Language, Search and Aporia in Plato's *Seventh Letter*

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> "The conclusion he [Socrates] comes to is actually the indefinable qualification of pure being: love *is* – because the addendum, that it is longing, desire, is no definition, since it is merely a relation to something that is not given"
>
> - Kierkegaard[1]

Abstract:

This paper investigates the relation between Language and Being as it is articulated in the so-called philosophical digression of Plato's alleged *Seventh Letter.* Here the author of the letter claims, in contrast to the testimony of Plato's many dialogues, that there has never been and there will never be any written word on Plato's philosophy; and in addition, as if this was not sufficiently perplexing, he goes on to explain that the matters of philosophy do in fact not admit of verbal expression at all.

In discussing the arguments for and the consequences of these claims, this paper explores what in the letter is argued to be the only viable way out of the ontological and epistemological deficiencies inherent in language. In trying to lay bare how the author of the letter argues for the insufficency of a rational, theoretical and linguistic understanding of ultimate reality, this paper explores the notions of *sunousia* and *tribô* (translatable in context perhaps as 'lived conversation' and 'spending of time') as the only acts powerful enough to overcome the obstacles of language and to reach a true understanding of Being.

Arguing against a mystical interpretation of the notions of *sunousia* and *tribô* – in terms of a certain union between subject and object – this paper

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claims that a true philosophical relation to Being, according to the letter, is not be understood as the *end* of a particular type of search, but must rather be understood as the search itself. It argues that neither *sunousia* nor *tribô* are to capture a type of meditative situation, but rather an articulated conversation reflecting the particular conditions of a philosophical approach.

Key Terms: Plato, *Seventh Letter*, *aporia*, language, dialectic, being, meta-philosophy

1. Introduction

In the second half of Plato's alleged *Seventh Letter*[2] the narrative of the letter is famously supplemented with what has been called a philosophical digression.[3] Here the writer of the letter, in defending himself against the possible misinterpretations of presumptuous readers[4], gives us some remarkable reflections upon the nature of his teachings. Or rather, here, the writer of the letter states – in contrast to the testimony of Plato's many dialogues – that there has never been, and there will never be, any written word (σύγγραμμα, 341c) on these matters;[5] and in addition, as if this was not sufficiently perplexing, he goes on to explain that these matters, in fact, do not admit of verbal expression (ῥητός) at all:

> "There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise (σύγγραμμα) of mine dealing therewith. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression (ῥητὸν) like other studies"[6]
>
> "οὔκουν ἐμόν γε περὶ αὐτῶν ἔστιν σύγγραμμα οὐδὲ μήποτε γένηται: ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἐστιν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα" (341c)

A few Stephanus pages down, this argument is given an even broader stance, and it now appears as if the danger of articulation applies not only to Plato's own teachings, but to any approach trying to state in words what has been grasped by the mind.[7] In fact, we are told, this cannot be directly articulated at all – not because it is unintelligible or obscure itself, but because language (λόγος) is all too weak:

> "[O]wing to the weakness inherent in language [...] no one of intelligence will ever dare to commit to it that which is perceived by the mind."[8]

> "διὰ τὸ τῶν λόγων ἀσθενές [...] ὧν ἕνεκα νοῦν ἔχων οὐδεὶς τολμήσει ποτὲ εἰς αὐτὸ τιθέναι τὰ νενοημένα ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ" (342e-343a)[9]

Despite the fact that these points may appear to undermine the use of any kind of linguistic device in order to exhibit the subject matter that these passages refer to, the writer of the letter is not at all reluctant to explain himself; and in terms of a fivefold distinction of knowledge and being (342a7-344d2), he is in fact quite explicit in trying to argue for why these matters cannot be directly articulated.[10]

This fivefold distinction first of all consists of three basic parts that together make up a fourth, which is called knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, 342a).[11] The three basic parts are the name (ὄνομα), the account (λόγος)[12] and the image (εἴδωλον, 342a-b). Besides these four, so to speak, epistemological factors, the writer also discerns a fifth, ontological, which is at first described as 'that which is graspable and true' ("ὃ [...] γνωστόν τε καὶ ἀληθῶς ἐστιν", 342a-b).[13]

The main reason, however, for making this distinction is, presumably, not to further discuss the basic structure of being and knowledge, but it is rather an attempt to explain why the subject matter of philosophy is difficult – or even impossible – to articulate; and the reason for this, in turn, is explained in terms of another distinction.

> "[...] as we mentioned a moment ago the main point is this, that while there are two objects of search, *being* (τὸ ὄν) and *howness* (τὸ ποῖόν τι), and the soul seeks to know not the *howness* (τὸ ποῖόν τι) but the *whatness* (τὸ τί), each of the four offers to the soul in word and deed that which is not sought."[14]

> "τὸ [...] μέγιστον, ὅπερ εἴπομεν ὀλίγον ἔμπροσθεν, ὅτι δυοῖν ὄντοιν, τοῦ τε ὄντος καὶ τοῦ ποιοῦ τινος, οὐ τὸ ποιόν τι, τὸ δὲ τί, ζητούσης εἰδέναι τῆς ψυχῆς, τὸ μὴ ζητούμενον ἕκαστον τῶν τεττάρων προτεῖνον τῇ ψυχῇ λόγῳ τε καὶ κατ᾽ ἔργα" (343c)

Naming, accounting for, depicting and knowing do not apparently give to the soul what it is seeking. On the contrary, what they do is rather that they somehow replace the *whatness* (τὸ τί) or the *being* (τὸ ὂν) of what is sought after with its *howness* (τὸ ποιόν τι). Instead of letting the soul grasp it, they describe it. Accordingly they also let this description overshadow that which the soul actually seeks to know (εἰδέναι); and as such, we read, their deficiencies do also pertain to language (λόγος) in general.

> "Moreover, these [four] attempt to express the *howness* (τὸ ποιόν τι) of each object no less than its *being* (τὸ ὂν), owing to the weakness (ἀσθενές) inherent in language (λόγος)."[15]

> "πρὸς γὰρ τούτοις ταῦτα οὐχ ἧττον ἐπιχειρεῖ τὸ ποιόν τι περὶ ἕκαστον δηλοῦν ἢ τὸ ὂν ἑκάστου διὰ τὸ τῶν λόγων ἀσθενές" (342e2-343a1)

Language (λόγος) and the four epistemological factors always fail to single out the *being* (τὸ ὂν) of whatever is in question. Although it is here suggested that some *being* might get through, this nonetheless appears to be eclipsed by the *howness* (τὸ ποιόν τι) that they always also appear to bring forth.

The problem, and indeed also the reason why the writer of the letter is so unwilling to put in words the notions of his mind, is presumably because neither language nor the four can capture *being*, i.e. *the fifth;* and anyone, we read, trying to articulate (ἐξηγέομαι) and disclose (δηλόω) this fifth factor will appear quite ignorant to his listeners or readers:

> "[I]n all cases where we compel a man to give the Fifth as his answer and to explain it, anyone who is able and willing to upset the argument gains the day, and makes the person who is expounding his view by speech or writing or answers appear to most of his hearers to be wholly ignorant of the subjects about which he is attempting to write or speak."[16]

> "ἐν οἷς δ' ἂν τὸ πέμπτον ἀποκρίνασθαι καὶ δηλοῦν ἀναγκάζωμεν, ὁ βουλόμενος τῶν δυναμένων ἀνατρέπειν κρατεῖ. καὶ ποιεῖ τὸν ἐξηγούμενον ἐν λόγοις ἢ γράμμασιν ἢ ἀποκρίσεσιν τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν ἀκουόντων δοκεῖν μηδὲν γιγνώσκειν ὧν ἂν ἐπιχειρῇ γράφειν ἢ λέγειν" (343d)

2. The Only Viable Tool

The nature of language and of the four epistemological factors, as presented so far, gives us a quite pessimistic outlook, to say the least, regarding the prospects of an articulated account of the subject matter of philosophy. What we now need to emphasize, however, is also the continual description of them, not only as weak (ἀσθενής, 343a1), uncertain (ἀσαφής, 343b7) and defective (φαῦλος, 343d10), but also as the only possible means available.

What the writer of the letter indeed insists upon, besides the deficiency of the four, is, in fact, that it is *only* by means of them that we can access the fifth at all.

> "For unless a man somehow or other have understood (λαμβάνω) the four of these, he will never perfectly be partaking (μέτοχος) in knowledge of the fifth."[17]

> "οὐ γὰρ ἂν τούτων μή τις τὰ τέτταρα λάβῃ ἁμῶς γέ πως, οὔποτε τελέως ἐπιστήμης τοῦ πέμπτου μέτοχος ἔσται." (342d-e)

There is apparently no short-cut to the fifth, so to speak. The critique of language (and the four) is not articulated in order for us to

realize that there is another, better way to ensue it. The writer of the letter – or so I will argue – does not suggest that the fifth can be grasped by any kind of direct apprehension, nor by some kind of special ability, that can do without the four. On the contrary, we cannot neglect the acts of naming, accounting, depicting and knowing, even if we must be aware of the fact that all of these acts bear with them also their own self-overshadowing features, that is, insofar as they replace the *being* (τὸ ὄν, 342e) of whatever the soul is looking for with its *howness* or *quality* (τὸ ποιόν τι, 342e).

In trying to give the fifth as our answer, we learn, we must somehow insist on using the linguistic and epistemological tools we have at hand, yet, somehow, without taking them at face value. We must instead intertwine the deficiencies of our words with our attempts to articulate it. Language must somehow stand against language, so to speak – not however outside language, but within it. Name must stand against name, definition against definition, vision against vision and sense perception against sense perception (344b), we read, in order for us to use them as viable tools.

What we learn from the letter is that they must be *rubbed* or *worn out* (τρίβω, 344b5) against each other, in order for the light of intelligence and reason to shine forth.[18] Only by means of language can we overcome its insufficiency.

> "[...] it is by means of rubbing (τρίβω) each of them with each other, names and definitions, visions and sense-perceptions, in a friendly refutation (ἔλεγχος) by means of cross-examination (ἐλέγχω) employing questions and answers that are void of envy, that there barely bursts out the light of intelligence and reason regarding each object in the mind of him who uses every effort of which mankind is capable"[19]

> "μόγις [...] τριβόμενα πρὸς ἄλληλα αὐτῶν ἕκαστα, ὀνόματα καὶ λόγοι ὄψεις τε καὶ αἰσθήσεις, ἐν εὐμενέσιν ἐλέγχοις ἐλεγχόμενα καὶ ἄνευ φθόνων ἐρωτήσεσιν καὶ ἀποκρίσεσιν χρωμένων, ἐξέλαμψε

> φρόνησις περὶ ἕκαστον καὶ νοῦς, συντείνων ὅτι μάλιστ᾽ εἰς δύναμιν ἀνθρωπίνην." (344b-c)

The method of reaching to the point where the light of intelligence and reason will shine through is not unexpectedly described as a hard endeavor. In rubbing names (ὀνόματα), definitions (λόγοι), visions (ὄψεις) and sense-perceptions (αἰσθήσεις) against each other, we are to strain or concentrate (συντείνω) our powers as far as possible. Even if it is demanding, a dimension of the process of reasoning apart from the direct articulation of propositions corresponding to the structure of the world is hence also to be identified and practiced; and through such a rubbing together we are apparently to realize what langue and the four hide from us.[20]

3. Philosophy Beyond Language

There are several different and interesting ways to interpret these complex passages in the *Seventh Letter.* Yet among those scholars that do acknowledge its significance, not only for its own philosophical value, but also for its relevance for the interpretation of Plato's dialogues, there is actually a kind of basic agreement. Many of these scholars – at least those that I know of – also argue that the philosophical digression of the *Seventh Letter,* in essence, amounts to the claim that the true nature of being, towards realization of which philosophy endeavors, cannot be directly articulated.[21] In identifying the grasp of the fifth as the end of *philosophical* striving – this kind of grasp is most often also acknowledged as a grasp beyond language. As such it is also often taken to be a more intuitive kind of grasp than any direct articulation of it can be.

"[T]he final fruit of philosophic regimen", Kenneth Sayre writes, for example, "is [not a set of true proposition about the world, but] a state of mind – a 'wisdom or intelligence' (344b7-8) that shines forth in the soul, and that cannot be captured in linguistic form."[22] On this point Charles Kahn would agree writing that "[...] the nature of reality, the nature of 'true Being,' is imperfectly reflected in our thought, and still more imperfectly expressed in our words."[23] "This is the basic experience in every philosophical endeavor", Hans-Georg Gadamer continues, "in every philosophical discussion [...] The

weakness of the logoi, which is the weakness of all four, is precisely the weakness of our intellect itself which depends upon them. They themselves offer no assurance that the thing itself is there in its true 'disconcealedness'."[24] Around half a century earlier and with a somewhat different attitude we find more of less the same point made by Glenn Morrow: "The region of language is the region of unavoidable vagueness and ambiguity [...] The goal of thought [i.e. in contrast to language], on the other hand, is the region of absolute clarity, the realm of precise meanings."[25] Hence, Francisco Gonzalez concludes 69 years later that "[...] philosophy cannot be expressed in words as other studies can."[26]

The *Seventh Letter* is also most often appreciated primarily for its critique of language. As a point of reference it is most often used in order to argue for the view that there is a fundamental limit to what language can actually accomplish. This is however rarely argued for without a certain important qualification, namely that the letter actually suggests a linguistic method to overcome this limit.

Given what we can read in the letter, many scholars also acknowledge the somewhat perplexing fact that the letter actually suggests that language is the only resource at hand to overcome the limitations of language. The deficiencies of the four epistemological factors can, in other words, be surmounted solely by means of their own natures – and this fact must accordingly be reasonably accounted for. What we therefore must try to understand, as we read the letter, is that "[t]hese four are indeed indispensible for true knowledge", as Gadamer puts it, "[b]ut they are [also] of such a nature that if one avails oneself of them, one can never be sure that with these means the thing itself is displayed in its full, 'disconcealed' intelligibility."[27] The four epistemological factors can, on the one hand, neither be directly applied nor fully trusted in trying to grasp the nature of 'that which is graspable and true' (ὃ γνωστόν τε καὶ ἀληθῶς ἐστιν, 342a), i.e. *the fifth*. Yet, on the other hand, they are the only viable tools at hand. This is the basic problem; and the only way to overcome this apparent gridlock, we read, is by means of rubbing (τρίβω, 344b) them together.

4. Rubbing Together

The process of overcoming the deficiency of language and hence –

if only barely (344b4) – to approach the situation in which we may partake (cf. 342e2) in knowledge of what the soul is looking for, i.e. *the fifth*, can supposedly also be explicated in terms of this rubbing together (τρίβω, 344b5).

In Kenneth Sayre's fruitful attempt to reconcile the teachings of the *Seventh Letter* with Plato's dialogues, he also analyses this process in more detail. According to Sayre, this method of rubbing together is indeed also to be found in them. As matter of fact one of the central notions used to describe this process in the *Seventh Letter*, συνουσία (341c8), is what elsewhere is used to describe the process of a dialogue.

> "'Repeated conversations'", Sayre writes, "are cited in the *Seventh Letter* as necessary for the training of *an aspiring* philosopher. While [the same term] συνουσία commonly means one or another form of non-verbal intercourse, it is also not infrequently used by Plato as synonymous with διάλογος (e.g. *Alc.I* 114D1, *Prot.*310A2, 335B3, 5, C1, 4, *Soph.*217D9, *Epin.991C3*). In this latter use it means 'conversation with a teacher'— i.e. conversation for didactic purposes, for philosophical training."[28]

The latter use is presumably also the one we find in the letter and the process that the letter prescribes in terms of a rub (τριβή, 344b3) could hence be understood as that kind of conversation which we may find in Plato's dialogues. Let us take a look at the passage in which this term, συνουσία, is introduced.

> "For it does not at all admit of verbal expression (ῥητὸν) like other studies, but from repeated conversations (συνουσία) regarding the matter itself and in living with it (συζάω), it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light (φῶς) that is kindled (ἐξάπτω) by a leaping spark (πυρός), and thereafter it nourishes itself."[29]

> "ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἐστιν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα, ἀλλ᾽ ἐκ πολλῆς συνουσίας γιγνομένης περὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα αὐτὸ καὶ τοῦ συζῆν ἐξαίφνης, οἷον ἀπὸ πυρὸς πηδήσαντος ἐξαφθὲν φῶς, ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ γενόμενον αὐτὸ ἑαυτὸ ἤδη τρέφει." (341c-d)

Insofar as we take συνουσία in this context to mean conversation by means of dialogue, the very core of the problem is also explicated here: *What cannot be articulated* (ῥητὸν) *is instead brought about by means of conversation (*συνουσία).

The process of getting to the point where the light of the soul is finally kindled is indeed demanding and it is surely a test of endurance. It is demanding because the process requires not only an engagement just barely within our reach and a critical use of the elements of language and reason, but also because it requires a friendly attitude and an aversion to ill will.

> "but it is merely by means of rubbing (τρίβω) each of them with each other, names and definitions, visions and sense-perceptions, in a friendly (εὐμενής) refutation (ἔλεγχος) by means of cross-examination (ἐλέγχω) employing questions and answers that are void of envy, that there bursts out the light of intelligence and reason regarding each object in the mind of him who uses every effort of which mankind is capable"[30]

> "μόγις δὲ τριβόμενα πρὸς ἄλληλα αὐτῶν ἕκαστα, ὀνόματα καὶ λόγοι ὄψεις τε καὶ αἰσθήσεις, ἐν εὐμενέσιν ἐλέγχοις ἐλεγχόμενα καὶ ἄνευ φθόνων ἐρωτήσεσιν καὶ ἀποκρίσεσιν χρωμένων, ἐξέλαμψε φρόνησις περὶ ἕκαστον καὶ νοῦς, συντείνων ὅτι μάλιστ᾽ εἰς δύναμιν ἀνθρωπίνην." (344b)

Presumably we may understand this friendly rubbing together in terms of conversation (συνουσία). Taking in to account, however,

the way that the notions 'refutation' (ἔλεγχος), 'easily refutable' (εὐέλεγκτος) and 'cross-examining' (ἐλέγχω) are used elsewhere in the letter (343c4, 343d2, 343d9), our friendly conversation is here certainly also given a somewhat critical stance. The names, account, visions and sense-perceptions that are to be rubbed against each other, are presumably not supposed to be refined and enriched by the process. It seems rather to be the case that what the 'rub' (τριβή, 344b3) is supposed to do, is to wear them out (τρίβω, 344b5), to point out their deficiencies and accordingly to refute (ἐλέγχω, 344b7) them.[31] Francisco Gonzalez, in discussing the translation of ἐλέγχω as merely 'testing', puts it even more strongly.

> "He [the writer of the letter] cannot possibly be saying in the present passages that [the four] are simply 'tested' [as Morrow's translations suggests], with the implication that one of them could be found non-defective and irrefutable; he [the writer of the letter] makes it perfectly clear that no proposition [articulated by means of the four] will succeed in expressing a thing's true being."[32]

According to Kenneth Sayre, however, the apparently quite negative stance of the process of rubbing together does also have a productive side to it. According to Sayre, it does indeed result in something quite extraordinary and the product, that is, what "like a light [...] is kindled by a leaping spark [that] thereafter [...] nourishes itself" (341c-d) has at the end also surmounted the difficulties of this process.[33] In the mind of the one who has done his rubbing properly, Sayre also seems to argue, something quite at odds with the negative stance of it does arise.[34] Even if the product of this process is not to be identified with any kind of discursive knowledge, as he argues, it does give rise to a kind of know-how and to a particular *philosophical* state of mind.[35] The fruits of this process are not propositional knowledge, he writes, but they are rather to be understood in terms of "capacities of mental discernments".[36] Arguing in terms of the psychic powers that in the *Sophist* are identified as an ability to distinguish (διακρίνειν, 253e1-2) and in the *Philebus* as an ability to recognize (κατίδῃ, 16d8), Sayre claims that what the philosopher has acquired

is not a doctrine that can be articulated, or anything like that, but it is rather a power of the mind. It is "[...] a state of mind – a 'wisdom and intelligence' (344b7-8) that shines forth in the soul of the philosopher, and that cannot be captured in linguistic form."[37] This does of course also casts its shadow upon the question of how we should understand Plato's dialogues:

> "[...] the fruits of philosophy", Sayre proclaims, "are represented as capacities of mental discernment, and not as arguments expressed in written or spoken language [...] The testimony of the *Seventh Letter*, in effect, is that the dialogues as written documents do not contain *philosophic wisdom*, but at the same time that dialogues like these are an essential part of the regimen by which that wisdom is generated."[38]

Radical as such a conviction that the dialogues are void of *philosophic wisdom* might appear, Sayre's interpretation is surely based upon what is stated in the letter. The problem, however, is that Sayre is actually quite reluctant to specify what kind of ability or 'state of mind' he actually discerns.

In Francisco Gonzalez' treatment of the same passages (on the rubbing together, 344b-c), we are however offered an account of what this ability might amount to; and even if the process of the 'rubbing together', for Gonzalez, just as for Sayre, is interpreted as the only means to overcome the deficiencies of language – and, in effect, the only means by which we may grasp what in the letter is referred to as *the fifth* – Gonzalez does not claim that this rubbing together merely amounts to a 'mental ability', as Sayre. Instead he insists that the result of this process really is a kind of *philosophical knowledge*.[39] Yet, just as Sayre qualifies his account of the philosophical 'state of mind' as a product that is earned and that "[...] cannot be captured in linguistic form"[40], Gonzalez also argues that *philosophical knowledge*, even if acquired by means of a discursive process, is non-propositional and thus beyond the deficiencies of language and the four.[41]

5. A Mystical Union?

Here however there are a few quite peculiar presuppositions that I

am not sure can be traced back to what the letter actually states. It seems to me that both Gonzalez and Sayre appeal to an absolute and perfect kind of know-how, that is ascribed to the philosopher and that at least is not explicit in the letter.[42] The philosopher is, for example, described by Sayre as someone endowed with the powers to distinguish (διακρίνειν, *Soph.*253e1-2) and to recognize (κατίδῃ, *Phil.*16d8) the true structure of the world. Yet, even if that was so, I do not see why this, as such, discerns a philosopher. A good scientist or even any ordinary person, at lest when pressed, could certainly organize the world in genera and species.[43] Furthermore they both make it their task to explain away the negative stance of the rubbing together in terms of the full-blown results that it is supposed to have generated and that accordingly also is ascribed the philosopher. Yet, none of them seems to acknowledge the problem that then naturally follows, namely that we then would need to ascribe the process itself to someone, so to speak, below or inferior to the philosopher, that is, if he has already acquired the final fruits of this labor.

All of this does however fall back on one basic assumption, I believe, namely that the philosopher is already endowed, either with what Sayre calls a 'philosophic wisdom' or with what Gonzalez describes as a philosophical knowledge beyond the obstacles of ordinary language. From this point of view the philosopher is also supposed to be someone that *has* something that the non-philosopher does not have and he must somehow have been in contact with something that the non-philosopher has not, as it were. Hence both Gonzalez and Sayre also assume that knowledge of this something (Gonzalez) – or the power of mind that would be the result of the grasp of it (Sayre) – is beyond the process of conversation.

In order to picture this type of person, however, we must somehow also admit that the letter suggests a kind of intermediate non-linguistic experience, above the process of the rubbing together itself, that gives rise to a non-defective kind of knowledge. This experience must therefore also be different from the process of conversation, since it is supposed to come as a result of the process and since this experience is not supposed to be the conversation itself. What such an account therefore entails – even if this is not made explicit either by Sayre or Gonzalez – is an acknowledgement of something that could be called unmediated apprehension or direct cognition.

In Nicholas White's discussion of Gadamer's account of the letter, the reasons for such an inference are however articulated.

> "Plato's criticism of language, makes no exceptions for language used *in foro interno* as a vehicle of thought. [...] Knowledge that is non-defective, therefore, must be knowledge that is not cast in language or any medium similarly defective – that is, defective in the sense of involving symbols or representations only contingently bound to objects. But since Plato shows no sign of thinking that any symbolic or representational medium lacks this defect, non-defective knowledge must dispense with anything of that kind and be in that sense *direct cognition*."[44]

The premises here used in order to conclude that non-defective knowledge must be direct cognition, are more or less the same as those used by Sayre and Gonzalez. It is because of the defects of language, as arbitrary symbols, that non-defective knowledge, i.e. the alleged knowledge of the philosopher, must be beyond language.

The reason, according to White, for why any such non-defective knowledge must be the result of direct cognition is because of the possibility of mistaken inferences, that is, due to the gap between the object cognized and the cognition of the cognizer.

> "[non-defective knowledge does] not involve a formulation in symbols, or any representation in the mind of the cognizer because that would impose the risk of a mistaken inference (particularly one that could confuse *ti* and *poion*, as noted) from features of what was in the cognizer's mind to features of the things cognized."[45]

The only way for non-defective knowledge to arise, is hence through a kind of union between the object and the knower. Only if the gap between knowledge and object is eliminated can a non-defective knowledge arise – and any acknowledgement of the philosopher as someone already in possession of such a non-defective knowledge, does, in one way or another, assume that he has actually experienced such a mystical unification.

6. Philosophy as Search

Now, if the writer of the letter would have wanted to claim that the grasp of *the fifth* would be the product of such a union and not of the conversational process itself, one might wonder why this is not argued for. In fact, the writer of the letter never makes any such claim. Although he does write that the insights of philosophical conversation do arise suddenly (ἐξαίφνης, 341c9), like light (φῶς, 341d1) enkindled by a leaping spark (πυρός, 341c9), this is presumably the product of a discursive rubbing together in the form of a dialogue and not of anything else.[46] The description of the philosopher that we actually get in the letter is in any case not a description of a meditating sage, but of someone searching by means of rubbing and conversing.

There are at lest a few explicit passages in the letter that do seem to suggest that the philosopher is a searcher and not yet a sage (cf. 340b-c, 341a, 343c1-2, 343c7-8). One of them, that I would like to taken into account, we find in the very beginning of the so-called philosophical digression. Here the writer of the letter describes a kind of simple philosophical test (πεῖρα, 340b5) of endurance. Or more precisely, it is a test that makes it plain whether or not someone is enkindled (ἐξάπτω, 340b2) by philosophy (φιλοσοφία) as it were by fire (ὥσπερ πυρός, 340b3) – wordings very much similar to the description of the one enkindled (ἐξάπτω, 341d1) by conversation (συνουσία, 341c8). What one must do, we read, in order to find this out, is described thus:

> "To such persons one must point out what the subject is as a whole, and what its character, and how many preliminary subjects it entails and how much labor. For on hearing this, if he is truly philosophic, in sympathy with the subject and worthy of it, because divinely gifted, he believes that he has been shown a marvelous pathway and that he must brace himself at once to follow it, and that life will not be worth living if he does otherwise."[47]
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> "δεικνύναι δὴ δεῖ τοῖς τοιούτοις ὅτι ἔστι πᾶν τὸ πρᾶγμα οἷόν τε καὶ δι᾽ ὅσων πραγμάτων καὶ ὅσον πόνον ἔχει. ὁ γὰρ ἀκούσας, ἐὰν μὲν ὄντως ᾖ

> φιλόσοφος οἰκεῖός τε καὶ ἄξιος τοῦ πράγματος θεῖος ὤν, ὁδόν τε ἡγεῖται θαυμαστὴν ἀκηκοέναι συντατέον τε εἶναι νῦν καὶ οὐ βιωτὸν ἄλλως ποιοῦντι" (340b-c)

The philosopher, we read, that is, the one enkindled by philosophy as by fire, is evidently not described as a sage sojourning at the end of the road, but rather as someone that has found a way of life that is worth living (βιωτός) and hence a path (ὁδός) to follow. This is not a description of someone that through his union with the object has found out the final truths of reality, but rather an image of someone with a burning desire to pursue the demanding paths of hard intellectual labor.

7. Being in-between

The problem, however, is that we for this reasons cannot of course merely dismiss the notion of the philosophical position as the position of the sage, in favor for an idea of the philosopher as someone that does not know what he is looking for at all. No, the philosopher's quest is presumably not blind, but on the right path. He does seem to have some good reasons, we might assume, to dedicate his life to the pursuit of *being* and *the fifth*. Hence the philosopher must certainly be admitted to be somehow familiar with the object of his pursuits. Yet, as the test of the philosopher bears witness to, this familiarity does not amount to the fact that he already knows what he is looking for.

Besides the fact that the writer of the letter repeatedly writes that the soul of the philosopher must somehow be naturally akin to the object of his search and that he cannot have a hostile (ἀλλότριος) disposition (ἕξις) from the beginning (cf.343e-344b), there is also another passage at the middle of the digression that might help us to identify him.

> "[I]n all cases where we compel a man to give the Fifth as his answer and to explain it, anyone who is able and willing to upset the argument gains the day, and makes the person who is expounding his view by speech or writing or answers appear to most of his hearers to be wholly ignorant of the subjects about which he is attempting to write or speak."

> "ἐν οἷς δ᾽ ἂν τὸ πέμπτον ἀποκρίνασθαι καὶ δηλοῦν ἀναγκάζωμεν, ὁ βουλόμενος τῶν δυναμένων ἀνατρέπειν κρατεῖ. καὶ ποιεῖ τὸν ἐξηγούμενον ἐν λόγοις ἢ γράμμασιν ἢ ἀποκρίσεσιν τοῖς πολλοῖς τῶν ἀκουόντων δοκεῖν μηδὲν γιγνώσκειν ὧν ἂν ἐπιχειρῇ γράφειν ἢ λέγειν"(343d)

Insofar as we admit that it is the philosopher who is the one whose endeavor it is to explicate and to grasp the nature of the fifth, this passage also situates the philosopher as a kind of in-between being.[48] The description we are here offered of the one trying to articulate the fifth is neither a description of a wise man nor of a fool, for that matter – even if he might appear closer the latter. He surely acknowledges the fact that he is supposed to articulate the fifth and he knows, in his heart, we might assume, that there is such a thing. Yet, as he tries to articulate it, he appears to his listeners (or readers) to be quite ignorant about the matter. This apparent ignorance is however not caused by the deficiency of his soul, we read, but by the weakness of language and of the four.

> "[...] as we mentioned a moment ago the main point is this, that while there are two objects of search, *being* and *howness*, and the soul seeks to know not *the howness* but *the whatness*, each of the four offers to the soul in word and in deed that which is not sought; and by thus causing each object which is described or exhibited to be always easy of refutation (εὐέλεγκτος) by the senses, it fills practically all men with all manner of perplexity (ἀπορίας) and confusion (ἀσάφεια)."[49]

> "τὸ [...] μέγιστον, ὅπερ εἴπομεν ὀλίγον ἔμπροσθεν, ὅτι δυοῖν ὄντοιν, τοῦ τε ὄντος καὶ τοῦ ποιοῦ τινος, οὐ τὸ ποιόν τι, τὸ δὲ τί, ζητούσης εἰδέναι τῆς ψυχῆς, τὸ μὴ ζητούμενον ἕκαστον τῶν τεττάρων προτεῖνον τῇ ψυχῇ λόγῳ τε καὶ κατ᾽ ἔργα, αἰσθήσεσιν εὐέλεγκτον τό τε λεγόμενον καὶ δεικνύμενον ἀεὶ παρεχόμενον

> ἕκαστον, ἀπορίας τε καὶ ἀσαφείας ἐμπίμπλησι πάσης ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν πάντ᾽ ἄνδρα." (343b-c)

The perplexity (ἀπορία) and confusion (ἀσάφεια) that fill the one trying to explicate *being* by means of the four, we learn, do not arise because of his ignorance, but they are caused by the weakness (ἀσθενές, 343a1) and deceitfulness of these means.[50] This explanation does however not come without qualification; and as a matter of fact, it is in this qualification that we find the clearest discrimination between the one who *is* engaged with *the fifth* and those who are content with *the four*:

> "Now in those matters in which, because of our defective training, we are not accustomed to look for truth but are satisfied with the first images suggested to us, we can ask and answer without making ourselves ridiculous to one another, being proficient in manipulating and testing these four instruments."[51]

> "ἐν οἷσι μὲν οὖν μηδ᾽ εἰθισμένοι τὸ ἀληθὲς ζητεῖν ἐσμεν ὑπὸ πονηρᾶς τροφῆς, ἐξαρκεῖ δὲ τὸ προταθὲν τῶν εἰδώλων, οὐ καταγέλαστοι γιγνόμεθα ὑπ᾽ ἀλλήλων, οἱ ἐρωτώμενοι ὑπὸ τῶν ἐρωτώντων, δυναμένων δὲ τὰ τέτταρα διαρρίπτειν τε καὶ ἐλέγχειν" (343c-d)

The qualification that the writer of the letter here articulates is presumably a qualification of the non-philosopher, at least insofar as we acknowledge that it is the philosopher who seeks what the soul seeks. From this point of view, the superior position of the philosopher identified by Sayre and Gonzalez is really turned upside down. It is now the philosopher, i.e. the one trying to give *the fifth* as his answer, and not anyone else, that is made to look quite ridiculous (καταγέλαστος, cf. 343c5-9). The one who is satisfied with what the four have to offer, however, is not. It is not when satisfied with mere *howness* (τὸ ποιόν τι), but when trying to articulate (λέγω) or

to point out (δείκνυμι) *being* (τὸ ὄν), that perplexity (ἀπορία) and confusion (ἀσάφεια, 343c) arise.

These states of mind might supposedly be brought about for other reasons than philosophical and they are certainly not univocal signs of the philosopher's commitment. Yet, they can nevertheless be taken to be necessary, even if not sufficient, evidence for the fact that his pursuit of *the fifth* is honest, that is, insofar as the philosophical process is supposed to be an articulated affair. Although these states of mind certainly are not the goal of his search they do appear to bear witness to his in-between situation. It is at lest certainly the case that if someone does claim that he is trying to articulate the fifth, that is, by means of the four, and everything seems clear and final, we can be quite sure that he is lying and that he not a philosopher.[52]

8. Summary and Conclusion

Now, with all of this in consideration and insofar as we are to try to understand what the grasping of *the fifth* actually entails, what the subject matter of the philosophical digression was – i.e. Plato's teachings – and furthermore what *being* (τὸ ὄν), in contrast to *howness* (τὸ ποῖον τι), actually amounts to, it is, in conclusion, a search that we need to be studying and not an end. In contrast to its end, this search is also clearly discussed and qualified in the letter.

First of all we may presumably understand it as a rubbing together, that is, as an examination and a refutation (ἔλεγχος, 344b) of the four epistemological factors, resulting in kindling the light of intelligence (φρόνησις) and reason (νοῦς, 344b-c). Besides being directed and motivated by what the soul seeks to know, i.e. by *the fifth*, what we know of this search is, in summary, that it is not an easy task: The philosopher must use every possible means available and, we read, concentrate (συντείνω, 344b) his mind to the utmost possible and therefore rub (τρίβω, 344b3) the tools available to him, until they ignite,.

What shines forth (ἐκλάμπω, 344b8) from this process of rubbing together can presumably also be said to converge with the light (φῶς, 341d1) that is supposed to be enkindled (ἐξάπτω, 341d1) by conversation (συνουσία, 341c8); and as a conversation we may also

assume that the search that we are here dealing with comes in the form of an articulated dialogue – guided by spoken or written questions and answers (cf.344b). It does not seem to be necessary to invoke any super-linguistic interaction here. The light of intelligence and reason that this process is to kindle is most likely not the result of some kind of mystical union, that *in turn* gives rise to this light, but the result of the conversation itself.

Insofar as the process of rubbing together and the conversation in the form of a dialogue both have *the fifth* as their end, they may also presumably be understood in terms of the description of what happens when someone does try to give this as his answer. Thus it is also plausible to assume that the description of the aporetic situation in which someone is trying to articulate *the fifth*, that is, by means of the four, is also a description of the process of conversation and of rubbing together.

So, (1) the rubbing together, (2) the continual conversation and (3) the perplexing attempts to give the fifth as the answer, are for these reasons presumably to be identified as fundamental aspects of the philosophical life characterized in the letter; and insofar as we are to track down the paths of this philosopher, capture the nature of his desire and eventually get to the point where we can actually grasp what his souls seeks to know, the understanding of these three must presumably be given our most serious attention.

Such an account of the teachings of the seventh letter does of course raise more questions than it answers, not only in terms of the details of these processes, but also in terms of what they really are supposed to get at.[53] Yet, insofar as the letter does not actually perform the search it describes, we must also acknowledge that it, by itself, cannot be used as the sole material in order to answer these questions. The philosophical digression of the seventh letter is neither, we might plausibly assume, a rubbing together, a continual conversation, nor an attempt to give *the fifth* as the answer. It is rather a commentary on the dialogues, i.e. of the texts where these tasks presumably are to take place. The only way for us to actually try to answer the questions that it raises is to pose these questions to the dialogues.[54]

Here however, the problem of the letter's authenticity surfaces. If we are to use the philosophical reflections of the seventh letter as a kind of guide, providing decisive questions to pose to the dialogues,

its origin and authorship surely is of great importance – a subject matter that, as noted, has been heavily debated over the years.[55] The best way to continue this debate, however, is, I believe, to keep on investigating whether or not the message of the letter is also to be found in the dialogues. As such, in fact, the letter can also be used as a hypothetical guide, so to speak, regardless of the status of its authenticity that will or will not be confirmed by the interpretations of the dialogues that we engage in. In evaluating whether or not the message of the letter does converge with what the dialogues, respectively, have to say, we may in effect be able to further qualify the relation between the philosophical digression of the seventh letter and the dialogues.[56]

Notes

1. Kierkegaard, Søren, 1989, *The Concept of Irony*, p.46.

2.There has been a long-running debate on the authenticity of this letter; and the fact of the matter is probably, as Julia Annas concludes, that the most secure positions to take in this debate is to suspend judgment. See Annas, especially p.75ff. As I take it, the letter is an important source of reflection on Plato's philosophy overall, even if it was not written by Plato himself. Whether or not we take the letter to be authentic it must nevertheless be regarded as a piece of evidence that should be taken into account in any general interpretation of the philosophy of Plato.

For a survey of the debate regarding the authenticity of the letter see Luc Brisson's edition of the Letters from 1987. Brisson offers a discussion of how the authenticity of the letters has been regarded from Ficino in 1484 to Kurz in 1983. Of the thirteen texts known as Plato's letters the Seventh is the one that is most often held to be authentic, as Brisson also emphasizes. As Annas points out however, "[...] there is something questionable about the widespread modern habit of assuming that the seventh 'letter' alone could be genuine, although no scholar would hold that the entire corpus of thirteen 'letters' could possibly be genuine, and then discussing it in a kind of scholarly void," p.75. Annas' suggestion, which in some sense undermines the authenticity debate, is that we should regard then letters as contributions to the literary genre of letters and not regard them in the literal sense as personal letters. See Annas, p. 75.

For a further discussion of the *Seventh Letter's* authenticity see for example, Morrow, R, Glenn, 1929, *The Theory of Knowledge in Plato's Seventh Letter,* arguing for, or Edelstein, Ludwig, 1966, *Plato's Seventh Letter*, arguing against. For a discussion see Sayre, 1992, *A Maieutic View of Five Late Dialogues* or his *Plato's Literary Garden,* from 1995, especially p.xviii-xxii. See also Gonzales, J, Francisco, 1998, *Nonpropositional Knowledge in Plato*, especially p.243-253. Gonzales makes an important point, namely that the only question we can actually answer, and to which we therefore should restrict our attempts, is whether or not what is to be found in the letter can also be found in the

dialogues; and if so, the impact of the letter becomes greater, of course, than if not. See also below.

The perhaps most famous modern philological debate regarding the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* was initiated in *Mind*, April 1968 by A.D.Winspear, A.Q.Morton and M. Levison, arguing on stylometric grounds that the author of the seventh letter might be Speusippus, i.e. Plato's nephew, who later took over the Academy after Plato's death around 348 B.C. This view was however challenged by Philip Deane, in his *Stylometrics do not Exclude the Seventh Letter,* in *Mind*, from 1973, vol.82, where he shows that a stylometric analysis does *not* rule out the seventh letter as an authentic text by Plato. For a further discussion of stylometry, modern computer based style analysis and their consequences on the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter,* see Sayre, 1995, especially p.xxii, citing Leger concluding that "Epistle 7 is nowadays accepted by the majority of scholars [...] it hardly seems necessary to rehearse once more the arguments pro and contra. The importance of having its authenticity confirmed is that it will now be possible to rely on the long excursus on the nature of reality (342A-344C) with confidence as a guide to Plato's later thoughts", Ledger, 1989, p.25

3. I here write 'supplemented' instead of 'broken off', as many commentators have it, because I do not believe that the pages that make up this philosophical digression can or should be taken from their native soil in the narrative of the letter, even if they, as Gadamer puts it, "[...] are characterized by the author of the letter as a self-citation and possess an inner completeness and unity which clearly distinguish them from the letter itself", p.97.

   The opinion that the letter is 'broken off' in a stronger sense has sometimes been taken as evidence for the fact that that this part is spurious, and in effect the entire letter is also. As Sayre argues, however, it seems strange that a forger would do such a drastic move if he wanted his forgery to blend in. In fact, the strangeness of the philosophical digression rather speaks in favor for the letter than against it. See Sayre, 1992, p.230. See also Brisson for a discussion of the digression and the consequences of its peculiarity, especially p.145ff. Moreover, even if the *Seventh Letter* would be merely a good forgery, it was nevertheless made to coincide with the teachings of Plato and to blend in with it, by someone that knew them well, and in effect it is still an important commentary on the dialogues as a whole.
4. The writer of the letter is in particular discussing the misinterpretation of Dionysius, who according to the letter had claimed to know the most important doctrines and even written them down (341a-b). The writer does however also discuss other active and prospective writers (341c-d) and his defense against misinterpretations has clearly a general stance. Another sign of this is of course that the letter is addressed to a crown of people, i.e. "τοῖς Δίωνος οἰκείοις τε καὶ ἑταίροις", "to Dion's associates and friends", 323d, and not to any particular person.
5. Whatever these matters are, they are not stated explicit as they are introduced in the letter around 340a. When they are introduced the writer of the letter is discussing the hard and laborious life that pertains to the study of philosophy, or

at least to the fact that this is what is necessary to say to anyone wanting to study philosophy in order to test the strength of his or her character. Later in the letter we learn that these matters apparently have to do with "ἔστιν τῶν ὄντων ἑκάστῳ", "each thing that is" (342a) and in effect with what is referred to as "ὃ [...] γνωστόν τε καὶ ἀληθῶς ἐστιν", "that which is graspable and true" (342a-b). At the end of the digression these matters are claimed to be "περὶ φύσεως ἄκρων καὶ πρώτων", "about the highest and first truths of nature' (344d). A few pages before that we learn that they amout to "τὸ ψεῦδος ἅμα καὶ ἀληθὲς τῆς ὅλης οὐσίας", i.e. to "what is false and at the same time true of the whole of existence", 344b2-3.

6. All translations of the quotes from the *Seventh Letter* are Bury's if not otherwise stated. When they are modified or when the translations are my own I have so indicated. I have also continuously consulted the newest translation of the letter by Glenn Morrow, but found that I most often prefer the translations made by Bury.
7. Written words always run the risk of being treated as if they were more than reminders (ὑπόμνημα, 344d10) we are told, for those who already are apt to discover the matters on their own. These remarks, even if they were not written by Plato himself, can surely be traced back to and intertwined with the argument at end of *Phaedrus*. From *Phaedrus* we learn that the one who thinks that the written word (ĤóĖĪī ĖĜĖĪáĥĥĜĦĪī, 275d) can be used as anything other than as a reminder (ὑπόμνημα, 275a) of things already known is surely a fool (cf. 275d). The wordings here clearly makes the same point as the passage in the *Seventh Letter* where the writer of the letter continues to explain that the writings of Dionysius were not merely meant as reminders or as aids to memory (ὑπόμνημα) and that this shows that his writings were not based on sound teaching or study (344d-e).
   Plato's critique at the end of *Phaedrus* might however be taken to be merely a critique of the written word (Ĭύγγραμμα), in favor for the spoken, and hence the passages in the *Phaedrus* would not be in accordance with the letter. A close reading of the passage in the *Phaedrus* (274b4-279c) where the critique of the written word is articulated does however destabilize any such clear-cut view. As has been argued, it is not obvious that Plato's critique of language is exhausted by the claim that the spoken word does the job that the written cannot: "A careful reading of either text [the *Seventh Letter* and *Phaedrus*]", Sayre writes, "[...] discloses a general disqualification of any system of perceptible symbols as a vehicle for the transmission of philosophical knowledge.", Sayre, 1992, p.231. See also Ferrari, p.204 or Brisson, p.147 and p.155-158. Today the most famous interpretation, belonging to the tradition of taking the critique of language in *Phaedrus* to be in favor for the spoken word, is probably Derrida's *La Pharmacie de Platon* in *Dissémination*, from 1972. See Ferrari for a discussion, especially p.214ff.
8. Translation by Bury, modified. See also below.
9. The verb νοέω means according to LSJ "to perceive by the mind, apprehend". Accordingly τὰ νενοημένα means something like that or those things which are perceived by the mind.

10. This passage, and the philosophical digression of the *Seventh Letter* overall, is one of the stronger textual evidence, from Plato, for the esoteric tradition in modern Platonic scholarship dealing with Plato's alleged 'unwritten doctrine'. For a nuanced introduction in English to the esoteric tradition see Szlezák, Alexander Thomas, 1999, *Reading Plato*. For a critical discussion in relation to the *Seventh Letter* see Sayre, 1995, especially p.11ff, arguing that neither this passage in the *Seventh Letter* nor the other, for the esoteric school, is as important as the end of *Phaedrus* (around 275) where Plato leaves the spoken word untouched, as the power of the written is diminished.
11. The fourth factor – knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) – is here also analyzed as consisting not only of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) but also of intelligence (νοῦς) and true opinion (ἀληθής τε δόξα); and of them it is the intelligent (νοῦς) part that is most akin to the fifth. They are nevertheless all more related to the fifth that the first three (342c-d). The difference in epistemological optimism between Aristotle and Plato does according to Drew Hyland also shine forth in this passage: "For Aristotle in, in his famous account of the modes of *aletheuein* in book 6 of the *Nichomachean Etics*, delineates, among the others, *episteme* and *nous* as 'not admitting of being false'. Plato's view seems at once less optimistic and more complex: as part of 'the four,' *episteme*, *nous* and *alethes doxa* are *also* 'week' and 'defective'. Our *episteme and even our nous* are sufficiently dependent on language to share the finitude conferred by it. [...] Plato, unlike Aristotle, does not seem to demand of these two modes of knowing that they be infallible. They can be, they are, *but are still knowing and insight* [...] This fallibility means that there will always be an element of aporia in our claim to knowledge and insight; and so if we understand ourselves, the *stance of questioning* that the dialogues exhibit so well will always be necessary.", Hyland, 2008, p.112.
12. The account or definition (λόγος) is according to the letter composed (σύγκειμαι) of name (ὄνομα) and verb (ῥῆμα). These words could here also be translated as subject and predicate. See Sedley, 2009, p.214f. The account or definition (λόγος) is furthermore explicated with an example, saying "that which is everywhere equidistant from the extremities to the center", "τὸ γὰρ ἐκ τῶν ἐσχάτων ἐπὶ τὸ μέσον ἴσον ἀπέχον πάντῃ" (342b7-8).
13. There is no word in the Greek that corresponds to what is here called a 'factor'. I am just using it for the sake of the argument. The only word that perhaps could be said to categorize them is the noun διαγωγή (343e1) insofar as this notion implies the passing through *stages* or via certain *station* or *places*. "ἡ δὲ διὰ πάντων αὐτῶν διαγωγή, ἄνω καὶ κάτω μεταβαίνουσα ἐφ᾽ ἕκαστον, μόγις ἐπιστήμην ἐνέτεκεν εὖ πεφυκότος εὖ πεφυκότι"(343d-e).
14. I have here modified the Bury translation that I am using quite a lot. His original translation runs thus "[...] as we mentioned a moment ago the main point is this, that while there are two separate things, the real essence and the quality, and the soul seeks to know not the quality but the essence, each of the Four proffers to the soul either in word or in concrete form that which is not sought". Morrow's translation runs thus: "[...] the most important point is what I said earlier: that of the two object of search – the particular quality and the being of an object – the

soul seeks to know no the quality but the essence, whereas each of the four instruments presents to the soul, in discourse and in example, what she is not seeking."

15. Bury's translation, modified. Italics my own.
16. On the face of it, and according to this explanation, the fifth factor is just as 'over and above' as the Good in the *Republic* (509b), whose nature Socrates reluctantly (506d-e) depicts in the three famous images (504e, 509d and 514a). In the *Republic*, however, Socrates does not explicitly explain why he at first is so reluctant. In the *Seventh Letter*, the writer does. That these passages refer to the same matter is not thereby proven, but the parallel is important and needs to be further investigated. There are obviously some restraints in the *Republic*, similar to those in the letter, that hinder direct articulation of the Good and that in effect necessitate the invocation of similes and indirect communication. See Gonzalez, 1998b, especially p. 209-245.
17. Bury's translation. Modified. Notice here that the writer uses the notion of knowledge as having the fifth as its object. See also below.
18. The rubbing or wearing out here prescribed is also suggested as a way to pursue the matter in Plato's *Republic* (Book IV, 434e). There the imagery is also made explicit insofar as the two images of justice – in the individual and in the city – are supposed to be rubbed against each other until justice lights up, as if we were rubbing two sticks together.
19. Bury's translation, modified. The friendly attitude and the generous discussion here prescribed are of course of utmost importance; and this description of the art of philosophical conversation surely reminds us of what Plato's has to say about this elsewhere, as for example in the *Republic* (454a), where he contrasts the friendly dialectics with futile eristics, or in the *Meno* (75c-d) where the more sensitive and inclusive attitude of dialectics is compared with the harsh prove-your-point-attitude of eristics. See below also for a discussion of the refutation and cross-examination here prescribed.
20. In order not to confuse these different uses, however, we must know them quite well and it is only by the careful study of them that we can avoid their deceptive powers: "[...] it is the methodical study of all these stages [the four], passing in turn from one to another, up and down, which with difficulty implants knowledge", "ἡ [...] διὰ πάντων αὐτῶν διαγωγή, ἄνω καὶ κάτω μεταβαίνουσα ἐφ᾽ ἕκαστον, μόγις ἐπιστήμην ἐνέτεκεν" (343e1-2).
21. See for example Sayre, Kenneth, 1992, 1995 and 1998, Gonzalez, J, Francisco, 1995, 1998a and 1998b, Gadamer, Hans-George, 1980, Brisson, Luc, 1987, While, P, Nicholas, 1988, Morrow, R, Glenn, 1929, Kahn, H. Charles, 1996, Ferrari, G. F. R., 1987 or Hyland, Drew, 2008.
22. Sayre, 1992, p.234.
23. Kahn, p.392.
24. Gadamer, p.105. Disconcealedness is, I would presume, Gadamer's way to appeal to Heidegger's interpretation of ἀλήθεια. See Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth.*
25. Morrow, p.338.

26.Gonzales, 1998a, p.243. For a further discussion of the letter see also Hyland, Drew, 2008, *Plato and the Question of Beauty.*
27. Gadamer, p.104.
28. Sayre, 1992, p.233. My italics.
29. Bury's translation, modified.
30. Translation by Bury. Modified.
31. The words used to qualify this process, τριβή (344b3) and τρίβω (344b5) and can mean 'a rub' or 'rub'. τρίβω can however also mean 'to wear out' (as one wears out clothes) or 'to waste' (as in money or time); and even if this rubbing here is supposed to result in the 'light of intelligence and reason', the very process itself surely does seems to have a refutational character. See LSJ.
32. Gonzalez, 1998, p.266. Morrow's translation of the passages in question runs thus: "Only when all of these things – names, definitions, and visual and other perceptions – have been rubbed against one another and tested, pupil and teacher asking and answering in good will and without envy – only then, when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort, can they illuminate the nature of any object."
33. See Sayre, 1992, p.323. This passage and the description of the hard and demanding process of philosophy are moreover, according to Sayre, reminiscent of what is going on in the *Theaetetus*: "Even more striking is the parallel between the philosophical regimen in the *Seventh Letter* and the maieutic process described by Socrates in the *Theaetetus.* In comparing his art with that of his mother, Socrates recount the case of Aristides, who like many other youths, seeks renewal of his conversation with the 'midwife' Socrates. Accepting those whom his daemon sanctions, Socrates refers the rest to teachers like Prodicus. Those who remain are filled with difficulties (ἀπορίας, 151A6) by day and night, greater than those of a woman in labour. In the language of the *Seventh Letter*, they 'live with the matter', 'persisting in hard work' until the time of delivery. But when the time comes they produce 'many beautiful discoveries' [...] Then, in response to the midwife's questioning – the friendly cross-examination of the *Seventh Letter* – the birth is tested for viability", p.233.
34. See Sayre, 1992, p.232.
35. Sayre, 1992, p.232f.
36. Sayre, 1992, p.233.
37. Sayre, 1992, p.234f. For an elaboration on the cultivating simile see his book *Plato's Literary Garden*, from 1995.
38. Sayre, 1992, p.233f. My italics.
39. Gonzales, 1998a, p.252. Gonzales insists on calling also the grasp of the fifth, which would be a more timid description, *knowledge.* In some sense he is also entitled to this. The word knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) in the *Seventh Letter* is not a technical term, and it is as a matter of fact used both to denote the fourth part of the basic analysis and the fifth part. Gonzalez refers his use especially to this passage: "[...] it is the methodical study of all these stages [the four], passing in turn from one to another, up and down, which with difficulty implants knowledge, when the man himself, like his object, is of a fine nature", "ἡ [...] διὰ πάντων αὐτῶν διαγωγή, ἄνω καὶ κάτω μεταβαίνουσα ἐφ᾽ ἕκαστον, μόγις

ἐπιστήμην ἐνέτεκεν εὖ πεφυκότος εὖ πεφυκότι" (343e1-2). In my discussion of Gonzalez views I will henceforth employ his use of the word.

40. Sayre, 1992, p.234.
41. See Gonzalez, 1998a, p.253. Gonzalez has a quite substantial account of what non-propositional knowledge entails, which is elaborated in terms of *practical knowledge*, *reflective knowledge* or *self-knowledge* and in terms of *knowledge of unanalyzable objects*. See Gonzalez, 1998a, especially p.240-242. The basic idea however, if I have understood it correctly, which also disperses many of the presuppositions of what non-propositional actually involves, falls back on his example of skiing; and one can surely know how to ski, without being able to explain it in words. In this sense Gonzalez's account in many respects resembles Sayre's idea of a philosophical 'state of mind', ever if their wordings are different. See Gonzalez, 1998b or his article *Self-knowledge, Practical Knowledge, and Insight*, from 1995. Sayre's account of a philosophical state of mind or ability to distinguish can be said to coincide with Gonzalez notion of non-propositional knowledge in terms of some kind of non-linguistic know-how. See also below.

    Gonzalez' discussion of non-propositional knowledge is of course not unprecedented and there is a quite extensive discussion on the nature of non-propositional knowledge in ancient thought, even thought the focus is more on Plotinus than on Plato. See for example, R. Sorabji, 1983, *Myths about Non-Propositional Thought* or A. C. Lloyd, 1986, *Non-Propositional Thought in Plotinus*.
42. They both take it for granted, perhaps adequately, that the one we are here dealing with is the philosopher. It is he who answers to the quest of the soul. The search for being (τὸ ὄν) is his quest; and whatever the results of the rubbing together might amount to, it affects him and it is in his soul that its effects take place.
43. See Sayre, 1992, p.234f. I owe this remark to Pauliina Remes.
44. White, p.253. My italics.
45. White, p.254.
46. It is hence really not necessary to assume that the writer of the letter had in mind a philosophical knowledge that was as ineffable as it was mystical. In someway I basically also agree with Kahn, as he dismantles the idea of a Platonic mysticism: "The flame that leaps from one soul to another is not a trance experience nor the result of silent meditation, but the light of understanding that dawns after much rational discussion and explanation. Nowhere does Plato attempt to blur or transcend the distinction between knowing subject and object known. [...] The path to understanding such reality [the fifth] is wholly rational," Kahn, p.391. One might here of course object, saying that such a demystifying point of view does not account for the rupture and suddenness that is here central to the description of what actually happen when someone has done his rubbing properly; and something remarkable is here definitely going on. The word used in the letter, depicting this rupture of understanding, as it is caused by repeated conversations and hence kindled like a light in the soul of the one that has lived together with the matter for quite some time, is ἐξαίφνης (341c). This word is

also the word Diotima uses in the *Symposium* when she explains how the vision suddenly changes for the one engaged in love; and when one sees Beauty for the very first time, it is sudden (ἐξαίφνης) and without residue. For a discussion see Hyland, p.56 or Edelstein, p.107, n.81. In the *Parmenides*, Plato also discusses the nature of τὸ ἐξαίφνης – which we might translate as 'the moment' or 'the instant' – in terms of that strange (ἄτοπος) in-between thing that is neither movement nor rest (156d-e).

47. These wordings do of course remind us of what Socrates has to say about the unexamined life in the *Apology* (38a).
48. This kind of situation, as you might have noticed, is quite similar to the what is known as *Meno's Paradox*, articulated in Plato's dialogue *Meno,* where Socrates famously discusses why learning or searching is not possible: If we know the object we are looking for, we do not need to search for it, yet if we do not know it, then we do not even know what we are looking for and hence cannot even begin to search (80d-e); and as a matter of fact, this kind of in-between situation – neither wise nor ignorant – is undeniably also quite similar to the in-between situation of the one who more that anyone else pursues the path of philosophy, namely Love, as he is depicted in the *Symposium*: "[...] So that Love must needs be a friend of wisdom, and, as such, must be between wise and ignorant. This again is a result for which he has to thank his origin: for while he comes of a wise and resourceful father, his mother is unwise and resourceless", "ὥστε ἀναγκαῖον ἔρωτα φιλόσοφον εἶναι, φιλόσοφον δὲ ὄντα μεταξὺ εἶναι σοφοῦ καὶ ἀμαθοῦς. αἰτία δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ τούτων ἡ γένεσις: πατρὸς μὲν γὰρ σοφοῦ ἐστι καὶ εὐπόρου, μητρὸς δὲ οὐ σοφῆς καὶ ἀπόρου" (203e-204a).
49. Translation by Bury, modified.
50. This passage might appear to claim that the perplexity and uncertainty caused by the senses or by any of the four, for that matter, as they present what is opposite to the nature of the fifth, is merely bad and corrupting. However, as this is explicated in the *Republic* we need not to judge the perplexity of the situation as such. Only when the mind is provoked by contradictory and aporetic (ἀπορεῖν, 524a) appearances, we read, is reflection awakened. "This, then, is just what I was trying to explain a little while ago when I said that some things are provocative of thought and some are not, defining as provocative things that impinge upon the senses together with their opposites, while those that do not I said do not tend to awaken reflection." (Shorey's translation). "ταῦτα τοίνυν καὶ ἄρτι ἐπεχείρουν λέγειν, ὡς τὰ μὲν παρακλητικὰ τῆς διανοίας ἐστί, τὰ δ᾽ οὔ, ἃ μὲν εἰς τὴν αἴσθησιν ἅμα τοῖς ἐναντίοις ἑαυτοῖς ἐμπίπτει, παρακλητικὰ ὁριζόμενος, ὅσα δὲ μή, οὐκ ἐγερτικὰ τῆς νοήσεως" (the *Republic*, 524d). For a discussion of the relation between the *Seventh Letter* and the *Republic* see Gonzalez, 1998a, p.276-283, or his book *Dialectic and Dialogue*, from 1998b, especially p. 209-245. See also below.
51. Morrow's translation. Modified.
52. One conclusion to be drawn from this would perhaps be that the philosopher and the non-philosopher are dealing with different objects. On the one hand one could hence argue that the philosopher has really grasped or understood something that the non-philosopher has not, namely the fifth. This would

accordingly amount to an insight of the philosopher that the non-philosopher lacks. Yet, on the other hand and insofar as the method that the letter prescribes to overcome the deficiencies of the four epistemological factors does not involve anything besides them, but is a rubbing together of them, this would really not make sense. It seems misleading indeed to argue that knowledge of the fifth has another object than the four not only because the writer of the letter is quite explicit in arguing that it is only be means of the four that access to the fifth is possible (342e), but also because in the example he offers, of a circle, the four and the fifth have obviously to do with the same thing: The circle itself is the fifth and the four consist of its name, its account, its image and the knowledge of it (342b). The difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher can therefore not be said to be that the former has something that the latter does not have. It is rather the other way around. It is the philosopher who lacks something that the non-philosopher has not even realized that he is in need of.

53. How can we, for example, understand the peculiar in-between situation of the philosopher insofar as he is supposed to both know and not know the object of his search? And if language is an insufficient tool to articulate the fifth, how can we ever distinguish the philosopher, who is looking for it, from the sage that presumably has already grasped it? Will they not both appear exactly the same, that is, ridiculous? And how shall we furthermore understand the fact that the fifth and the four all have to do with the same object?
54. As I have tried to point out in the notes above, there are indeed several passages throughout the dialogues that do intersect with the letter in several ways, i.e. passages that indicated that the teachings of the seventh letter do coincide with teachings of the dialogues. Besides these more specific parallels there is also a more general parallel to be made in terms of the description of the kind of conversation that is necessary in order for the light of intelligence and reason to shine forth. In the letter this is described, among other things, as a friendly refutation/cross-examination (ἔλεγχος, 344b7). This, of course, is the same word that has given rise to the idea of the Socratic *Elenchus*, known from the so-called early dialogues. And as a matter of fact, the generally accepted negative stance of these dialogues, harmonizes in many ways with what the letter briefly describes as the method of the search, i.e. the rubbing together of the four epistemological factors (cf.344b). Taking this rubbing together to be the refutation of presumptuous accounts of the phenomena of the world, articulated by means of the four, dismantled in the course of an argument showing their self-contradictory nature and amounting to an aporetic conclusion, we have a picture that would fit quite nice with the *Elenchus* of the so-called early dialogues. The letter does, however, not restrict its account to any early dialogue. The rubbing together and the *Elenchus* described in the letter can hence not merely be said to be a description of what goes on in the so-called early dialogues, but must surely also apply to the so-called middle and late ones.
55. See note 2.
56. The general stance of the letter, that is, the fact that it, apparently, is a commentary on all of the dialogues, might seem to be a first problem. Yet, a

unitarian interpretation of Plato, is not automatically a disqualified approach, even today, even if it was more popular in ancient times.

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