

The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter

By Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede

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It is a familiar paradox that philosophy typically aims to reveal the perennial nature of objective reality, and yet, in the lack of any secure support, must rest upon the transient mindset and milieu of the individual philosopher. This becomes particularly striking within the work of Plato, who is at once, in his theory of Forms, the most ambitious, and, in his modes of thinking and writing, one of the most idiosyncratic, of the luminaries of the western canon. So great personal interest has always attached to his so-called 7th Letter, which gives a long account both of the origins of his political philosophy, and of his attempts to put it to some practical purpose. According to the writer, what ultimately weighed with him in consenting to visit the city of Syracuse at the invitation of its tyrant Dionysius II was the following thought: ‘If anyone ever was to attempt to realize these principles of law and government, now was the time to try, since it was only necessary to win over a single man and I should have accomplished all the good I dreamed of’ (328bc, tr. Morrow). What we have is either an *apologia pro vita sua*, ostensibly addressed to friends of the dead Dion trying to make the best of his legacy, or, as Myles Burnyeat rather supposes, another’s attempt ‘to make a tragedy in epistolary form out of Plato’s own life’. If the second holds, we have a work to be read as literature that is of some curiosity but of little philosophical significance.

The present compilation is itself a touching tribute to contingency and mutability. It arises out of a joint seminar that Burnyeat gave with Michael Frede at Oxford in Michaelmas 2001; since then one has died, and one is still with us. Dominic Scott has now, with the assistance of Carol Atack, edited (and in part annotated) the materials that survive from that collaboration. It was intended initially that Frede’s role should be to oppose, Burnyeat’s to defend, the letter’s authenticity. In the event, their arguments turned out to be complementary rather than contrasted: neither could believe, for a moment, that the letter is authentic. Their dual alliance is likely to reverse what has been a half-hearted willingness on the part of scholars to take this text seriously when it is convenient to do so. Much of their persuasiveness comes of contrasted styles and approaches; the campaign is fought on several fronts, and can succeed without triumphing on all.

Frede combined a huge willingness to take pains with a reluctance to display them. His posthumous publications have demanded the supply of endnotes by others. His own handwritten notes, of which a few pages are charmingly reproduced here (113-17), look like a series of epigraphs to Beerbohm caricatures; they have been converted into a seamless prose that mimics his own published style by the editor. The product of this collaboration carries the reader, with no effort on *his* part, like a glider traversing rocky places. As Burnyeat describes (x), he ‘had embarked on a thorough study of ancient Greek epistolography as such and developed a passion for painstaking analysis of each and every forgery he encountered’. What he presented in the first three seminars shifts the *onus probandi* from a default presumption of authenticity to an acknowledgement that *if* (as many have supposed) the 7th Letter is alone authentic within the traditional sequence of thirteen Platonic letters, this is a unique case. Real letters were doubtless composed; yet what has come down to us from this period is a fictional genre.

The first and last parts of this compilation form literary side-panels to a centrepiece of philosophical argument. Burnyeat almost persuades one to relish the ingenuity of the invention.

Though this doubtless deepens the impression of spuriousness, one may enter a note of reservation. In the *Laws*, which would be contemporaneous with a genuine 7th *Letter*, the Athenian Stranger approves the circulation of ‘prose writings ... that show a family resemblance to our discussion today’ (VII 811e), and even of odes whose ‘doctrines seem the same as or better than our own’ (817d). The artifice itself might be Plato’s. Yet what more clearly excludes his authorship is stage machinery that he would think blasphemous. Burnyeat notes (143) a recurrence of ‘seemingly malevolent superhuman powers’ that ‘appear at regular intervals in this story’. Even Plutarch, who draws on the 7th *Letter* in his own life of Dion, hesitates to reproduce this feature.

Philosophically most nutritious in this volume are twelve pages by Burnyeat about what he calls ‘the pseudo-philosophical digression’ at 432a-433d (122). Well versed in the elusiveness of philosophical prose, scholars generally hold back from relegating a text on the ground of its intellectual deficiency. (After all, it has been an Oxford tradition to view Plato’s arguments as typically fallacious.) And the 7th *Letter* has rather been plundered than analysed. What Burnyeat beautifully displays is just why this passage has seemed, but cannot be, Platonic. The author is attentive and well-read, and picks up ideas and phrases from several dialogues (notably the *Cratylus*). He is capable of a prose reminiscent of the austere Plato: ‘For every real being, there are three things that are necessary if knowledge of it is to be acquired. Knowledge itself is the fourth, while in the fifth place we must put the object itself, the knowable and truly real being. First is the name, second the definition, third the image, fourth knowledge’ (342a7-b3, tr. Burnyeat). Yet what follows is a sequence of *non sequiturs*: that language is conventional does not in fact entail that it cannot serve for defining an essence in distinction from other qualities; nor does it confirm the Platonic theme (familiar from the *Phaedrus*) that nothing serious can be learnt by reading. This is the Peruvian gold of philosophy.

Frede focuses on Plato’s alleged political ambitions in Syracuse. According to the 7th *Letter*, Plato was already convinced at the time of his first visit ‘that the ills of the human race would never end until ... those are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power’ (326b). Getting then to know Dion as a young man, he ‘imparted to him [his] ideas of what was best for men and urged him to put them into practice’ (327a). Writing much later, after Dion’s murder, he still hypothesizes about how wonderful it would have been if Dionysius had brought about ‘a real union of philosophy and power’: ‘All mankind would have been convinced of the truth that no city nor individual can be happy except by living in company with wisdom under the guidance of justice, either from personal achievement of these virtues or from a right training and education received under God-fearing rulers’ (335d). Plato feels a personal resentment that the opportunity was missed: ‘This is the centre of my grievance against Dionysius; the other injuries that he has done to me are trivial in comparison’ (335de).

This account represents Plato as remaining convinced, from his first visit in 388 until the composition of this letter after 354, that the ills of mankind can only be cured by philosophers, and as remaining hopeful, up to his third visit in 361/0, that it might be within the power of Dion, and even of Dionysius, to bring this about. According to our text, it was the disappointment of his final visit to discover that Dionysius was either complacent about his grasp of Platonic philosophy, or discouraged to think ‘that this teaching was beyond him, and that truly he would not be able to live in constant pursuit of virtue and wisdom’ (345b). Frede finds this incongruous in two ways. It has Plato retain the ambition, adumbrated in the *Republic* but discarded in the *Laws*, of a philosophical statecraft that would come of a full education in a science of dialectic that built upon a long schooling in the higher mathematics; and it has him suppose that Dion,

described already as a ‘philosopher’ as well as a ‘man of justice’ (336ab), and even Dionysius if he had been willing to learn, might really have brought that about. Yet we know Plato to have become more realistic about what is possible in politics, and may presume that he was never so deluded about the abilities and accomplishments of his associates.

Scott (95-7) half questions and half endorses Frede’s argument. Burnyeat had already noted in passing that, in a passage ignored by Frede (337cd), Dion’s friends are in fact advised to discard the original ambitions of Plato and Dion, and instead to embrace a ‘second best’, which, as Burnyeat puts it, ‘substitutes the rule of law for the rule of philosophy’ (157). Hence, Scott argues, Frede is wrong to complain that the 7th *Letter* ignores the actual development of Plato’s thought. However, he still finds force in the other complaint, which, indeed, takes on a new edge: did Plato really combine a modicum of political realism with a maximal degree of personal naivety?

One may doubt whether this Plato is really clear either way. In 335d (quoted above) he requires at least of the lawgivers that they be philosophers; yet in 337cd he proposes recruiting for the purpose fifty worthies, whose qualifications are not dialectic, but age, wealth, and lineage. It appears that the present writer is no clearer-headed about Platonic politics than he is about philosophical logic. Which is of no great significance if we are persuaded to read the 7th *Letter* not as a relatively neglected piece of philosophy, but instead (in Burnyeat’s words) as a ‘Trajick Tale of Plato’s Adventures in Sicilie’, such as to be set out, with a prologue and an epilogue, in three acts. Anyone who wishes to reinstate it has his work cut out.

A. W. Price
a.price@bbk.ac.uk