaning of possible and permissible, but the word *γραπτέα*, which has a single interpretation, that which must or may be written. The meaning here is that, in Plato's view, philosophy may not, i.e. is not permitted to be either written or spoken to the many but only to the few, who are capable with little indication of discovering the deeper meaning of his words on philosophy. The question which now arises is why philosophy must be written in such a way as to address the few, who must discover it themselves with the help of only little instruction, rather than the many. The answer may be that the correct expression of philosophy lies in discovering the truth with little instruction and not by its being passed on, that is being transmitted clearly in a way easy to understand. The many, as opposed to the few, cannot find the truth.

The fact that here the word *ρητόν* is used to indicate that philosophy is not permitted rather than is not possible to be told in the same way that other studies are, also emerges from another two points of the *Seventh Letter*. 1. In order to attain knowledge and grasp the truth, one must first know the name (*ὄνομα*), the definition (*λόγον*) and the image (*εἶδωλον*). These, together with knowledge, are a prerequisite for one to acquire perfect knowledge of the idea sought (342b-e). While this is not of course impossible, it is exceedingly difficult, since *logos* is innately unsuitable to express meanings. Given this fact, it is not permitted for the writer to believe that meanings are clearly expressed in his work. 2. When Plato speaks of Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, he says that the latter should not have written his philosophy in an unseemly and degrading way (344d: *καὶ οὐκ ἂν αὐτὰ ἐτόλμησεν εἰς ἀναρμοστίαν καὶ ἀπρόπειαν ἐκβάλλειν*). Plato thus considers it unsuitable and improper for one to write or speak his philosophy in the same way as other studies.

What is meant by Plato's words that philosophy must not or is not permitted to be spoken or written in the same way that other stu-

24. PLATO, *Lg.*, VI 773c.



dies are? This implies that this is not the correct way to express philosophy. In other words, Plato considers that it is not right for philosophy to be spoken or written like other studies. If, in spite of this, one believes that it is correct to speak or write philosophy like other studies and realises this opinion, that is by writing his philosophy and retaining the conviction that what he writes is important, then nothing more remains to be said of him than that he has lost his mind (344c-d). This means, furthermore, that if one believes what one has written to be true philosophy, then he is wrong. Plato believes that it is great foolishness for one to think that he writes is clear (*σαφές*) and certain (*βέβαιον*) (*Phdr.*, 275c), attributes of dialectics. Here therefore we have an exclusive disjunction: 1) Philosophy is or should be expressed in a particular way, which must be different to that used for other studies, or 2) if that is not the case, written philosophy is not true. From this point of view, the use of *ὁ ῥητὸν* is justified in the sense that philosophy cannot be spoken or written in the same way that other studies are. Thus the use of *ὁ ῥητὸν* with its double meaning of 1) not possible and 2) not permitted, not correct, is justified. But it is closer to the truth to hypothesise that Plato used the word in the second sense, since another might say that it is possible. In this case, however, Plato would answer that while it might be possible, it is not correct and thus not permissible.

4. *The way of expressing philosophy is enigmatic.* The question further arises, what might be the particular way of speaking or writing philosophy. If the way in which Plato made his talk "*On the Good*", the main embodiment of his unwritten teaching, is taken as a basis and indicator, then that way is the enigmatic method, at least as ancient commentators understood it.²⁵ Plato himself often mentions the necessity for meanings to be expressed "in riddles", *δι' αἰνυγμῶν*.²⁶ The enigmatic way of expressing concepts on man and the world is that which constitutes the difference between philosophy and all other studies. This differentiation lies in the acceptance of the fact that it is one thing to compose a written work clearly, lucidly and unambiguously, as with usual studies, and another to write obscurely, with puzzles and ambiguity, like telling a riddle.

25. ARIST., "On the Good", *op. cit.*, pp. 117-118.

26. PLATO, *Ep. II*, 312d. *R.*, V 479c. *Ep. VII*, 332d. *Smp.*, 192d. *Ap.*, 21b, 37d. *Ly.*, 214d.



Since at first glance there is no similarity between what is spoken or written on the one hand and concepts on the other, and given that none of his works are entitled *philosophy* or *philosopher*, Plato can justly claim that he has composed no treatise or written work on philosophy bearing a similarity to those on other studies. This is because the deeper meaning of his words is not immediately apparent, being ambiguous. A written riddle or riddle book cannot be called a written work, and especially not a philosophical work, in the established sense of the word. From this point of view, Plato's statement that he has not left a written work of philosophy is correct, as long it is proven satisfactorily that the way of expressing (Platonic) philosophy is enigmatic. This is due to the fact that immediate and unambiguous transmission of concepts does not take place through writing or speech. To be precise, philosophy does not even concern the transmission of ready knowledge, but is a challenge to discover the truth. The prerequisite for the inspiration of the riddle is the multiplicity of meanings of words and phrases. Choosing the only true one among many possible interpretations constitutes discovery of the truth through the dialectic method.

When we do not find the truth but choose a wrong answer, we become unwitting victims of deceit. This is why Plato expresses the general principle that man is unwittingly deprived of good things (knowledge and truth) due to three causes: theft (*κλοπή*), charm (*γοητεία*) and force (*βία*). One is charmed when one changes one's mind because he has been either under a spell of pleasure or consumed by fear. Everything that deceives appears to cast a spell.²⁷ The prerequisite for one to fall into deceit is falsehood, which is born when one believes in what does not exist, that is, things contrary to the underlying reality.²⁸ Falsehood and deceit belong to the same *eidos*.²⁹ A deceitful argument seduces us, making us arrive at mistaken convictions and thus leading us astray.³⁰ But not all deceit is a bad thing; there is also good deceit, which makes us better.³¹

Deceit takes place in those cases where things are debatable rather than firm, i.e. when we can be misled. Plato mentions the example

27. PLATO, *R.*, III 413a-c.

28. PLATO, *Sph.*, 260c, 240d.

29. PLATO, *Lg.*, XI 916d7.

30. *Ibid.*, X 892d.

31. PLATO, *Smp.*, 185a-b.



of iron and silver. When we speak these words, we all know what we are saying. When, on the contrary, we talk about justice and goodness, we do not all think the same things about them; our views are at variance since we question their meaning. In this case we are misled. Plato therefore concludes that the wordsmith must first make a division by kinds or class (*κατ' εἶδος*), separating those things concerning which man is misled from those concerning which he is not.³² But this division by kinds is none other than dialectics. Therefore the wordsmith is the dialectician, i.e. the philosopher. In order for one to divide by kinds, however, one must have precise knowledge of the similarity and dissimilarity, great or small, of things. In this case alone can one deceive another without risking being deceived himself. The man who knows the similarities and dissimilarities of things is the knowledgeable man, i.e. the philosopher, and not the disputatious sophist, who may be able to deceive others but cannot protect himself against deceit.³³ Division by kinds presupposes inquiry by kinds.³⁴ Error, the prerequisite of deceit, is connected to confusion,³⁵ difference³⁶ and perplexity.³⁷ It is a result of the ignorance Socrates held throughout his life³⁸ and thus a vital consequence of mind, as one is never free from deceit no matter how wise one is.³⁹ There is also the wandering essence⁴⁰ and the wandering cause.⁴¹ Error is consequently also a precondition of dialectics, since the dialectician must discover the truth from among mutually exclusive possibilities. This is why Plato challenges us to recognise error in the second part of *Parmenides*, which is true philosophy, i.e. dialectics.

Sin or error is due to three causes which come under the three parts of the soul, the seat of reason (*λογιστικόν*), the seat of wrath (*θυμοειδές*) and the seat of desire (*ἐπιθυμητικόν*). Specifically, fear is based in wrath, pleasure in desire, and truth and the inclination to

32. PLATO, *Phdr.*, 263a-b.

33. *Ibid.*, 262a-c.

34. PLATO, *Lg.*, I 630e.

35. PLATO, *Phd.*, 79c. *R.*, IV 444b.

36. PLATO, *Lg.*, IX 861b.

37. PLATO, *Hp.*, *Ma.*, 304c.

38. PLATO, *Hp. Mi.*, 372d-e. *R.*, IX 586a.

39. PLATO, *Hp. Mi.*, 376c.

40. PLATO, *R.*, VI 485b.

41. PLATO, *Ti.*, 48a.



perfection in reason.⁴² According to Aristotle, sinning (*ἀμάρτημα*) is the injury that takes place within reason and without malice. The beginning of sin lies in the sinner.⁴³ Sins due to ignorance come under two headings, simple ignorance and double ignorance, when we think we know something that in fact we do not. He who has this kind of ignorance cannot be taught. In order for one to learn, one must remove through elenchus the false knowledge that prevents one from learning the truth.⁴⁴ When one is in error, one mistakes one thing for another, given that they bear great similarity to one another. Plato gives the example of the ringdove (*φάρτα*) and the pigeon; one is mistaken if one takes a ringdove for a pigeon and vice versa. In the case of such an error, one has false opinion and not true knowledge.⁴⁵

Plato describes in *Cratylus* (436a-d) how one may be deceived. He says that, when one seeks the essence of things, one is forced to follow (i.e. base his search on) the names by which the things are expressed. In this case, he maintains, there is no little danger of being deceived. This is due to the fact that he who first gave names was guided by his conception of the corresponding things. If he was incorrect, then all the consequences will also be mistaken. Whoever gives names must thus know the things; otherwise it is not worth saying names. The prerequisite for the correct allocation of names, therefore, is that he who allocates them must not err concerning the truth. As a result, the name will accord with the corresponding thing. If, on the contrary, he who first gave names was in error and forced them to agree, then it is both likely and reasonable that, when the first small hidden lie emerges, the many subsequent lies will agree with each other and therefore all be wrong. Plato concludes that one must give great care to the beginning of each thing when judging how far something is true or not. If the beginning is examined satisfactorily, then the consequences will seem to be in accordance. This idea is also set out in the *Republic* (VII 533c). When one begins his syllogism from something he does not know, the result and the steps leading to it cannot be scientifically valid. This dissimilarity between the meaning of names also leads to the difference in meaning of phrases. Thus the questioner may

42. PLATO, *Lg.*, IX 864a-c, 863b-c. *R.*, III 413c.

43. ARIST., *EN.*, V 8, 1135b16-19.

44. PLATO, *Sph.*, 229c - 230d. *Lg.*, IX 863b-c.

45. PLATO, *Tht.*, 199b-e.



have one thing in mind and the person questioned understand another, as stated in *Euthydemus* (295c).

To return to our original question, it must be stressed that it cannot justifiably be held that Plato's statement that he has not left a treatise on philosophy was made as a joke (*παιδιᾶς*) or ironically. This declaration in the *Seventh Letter* is not the only one of its kind, as similar hints are found in other dialogues and mainly in *Phaedrus* (278d), where Plato refers to things that are more valuable (*τιμιώτερα*) than his writings. Another argument of the same type is the fact that Plato never wrote a work entitled *philosopher*, although he repeatedly promised to do so. This argument will be analysed more fully in a different study. If of course one accepts the proposed interpretation, that the way of expressing Platonic philosophy is enigmatic, then it remains to prove the ambiguity of the philosopher's words, an elemental part of dialectics. I hope I have made a small step in this direction in certain other of my studies.⁴⁶

If, then, Plato believes in the validity of the conclusion that philosophy may be neither spoken nor written, and holds firmly to his conviction, then for the sake of consistency he must not consider his writing philosophical. Further, it is not permissible for him to create a work entitled *philosopher* or on *philosophy*. Thus Plato, in accordance with his theory, may not consider his writings philosophical or bring to light an intellectual work, in oral or written form, entitled *philosopher* or on *philosophy*. Indeed, he himself does not consider his works - written or oral - to be philosophical, nor has he produced a work, oral or written, bearing the above titles.

Thus it remains a great challenge for mankind to move towards the solution of the difficult riddle left by the Athenian philosopher. Unfortunately, I dare to say with full awareness of the scientific weight of this attempt, we are still only just beginning to comprehend his philosophy. From this point of view, it is a tragic irony that we are deluding ourselves with the idea that our efforts at correct interpretation and detailed understanding of his philosophy have been crowned with success and are therefore near their end. What has been achieved on a global scale to the present day - despite the admittedly huge size of the offering - is only the beginning of a quasi-Olympic struggle.

46. G. KOUMAKIS, 1) *Platons Parmenides*, Bouvier Verlag, Bonn, 1971, 2) "Plato on Dialectic", *op. cit.*, 3) "The Sophists' Paradox on the Teaching of Political Virtue", in: *Philosophical Inquiry*, vol. 24, Thessaloniki 2002, 103-120.



5. *Dialogue and conversation as philosophy.* Plato's uniqueness lies not only in the enigmatic, but in the dialogical method of expressing philosophy. That is why he calls genuine and pure philosophy dialectics, derived from the verb *διαλέγεσθαι*, to converse. Consequently, according to Plato, the simple quest for truth is insufficient condition for logos to be termed philosophical, as for example in Aristotle. The pre-condition for *φιλοσοφείν* is not simply inquiry - and specifically inquiry by kinds - but *συζήτηση*, discussion or joint inquiry, the common quest for truth together with the other person. Thus the authoritative and ostentatious method of searching for and supposed possession of truth by important persons is eliminated. The accusation occasionally levelled at Plato, that his dialogues are not true and authentic but fictitious and contrived, are not based on fact; in spite of their apparently limiting structure, where everything is predetermined, the dialogues contain genuine speculation. Thus Plato's interlocutor, who is of course none other than himself in a different role, is given complete freedom.

In effect, therefore, Plato is conversing with himself. Proof of the genuineness of the dialogue is provided by the fact that he himself generally doubts his own findings. In his examinations he - like his teacher Socrates - usually concludes in perplexity, while he often turns against his own theory, as for example in *Parmenides*. The riddle, i.e. the obscurity and vagueness in which Plato's thoughts are clothed, is not something invented and projected by the questioner onto the respondent; it is built up equally and freely by the conversants, who are different aspects of the same person, the author. This means that both participants in the conversation are responsible. In this way, the idea of collaboration is born and the sentiment of collective responsibility as a productive social virtue is developed.

Let us take a closer look at the meaning of dialogue, which forms the foundation of dialectics, i.e. -the true philosophy that constitutes Plato's unwritten doctrine. For Aristotle, by enquiring one philosophises; inquiry is philosophy or rather the cause of philosophy. He thus proves the necessity for philosophy, for in order for someone to refute it he must use proof, i.e. inquiry, as philosophy, the mother of proof.⁴⁷ According to Plato, too, inquiry is philosophy and music;⁴⁸ philosophy is even called the greatest kind of music.⁴⁹

47. ARIST., "Protrepitkos", in *Aristotelis fragmenta selecta*. Rec.W.D. Ross, Oxford 1955, pp. 27-28. *Pol.*, VIII 11, 1331a16.

48. PLATO, *Cra.*, 406a.

49. PLATO, *Phd.*, 61a. *Ti.*, 88c.



A basic principle of inquiry, that is, philosophy, is not to argue (*φιλονικεῖν*).⁵⁰ Philosophy is against both eristics and disputation.⁵¹ In order for one to seek something, of course, he must need it,⁵² in other words not know what is sought but be in a state of perplexity.⁵³ In order to find something however, one must seek it.⁵⁴ It is possible for one to find something other than that which he seeks. For example when Plato was looking for the sophist, he found the philosopher.⁵⁵ There are two general ways for one to attain knowledge: 1) learning and 2) discovery.⁵⁶ The latter is safer and more certain, because it opens the way to philosophy. Since discovery entails inquiry, the latter replaces the former; thus the phrases is often repeated: to inquire or to learn.⁵⁷

Obviously it must first be noted that this division is neither rigorous nor absolute, as there can be a combination of the two. In this case the usual phrase is that I seek to learn from someone.⁵⁸ This is because in order for one to learn, he must hunger for it. This is innate in humans, since, as Aristotle observes at the beginning of this *Metaphysics*, all men by nature hunger for knowledge. The road from inquiry to discovery is long, hard and rough, with the result, as Plato himself remarks, that many wise men from ancient times reached great old age before finding what they sought.⁵⁹

Plato, of course, notes emphatically that, for a successful outcome of inquiry and examination, everything depends on the way these are undertaken. So the basic question which arises each time is how one intends to conduct his examination and inquiry.⁶⁰ This is because in order for it to be possible to find what is sought, the inquiry must be conducted in a dialectic way, based on *hypothesis* or comparison (*σύγκριση*) and distinction (*διάκριση*). Otherwise one meets insupera-

50. PLATO, *Grg.*, 457d.

51. PLATO, *Ly.*, 211b. *Tht.*, 164c-d. *Sph.*, 216b-c. *Phd.*, 101e.

52. PLATO, *Ap.*, 22a. *Lg.*, XI 630e.

53. PLATO, *Chrm.*, 165b. *Men.*, 80d.

54. PLATO, *Phlb.*, 34d. *Cra.*, 436a.

55. PLATO, *Sph.*, 253c. Cf. *Men.*, 74a-b.

56. PLATO, *Phd.*, 85c. *La.*, 186c. *Sph.*, 221c. *Alc.*, I 106d.

57. PLATO, *Alc.*, I 106d. *Cra.*, 439b. *Ti.*, 88a. *R.*, X 618c. *Tht.*, 144e. *Men.*, 81d.

58. PLATO, *Men.*, 90e.

59. PLATO, *Tht.*, 202d.

60. PLATO, *Men.*, 80d.



ble difficulties.⁶¹ Of course this does not in any way mean that if the correct method is applied the aim will be achieved. Even in this case one may first discover something other than what he sought. As we have already mentioned, Plato, when seeking the sophist, first found the philosopher. What we seek each time is the cause of each thing,⁶² because only having found the first cause can we say - as Aristotle showed - that we truly know beings.⁶³ But it is not certain that by attaining knowledge through examination, one will find the answer to one's question. On the contrary, in fact, each time Plato - like Socrates - reached certain conclusions through examination, he exclaimed that before he had though he knew, while at the end he was in greater perplexity.⁶⁴ In any case, Plato recognised the necessity for education and supervision during inquiry. The investigator needs a supervisor, i.e. a teacher, whose teaching will determine the intensity, show the way and give the direction of the inquiry. Plato believes a teacher to be indispensable, because without his presence the pupil wavers and finds it hard to discover something unaided. He also adds the observation that without the presence of the supervisor, the investigator may only make a small and weak effort to understand large and difficult matters, with dubious results.⁶⁵

Plato maintains that a basic element for the successful outcome of the inquiry into the causes of things is correct and precise thinking. Specifically, he expresses the principle that if one seeks in a correct manner, he is likely to discover something.⁶⁶ The correct way of inquiry is none other than dialectics, which, as the monarch's art, makes men happy, wise and good.⁶⁷ In order to attain the monarch's art however one must use that art itself, as it is not possible to use a lesser. In other words, dialectics is the only art that can lead us to the truth. It must be of the greatest value and importance. In this case, Plato himself states that the monarch's art is the only one which confers no other knowledge but itself. (*ἐπιστήμην δὲ παραδιδόναι μηδεμίαν ἄλλην ἢ αὐτήν*

61. *Ibid.*, 74a-b. *Ti.*, 80c.

62. PLATO, *Phd.*, 99d.

63. ARIST., *Ph.*, I 1, 184a12-14.

64. PLATO *Sph.*, 244a. *Men.*, 80d.

65. PLATO, *R.*, VII 528b. See also G. KOUMAKIS, *Theory and Philosophy of Education*, Typotheto Editions, Athens 2001, pp. 263-268 (in Greek).

66. PLATO, *Grg.*, 503d. *Men.*, 99e. *Lg.*, I 630e-631a.

67. PLATO, *Euthd.*, 291d-e, 292b-c. *Plt.*, 284b.



ἑαυτήν).⁶⁸ This means that dialectics, the true philosophy, cannot be taught and therefore cannot be passed on by any science other than itself. This further means - as Aristotle later said - that one learns to philosophise by philosophising, as one learns to build by building. Philosophy nourishes itself (τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτὸ ἑαυτὸ ἤδη τρέφει), as Plato states in the *Seventh Letter* (341d). The fact that his method of inquiry is none other than dialectics also emerges from the fact that it must be an inquiry by kinds (κατ' εἶδη),⁶⁹ which is in essence division by kind, which is in turn dialectics.⁷⁰ Otherwise, if one does not apply the correct method of inquiry - dialectics - he is called a false inquirer (ψαῦδος ζητητής).⁷¹

Inquiry and discovery do not always constitute the end of our efforts and activity. They may be simply the means to a higher end. It depends on what we are trying to do each time and on what we want, that is how we wish to attain it. This is because, as Aristotle notes, will refers to the *telos*, i.e. the final end, while intention refers to that towards the end (εἰς τὰ πρὸς τὸ τέλος), i.e. the means by which we mean to achieve each aim.⁷² The final cause (τὸ οὖν ἔνεκα), i.e. the reason for which we do something, is a better thing than what we do, but it is the last to emerge.⁷³ Thus man does not always want what he does, but that for whose sake he does it. We take medicine in order to regain our health.⁷⁴ Inquiry comes within the boundaries of action, which is a wider concept. Thus when we inquire, we ask ourselves each time whether we have found that for whose sake we were seeking something.⁷⁵

Plato, however, sets limitations on inquiry and examination. Specifically, he expresses the opinion that we must not seek proof of God's existence, nor investigate the cause of the whole cosmos, as that would be sacrilegious. He also says that men must remain respectful and not be blasphemous. The Sun and Moon are great gods.⁷⁶ In other words,

68. PLATO, *Euthd.*, 292d.

69. PLATO, *Lg.*, I 630e.

70. PLATO, *Plt.*, 285a.

71. PLATO, *Chrm.*, 175e.

72. ARIST., *EN.*, III2, 1111b26-29.

73. ARIST., "*Protreptikos*", op. cit., p. 45.

74. PLATO, *Grg.*, 467c-d.

75. PLATO, *Euthd.*, 291a.

76. PLATO, *Lg.*, VII 821a.



the existence of the highest or only god cannot be proven by logical arguments, but is based on human faith. It is also almost impossible for one to investigate the whole cosmos, that is, the universe. In both cases, it is impossible for man's finite mind and limited lifespan to conceive the majesty of god and the infinite universe.

In order for these ideas to become more generally available to society, the philosopher in his *Laws* (I 634 d-e) refers to the educational principle that one of the best laws of the polity is that which enjoins that the youth must not enquire and try to learn which actions of the gods are right or wrong, but must all agree with one mouth and one voice that all are rightly established, since they are the works of the gods. If anyone has a different opinion, we must not tolerate or even listen to it. He who disagrees may express his views freely, but may not be allowed to do so in front of the young.

But searching on one's own is not the best form of examination and inquiry. Plato's ideal is joint inquiry, i.e. in conjunction with someone else.⁷⁷ Thus not inquiry but discussion (*συζήτηση*) is his ideal. The dialogical form of his work is thus proven. The Athenian philosopher often expresses his readiness to discuss with others the problems that arise each time. This readiness is not so much due to the fact that one will thus be aided to discover the answer to the problem more quickly and easily - as he may find it for himself - but to the fact that others must also become party to that answer. Plato considers it best if the answer arises from cooperation between certain people, as one will but annoy the other by asking him how he arrived at it and with what proof, since all must be informed of the process of discovery.⁷⁸

Collaboration with others, however, does not necessarily mean that one will necessarily find the answer; the chances of doing so are merely increased. It is extremely important to choose one's interlocutors carefully. Thus Plato states that, although he did everything and collaborated with many people, not chosen at random but of great experience, he was unable to discover the answer to a problem that had occupied him for some time, whether there are teachers of virtue. He was able to escape from this impasse when he found a suitable interlocutor in Anytos. The latter's father, Anthemion, was a wise and wealthy man, who became rich not by a fluke or gift of property or money

77. PLATO, *Cra.*, 384b-c.

78. PLATO, *Hp. Ma.*, 295a-b.



as others had, but by his own wisdom and industry. As to his character and morals, he was not ill - tempered and difficult but a well - conducted (*κόσμιος*) and mannerly man. Anytos was also well brought - up and educated.⁷⁹

Plato's conclusion on this subject is that virtue cannot be taught and therefore there are no teachers of virtue.⁸⁰ Such people as Anytos are suitable interlocutors on the subject of the teachability of virtue, as they can be used as examples to support his theory that virtue cannot always be taught, but can sometimes be taught and other times not. These individuals have firsthand experience of the subject under discussion and can be used as witnesses to and evidence of the propositions on which his theory is founded. Discussion is absolutely indispensable to Plato because knowledge must not remain hermetically sealed in the man who discovers, it, but become public property.⁸¹ The findings of the investigation must be accepted by the scientific community and prove to the benefit of all mankind.

When we say that we are examining and seeking something, this can be nothing other than the knowledge and the truth of a thing, assuming that we are ignorant of these.⁸² Yet knowledge and truth are, or are caused, by the Good.⁸³ In other words, what we seek is the Good, i.e. dialectics,⁸⁴ using dialectics itself as an aid to doing so. Through the dialectic method, we try to discover what dialectics is and apply it, as we have seen above. The Good is related to the precise (*ἀκριβής*) the moderate (*μέτρον*), the fitting (*πρέπον*), the opportune (*καιρόν*), the needful (*δέον*) and the mean (*μέσον*).⁸⁵ When we have achieved the above by reaching a satisfactory level of truth and knowledge, which is the Good, we cease to seek further, as we have attained our final aim.⁸⁶

6. *Elenchus and the art of midwifery.* Closely connected to inquiry, i.e. discussion, and examination, is Socrates' art of midwifery and elenchus, which are inextricably linked. Socrates compares his work to

79. PLATO, *Men.*, 89e - 90b.

80. *Ibid.*, 98e, 99e - 100a.

81. PLATO, *Cra.*, 384b-c.

82. PLATO, *Tht.*, 196d. *R.*, VI 499a.

83. PLATO, *R.*, VI 509b.

84. *Ibid.*, VII 531c, 532a-b, VI 511a-b. *Ti.*, 29c.

85. PLATO, *Plt.*, 284d-e.

86. PLATO, *R.*, VI 504b-c. *Ti.*, 29c. *Phd.*, 107b.



that of the midwife, with the difference that while the midwife helps the woman's body to give birth, Socrates and Plato help the young man's soul and mind to do so. Here we must note the inferior place of the female sex, who did not as a general rule participate in the discussion. The greatest (*μέγιστον*) and noblest (*κάλλιστον*) work of the midwife is - as far as her abilities permit - to distinguish between the true and the false. She must therefore put concepts to the test, i.e. elenchus, in order to ascertain if what man's mind brings is an image and a falsehood or fertile (*γόνιμον*) and genuine (*ἀληθές*).

Socrates himself, who plays the part of the midwife, is sterile in point of wisdom and thus has no discoveries during the inquiry. He makes it clear that his interlocutors have not learned anything from him, but have themselves brought forth or found many fair things with the help of the god and Socrates himself in the role of midwife. But some of those whom Socrates helped to produce their ideas - either because they were ignorant of the importance of the art of midwifery, or because they despised Socrates himself and went away sooner than they ought - were corrupted by bad company and thus lost the offspring they had brought forth by rearing it badly, and by considering impostures and images of more importance than the truth. Thus they appeared ignorant both to themselves and to others.⁸⁷

It emerges clearly from the above that the greatest and noblest work of the midwife is not simply to help the mind to produce ideas but to distinguish the true from the false, as it is natural and understandable that every man produces both kinds of idea. Thus the midwife's true work begins after the birth and lies in distinguishing the false ideas produced from the true, so that their parent may reject the former and nourish the latter. The midwife considers which of the ideas produced are fertile and worthy of nourishment and which are mere wind - eggs.⁸⁸ Of course, for Plato it is a basic principle that the evils done by those who are nourished and taught are more the responsibility of those who nourish and teach them than that of the doers.⁸⁹ Consequently, the art of midwifery allows one to reject one's false ideas and leave only the true. This aim is achieved though the process of elenchus, whereby ideas are collected and contrasted. If they are

87. PLATO, *Tht.*, 150a-e.

88. *ibid.*, 157d, 160e, 210b.

89. PLATO, *Ti.*, 87b.



contradictory, they are rejected. In this way the person being tested becomes ashamed, blames himself due to a guilty conscience and becomes gentler to others. By removing the false knowledge that was an obstacle to learning, he becomes clean to receive the new learning. His clearness lies in believing that he only knows what he truly does know and nothing more.⁹⁰ If one follows this process, one avoids the ignorance (*ἀμύθεια*)⁹¹ which is false opinion (*ψευδῆς δόξα*).⁹² This lies in thinking that one knows something without in fact knowing anything,⁹³ which is called the ugliest thing of all (*αἰσχιστον*) - compared to wisdom, which is the most beautiful⁹⁴ - and the worst of diseases.⁹⁵ Wisdom, on the contrary, is health.⁹⁶

Deliverance from the false opinion that prevents man accepting true knowledge - or rather discovering it for himself by the dialectic method - entails, as Plato remarks, another person's help. This is precisely the work of elenchus and the art of midwifery. The problem now is why man needs outside help to understand that some of his opinions are false and rid himself of them. The answer is provided by Plato when he says that men do not concede that they are in error concerning their opinion.⁹⁷ He does not explain or prove this general view here; perhaps he regards it as axiomatic, i.e. a statement which needs no proof, as it is common sense. The truth of this self-evident proposition obviously emerges from the fact that, if one did not believe his words to be true, then one would not say them, unless the speaker were acting with the intention of deceiving or benefiting another, or even society as a whole. This falsehood can become a useful medicine with which to avert the evil attempted by someone possessed by madness or folly.⁹⁸

7. *The refutation of Protagoras' position, as a prerequisite for the possibility of dialectics.* Yet this proposition, that everyone believes what he says to be true, differs from that of the sophists, who held

90. PLATO, *Sph.*, 230b-e. *Tht.*, 210b-c.

91. PLATO, *Tht.*, 150e - 151a, 170a.

92. *Ibid.*, 170a.

93. PLATO, *Sph.*, 229c. *Lg.*, IX 863c.

94. PLATO, *Hp. Ma.*, 296a.

95. PLATO, *Ti.*, 88b.

96. PLATO, *Tht.*, 167a.

97. *Ibid.*, 171b.

98. PLATO, *R.*, II 382c-d.



that whatever seems true to each person is indeed so.⁹⁹ Plato does not believe this to be true.¹⁰⁰ He holds that what one says is sometimes true and sometimes not,¹⁰¹ just as virtue can sometimes be taught and sometimes not.¹⁰² In my opinion, Plato's arguments refuting the sophists' position are worthy of note and fully proven.

He firstly refers to the democratic principle of the majority vote, which Aristotle received and uses in the third book of his *Politics* (11, 1282a 1-23). Plato's first argument against the sophists is as follows: if we accept the sophists' position that what one believes to be true is so, then if the people in general did not agree with Protagoras, their opinion would prevail, as they are in the majority. Here the principle is that the more people subscribe to a belief - specifically, Protagoras' position that what one believes to be true is so - the truer their opinion will be.¹⁰³

The basis of this argument is the idea that all opinions are of equal numerical value. This means that opinions do not differ in value and truth from person to person, but are all equally valid scientifically, given that everything one believes to be good is so, independent of any criteria of validity in each case. It is not the truth of the concepts that distinguishes falsehood from truth, but simply the fact that one has a personal opinion. So here we see subjectivity at its peak. Based on these facts, the *ἐπαίτων*, the connoisseur or special scientist on a subject, does not play any particular part as far as the sophists are concerned. For Plato, on the contrary, the *ἐπαίτων* is of primary importance.¹⁰⁴

Thus Plato applies proportional equality, whereas Aristotle applies numerical equality. When Aristotle borrowed this argument he did not see it as Plato ascribed it to the sophists, as unsubstantiated opinion, but with proof. Aristotle simply believed - I believe partly correctly - that it is easier for the many to have a fuller and more accurate view on general matters, such as politics, than it is for the one, even if he is a perfect scientist. This is because what one does not grasp another will, since the many constitute, in a way, a single person with many

99. PLATO, *Tht.*, 167c, 168b, 170a.

100. *Ibid.*, 162d.

101. *Ibid.*, 170c.

102. PLATO, *Men.*, 100b.

103. PLATO, *Tht.*, 170e-171a.

104. PLATO, *Cri.*, 47b. *Phdr.*, 275e. *Cra.*, 395b. *Pr.*, 327c.



eyes and limbs. In Plato's view, Protagoras' opinion is self-defeating if one simply disagrees, something both natural and reasonable. Freedom to express a different opinion is in any case a basic element of democracy. Plato goes on to give a second argument, much more powerful than the first, which he calls "most elegant" (*κομψότατον*), i.e. extremely nice and pretty.

It must first be noted that the sophists' aforementioned position arises from their more general thesis that man is the measure of all things, of the existence of the things that are and the non-existence of the things that are not (*πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστι, τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν*).¹⁰⁵ This statement is - according to Plato - logically equivalent to Theaetetus' declaration that "knowledge is perception".¹⁰⁶ This is reasonable, since if things are just as we perceive them, then knowledge must necessarily be perception. This view has been repeated in modern times by Berkeley, for whom all that which one sees, hears and feels, i.e. is perceived, truly exists.¹⁰⁷ His statement "*esse est percipi*",¹⁰⁸ making *being* identical with *perception*, is well-known. Parmenides disagreed, identifying being (*εἶναι*) with *understanding* (*νοεῖν*).¹⁰⁹

Socrates wonders why Protagoras says that man, rather than a pig or a dog, is the measure of all things, as these have more advanced sensations.¹¹⁰ It should be noted that swine are an analogy used of the worst people, as an evil society is compared to a city of pigs.¹¹¹ Plato rejects Protagoras' proposition and sets out his own, by which *god is the measure of all things*.¹¹²

In his second argument in refutation of the sophists' aforementioned position, Plato uses the method of *reductio ad absurdum*. He takes the sophists position as true and goes on to draw certain conclusions that refute or at least question and doubt that position, proving it to be contradictory. He says specifically that, if one accepts Protagoras'

105. PLATO, *Tht.*, 152a, 171b-c, 170d.

106. *Ibid.*, 151e - 152a.

107. G. BERKELEY, *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. Greek Trans. D. Sfendoni, Thessaloniki, ch. XL.

108. *Ibid.*, II

109. PARMENIDES, *Extracts* II 8, 34 (DK I, 238), II 3 (DK I, 231).

110. PLATO, *Tht.*, 161c.

111. PLATO, *R.*, II 372d-e.

112. PLATO, *Lg.*, IV 716c.



thesis, then one must also accept its exact opposite, i.e. the view of those who hold that Protagoras is deceived at this point. But if one accepts the latter view, then Protagoras is forced to accept that his own position is false. Thus Protagoras's statement, taken to its logical conclusion, is self-contradictory.

Here one could object that those who disagree with Protagoras are lying. This is true, as man cannot always tell the truth. Falsehood is the opposite of truth; thus there is both true and false opinion (*δόξα*).¹¹³ One's opinion is false when one thinks the opposite of reality.¹¹⁴ Falsehood is due to the ignorance in the soul of the man deceived.¹¹⁵ It is of course true that one may be deceived in any opinion; but it is also true that the one deceived is generally unaware of the fact, and therefore does not admit that he is deceived, for the reasons mentioned above. Plato thus correctly believes that those who are deceived do not admit it, as they usually hold their opinion to be true. If Protagoras' statement is applied under these circumstances, he himself must admit that the view of those who disagree with him is true, i.e. that they are not deceived and that his opinion is consequently false.¹¹⁶

From all the above facts, Plato comes to the conclusion that Protagoras' thesis is denied by all, not excepting Protagoras himself - as he admits when he says that the opinion of those who disagree with him is true. Under these circumstances, even Protagoras himself must admit that neither man nor dog nor pig can be the measure of anything. Plato thus concludes that since his *Truth* is denied by everyone, then it is not true for anyone, neither others nor himself.¹¹⁷

Here there appears to be a problem. How did Plato come to the conclusion that Protagoras' thesis is denied by all, when he did not ask all Athenian citizens? How can it be proven that these people disagree with Protagoras' statement? Is it impossible for even one person to agree with it? Naturally there must have been some people who believed in the truth of the proposition, as Berkeley did in modern times. So how can Plato state without any evidence that everybody disagrees with Protagoras? Could Plato's view be proven without us being aware

113. PLATO, *Phdr.*, 253d. *Phlb.*, 37b.

114. PLATO, *Sph.*, 240d.

115. PLATO, *R.*, II 382b.

116. PLATO, *Tht.*, 171a-b.

117. *Ibid.*, 171c.



of it, thereby negating our accusation? I believe that this is the case, and that Plato's statement is fully proven.

I think that Plato's reasoning is as follows: if even one person - such as Plato - disagrees with Protagoras' thesis, saying that it is not true, then Protagoras, accepting this contrary proposition as true according to his thesis, is obliged, as we have seen, to admit that his own thesis is false, i.e. erroneous. The moment Protagoras is forced to accept that his thesis is false and therefore to be rejected, it becomes impossible for others to confirm and accept it. If we suppose the proposition to hold true in itself for some people, then it is not Protagoras' proposition but that of someone else who accepts and supports it. On these grounds, Protagoras' theory on truth ceases to exist.

I believe that the above analyses have shown that Plato disproved Protagoras' thesis that man is the measure of all things, and that consequently what seems true to each person is necessarily so. According to Plato, things are sometimes true and sometimes not. The demolition of this thesis of the sophists is of primary importance to Platonic philosophy, as the latter would otherwise be impossible. Specifically, elenchus, the midwifery and the dialectic art would be utterly impossible to implement, since, as we have seen above, these sciences or arts' aim to distinguish true from false,¹¹⁸ so that we can adopt the former and reject the latter. These arts of Plato's would become long and tedious idle chatter if Protagoras' *Truth*, whereby what seems true to each person is so, were true. Midwifery and the whole treatise of dialectic would become ridiculous.¹¹⁹

118. PLATO, *Ep. VII*, 344b. See also: H.H. BENSON, The Priority of Definition in the Socratic Elenchus, in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. VIII 1990, pp. 19-65. H.E. MAY, Socratic Ignorance and the Therapeutic Aim of the Elenchos, in: *Wisdom, Ignorance and Virtue. New Essays in Socratic Studies*. Ed. by M.L. Mapherran Academic Printing and Publishing. 1996, pp. 37-50. GR. VLASTOS, The Socratic Elenchus, in: *Oxford Readings in Philosophy. Plato I* Ed. In. Gr. Fine, Oxford 1999, pp. 36-63.

119. PLATO, *Tht.*, 161e-162a. Για την προβληματική του σωκρατικού ελέγχου βλέπε: H.H. BENSON, The Priority of Definition in the Socratic Elenchus, in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. VIII, 1990, pp. 19-65. H.E. MAY, Socratic Ignorance and the Therapeutic Aim of the Elenchos, in: *Wisdom, Ignorance and Virtue. New Essays in Socratic Studies*, Ed. by M.L. Mapherran, Academic Printing and Publishing. 1996, pp. 37-50. GR. VLASTOS, The Socratic Elenchus, in: *Oxford Readings in Philosophy, Plato I*, Ed. by G. Fine, Oxford 1999, 6-63.



Dialectic, therefore, is Plato's true and genuine philosophy, the highest good and greatest lesson, or, in other words, the beginning and the end. What dialectics itself is and how it is presented in Plato's writings, if we assume it to be found there, is still a difficult problem to our day. The question which remains to be answered is, what is the unique mode of expression of dialectics. It is also important to note the two meanings of the word "unwritten". The first is Plato's oral instruction, which differs in many points from his written teachings and was not set down exactly as it was told; the meaning is the same in both cases. This is the type of unwritten teaching mentioned by Aristotle and other members of Plato's inner circle or ancient commentators. The other type is that mentioned by Plato himself, and expressed, as we have seen, in an enigmatic way either verbally or in writing. Unwritten teaching is literally the meanings behind words, whether these are spoken or written; in other words, the language residing in the mind. This is what Plato means when he says that he has left no treatise on philosophy. His philosophy, dialectics, was written by himself in a different and unusual way; one can claim that it is written in the normal and commonly accepted manner. In this sense, it is unwritten. Thus the word unwritten has a double meaning, a which makes deceit and error possible, the foundation of the dialectic art. Plato repeatedly stresses that it is possible for the same thing to be set out in different ways.¹²⁰

120. PLATO, *Tht.*, 152a. *Sph.*, 251a-b. *Phlb.*, 209. *Phdr.*, 232b. *Ti.*, 87b. I would like to thank Dr. Rosemary Tzanaki for the translation of this article into English.

