



## The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter

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BOOK REVIEWS

**Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede:** *The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter*, edited by Dominic Scott. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 224. £30.00 (hb). ISBN 9780198733652

Written to ‘the friends and followers of Dion’, Plato’s *Seventh Epistle* is of great interest to all students of Plato. In the events leading up to the epistle, Dion, who was Plato’s friend and disciple, had led an expedition that overthrew Dionysius II, tyrant of Syracuse, and seized power himself, before he was assassinated. Primarily a defense of Plato’s involvement in these events, the epistle provides a detailed account of Plato’s dealings with Dion and Dionysius II in Syracuse and recommendations for future reforms. It also presents a highly interesting account of Plato’s early political experience, leading to disillusion with Athenian politics and his turn to the idea of the philosopher-king. Finally, in a lengthy philosophical digression, the epistle discusses Plato’s views concerning the possibility of written versions of his central ideas, in response to Dionysius II’s claim to have composed an account of them. Whether or not one accepts the epistle as genuine has decisive influence on how one understands these and other related subjects. But about the authenticity of the epistle there are significant doubts.

On this question scholarly opinion has fluctuated. In recent decades the epistle has been accepted by a majority of – though far from all – scholars. In his *History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1962–81, IV, 8), W. K. C. Guthrie, who himself views it as ‘of highest value’, compiled the opinions of other scholars. He reports that thirty-six scholars accept it and fourteen reject it, while most of the doubters are from a period when scholars questioned a great deal of Plato’s corpus that is now universally viewed as genuine (V, 401). It is this general movement towards acceptance that Burnyeat and Frede seek to counteract. The work under review grew out of a seminar on *Epistle 7* that the two conducted in Oxford in 2001. According to the original plan, Frede was to argue against authenticity and Burnyeat was to defend it. But in the course of his studies, the latter became firmly convinced it is a forgery. While definitive resolution of so difficult and longstanding an issue is not possible, the aim of the current work could be viewed as reversing the burden of proof (xiv). Given the evidence that Frede and Burnyeat present, in the future, scholars who argue for authenticity will bear the burden of justification. In addition, many scholars maintain that, even if the epistle is not by Plato, its contents should still be viewed as reliable, since it must have been written by a close associate of Plato who was thoroughly versed in the matters discussed. However, the arguments of Burnyeat and Frede are also intended to disprove this ‘fall-back position’, as Burnyeat calls it (ix).

*The Pseudo-Platonic Seventh Letter* is in two main parts. First are Frede’s five seminar presentations, followed by two essays by Burnyeat. Frede unfortunately

died between the seminar and publication of the present work. His detailed notes have been worked into coherent text by Dominic Scott, who edited the volume. Scott also provides facsimiles of some of Frede's notes, which give the reader a sense of what the former had to work with, and a continuous prose account of the political argument discussed below, which is included as an Appendix. Frede presents two main arguments. The first is based on epistolary evidence. Through rigorous examination of ancient Greek letters, he calls into question some that scholars have accepted. He claims that we have no genuine letters earlier than those of Epicurus, some sixty or seventy years after the date of *Epistle 7*. For example, in Seminar 3, Frede examines a letter supposedly by Speusippus. Because the other letters in the collection in which this is found are generally regarded as forgeries, this adds another example to the collections of letters that have come down to us all of which are fakes. In addition, rejecting this letter lengthens the time between *Epistle 7* and the earliest other genuine letters. Frede's examination of the epistolary evidence is a dazzling feat of erudition, far beyond the capacities of most readers to assess – including this reviewer. But however impressive this performance, it contributes relatively little to his overall case beyond heightening general suspicions. More important are Seminars 4 and 5 in which he launches a frontal philosophical assault.

Frede's argument, which is in two parts, concerns the relationship between the political views expressed in the epistle and what we know of Plato's political theory. The letter was ostensibly written in 354 or 353, at which time Plato was presumably working on the *Laws*. As students of Plato's political theory know, in the latter work, he rejects the ideal of rule by philosopher-kings espoused in the *Republic*, in favour of rule by laws. In Seminar 4, Frede argues that, because its recommendation for Syracuse is full philosophic rule, the epistle is not by Plato. In Seminar 5, he contends that, even if Plato had been willing to consider instituting an approximation of the just city of the *Republic*, he could not possibly have viewed Dionysius II or Dion as approximations of the philosopher-ruler.

In his first essay, Burnyeat examines the philosophical 'digression' in the epistle, and argues that it could not possibly be by Plato himself or even a close associate, because it is 'philosophically incompetent' (122). The contents of this section of the epistle are dense and difficult. The author argues for the conventionality of language and that words, both singly and in combination, cannot express the essence of their object, but only its qualities. Because of language's shortcomings, the core of Plato's teaching cannot be expressed in writing. Burnyeat picks this argument apart, piling up shortcomings. In addition, he argues that terminology in this section is foreign to 'real Plato' (128).

In his second and longer section, Burnyeat performs a literary analysis of the epistle, in order to demonstrate that it is not actually an apology for Plato's activities but a literary tragedy, in which the protagonist is 'the Policy', that is, Plato's plans for reform in Syracuse. Burnyeat works through the epistle from end to end, pointing out a large number of literary conventions associated with tragedy.

Burnyeat and Frede are major scholars and important authorities on many matters bearing on the question of authenticity. The result of their efforts is a work of overwhelming erudition and detailed philosophical argument. All

readers will be deeply impressed by 'the extraordinary learning and density of argument across the book as a whole', to use Scott's words (xiv). Taken as a whole, the work undoubtedly sets a severe challenge for supporters of the epistle, and so may well succeed at the task of reversing the burden of proof that Scott describes. That it does not do more and conclusively establish the spuriousness of the epistle is not surprising in view of the deeply contestable nature of many matters on which the question of authenticity turns, some of the most important of which rest on interpretations of aspects of Plato's philosophy. However, it is possible to take issue with many of the two scholars' claims. In particular, I believe Frede's central contentions turn on questionable interpretations of the political aims expressed in the letter.

At one point in making the argument of Seminar 4, Frede criticizes earlier scholars for their tendency to 'flatten out' the differences between the epistle's distinctive political views and those of the *Republic* and the *Laws* (56). The argument of Seminar 4 depends on heightening these. In particular, the incompatibility on which Frede focuses depends on the epistle's recommending full philosophic rule in the sense found in the *Republic*. In his view, Plato in the epistle 'is not prepared to support any political reform which falls short' of having Syracuse ruled by philosophers (45) – with the latter term used in the full sense of the *Republic*. Because Plato was working on the *Laws* when the letter was supposedly written, the letter's recommendations are inconsistent with the political views Plato held at that time. The problem, however, is the unlikelihood that full philosophic rule is what the letter actually recommends. In making this argument, Frede overlooks central elements of the text. As for the argument of Seminar 5 that Dionysius and Dion were not suitable as philosopher rulers, I believe Frede applies too strong a conception of what Plato had in mind. In his 'editor's guide' to Frede's case, Scott notes weaknesses of Frede's claims in regard to Dionysius II, although he believes the evidence in regard to Dion is 'very powerful' (97). But I believe the evidence is shaky in regard to both.

What then does the epistle recommend for Syracuse? At the opening of the epistle, Plato expresses his hope that Dion's friends and followers strive to make Syracuse free 'and dwell under the best laws' (324b1–2; Bury trans.). Far from inconsistency, this basic message, which Plato had communicated to both Dionysius II and Dion, is what we would expect from an author then working on the *Laws*. Throughout the epistle, Plato's account of what he had proposed repeatedly focuses on establishing good laws (esp. 334c, 336a, 337a–d). This is clearly the most important consideration against Frede's position. But there is an additional important point he overlooks, the close relationship between the epistle and a passage in Book IV of the *Laws*. In this passage, the Athenian Stranger, the main spokesperson in the work, discusses how best to give rise to a happy city. This passage is puzzling, in that it is an interlude, not organically connected with the ongoing conversation in the *Laws*, or with the plans underway in the work to establish the ideal city as a colony of Knossos. The Stranger claims that the best way to attain the desired end is to combine a monarch, quick to learn, temperate, and with additional virtues, and a wise lawgiver. The monarch would be able to reform the culture of his city relatively easily, through the

force of example (711b–d), while the Athenian emphasizes the attainability of his qualities. He describes the monarch's temperance as follows: 'temperance, that is, of the ordinary kind (*tên dêmôdê*) ... that kind which by natural instinct springs up at birth in children and animals' (710a5–7; Bury trans.). Since it is found in the *Laws*, it is not surprising that the goal of this process of reform is good laws rather than rule of a philosopher. Whatever one makes of this passage, its closeness to *Epistle 7* is overwhelmingly clear. It also bears mention that scholars have maintained that the early books of the *Laws* were written with Syracuse especially in mind (see Post, L. A. 'The Preludes to Plato's *Laws*'. *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 60 (1929): 5–25.).

In Frede's defense, there is evidence against the view that Plato intended rule by law for Syracuse, and on this he focuses. As I have noted, in his biographical sketch, Plato describes how he came to be disillusioned with Athenian politics and turned to the philosopher-king. When he was originally summoned to Syracuse by Dion, Plato says that it was with the hope of uniting political philosophy and political power in the same hands (328a6–b1). However, in spite of allusions to the ideal of the *Republic*, I see little reason to construe Plato's meaning in regard to the philosophic nature in his discussions of both Dionysius II and Dion as requiring the qualities of that work's philosopher-king. Rather, as in the passage in *Laws IV*, this should be understood as requiring only virtues 'of the ordinary kind'. The *Laws* passage does not mention the ruler's need for philosophy. But I believe that in each context in which the author of *Epistle 7* speaks of the need for Dionysius II or Dion to pursue philosophy, this is in service of their developing philosophical temperaments or philosophical values, rather than their becoming the completely realized philosophers of the *Republic*. If the discussions of philosophy in the epistle are interpreted in this sense, the incompatibilities on which Frede focuses largely disappear, while Plato's hopes for both Dionysius II and Dion appear to be far more plausible.

On the whole, I believe Burnyeat's contribution is more convincing. Through minute analysis of the philosophical digression, he establishes that there are deep problems with the argument. He also points out parallels between particular aspects of the discussion and passages in different dialogues, notably the *Laws* and the *Cratylus*, on which the epistle's author may have drawn. However, while I do not believe the quality of the digression's argument can be defended, it is less clear what this means for the question of authenticity. I will suggest two points. First, it is important to bear in mind that the digression is found in a letter, rather than an article submitted to a philosophy journal. The degree of philosophical precision required in such a composition is not clear. However deficient from a philosophical point of view, the quality of the discussion is sufficiently high to have satisfied numerous scholars for many decades, many of whom are noted by Burnyeat. More important, it is not clear that philosophical deficiency disqualifies an argument as being by Plato. For example, the three theological arguments in Book X of the *Laws* are horrendous in terms of philosophical validity. And these arguments are of decisive importance in the work, so much so that citizens of the city described in the *Laws* who don't accept them are to be put to death. However,

once again, Burnyeat's masterful analysis of the arguments in this section of the epistle must trouble the work's defenders.

In introducing his discussion, Burnyeat refers to 'the tricky issues of language, history, and philosophy on which the authenticity debate depends' (121). Combine these with the absence in the epistle of decisive evidence of forgery, and it is not surprising that the authenticity question has been hotly debated for centuries. How successful Frede and Burnyeat will be in reversing current movement towards acceptance remains to be seen, while their particular claims will long be debated by scholars who wrestle with their work. But there is little doubt that this is a book with which all serious students of Plato must wrestle, whether they are inclined to accept the epistle or reject it.

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**Aesthetic themes in pagan and Christian Neoplatonism from Plotinus to Gregory of Nyssa**, by Daniele Iozzia, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2015, xiv + 130 pp., £22.99 (hb), ISBN: 978-1-47257-232-5

This is a short and welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship dealing with late Mediterranean antiquity in pagan and Christian circles. Daniele Iozzia's particular focus is on the relationship of Plotinian aesthetics to contemporary artistic expression and the thoughts of the Cappadocian Fathers, especially Gregory and Basil of Nyssa. Aesthetics, as he notes, was not then a discipline distinct from philosophical ethics, metaphysics and theology, nor the province of art critics: what we would call an 'aesthetic' issue was for the ancients bound up with much more serious concerns. Art was not autonomous, nor artistry confined to human agents. Iozzia concludes that 'the aesthetic reflection, in a way that mirrors the spiritual needs of the age, ends up highlighting the ineffectiveness of logical discourse in expressing the experience of the soul in its search for the divine' (94). Beauty is at once something more than a classical praise of symmetry would suggest (if only the *symmetrical* were beautiful gold and the stars could not be beautiful – as obviously they are) and something less than the inimitable, inexpressible, divine. The One holds Being and Beauty before itself as a veil or bulwark (*Ennead* I.6 [1].9, 34ff; see Iozzia 79–80).

Iozzia considers Plotinus's use of metaphor – especially metaphors drawn from art and theatre, his analysis – against conventional opinion – of beauty, and the particular significance of the 'uncompounded beauties' of light and gold. Gregory and Basil both show signs of having read at least some of Plotinus's *Enneads*, and had the serious intention of co-opting Platonic and Plotinian insights