

Platonic Letters on the Philosophic Life

Letters which purport to be from Plato are incorporated in most of the collected writings of Plato – these number 12 or 13 in all, but modern scholarship disputes the authorship of some or even all of these letters. The two least disputed are the seventh and eighth letters, and whether or not these were written by Plato himself, they are close enough in spirit to him to give us some insight into the practicalities of the philosophic life which they often discuss. All the letters except the first and the thirteenth have some scholarly acceptance, and since ancient writers quote especially from the second and seventh letters, the following extracts are, perhaps, the most reliable since I have selected passages from the second, seventh and eighth. All the letters concern the events surrounding Plato's dealings with the Greek settlement of Syracuse and the surrounding region of Sicily and his influence on the political figures Dion and Dionysius – the latter being son of Dionysius the elder (both father and son had distinctly tyrannical tendencies); Dion studied under Plato and invited him to the Greek colony to help reform the government there.

The second letter, addressed to Dionysius, lays out the vast scope of philosophy, the fact that it is a lifetime's labour, and the paradoxical truth that ultimately it approaches what the soul feels is profoundly its own, and yet is entirely beyond its comprehension. The terms in which the writer outlines the primary principles of his philosophy are extremely obscure – but more easily understood if the reader has read later Platonists such as Plotinus or Proclus: they explain their understanding of things by outlining the three great principles which can be seen at work in the scheme of reality. The nature which underlies the temporal and moving order is called *soul*; the nature which underlies the eternal order beyond motion is called *intellect*; the nature which transcends both these and yet is immanent within the all is called the *One* – or here referred to as "the King of All things" – so absolutely transcendent is this principle that as soon as the mind thinks of it as possessing any particular quality (or indeed as possessing every quality) it slips out of sight:

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All things are situated about the king of all things; and all things subsist for his sake, and he is the cause of all beautiful things. But second things are situated about that which is second; and such as are third in gradation about that which is third. The human soul therefore extends itself in order to learn the quality of these things, and looks to such particulars as are allied to itself, *none of which are sufficient for the purpose*. But about the king himself, and the natures of which I have spoken, there is nothing of this kind: but the soul speaks of that which is posterior to this. Indeed, O Son of Dionysius and Doris, this your inquiry concerning the cause of all beautiful things, is as of a nature endued with a particular quality. Or rather it is a conception respecting this ingenerated in the soul; from which he who is not liberated will never in reality acquire truth. . . . in my opinion there is in general no doctrine more ridiculous in the eyes of the general public than this, nor on the other hand any more wonderful and inspiring to those naturally gifted. Often repeated and constantly attended to for many years, it is at last like gold with great effort freed from all alloy. Let me tell you, however, the surprising thing about it. There are men, and a good many of them too, who have intelligence and memory and the ability to judge a doctrine after examining it by every possible test, who are now old men and have

been receiving instruction not less than thirty years, who have just reached the point of saying that what formerly they thought most uncertain, now appears to them quite certain and evident, while what seemed most certain then, appears now uncertain.

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Thus runs the heart of the second letter and its plea to Dionysius to understand what lies unspoken yet supremely causal above and within all things – whether they be of the second order of things (in eternal intellect) or of the third order of things (activated by soul) . But how did Plato become involved with the prince of Syracuse? He responded to the request of Dion, the brother-in-law of Dionysius the First (in other words, he was our present Dionysius' uncle): the request was that Plato come to Syracuse to encourage the promising young prince to take up philosophy and thereby reform a state based on philosophic laws rather than mere tyrannical power. Plato, who has become disenchanted with politics following the upheavals in Athens (which had, amongst other things, brought about the death of his beloved teacher, Socrates), responded positively to Dion, who had studied with him. He writes in the Seventh Letter, "I feared to see myself at last altogether nothing but words, so to speak – a man who would never willing lay hand to any concrete task."

The attempt to draw Dionysius into the ways of philosophy, and thereby to root the Greek state of Sicily in good laws was not successful – the whole court in Syracuse being riven by faction and intrigue – and, perhaps the most disappointing thing, Plato found was that the would-be philosopher-king was more interested in the reputation of a philosopher than in actually being one. He explains in the Seventh Letter, that to those who, like Dionysius, have such views,

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". . . it is requisite to show that philosophy is a thing of the greatest consequence, and that it is only to be obtained by great study and mighty labour. For he who hears that this is the case, if he is truly a lover of wisdom, and is adapted to and worthy of its acquisition, being a divine person, will think that he hears of an admirable way, that he ought immediately to betake himself to this path, and make it the great business of his life. After this, he will not cease exciting both himself, and the leader of this way, till he either obtains the consummation of his wishes, or receives a power by which he may be able to conduct himself without a guide.

Such a one, therefore, will so live, that all his actions may accord with these conceptions. But before all things he will be perpetually intent on philosophy, and will daily procure for himself such nutriment, as may especially render him docile, of a good memory, and able to reason; living soberly, and hating intoxication. . . "

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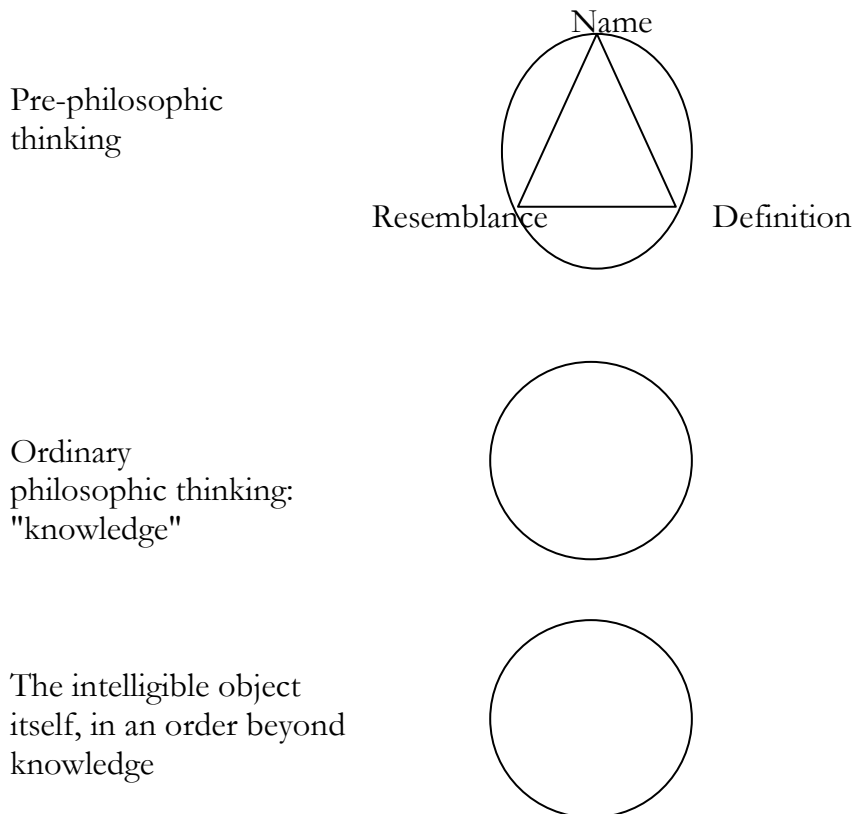
Plato then discusses the steps which allow the serious philosopher to approach the essence of things:

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"There are three things belonging to each of those particulars through which knowledge is necessarily produced. But the fourth is knowledge itself. And it is requisite to establish as the fifth *that which is known and true*. One of these is the *name* of a thing; the second its

definition; the third the *resemblance*; the fourth *knowledge*. Now take each of these, desiring to learn what we have lately asserted, and think as follows concerning them all. A circle is called something, whose name we have just expressed. After this follows its definition, composed from nouns and verbs. For 'that which everywhere is equally distant from the extremes to the middle', is the definition of that which we signify by the name of a round, and a circumference, and a circle. But the third is the circle which may be painted, or blotted out, which may be made by a [potters] wheel, or destroyed. None of which activities, the circle itself, which each of these manifests, experiences, as being of a different nature. But the fourth is knowledge and intellect, and true opinion about these. And the whole of this again must be established as one thing which neither subsists in voice, nor material figures, but is inherent in soul. It is therefore manifest, that this fourth is different from the nature itself of the circle, and again different from the three we have previously mentioned. But among the number of these, intellect, by its relation and similitude, proximately adheres to the fifth, while the rest are more remote from its nature. The same may likewise be affirmed of a straight and crooked figure, of colour, and of the good, the beautiful, and the just.



The move from ordinary consciousness to knowledge is straight-forward, if demanding, and requires careful dialectical exercises: but how are we to make the jump from knowledge to the "thing itself"? What Plato writes next perhaps answers this question.

Plato took his leave from the swirl of plot and counter-plot that was the court of Dionysius – barely escaping with his life, such was the suspicion which grew up about both those of ill-will and those, like Plato, of benevolent disposition. After he had left, he

heard reports that Dionysius boasted that he had learnt in the deepest secrets of Platonic philosophy- to which Plato offers this rebuke:

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344b "Thus much however I shall say respecting all those who either have written, or shall write, affirming that they know those things which are the objects of my study, (whether they have heard them from me or from others, or whether they have discovered them themselves,) that they have not heard anything about these [deepest] particulars conformable to my opinion: for I never have written, nor ever shall write, about them. For a thing of this kind cannot be expressed by words like other disciplines, *but by long familiarity, and living in conjunction with the thing itself, a light as it were leaping from a fire will on a sudden be enkindled in the soul, and there itself nourish itself.* . . . The study of virtue and vice must be accompanied by an inquiry into what is false and true of existence in general and must be carried on by constant practice throughout a long period. Hardly after practicing detailed comparisons of names and definitions and sensible perceptions, after examining them in a benevolent manner by use of question and answer without jealousy, at last in a flash understanding of each blazes up, and the mind as it exerts all its powers to the limit of human capacity, is flooded with light."

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This sudden coming of light is the natural outcome of philosophic endeavour coupled with a philosophic life: it cannot be commanded, and from this point of view, may be considered as a divine gift. Proclus says that all transformations are themselves accomplished in an instant – but the necessary preparation for that instantaneous spark often takes a very long time. The moment when the life-force enters the ready matter of the cell rests on long preparation: the *knowledge* of beauty, justice, a circle, or whatever is not *the thing itself* – but its alliance to it is what allows the philosopher to make that last jump. This jump is not to a human conception, but upwards to an entirely different experience, for, as Plato writes in this letter, "the objects of the philosopher's pursuit are situated in a most beautiful region."

After Dion's death his friends continued the attempts to bring Greek Sicily under the rule of law and free it from tyranny: they asked Plato for his advice as to how to bring the various competing reformers together. His eighth letter outlines a series of compromises which, had they been followed, might have been a practical way forward. Had they taken power, he said, then the following axiom should form the general direction of their state:

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355b "There are three things, soul and body and money. Put in place of highest honour the excellence of soul; put next, that of body, subject, however, to that of the soul; and in the third and last place put the honour paid to money, making it a servant to the body and to the soul. If an ordinance produced this effect, it would rightly be a part of your constitution, of it would result in the genuine happiness of those who observed it. The usage that applies the term "happy" to the rich is itself miserable."

Of the three things, only the soul gives access to "the beautiful region", only the soul can go through the process of moving from name, definition and resemblance to knowledge, and only the soul can withstand the shock of transformation from knowledge to "the thing itself."