

Gregor DAMSCHEN

The Writing About X Argument: A New Approach to Plato's Criticism of Writing in his Seventh Letter

In this paper, I will present a new philological argument, the *syngramma peri tinos* argument (SaPiT), along with a new philosophical argument, the *writing about x* argument (WAX). Both arguments show that Plato's criticism of writing in the *Seventh Letter* does not undermine the impact of his own dialogues.

I. In the *Seventh Letter* 341c, Plato proposes his famous criticism of writing: "There is no (*oukoun*) writing (*syngramma*) of mine (*emon*) about (*peri*) these matters (*auton*), nor will there ever be one. The reason is that this subject matter cannot be expressed in words (*rheton oudamos*) in the same way as other objects of learning can." Judging by this quotation, the scholars of the School of Tuebingen argue that no philosophical content can be written down: (1) The meaning of the word "syngramma" makes it impossible to exclude the dialogues from the criticism of writing because it simply means "a work of literary prose" (Slezák 1985, 344; Kraemer 1990, 44). (2) On the other hand, Schleiermacher and contemporary scholars thinking along his lines put forward the argument that in the passage cited above "syngramma" means only "treatise", not "dialogue", because in ancient Greek "syngramma" is the opposite of "dialogue". In my opinion, both positions are wrong. I will defend a new, third position making use of a philological argument. I call it "*syngramma peri tinos* argument" (SaPiT): It is philologically correct to say that "syngramma" does not only mean "treatise" (Slezák 1985, 344). However, it is very important to note that in the *Seventh Letter* 341c Plato does not only use "syngramma" but the phrase "syngramma peri auton". A short discussion of all relevant places of "syngramma peri" plus genitive case makes clear that throughout Plato's dialogues "*syngramma peri tinos*" means "treatise". SaPiT shows that Plato in his criticism of writing only argues that he never wrote a *treatise* (*syngramma peri tinos*) on his philosophical matters, and that on account of systematic reasons it is indeed impossible to do so.

II. But is Plato's opinion philosophically sound? I hold that Plato systematically supports a philosophical argument which I call the "*writing about x* argument" (WAX). What is the systematic difference between a treatise and a Platonic dialogue? A treatise on x is a composition of propositions the goal of which is to give a real definition of x. A Platonic dialogue, on the contrary, is a composition of propositions and nonpropositional elements (e.g. the *dramatis personae* and their acts). Its goal is to achieve truth, but it is not always clear what the dialogue is about (the *peri x* subheadings in Diogenes Laertius are *not* by Plato himself). The nonpropositional elements show acts of persons. There is a systematic difference between (i) *writing about x* and (ii) *showing x* through writing because there is a set of entities which have no adequate real definition, but only an appropriate ostensive definition. Morally relevant capabilities like *arete*, *andreia*, *sophrosyne* etc. might be considered exemplary elements of that set. They stand for nonpropositional knowledge which cannot be fully expressed as an object of statements, but can only be expressed or showed through the pragmatic parts of a dialogue (Wieland 1982; Gonzalez 1998). The form of the good is the most important element of Plato's philosophical knowledge.

Looking at it we can decide which act is good. The form of the good itself is partly nonpropositional knowledge. Because of this, it is not possible to define the form of the good (or another form) in a treatise on it.

The author is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Halle, Germany. He may be contacted at damschen@phil.uni-halle.de, and his CV is online here.