Lifelong Studies in Love
With Plato

Maurizio Migliori

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I wanted to emphasize here some important things for me, like the sense of limit, the importance of perseverance, the need for a passion. Then, aware of my limitations and my 77 years, I decided to join Hokusai’s ironic hope. The reader will do the rest. This way, somehow, I also respect Plato’s teaching: you, the readers, are the ones who have to discover the meaning of these proposals. In this text I talk too much.¹

«From the age of 6 I had a mania for drawing shapes of things. When I was 50, I had published an infinity of designs, but all I have produced before the age of 70 is no worth taking into account. At the age of 75 I finally apprehended something of the true quality of birds, animals, insects, fishes, and of the vital nature of grasses and trees. When I am 80 you will see real progress. At 90 I shall have penetrated even further the deeper meaning of things, at 100 I shall have become truly marvellous, and at 110 everything I create; a dot, a line, will jump to life as never before. I only beg that gentlemen of sufficiently long life take care to note the truth of my words I am writing this in my old age. I used to call myself Hokusai, but today I sign myself ‘The Old Man Mad About Drawing”».  

¹ Unfortunately it is not enough. Since many elements of my interpretation of Plato are different from the statements of traditional manuals, I have to refer, for the textual demonstration, to the two big books Migliori 2013. There is then a shorter text and exposition Migliori 2017. Furthermore I will be quoting Plato extensively, as I am mistrustful of all too clever and original interpretations that do not keep to the text. Unfortunately, Plato has written by creating a new technique, which he describes as a “game” in the Phaedrus. Therefore it is always necessary to know the first essay, pp. 8-19.
How Plato writes

In this short and schematic text\(^1\) I just want to understand what Plato said in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* about the limits of philosophical communication, especially written communication. The main point is that there is in the text of Plato some “strange behaviour” that the critics however accept almost as normal; therefore there is the risk of not reflecting enough on this strange situation. For example, in many passages Plato affirms the need to define a term but then does not define it. The most famous example of this “technique of postponing” regards the Good: Plato, in the *Republic* VI, 506D-507A, puts off the (necessary) treatment of the Good and prefers to talk of the "son of Good and really similar to him", – not to pay the debt (= talk about good), but only the interests (= to allude to that through examples). Now, it is evident that Plato knows the Good because 1) he can not say that the son is “really similar” to the father if he does not know the latter; 2) nobody can pay interest if he does not know the amount of the debt. However, Plato does not explain what the Good is.

It might seem this example is only a single and “a bit strange” case. But in the *Philebus*, Plato talks about the good and happy life, so he must necessarily mention the Good. Once again, Instead of telling us what the Good is, 1) he merely informs us of its house (61A-B), where we could meet the Good; 2) then he leads us so close to the Good that he declares we are “in the vestibules of the Good and its home” (64C). But 1) you cannot know the “home” of a subject (= the context that qualifies a concept) without already knowing this subject (= the concept); 2) because he does not tell us what the Good is, if we meet the Good near his home, how can we recognize it?

In brief (leaving out other examples), we have to take note of the fact that Plato knows the Good but 1) he never wants to tell us what the Good is; 2) he leaves it to the reader to discover the Good on the basis of some clues: the son, the interest, the house, the vestibule.

\(^1\) Migliori 2013 addresses this issue in 160 pages.
1. Some examples

More generally we can say that in many cases Plato seems to want to make the issues that he proposes more difficult for the readers to understand.\(^2\) We can find an example of this technique in the *Sophist*. Plato examines *some* of the most important ideas to see the relationships between them (254C3–4). Therefore, the number of these ideas is not important, because – for the author's statement – we are not at all in front of a full and significant list. There are five meta-ideas: motion-rest, same-different, being. This looks very simple, but strange, because 1) they are two couples (motion-rest, same-different) and being remains “alone”; 2) Plato in the *Sophist* must clarify precisely not-being, but it is not listed; as a consequence, being remains without its opposite. This is a very bizarre situation.

But the real oddity is this text is another: Plato insists too much on the number of these meta-ideas, moreover stressing very irrelevant things. It makes no sense to say that

– rest and motion are two (2) (254D7), while in relation to Being they become three (3) (254D12):

– same and different are added to the previous three (3) Ideas (254E3) so we have to conduct a research on five (5) Ideas (254E4) and not on three (3) (254E5).

What reason is there in such a difficult dialogue to point out that \(2 + 1 = 3\), and \(2 + 3 = 5\)? In these few lines Plato repeats these numbers and these "calculations" sixteen (16) times and most importantly he does it without any plausible reason. If you read aloud – as you must always do with Plato’s text, which belongs to an oral culture and not to a written one such as ours – you are struck by such an abundant use of numbers, *often embarrassing in its utter futility*.

In short Plato always writes “five ideas”, but they are certainly not five. I think that Plato wants to draw our attention to the number of these meta-ideas, to make us think and find out they are not five but six or even better eight. (I cannot prove it here, but in my opinion, this is the exact number).\(^3\) Theaetetus in fact says it is impossible that their number

\(^2\) Even the ancients had noticed this: «Plato employs a variety of terms in order to make his system less intelligible to the ignorant» (Diogenes Laertius, III, 63, 1–2).

is less than five (256D3–4); by stating this entirely useless fact, Plato proposes an artful expression, because he does not exclude that they are more than five.

If my solution does not convince you, this is not a problem, but you must find another interpretation. I believe that we must refuse to think that an author who calibrates so carefully and ingeniously his texts suddenly... I do not know how to say this... "goes crazy" and starts to write numbers for no reason. Instead, the problem becomes serious if the critics, accustomed to these "incomprehensible" oddities, begin to assume a very cavalier attitude towards the Platonic text. There are in fact many "special" statements of Plato that are ignored, or often contradicted, by the more common interpretations.

Since this judgement might seem excessive I'm forced to give one last example: the parricide of the Elea Stranger in the Sophist. The manuals often speak of “platonic parricide", i.e. of the total "denial" of the Eleatism, and – what is more – effected by a philosopher who came from Elea and who was a pupil of Parmenides and Zeno. Such a man would have destroyed the master's philosophy! The text, however, tells a very different thing.

Stranger – Then, I strongly beg you... to not believe that I am becoming a sort of parricide.
Theaetetus – What do you mean?
Stranger – To defend ourselves we will need to put the theory of our father Parmenides to the test, and to force 'what is not', in some way, to be, and, in turn, 'what is', in some way, not to be (Sophist 241D1–7).

Here we have two important points: 1) a prayer (be careful how you judge me); 2) a denial (I'm not a parricide, although perhaps it may seem that I am). What should Plato have written to make it clear to the reader that this Stranger is not a parricide and that on the contrary he is trying to save the philosophical truth of the father? This is not the total rejection of the Parmenides’ thesis. To defend Being and the truth of the Eleatic’s philosophy from the attack of the sophists it is necessary to make them in some way relative, i.e. to admit that 'what is not', in some sense, is. But the texts for our students continue to talk about platonic parricide.
But for us here the most important thing is that the whole matter is clearly not aimed so much at Theaetetus but rather at the readers.

2. The reasons for this approach

These examples bring us to the heart of our reflection. Plato is a good teacher: we can find in Phaedrus the reasons why he decided to write in this strange way. I will consider this dialogue only from the point of view of problems of communication, leaving out other issues.4

In Phaedrus:

1. Plato repeatedly shows how Socrates loves both written and oral speeches. Socrates even says that he is “ill” due to his passion for listening to speeches (228B); besides, he agrees to make his speech about Eros because he gives in to blackmail by Phaedrus, who threatens to no more bring him the texts that only he, who is rich, could buy (236E).

2. The text highlights the importance of the written word. Phaedrus is able to memorize Lysias's speech only because the author has given him the written text; Socrates twice asks Phaedrus to re-read the text from the beginning (262D-E); Socrates can also stop Phaedrus reading and then ask him to re-read (263E).

This is possible because the written word is always available. In short, only a reflection on written texts has allowed the birth and development of rhetoric: to elaborate rules, it is necessary to analyze something stable and analyzable, as only a written text is.

3. Plato claims that a text retains and communicates.

3.1. Socrates claims to have learned things (235C3) from the ancient poets. But we can hear the voice of the ancients only by reading their texts.

3.2. Socrates affirms that powerful men also love writing with reference to the judgment of posterity (257D-258C) i.e. we write for our contemporaries, but also (and perhaps especially) for posterity. In fact, unlike oral communication, the written text persists.

3.3. Socrates wrote nothing, and so his thinking is totally lost, or rather it was entrusted to the interpretations of his followers.

4 For a more comprehensive discussion of this important text, see the fifth essay, The Phaedrus polyphonic structure, pp. 70-96.
Plato did not want to run this risk; for this reason, he wrote a great
deal for his time. Indeed, Socrates expresses a clear opinion:

For this it is quite clear that, in itself, to write speeches is not shame-
ful... But I think that it is wrong to speak and write in a non beauti-
ful way, but ugly and bad... So what is the way to write beautifully or
not? Phaedrus, we must examine these issues with respect to Lysias’
texts and also of everyone that had written once or who will write
something, a public or private essay, as a poet in verse or as a prose
writer in prose (258D1–11).

Thus, for Plato
1. writing is important and cannot be condemned in general or absolute
terms;
2. the issue concerns both speaking and writing;
3. the problem of writing is emphasized, with reference to the various
forms which it has and to the different content that it deals with.

Then Plato displays the characteristics that are necessary for a good
speech. A person who writes speeches must
1. know the truth regarding the arguments about the topics expounded
or written;
2. not despise the "formal" elements:

But I think that you will admit this, namely, that every speech
must be made up as a living being that has its own body, so it
does not lack neither the head nor feet and have parts of the mid-
dle and the extremities, which are written in a convenient manner
relative to one another and relative to the entire (264C2–5);
3. know the nature of the soul to which the speech is directed. In short,
as for a medicine you must each time carefully evaluate

for which people, when and to what extent you have to apply
each of these things (268B7–8).

We need to understand the nature of the soul to which it is ad-
dressed to make a simple speech to a simple soul, a complex one
for a complex soul (277B-C).

For this in Phaedrus Plato speaks a lot about the soul, presenting a fa-
mous image, a winged chariot, with two horses, one white and one
black, driven by a charioteer.
3. The problem of writing

Then Socrates focuses on the problem of “writing”:

It remains only to deal with the opportunity and no opportunity to write, under what conditions it is beautiful and under what conditions it is not appropriate to do it (274B6–7).

The issue is addressed on the basis of a myth (274C ff.). In Egypt, the god Theuth, who had discovered arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, the dice game, and also writing, wanted to show these discoveries to the king of Egypt in order to teach them to all Egyptians.

With regard to writing, Theuth praises it as an aid to wisdom and memory for all men. But the king disagrees and illustrates all the limitations of this medium.

1. the written word does not strengthen, but weakens the memory,
   1.1. because people, trusting in the written text, will no longer exercise;
   1.2. because they will get used to relying not on what they have inside, but on outside signs;
   1.3. the written word is useful to remember something only for the people that already know it (275A, 275C-D, 276D);
2. writing does not offer true knowledge, but only the appearance of it (275A6; 276C), therefore
   2.1. the readers, having a lot of information without “teaching” (ἄνευ διδαχῆς, 275A7), will believe they are learned people, while they will not know anything;
   2.2. it will be hard to argue with these people who are carriers of opinions instead of being learned men (275B2);
3. worse still, writing has serious limitations, because it seems alive, but it is not (275D-E); indeed:
   3.1. it is unable to answer;
   3.2. it always repeats the same thing;
   3.3. it “rolls” into the hands of anyone, either worthy or unworthy;
   3.4. it does not know when to speak and when to be silent;
   3.5. it does not know how to defend itself, but it always needs its father, that is the author (275E; 276C).

In brief, only a naive person can think to pass or receive some stable knowledge with written words (275C6; 277D8–9). It seems like a condemnation without remedy, but it is not.
Indeed, Socrates adds that there is another speech, "legitimate brother" of the written one (276A1–2), the oral discourse that is better and more powerful (276A2–3). The oral speech: 1) is written with science (276A5), 2) in the soul of the learner; 3) it knows how to defend itself; 4) it knows who to talk to and with whom to remain silent. In conclusion, oral discourse is

the speech of those who know, a living and animated speech of which the one written can be said, with good reason, to be an image (276A8–9).

There is a strange game of connection and opposition. You cannot underestimate the constant opposition between the two types of speech. But it would be equally wrong to forget that these are "two legitimate brothers"; consequently they cannot be opposed as good and evil. We have to accept the evident weakness of the written word without turning it into a condemnation, or worse still, into a refusal: it is a more fragile and weaker brother, which should be taken care of and be very concerned about.

For this, Plato repeatedly makes it clear that one must not put in writing "the most valuable things", which one cares about a lot and which could not be defended by anyone.

Plato, as he often does, says the most important thing between the lines: the writer proceeds

storing memories both for himself – for old age that brings forgetfulness, if it ever comes – and for anyone who follows in the same footsteps (276D3–4).

So, Plato himself says that we can and must write both as a reminder and for those who follow our steps, that is, for those who come after us, posterity.

To sum up, the philosopher is convinced of the radical communicative weakness proper to human nature, which is accentuated in the written word. Plato reiterates that there are difficulties with all the instruments, i.e.

claims made in oral discourse or writings or answers to questions (Seventh Letter 343D4–5).
4. The writing as “game”

Plato faces the problem of written word. His solution is the invention of the "written game". He wanted to write respecting his theoretical and educational framework; therefore he invented a writing technique that allowed him to overcome the two problems that he had shown us: 1) the respect for the individual development of the reader; 2) the defence of the content that the author makes available to the reader. In conclusion, Plato forced himself 1) to not put in writing the "things of greater value" than the problems faced, 2) to provoke the reader with tricks, omissions, problems and other inventions, in order to force him to “do” - not only learn - philosophy, that is, to think in order to respond to the problems that the text poses; 3) to gradually propose more difficult problems with a protreptic attitude, i.e. he invites the reader to address these issues which always leave something unwritten, which must be thought about by the reader. These problems can be dealt with in subsequent texts, that leave new unresolved problems, but, consequently the final solution cannot be written.

We must not forget that 1) the Platonic proposal is a philosophical one; 2) Plato is a follower of Socrates and he tries to keep in the written words the educational attitude of his teacher. A teacher who reveals the solution of a problem commits a double error: 1) he prevents the student from discovering it by himself; 2) the student who ignores the question does not hear “a solution", but only a brilliant reasoning, of which he does not understand the real meaning and importance. Instead, a help must be provided with respect to the student’s level of maturity (saying things in a simple way for simple souls and in a complex way for complex souls). This is extremely difficult in the writing and requires great attention by the teacher who wants to induce the reader to think in order to discover the truth.

This choice not to explain everything, but to proceed by allusions, provocations etc. (as we saw in the above examples), leads him to define this activity as a "game": The thinker who has knowledge of the Just, the Beautiful and the Good will be wise and will not waste this knowledge

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5 Many examples of this have been provided by exponents of the Tübingen-Milano (and now Macerata) school (K. Gaiser, H. Krämer, G. Reale, T. A. Szlezák, and now F. Eustacchi, A. Fermani, M. Migliori, L. Palpacelli, plus E. Cattanei).
So he does not write seriously with black water, sowing this knowledge using a straw, with speeches that can not defend themselves discursively and which can not properly teach the truth... But he, it seems, will sow them in the gardens of writing and he will write, *when he writes, as a game* (276C7-D2).

The writing game becomes the principal characteristic of the philosopher. That is

one who thinks that in a written discourse on any subject there is necessarily a large part of the game and that no discourse worth of great seriousness has ever been written in verse or prose (277E5–8).

Plato’s affirmation is peremptory and criticizes all forms of writing. And yet we have to write. So what is the difference between a philosopher who writes about mathematics or politics, and the mathematician or politician who write things apparently similar? If any one has composed these works <1> knowing the truth and <2> being able to come to their aid when he is challenged on the things he wrote, and <3> if *speaking* is able to demonstrate the weakness of the writing, he must not be called by a name derived from those <that is, from the themes that he addresses>, but by what he is dedicated to...

To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems excessive and proper only for a deity, but a lover of wisdom (philosopher) or something similar, would be more appropriate for him and more moderate (278C4-D6).

Therefore, the defining characteristics of the "philosopher who writes" consist not only 1) in the knowledge of the truth and 2) in the capacity to help the written word, 3) but also and above all in the capacity to orally demonstrate the weakness of the written word. The real educational relationship is direct:

only in speeches about the Just, the Beautiful and the Good in the context of teaching, that is written in the soul of the interlocutor, are there clarity, completeness and seriousness (278A4–5).
All written texts are only "games", but not futile; they are, on the contrary, very good (Phaedrus 276E), and above all useful. Plato does not despise them, indeed he says that they are so important and challenging that we can dedicate all our life to them (Phaedrus 276D).

It is unlikely that he wrote this without thinking of the many dialogues that he had already written.

5. The Seventh Letter

This judgment is confirmed in the Seventh Letter:

Therefore, every serious man must not write serious things so as not to expose them to aversion and to the inability of being understood by men. In short, we must logically recognize that, whenever we see someone who has written works, whether laws of a legislator or writings of some other subject, those works were not for him the most serious things, if he is really serious, because the serious things remain placed in his most beautiful part <the soul>. If he has put something in writing, taking them as serious things, “then certainly” not the gods but men, “have taken his wits away” (344C1-D2).

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6 This is the real problem for the scholars. Cf. Kahn 1999 pp. 41–42: «To suppose that one can treat these dialogues as a direct statement of the author’s opinion is what I call the fallacy of transparency, the failure to take account of the doctrinal opacity of these literari texts. What we can and must attempt to discern, however, is the artistic <I would also say "philosophical" and “maieutic”> intention with which they were composed. For in this sense the intention of the author is inscribed in the text». That is: «The meaning of a Platonic text is accessible only at the cost of a considerable effort of interpretation. The reader must be as cunning in interpreting a dialogue as the author has been artful in composing it. This distance between text and message, or between what Plato writes and what he means to convey, is the first problem that any interpretation must confront» (p. 59). Similarly, Tigerstedt 1977 p. 99 speaks on “the reader’s responsibility”: «Nothing is a matter of course; everything can be called into question. To read Plato demands a far higher degree of vigilance and activity than any other philosopher asks for. Time after time, we are forced to make our choice, to decide how we should interpret what we are reading».

7 Homer, Iliad, VIII, 360; XII, 234.
Plato explains why he himself has never put his philosophy in writing:

In fact, this knowledge is not at all communicable like other sciences, but, after much discussion on these issues, and after a life in communion, instantly, like a light flashing from a crackling fire, it is born in the soul itself and soon it feeds from itself (341C5-D2).

Therefore Plato says that 1) philosophy, unlike other sciences, is not communicable, that is not learned by direct instruction, by frontal lessons; 2) philosophy should be practiced together in a Socratic manner, because it lives through discussions; 3) above all it is personal work, i.e. the discovery that, even with the guidance of a "teacher", we make by reflecting on the aporias that reality and/or discussions put in front of him.

Therefore, it may be useful to write about philosophy for those few who can make good use of the information provided to them to conduct their research.

But I do not believe that the communication of the arguments on these issues would be of any benefit to men, except to a few, i.e., to those who are capable of finding solutions by themselves on the basis of a few indications. Instead some of the other men would be filled with an improper contempt, absolutely not convenient, and others with exaggerated and vain confidence, as if they had learned wonderful things (341E1–342A1).

For “the readers”, Plato writes about philosophy, but does not expose his philosophy, as he states with a particularly explicit sentence:

There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one (341C4–5).

6. Conclusion

This situation should not surprise us. Plato lived during the time of the epochal transition from an oral culture to a written one. He attempts to

8 Tulli 1989 p. 24: «The knowledge is handed down by means of a συμπραγματευόμενης and each disciple, instead of taking note of it, conquers it (341E). They are references to the ποιητικόν πράγμα of the Academy, as well as to the dialogues often governed by various proceeding through allusions». 
overcome the limits that the written word has, in his eyes, not by opposing it, but by proposing a use that expands the reader's abilities and to respect the proposed contents.

Actually, he is fighting a hopeless battle, like the ones that today are opposed to the new media. But, as proof that the processes are never linear, this "failure" is also the source of Plato's exceptional success. He wanted to bring his reader to think, to do philosophy, because, as Wittgenstein rightly says: "philosophy is not a theory but an activity" (*Tractatus* 4.112). If that was Plato's aim, even if "his" philosophy was not understood from his dialogues, no other author has had a success comparable to the great writer and philosopher of Athens.

For two thousand four hundred years, the provocations, the questions and the answers that Plato has "sown" in his dialogues have led to thinking: metaphysicians and scientists, philosophers and men of letters, believers and atheists.

He has entrusted to his readers one of the most positive messages that the West has repeated over the centuries:

A life without searching is not worthy of being lived by a human being (*Apology* 38A5–6).

Culture owes much to the ingenious "invention" of the protreptic dialogues of Plato.

From this point of view, he is unique: no other, neither philosopher nor writer, may be placed next to him.
The Platonic Philosophy as Dialectic

1. How Plato comes to the doctrine of the Ideas and Principles in the Phaedo

As traditional interpretations can prove misleading, it is best to consider how Plato himself has outlined his philosophical journey in the famous passage (Phaedo 96A-102A), in which Socrates reconstructs the genesis of his philosophy. As the culmination of this process is constituted by the Ideas and by a reference to the Principles, it is evident that in outlining the evolution of his master, Socrates, Plato is presenting his own thought as the outcome of Socratic philosophy.

Plato (first passage) sets out from the “investigation of nature” (96A), or more precisely from the desire to

know the causes of each thing, i.e. by what each reality [1] is generated, [2] is destroyed and [3] exists (96A9–10),

in brief, to know the causes of being and becoming. Immediately afterwards, Plato notes that a solution internal to this physical-material sphere does not withstand logical analysis and seems inadequate to identify the cause sought for.

The second passage is constituted by Anaxagoras' suggestion, positing a higher entity that organises the cosmos: Intelligence orders and causes all things (97C). The text emphasises the causal value of the ordering Intelligence (97C2; 97C4; 97C6) and, on the basis of this, the possibility of finding the cause of each thing, i.e. in what way each reality is generated or is destroyed or exists (97C6–7). Plato repeats the same sentence used for physical enquiry, with one significant change: we have one single cause and not many.

The fact that this cause, the divine Nous, is an intelligence allows us not to limit the investigation to generation, corruption and existence, but to posit the problem of the way in which these processes take place. Both before and after the text just quoted, Plato notes that the Nous must arrange each reality as well as possible (97C5–6; 97C8). If the Nous is an intelligent cause, he operates in view of an aim and not in a mechanistic
way. This explains why he must seek to accomplish what is best. Yet this implies knowledge of the Good, without which it is impossible to speak of “the best”.

Had Anaxagoras taken this into account, he would have solved his problem:

Had he shown me these things, I would have been willing not to ask for any other kind of cause (97E4–98A2).

Anaxagoras, however, does not speak of the Good and does not bring the Nous into play as the ordering cause of the world, but rather only brings the material co-causes into play. This is like saying that Socrates acts intelligently and then pointing to his skeletal and muscular frame as the cause of his actions.

In brief: natural philosophers denote the cause, but fail to grasp the real cause, distinguishing it from the means, namely from the co-cause without which the cause cannot operate. Their error consists in thinking that one acts 1) because of some things, which at most are co-causes; 2) with intelligence yet not in view of the best, i.e. for the sake of the Good (99A-B).

Third passage: “Socrates” chose to try a different approach and posited some logoi, which we can be understood as “postulates”:

However, that is the way I began. I assume in each individual case some postulate which I consider strongest, and whatever seems to me to agree with this, whether relating to cause or to anything else, I regard as true, and whatever disagrees with it, as untrue (100A3–7).

This is the kind of cause he has come up with:

setting out from the postulate that there exists such a thing as the Beautiful in itself, the Good in itself, the Great in itself, and so on (100B5–7)

which is to say, the world of ideal Forms.

In brief: Platonic philosophy unfolds according to an analysis of phenomenal reality to understand their causes; the discovery that such causes are not to be found in physical reality force us to posit a second level of ideal causes, which must be subjected to critical analysis. What emerges,

1 Plato distinguishes the real (and true) cause from other possible causes.

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then, is a double causality, that of the divine \textit{Nous} (efficient cause) and that of the Good (final cause). There are other elements associated with these, such as physical ones that act as co-causes.

The horizon of Platonic philosophy is not limited to the world of the Ideas, but extends to a Whole that encompasses two dimensions: – the physical world of our experience, which must be explained, – another higher reality that provides the foundation for the existence of the former reality and explains its structure.

Without this “theoretical” respect for the empirical dimension and our world, the other great interest of Plato, attested to by the dialogues as well as by the choices he made during his lifetime, namely his political interest, would remain philosophically unexplainable.

This rules out one-sided views: Plato is not exclusively oriented towards the Ideas, since these are used to understand the multiplicity of the empirical world. He wants to fight the simplistic visions of the world: he knows that the system of causes is complex and complicated.

\textit{Fourth passage}: a reference to the Principles. Plato formulates a further hypothesis, that the postulate itself is attacked:

If someone wished to dispute the postulate itself, you wouldn’t pay attention and reply to him until you had examined [1] whether the consequences agreed with one another or not; [2] and when you had to give an explanation of the postulate, you would give it in the same way by assuming some other postulate which seemed to you the best of the higher ones, [3] and so on until you reached something adequate. [4] And, if you wished to discover something about beings, you would not mix things up, as the sophistic debaters do, who question together both the principle and the consequences deriving from it (101D3-E3).

It is a matter of setting out to build and test a genuine “paradigm”, an explicative system: first it is necessary to evaluate the consequences of the postulate in order to see if they agree, i.e. to see whether the system they give rise to is a consistent one, without contradictions; then, in order to “ground” the postulate, it is necessary to ascertain whether there is an even higher postulate, gradually ascending to higher hypotheses, until we find an adequate postulate, i.e. one that may be assumed as primary; if an adequate primary postulate is identified and fully understood, we can claim that our investigation has reached its end (107B8–10).
Plato employs a single procedure: from the aporias of purely physical explanations we ascend to the theory of the Ideas, from the aporias of the Ideas we ascend to the search for those First Principles that may serve as the premises for the whole system of causes, what the *Republic* describes as the Good and the Unhypothetical First Principle.

2. *Parmenides*

This process, up to the final hypothesis, we have found in the *Phaedo*, is presented again in the *Parmenides*, this time in a dramatic form, i.e. through a narrative. I must now proceed in a very schematic fashion:

1. Zeno shows that phenomenal reality is intrinsically contradictory; 2. the young Socrates maintains that the aporias of the physical world can be easily overcome through the doctrine of the Ideas; 3. Parmenides accepts Socrates' solution, but puts forth a series of objections and aporias in relation to the doctrine of the Ideas. The sequence of passages is identical to the one we find in the *Phaedo*, which shows that this criticism of the Ideas is functional to Plato's philosophical system. Contrary to what many scholars have argued, Parmenides is not attacking or refuting the Ideas. The text is carefully constructed: both *before and after* the objections, the need for the Ideas is strongly emphasised.

*Before the aporias* (130B-E) we find a sort of premise to the whole reasoning in favour of the existence of the Idea. On Parmenides' request, Socrates explains that 1) he is certain of the existence of the Ideas of abstract concepts; 2) he is uncertain of the existence of Ideas of physical realities, 3) he is certain of the *non-existence* of the Ideas of ridiculous and vulgar beings.

It is quite clear that, from a logical perspective, the last claim is incoherent. If the Ideas are the raison for both existence and knowability of things, a reality, i.e. something manifesting some kind of order, something self-identical and different from other things, must have an idea that corresponds to it even when it is considered ridiculous by most people.

Parmenides reproaches the young man in a benevolent way, but he delivers a harsh criticism of his view:

Certainly, you are still young, Socrates, and philosophy has not yet taken hold upon you, as I think it later will, when you will no longer despise any of these realities. But now you still consider the opinions of men, on account of your youth (130E1–4).

Parmenides thus clearly states that Ideas of “ridiculous” things exist, and hence, all the more so, all other Ideas; Instead, the young Socrates, who will certainly become a philosopher one day, is still influenced by people’s prejudices.\(^3\)

*After the aporias* Plato states once again that we cannot do without the Ideas, because this would compromise philosophy itself:

If anyone, with his mind fixed on all these objections and others like them, is unwilling to grant the existence of an Idea for each individual reality, he will be quite at a loss, since he does not grant the existence of an Idea that is always the same for each existing reality: in such a way he will utterly destroy the power of dialectic (135B5-C2).

Parmenides has no doubt: he claims that there are other aporias, but without the Ideas there cannot be any philosophy understood in a strong sense, as dialectic. What emerges, then, is a very interesting scenario: it is necessary to defend the Ideas by ascending to other, higher postulates. On account of his young age, Socrates is not a dialectician yet and is unaware of the devices required to defend his own doctrine. Parmenides does not explain what these devices are, but points to the extensive practise of dialectic required to find the answer.

If dialectics is necessary to save ideas, if the young philosopher must have an indication of the research he must do, only Parmenides can help him. The *philia* among friendly philosophers is coercive: despite age the old master agrees to provide a small example of this practise, which constitutes the crucial and definitive part of the dialogue.

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3 This is a distinctly Platonic statement: a thinker must not let himself be conditioned by common opinions, such as the notion of “ridiculousness”.

2. *Parmenides*
3. One important consequence

A process of dialectical ascent from the aporias of the physical world to the Ideas, and from the Ideas to the Principles accounting for the whole “system”, radically changes the initial picture. The new view of reality brings out new and hitherto “invisible” aporias and difficulties. Hence, it is necessary to ascend even further in order to find some solutions and consequently new aporias, and so on, ad infinitum.

Plato’s system – like any science – is as closed as it is open. It is closed because it rests on some assumptions that never change, even though they are constantly put to the test. It is open not because of any incapacity to reach a result, but precisely because a result has been attained: every “true” achievement discloses new problems and hence new perspectives.

The points made thus far raise two questions: 1) Why is reality so aporetic for Plato? 2) What is the reason for this unexplained emphasis on “dialectic”? At the basis of all this is a view of reality as one and many: the same reality may be seen as both single and multiple. This appears true if we set out

1) from the many: there is something unitary at the basis of every multitude of similar or identical objects and concepts;

2) from the one: every reality is a whole (a system) made up of parts (e.g. genus and species).

This reasoning is to be found practically in all the dialogues. Plato repeatedly stresses that, as a whole, a genus and its parts constitute a single reality, whereas if we consider the parts in themselves, we will find many differences between them or even opposite features (Philebus 12E-13A).

Hence, it is necessary to embark on that discourse which gives trouble to all men, to some of them sometimes against their will... I mean what came in our way just now and which by nature is quite astonishing. For the assertion that many are one and the one many is marvellous (Philebus 14C4–9).

The real problems, however, emerge not on the physical level, but in relation to the Ideas themselves. Indeed, even the Ideas, which are absolutely simple and unitary, are one-and-many.

Plato states this repeatedly and in many different ways. The dialectician is he who must
be able to divide things according to Ideas (κατ'εἴδη), where the natural joints are, and try not to break any part (Phaedrus 265E1–2).

Plato emphasises that it is necessary to divide things according to Ideas and hence by respecting the joints of reality:

it is necessary for a person to know the truth on each of the things about which he is speaking or writing, and to be capable of giving an overall definition of it in itself, as well as of dividing it according to Ideas (κατ'εἴδη), once it has been defined, until he reaches that which cannot be divided any further (Phaedrus 277B5–8).

The matter is further clarified in the Statesman.

Stranger – We must not separate a small part from the large and numerous parts, nor act with no regard to the Ideas; rather, the part must also be an Idea (Statesman 262A8-B2).

It is necessary to avoid positing a generic terms which does not correspond to any unity, i.e. which does not express an Idea. This occurs, for instance, when we divide the human race between Greeks and Barbarians:

A better division, more in conformity with the Ideas (κατ'εἴδη) and the method of dichotomy, would be made by dividing number into odd and even, and the human race into male and female, and so it is distinguished the Lydians and Phrygians and any other nation that is opposed to all the other when it is theoretically impossible to find and separate two elements that are both Idea and part (Statesman 262E3–263A1).

This leads the Stranger's interlocutor to raise a legitimate question:

Young Socrates – Very true. But, in relation to this point, Stranger: how can we get a clearer knowledge of the fact that Idea and part are not the same, but different realities?

Stranger – Socrates, my excellent fellow, it is no small task you impose upon me. ... Only take very good care not to imagine that you ever heard me [1] clarify this distinction... that Idea and part are different from one another... [2] The fact is that, when there is an Idea, it must necessarily be a part of the thing of which it is said to be the Idea; but [3] there is no need for that a part to be also an Idea. So,
you must say that I always uphold this rather than the other as my doctrine (Statesman 263A2–263B10).

Therefore, the topic has not adequately been developed, when there is an Idea it is necessary for it to be also part of the thing of which it is said to be the Idea, whereas there is no need for a part to be an Idea, since it can be a “piece” that lacks unity and a logic of its own. Hence, every Idea is made up of other Ideas and is part of an Idea.

This explains the importance that Plato attributes to the dialectic and diairetic method. For this reason, Plato criticises the Pythagoreans, who

are not in the habit of investigating things by dividing them according to Ideas (κατ'εἴδη)... What you ought to do is this: when a person at first sees the common quality of many things, he must not break off the analysis until he sees all the differences, or at any rate all those which may be qualified as Ideas; and then, when all sorts of dissimilarities are seen in a large number of objects, he must not be discouraged and stop until he has gathered all related things into one similarity and has included them in the essence of a given genre (Statesman 285A3-B 6).

In this polemic we find 1) a confirmation of the interchangeability between Idea and part, 2) a view of reality as something consisting of wholes that are necessarily made up of parts. As I cannot dwell on this topic, let me merely note that the task of knowledge consists precisely in identifying the various parts and leading them back to unity.

Two new problems emerge here: 1) What does it mean to say that a “simple and single” thing is made up of parts? 2) What is it that justifies the absolute diffusion of this whole-parts model, which concerns all realities? Plato answers the first question by presenting the one-many connection through a radical formulation:

Socrates – We say – it seems to me – that the identity (ταὐτόν) between the one and the many manifested in reasoning occurs every time in each statement, always, in the past as now. This neither will never end nor begins now, but it is, in my opinion, an everlasting and incorruptible characteristic of our own discourses (Philebus 15D4–8).

The dialectic does not only apply to the relations between different terms, but also to this identity because each well-ordered reality is both
one and many. It is necessary to focus on the meaning of this *identity*. Plato is well aware of the principle of non-contradiction and knows that opposite terms rule out each other.4 Clearly, however, an exception is to be accept, because Plato here speaks of the “identity” of one and many, which does not mean that what is one becomes many, but that it is possible to speak of an intrinsically complex single reality as both one and many.

Reality is neither just one nor just many, but is a one-and-many (one-many). In *Philebus*, 14C8–10, Plato upholds that it is easy to object to the both one-sided positions, that in favour of the one (for the many is one) and that in favour of the many (for the one has parts and is multiple), since *both these claims are true if reality is one-many*.

4. Ontological justification

In the *Philebus* Plato repeatedly stresses the nature of reality as one-and-many even at the level of the Ideas:

the realities which are said to always exist are constituted by one and many, and hence have inherent in themselves the Limit (*Peras*) and the Unlimited (*Apeiron*) (16C9–10).

Plato later explains at length that every reality is a mixture, stemming from the action of an ordering principle, a limit (*Peras*), which operates on something unlimited (*Apeiron*), an indeterminate reality with no limit. Plato then goes on to explain:

the three genera have provided a frame of reference for the things that come into being and for those from which everything derives (27A11–12).

We will thus have 1) two elements from which everything derives and 2) a mixed reality that comes into being – and which is at the same time one and many, because it bears the mark of the action of the ordering principle upon an intrinsically disorderly reality. To this Plato adds a fourth

4 Consider for example: *Phaedo* 60B: opposite terms cannot be co-present; *Phaedo* 102D-103A: in an essential predication, opposites rule each other out; *Republic* IV, 436B, 436E-437A, the same reality cannot suffer, do or be opposite things.
genus, the Cause, a divine principle that acts as an “efficient cause”: what he elsewhere terms the Demiurge – a topic I cannot go into here.

What is more important is to grasp the complexity of the connections, something that may easily be understandable, if we consider the case of a living organism:

– The whole is necessarily made up of parts, which are parts insofar as they belong to the specific whole in question. Hence,
– the whole stands in relation 1.1. to the sum of all parts, 1.2 to some parts, 1.3 to a single part;
– each part stands in relation 2.1. to the sum of all parts, 2.2 to some parts, 2.3 to a single part, 2.4. to the whole;
– each part, as a unity, constitutes – and hence may be analysed as – a whole, with the other parts that it comprises.

And let us not forget the Demiurge, who acts in view of the Good!! Therefore, as Aristotle too states in various passages, Plato bases his systemic view on a polarity of principles, where each principle acts upon the other, and he reproduces the same mechanisms at all levels of reality. The ultimate confirmation of this lies in the importance which Plato assigns to the acting (poiein) – suffering (paschein) pair.⁵

The insufficiency of having only one principle is clarified by an argument in Parmenides:

A reality as a whole cannot at the same time possess the double function of suffering and doing. For else the One would no longer be one, but two (Parmenides 138B3–5).

The same claim is also made in other texts:

The same thing cannot do or suffer opposite things (Republic IV, 436B8).

No one will ever persuade us that the same thing suffers or is or even does opposite things (Republic IV, 437A1–2).

This might seem like a mere affirmation of the principle of non-contradiction, but another element comes into play: the double process of acting and suffering, which Plato strangely emphasises. This is actually one

⁵ I can only quote a few passages, but many more could be adduced; cf. Migliori 2013 pp. 503–512.
of the cornerstones of the Platonic “system”, and is related to the presence of a “polar” principle.

Plato makes this point clear in the *Sophist*. The Eleatic Stranger demolishes the materialists’ position, but then suddenly seems displeased:

Perhaps they are at a loss. If they are in that condition, consider whether they might accept a suggestion if we offered it, and might agree that the nature of being is as follows....

I suggest that everything which possesses any power (δύναμιν) of any kind, or which is predisposed by nature to produce (τὸ ποιεῖν) any other thing, or to suffer (τὸ παθεῖν) even the slightest action on the part of the most insignificant reality, though it be only on one occasion, all these really exist. Indeed, I suggest the following definition: beings are nothing else but power (δύναμις)...

For later something else may occur to them and to us. As between them and us, let us assume that this definition is for the present agreed upon and settled (*Sophist* 247D4–248A2).

That this suggestion is not just an improbable generous act towards the materialists is shown by the following discussion with the Friends of the Ideas (248A-250D). The latter argue in favour of the existence of *eide*, intelligible and incorporeal forms, setting bodily world not in the realm of being but in that of “constant becoming”. This distinction between being and becoming, which is the main point of contact between them and Platonism, is associated with a similar distinction between cognitive functions:

Stranger – And you <Friends of the Ideas> say that with the body, by means of perception, we participate in the coming-to-be, whereas with the soul, by means of reasoning, we participate in the real being, which you say is always unchanged and the same, whereas becoming is different at different times ....

Stranger – But, excellent friends, how shall we define this “participation” which you attribute to both? Is it not that of which we were just speaking? ... A suffering or doing by means of some particular power which is derived from things that meet each other... If I am not mistaken, we have set up as a sort of adequate definition of beings, the presence of the power to suffer or to act, even in relation to the most insignificant reality (*Sophist* 248A10-C5).
Criticising the “Friends of the Ideas”, Plato confirms the suggestion made to materialists; he does so with a more radical formulation than the first one: he states that it is an adequate definition and that it also applies to the most insignificant realities: being is the power to act or to suffer. We cannot dismiss the fact that Plato claims twice – and with no compelling need to make statements of this sort – that the capacity to act or suffer is the fundamental characteristic of reality.

5. Conclusion

The vision of reality that Plato presents to the materialists and the idealists – which is to say to all philosophers – is not a static ontology but a dynamic and dialectic philosophy, the only philosophy adequate to a reality so complex as to be made of entity always one-and-many with various ontological levels; a reality governed by a series of causes that order (formal causes as Peras, Ideas), suffer (material causes, Apeiron, material things), point to the aim (final causes, as the Good, virtue) and seek to accomplish it (efficient causes, divine Nous, human nous).

Plato’s philosophy is the first example of a complexity theory. Anyone who reduces Plato's thought to elementary metaphysical formulas or a fruitless investigation betrays his work in a radical and unjust way.
Plato: The knowledge of the unstable reality

I think it is necessary to immediately declare the main focus of this analysis, which revolves around three questions: 1) can this world be known, i.e. is there such a thing as a “true” knowledge of the empirical? If the answer is affirmative, 2) which tools and mechanisms allow such knowledge? And, if this question also is answered, 3) given that knowledge necessarily implies a stability, whereas the world we live in is undeniably distinguished by continuous variability, what allows enough stability as to justify such knowledge?¹

A. First premise. The reasons for the crisis of truth

It is proved, in *Phaedo* 89C-91C, that truth is a topic that cannot be ignored when speaking of Plato’s philosophy. Before answering Simmias and Cebes’ objections, Socrates, almost surprised, tries to explain how it can happen that a man comes to hate the reasoning; he draws a parallel with friendship: if one puts too much faith in friends, if he considers friendship as an absolute value, he will most certainly face a major disappointment; if this happens again and again, he will end up believing it is not possible to trust anyone. The truth, instead, is that he committed a trivial mistake:

It is evident that he tries to deal with men without competence of human things; if he somehow treated them on the basis of a competence, he would judge things as they are, that both good and evil men are very few and that most are in the interval halfway (*Phaedo* 89E5–90A2).

¹ Some important information on our method can be found in other essays of the present volume: see the first text for the peculiar nature of Plato’s writing, the second text for the conceptualization of Ideas and the dialectic, the seventh for the multifocal approach. The latter inevitably overlaps with some issues that will be addressed here, resulting in partial repetition of concepts.
This applies not only to friendship, but to everything: the large and the small, the swift and the slow, the colours. In short, in all spheres of reality extremes are rare, whereas intermediate things are frequent. He who argues but has no skill in dialectics is mistaken and infers, like the eristic, that there is no sound argument. This is a misinterpretation of a subjective experience:

It would be deplorable, Phaedo, – he said – even if there are some true and reliable arguments (τινὸς ἀληθοῦς καὶ βεβαίου λόγου) that can be understood, that a man, who has dealt with arguments that appear at one time true, at another time untrue, should not blame himself and his incompetence but, because of his distress, in the end shift the blame away from himself to the arguments, and spend the rest of his life hating and reviling those and so be deprived of truth and scientific knowledge of realities (τῶν δὲ ὄντων τῆς ἀληθείας τε καὶ ἐπιστήμης) (Phaedo 90C8-D7).

This subjective mistake should not, therefore, lead to renouncing to truth, since there are sound arguments and it is possible to have scientific knowledge of realities:

This, then, is the first thing we should guard against – he said. We should not admit into our soul the conviction that there is no health in any arguments at all; we should rather believe that we are not yet sound and that we must take courage and be eager to attain health (Phaedo 90D9-E3).

Socrates, therefore, suggests proceeding with strict method and a highly critical attitude, stressing that one should only be preoccupied with truth. It is no coincidence that the term “truth”, ἀλήθεια, and its derivatives, occur ten times in this part of the dialogue.²

B. Second premise. The multifocal approach to knowledge

At this point it is easy to foresee an objection, grounded on a sort of statement indeed often to be found in the dialogues: for Plato 1) knowledge implies stability, 2) the physical world is intrinsically unstable, 3)...

² 89D6, 90B6, C7, C9, D2, D7, 91A8, B2, C1, C2.
thus our world cannot be known. There are surely many platonic texts that justify this deduction. Luckily, there also are many statements pointing in the opposite direction, showing that Plato considers our world to be knowable.

Even if there is a limit concerning human nature and a limit concerning the nature of the universe itself, there are both a merely probable knowledge and an epistemic knowledge, or rather it may be best to say that episteme can be said in many ways. In short, it is necessary to highlight the structural polyvalence of arguments in Plato, which are normally considered as ambiguities or changes of opinion: they are particularly frequent on the topic of knowledge and truth, which displays two apparently opposed attitudes, as we have started to see.

The first one is a limiting, if not denigrator judgment. Already in the Apology Apollo praises Socrates because he knows that

the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing (23A6–7)… his wisdom, in truth, is worth nothing (23B3–4).

This is often repeated in other dialogues until, in Laws, Plato says a human being should

live the life according that nature for which we are mostly puppets that participate in small parts of the truth (θαύματα ὄντες τὸ πολύ, σμικρὰ δὲ ἄλθειας ἢττα μετέχοντες) (804B2–4).

More generally speaking, Plato holds that only God is sofos, wise, whereas a human being can only be philo-sofos (Phaedrus 278D). Thus, truth and wisdom are approached but never reached.

On the other hand, in the Phaedrus, the first feature of a good argument, i.e. the precondition for communication, is the knowledge of truth.3 If we were to exclude truth from the range of human possibilities, we should infer that a correct interpersonal communication is not possible.

3 Plato then adds that the philosopher who writes is different from other writers: he must not only know the truth (τὸ ἀληθὲς, 278C4–5), but also be able to both come to the aid of his own writings when tested, and show, orally, the weak spots of what he wrote.
In the same *Laws* Plato also says that

truth (ἄληθεία) is the most important good, both to Gods and men; he anyone who intends to be blessed and happy can be its partner from the start, so that he may live as much of his life in truth (ὡς πλεῖστον χρόνον ἄληθής ὢν) (730C1–4).

On the one hand we participate in small parts of the truth; on the other hand, we can, and/or must, live as much of our life in the truth. Fortunately we can quote another platonic text that explains this attitude. In the *Laws*, as we have said, humans are depicted as puppets. This unsettles the listeners, leading to an immediate explanation:

Nay, Megillus, be not amazed, but forgive me. I spoke looking at the divinity and suffering its influence. So, if you like, let’s take it that our human race is not worthless, but worthy of some consideration (*Laws* 804B7-C1).

A judgement can be expressed from the divine or from the human point of view, and the outcomes are obviously different. This is a clear example of what we call multifocal approach, which Plato continuously resorts to and of which we will here give a little (but, I hope, enough) example.

1. *The sense perception*

Knowledge is, indeed, a good field to test this multifocal approach, which in the case of perception is (not casually) pushed to limits. On the one side, it appears that sense perception is the necessary starting point for knowing the world, on the other perception is not a form of knowledge; even better, from a certain point of view it is not, from another it allows us to have knowledge and is necessary for knowing.

That the sense perception is not a tool of knowledge is a traditional opinion, based upon many statements in the dialogues. It is often said that, for Plato, perception has nothing to do with knowledge, because it is 1) subjective and 2) variable. This requires caution, because these two terms, especially in Plato, are different and must be considered separately. For Plato, perception is subjective in a certain sense, but strictly speaking it is not; especially, senses do not merely “undergo” the effects of the presence of the object, because they are both agent and patient. Plato ex-
plores this topic in the *Timaeus* and, more extensively, in the *Theaetetus*, where he highlights the relativity of these two concepts:

for a thing is not “agent” (ποιοῦν) until united with the patient (πάσχοντι), and is not “patient” (πάσχον) until united with the agent (ποιοῦντι) (*Theaetetus* 157A4–6).

Plato then strongly underlines how these terms are not to be held as absolute:

that which by uniting with something becomes an agent (ποιοῦν), by meeting with some other thing appears instead a patient (πάσχον) (*Theaetetus* 157A6–7).

He insists on this, on the grounds that the origin of qualities is moving between the agent and the patient (182A5–6). A motion proceeds from both subject and object; a quality becomes manifest when they “come together”; from here, a motion of return begins towards them both: the patient becomes percipient and the agent (182A6–7) on such percipient becomes, for example, “hot” and “white”. In short, they both are agent and patient. The sensorial organ, inasmuch as it perceives, is active and therefore acts, e.g. it sees. Plato has been stating it ever since the beginning of the argument: objects are «what we confront or touch» (154B1) and the subject is «what is measuring or touching» (154B3–4). Coherently, Plato underlines that also the object is agent, defining it as that «which combines <with the subject> in producing the colour» (156E4): the subject, indeed, is also the patient, as acknowledged when talking of «that which acts upon me» (160A1, C4); furthermore, the text shows that they both act, when it says that both the agent and the patient produce (159C-D) sweetness and a perception of sweetness. This strategy is displayed multiple times: first it is said that perception is produced by relation with the suffering subject (159D2) and makes the tongue percipient, then it is made clear that “I perceive” (160C5).

The variation of roles, anyhow, should not make us forget that the relation remains stable, at least in the sense that there always is one active and one passive, because there is no action without passion and vice versa.

Nonetheless, if it is not completely correct to affirm that perception is subjective, it is still clear that it is unstable and variable, because of the field of its application, which is that of becoming. Therefore, it cannot be

1. The sense perception
true knowledge. But we should not forget that Plato, coherently with the multifocal approach, distinguishes many times between a reality and its true manifestation. ⁴

2. The central role of the soul

There is also another point of view that seems to diminish the role of perception, but in fact confirms it is also, in a sense, knowledge. First it has to be acknowledged that everything depends upon the soul. In Philebus, 33C-34A, Plato shows there is perception only when sensitive stimuli reach the soul, which is therefore the true place of perception (as it is of desire): there is no indication of the dead line for text delivery

Instead of saying that they escape the soul, when it remains indifferent to the affections that shake the body, what you now call forgetfulness, call it, instead, "absence of sensation"... When the soul and the body are tied with an affection in common, and move together, one would not talk inappropriately if this movement was called "sensation" (33E10–34A5).

The body has many contacts with the physical reality, but most of them do not become perception (consciousness) because the soul does not perceive them. Therefore, it is the soul, and not the senses, that has knowledge.

Even more relevant is the theoretical motion of the Theaetetus, which deals with a subject of paramount importance: perceptions are multiple, but the world which we see, hear, touch is one. The unity of the sensible is not within the range of the senses’ reach, since they act by specialist criteria: eyes see, ears hear and so on. The unity leads back to a superior function that can only be conferred upon the soul.

The importance of the soul is validated when considering yet another point of view: in all things, universal notions (τὰ κοινὰ... περὶ πάντων, 185E1), those which do not belong to a specific perception, such as being

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⁴ E.g. the true cause is separated from secondary causes in Phaedo 98E5; the soul’s truest nature (Republic 611B1); the true being of man in Alcibiades I 129A-E; and, in a sense, also the political vision of the ruler’s art, which expresses its true being.
and not being, likeness and unlikeness, sameness and difference or numbers, have no bodily organ. Therefore they are extrasensory, but are typical of the quest that a soul investigates by its own power. Therefore, some things the soul views by itself, others by bodily organs (185E7): it is the soul that feels hardness and softness by the touch (185E1–186B3).

We cannot, at the same time, forget a very basic fact:

that which always becomes and never is... is conceived by opinion with the help of sense (Timaeus 28B8-C1).

Since it cannot reach being, perception does not reach truth and does not have true knowledge.

Then knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) does not consist in impressions of sense, but in reasoning about them; in that only, and not in the mere sensation, being (οὐσίας) and truth (ἀληθείας) can be attained (Theaetetus 186D2–5).

This way Plato answers the challenge of Protagoras’ homo mensura: the problem cannot be solved on the plan of perceptions (and the doxa connected to it), because perceptions themselves always necessarily point back to the soul. Only on this rational level one can speak in terms of truth or falsity. True knowledge cannot limit itself to perception: it does not rule it out, but its centre is only the soul. The latter is introduced as that faculty that operates through the tongue (185C3), i.e. through words, i.e. through thought: words and thought are, for Plato, deeply intertwined. In Theaetetus, 189E-190A, doxa is only a dialogue, questions and answers, in own interiority; analogously, in the Sophist, thought and speech (διάνοια and λόγος, 263E3) are the same thing, except that the former is internal dialogue of the soul with itself, without voice, whereas we call speech (λόγος, 263E8) what comes from the soul and, through the mouth, flows with the voice: this is opinion (doxa, 264A2).

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5 This is so important that it is repeated: 186A4; A11; 187A5.
6 Ousia, a word used repeatedly (186B6, 7, C3, 7, D3, E5).
7 Aletheia, a word used repeatedly (186C7, 9, D3–4, E4).
8 Episteme, a word used repeatedly (186C9, D 2, E7, 187A2, 4).
3. The necessity and insufficiency of the various ways of knowledge

This primacy of the word is reassessed in the brilliant text constituting the final digression of the Seventh Letter:

For every real being, there are three things that are necessary if science (ἐπιστήμην) of it is to be acquired; the fourth is science itself, in the fifth place we must put the object itself, the knowable and truly real being. First, the name (ὄνομα); second, the definition (λόγος); third, the image (εἴδωλον); fourth comes science (ἐπιστήμη) (Seventh Letter 342A7-B3).

Besides the fact that the word is first, and therefore inevitable, in this list, it should be noted that perception is not mentioned. Human knowledge as such begins with one reality being thought and spoken of. Plato then proceeds to exemplify what he is talking about: the word is “circle”, the definition, made of names and verbs, is “the figure whose extremities are everywhere equally distant from its centre”, the image is what is drawn and erased, using a compasses, but which does not have the perfection of the circle itself, which is another kind of being.

Another striking thing is what Plato immediately adds concerning intellectual knowledge, which constitutes the fourth level:

Science, reason and right opinion are in the fourth place (ἐπιστήμη καὶ νοῦς ἀληθῆς τε δόξα); these are in our souls, not in words or bodily shapes, and therefore must be taken together as one thing distinct both from the circle itself and from the three things previously mentioned (342C4-D1).

Therefore, the soul holds together these three ways of knowledge, which belong to a higher level than discourses and geometrical demonstrations. This means the sensitive sphere cannot be completely ruled out of the “sounds” and “figures”, i.e. the first three ways of knowledge. Furthermore, among the superior ways belonging to the soul itself the first one is the true opinion; this contradicts hundreds of pages of schoolbooks that point to opinion as a non-knowledge.

Furthermore, the limited human beings need to, somehow, use all four steps:

The same thing is true for straight-lined as for circular figures; for colours; for the good, the beautiful, the just; the body in general,
whether artificial or natural; for the fire, the water, and all the elements; for all living beings and qualities of souls; for all actions and affections. For in each case, whoever does not somehow grasp the four things mentioned will never fully attain scientific knowledge of the fifth (ἐπιστήμης τοῦ πέμπτου μέτοχος ἔσται) (342D3-E2).

Two things should strike us. The description, indeed, points towards both of the levels, that we are familiar with, constituting the whole of reality: 1) the higher level of ideas and the first realities (the good, the beautiful, the just), to which an ambivalent, if not ambiguous, dimension is added – that of mathematical figures and the so-called first elements (water, fire); 2) the empirical level of our world, a dimension that cannot be approached without senses: colours, living beings, souls with actions and affections; a particular attention is paid to the sphere of artefacts. 9

4. Doxa

We can see how doxa is confirmed in its essentiality. This can be easily connected to what we are discussing with regard to perception, because, from a certain point of view, empirical knowledge is often pure opinion, purely doxastic. The only problem is not to be unilateral. Often, scholars unilaterally assume the binary paradigm, that opposes episteme and doxa on the grounds of the two levels of reality, each one of which is approached in an exclusive way. Plato himself often makes the suggestion, so it is undeniably possible to adopt this paradigm. In this case, tertium non datur: doxa is completely condemned, a non-truth faced with the truth that only the stable episteme can reach.

But Plato also – and often – presents a different paradigm. Socrates has learned something important from a woman, the priestess Diotima (Symposium 201E-202A): binary models not always apply. Eros is neither beautiful nor good, but this does not authorize someone to call him ugly and evil. In order to explain this, Diotima broadens the focus of her speech with no apparent reason; she proceeds to state that there is a mean between knowledge and ignorance: that is to correctly formulate an opinion (202A9). It is a ternary paradigm, that is fittingly advanced

9 Regarding the existence of ideas of artefacts, see Migliori 2013 pp. 348–353.
with regards to knowledge and confirmed as for reality itself: being, non-being and becoming as being of non-being or as non-being of being.

It is therefore established that *doxa*, especially when it is according to truth, deserves respect, as Plato confirms both on a theoretical and on a practical level. Concerning the latter, it is said of an individual that

until he has a correct opinion (ὁρθὴν δόξαν) about the questions on which another has science (ἐπιστήμην), believing the true but not reasoning, he will not be at all a worse guide than the other who reasons (οἰόμενος μὲν ἀληθῆ, φρονῶν δὲ μὴ, τοῦ τούτο φρονοῦντος) (*Meno* 97B5–7).

Here the position is deliberately extreme in its judgement of the “rational” guide. The criterion here is only the true. Therefore, one can conclude that:

Therefore, the true opinion (δόξα ἀληθῆς), relative to the correctness of the action, will not be at all a guide worse than the reason; and this is what we have omitted before in the investigation of the nature of virtue, saying that only reason guides the right action, while there was also the true opinion (δόξα ἀληθῆς)... therefore, the right opinion (ὁρθὴ δόξα) is no less useful than science (ἐπιστήμης) (97B9-C5).

This explains why Plato is so eager to stress the importance of *doxa* in some focal points of his reasoning. For example, in order to create a good *polis*, that favours cooperation among citizens who have opposite virtues, the statesman has to connect with a divine thread the part of their souls that has an eternal nature. This operation is presented as follows:

when in souls a true and founded opinion is born (ἀληθῆ δόξαν μετὰ βεβαιώσεως) on the beautiful, the just, the good and their opposites, I say that it is a divine reality that is produced in a spiritual genre (*Statesman* 309C5–8).

Therefore, not only it is legitimate to have opinions about the most important Ideas, but they seem to be decisive on a practical level and divine in their spiritual function.

As for the theoretical level, let us go back to the Meno. Here we find Meno who strongly argues in favour of the difference between true opinion and science, citing the statues of Daedalus that move by themselves:
science is stable, while true opinions (which are explicitly mentioned twice, πρὸς τὰς δόξας τὰς ἀληθεῖς, καὶ γὰρ αἱ δόξαι αἱ ἀληθεῖς, 97E6) are never still. Actually, they do not are not very valuable

if one does not tie them with causal reasoning (δήσῃ αἰτίας λογισμῷ). This is, dear Meno, the recollection, as we admitted in previous speeches. But when they are bound (δεθῶσι), they become first of all sciences (ἐπιστήμαι) and then they are stable. For these things science (ἐπιστήμη) is worth more than the right opinion (ὀρθῆς δόξης), and thanks to the link (δεσμῷ) science (ἐπιστήμη) differs from the right opinion (ὀρθῆς δόξης) (Meno 98A3–8).

Therefore, 1) truth establishes a strong bond between true and/or right opinion and science; 2) the difference is to be found in the causal connections that connect and separate the different Ideas forming a meaningful structure, a paradigm that later (on a complex structure level, and not on a temporal one) explains and guarantees the stability or instability; 3) more simply, a causal system stabilizes the truth of a statement by providing reasons for it; 4) these causes depend on a superior dimension, as one can infer by the unexplained reference to recollection.

In the Theaetetus, we find strong analogies with what we have said so far:

When, therefore, any one forms the true opinion (τὴν ἀληθῆ δόξαν) of anything without logos, its soul is in truth with respect to that, but does not know it (γιγνώσκειν). In fact, who cannot give and receive the logos of a thing has no science (ἀνεπιστήμονα) of that thing. If he add the logos he is capable of all this and finds itself in a complete condition with respect to science (τελείως πρὸς ἐπιστήμην ἔχειν) (202B8-C5).

Plato argues that 1) the soul conceives the truth if the opinion is true; 2) the opinion is not true knowledge because it cannot give logos to that truth it states; 3) the passage from a true opinion to true knowledge is granted by logos. It's almost natural to think that, as in the Meno, Plato hints towards the necessity of establishing knowledge with a system of causal connections that grant the truth of a statement. Socrates then expresses his own satisfaction with the result:

In fact, which science can still exist separately from the logos and the right opinion (ὀρθῆς δόξης)? (202D6–7).
Plato hints to a bond that ties logos, true opinion and science. Like in the *Seventh Letter*, human knowledge requires the constant intertwining of all options.

5. *To know a complex reality*

This bond finds a more true reason in the extreme complexity of reality, that Plato shows in his dialectic treatment. It is a topic we cannot delve into in this article. I will be content with pointing towards the most important issue, that concerns the one-many nexus:

Socrates – We say – it seems to me – that the identity (ταύτον) between the one and the many manifested in reasoning occurs every time in each statement, always, in the past as now. This neither will never end nor begins now, but it is, in my opinion, an everlasting and incorruptible characteristic of our own discourses (*Philebus* 15D4–8).

Dialectics do not only work in the relation between terms, but also on the identity of opposites. We need to take into close consideration the meaning of this identity: Plato is, in fact, well aware of the principle of non-contradiction and knows very well that one opposite concept rules out the other. It seems that there is, here, an exception made for the identity of one and many. *Identity* does not mean that what is one becomes many, but that an intrinsically complex reality can be said of both as one and as many. Reality, therefore, is neither only one or only multiplicity, but rather uni-multiple. This allows us to understand the words we read in the *Philebus*:

that the many are one and that one is many, in fact, are propositions that arouse astonishment and it is easy to attack those who support one or the other thesis (*Philebus* 14C810).

A unilateral statement that one is many or that many is one will meet objections, because both are true if reality is uni-multiple, and therefore ruling either one out of the picture is “wrong”. Dialectics must therefore show and justify this identity without breaking the principle of non-con-
tradiction. We will synthetically provide the solution, given that there is no space here for the necessary textual analysis: every reality is a whole (we would say, nowadays, a system) made of parts, and therefore relatively multiple (we would say, nowadays, complex) even when it is “one” in a strong sense – that is, when it is simple (not composite and not complicated).

Plato gives two basic explanations of this situation in the Seventh Letter: the first one is functional, the second one ontological and gnoseological. The functional one is very clear:

Much more might be said to show that each of these four instruments¹¹ is unclear, but the most important point is what I have said earlier: since there are two objects of search – the being and the quality (τοῦ τε ὄντος καὶ τοῦ ποιοῦ τινος) – the soul seeks to know not the quality but the essence, whereas each of these four instruments presents to the soul, in discourse and in deeds, what she is not seeking, and thus makes it easy to refute by sense perception (αἰσθήσεις εὐέλεγκτον) anything that may be said or pointed out, and fills everyone, so to speak, with perplexity and confusion (343B6-C5).

Here, Plato states that the main problem is that the soul seeks knowledge of the essence but, at the same time, it is always faced with qualities both in speech and in reality: this is what creates endless perplexities and confusions. The problem is not only logical: sense perception has the authority to confute a correct reasoning. Senses testify, although from an epistemologically insufficient ground, an objective reality. Thus, Plato explains his attitude against Zeno (see Parmenides 128A-130A; Philebus 14D): a reasoning is wrong if sensorial evidence, fittingly verified, disproves it. This does not mean senses are considered to provide valid knowledge, because it is always necessary to think and say what the sensory evidence can only manifest.

Therefore, on the one hand, perception is required as origin of the material elements of our world; on the other hand, it holds the function of a litmus test within the whole of experience, since it shows something real that requires explanation and not denial. This strengthens the importance of the empirical dimension and the doxa.

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¹¹ Name, definition, image, science (ἐπιστήμη): cf. before, Seventh Letter 342A7-B3.
Then there is the onto-gnoseological explanation, which we have already met but to which we now invite to pay a new attention:

For every real being, there are three data that are necessary if it is to be acquired their scientific knowledge; the fourth is science itself, in the fifth place we must put the object itself, the knowable and truly real being (ὅ δὲ γνωστὸν τε καὶ ἠληθῶς ἐστιν ὄν) (Seventh Letter 342A7-B1).

I think it is important to highlight the fact that (human) scientific knowledge is the fourth level, whereas reality is the fifth level: it is, therefore, knowable but beyond the sphere of knowledge itself. Plato handed us the key to understand why human knowledge, even at its highest, is always weak, as he clearly states not much later.

Therefore, in those cases in which, because of our defective education, we are not used to look for truth and are satisfied with the images (τῶν εἰδώλων) that they offer us, let us not make ourselves ridiculous between us, those who answer and those who ask, who are able to test and refute the four instruments. But when we force someone to answer and clarify the fifth element, anyone who is capable of turning the subjects upside down, if he wishes, wins and can make those who support a thesis – in speaking or writings or in answering questions – seem completely ignorant of the matter on which he is trying to speak or write to the majority of his listeners. But they sometimes ignore that is not the soul of the writer or speaker which is refuted, but those four instruments mentioned, each of which is by nature defective (πεφυκυῖα φαύλως) (343C5-E1).

In short, if we begin from the real object, the fifth level, then a skilled polemicist will always have the upper hand, because the knowledge of x will always be other than x; but one should be aware that, this way, the opponent is not confuted: rather, it is merely made clear that human knowledge, in all of its functions, is by nature defective. Knowledge never provides the object in its totality, and yet maintains its (human and relative) validity. For this reason Plato does not speak of persuasion but of episteme (342A7, B3, C4) having true being as object of knowledge (342B1).
6. The basis of knowledge

A question arises: if everything moves from perception, which is not a true knowledge, and if everything depends on the soul that, given human limitations and our ontological situation, must struggle to connect terms as distant from each other as words and doxa, figures and nous etc., how is knowledge attained? To put it at the most radical level: where does the discovery of truth come from? To answer with “enquiry” or reflection is insufficient, because such an answer remains open to the eristic objection Plato himself formulates in Euthydemus 275D-277C. There are two options, that exclude any possible third: either only he that knows can learn what he already knows, or else only he that ignores learns what he ignores. There appears to be no acceptable answer: on one hand, it makes no sense to look for what is already known, therefore he who knows does not learn; on the other hand, one cannot either search without knowing nor find what he does not know (since he cannot recognize it), therefore he who does not know does not learn.

Plato’s answer is well known, and it is anamnesis, as is clearly expressed in the Meno. Socrates considers the geometrical problem the ignorant slave has solved, only guided by the philosopher’s questions:

Then he who does not know may still have true opinions (ἀληθεῖς δόξαι) of that which he does not know (Meno 85C6–7).

Ground zero of anamnesis is made of true opinions that, through following enquiry, become episteme:

there have been always true opinions (ἀληθεῖς δόξαι) in him, both at the time when he was and was not a man, which, awakened by the questions, become science (ἐπιστήμαι) (Meno 86A6–8).

It is therefore possible to conclude that, in a certain way,

the truth of things (ἡ ἀλήθεια τῶν ὀντῶν) always existed in the soul (Meno 86B1–2).

Nonetheless, in other dialogues Plato calls this “level zero” knowledge of things episteme:

And if we acquired this knowledge before we were born, and were born having it, then we also knew (ηπιστήμωθα) before we were born and at the instant of birth not only the equal or the greater or the
less, but all other ideas of this type; for we are not speaking only of
equality, but of beauty, goodness, justice, holiness, and of all which
we stamp with the expression “which is in itself” (αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστι) in the
dialogue, both when we ask and when we answer questions. There-
fore it is necessary that we have acquired the true knowledge (τὰς ἐπιστήμας) of all these things before birth. (Phaedo 75C7-D5).

How come this knowledge we possess *a priori*, that is correctly defined at
the beginning as “opinion”, can also be called *episteme*? This double
definition requires an explanation. Plato highlights the fact that the soul
autonomously develops the process of recollection (*anamnesis*). There is
a (quite ambiguous) passage of the *Philebus* that states the difference be-
tween memory and *anamnesis*: memory only preserves, whereas recollec-
tion is when the soul finds something by itself, in itself and without the
body (34B7; 34C1) – that is, with an intellectual act the autonomy of
which is stressed. Therefore, anamnesis involves the soul that begins with
an *a priori* doxastic knowledge that, enriched by facts and logic, becomes
*episteme*. Nonetheless, since the whole process happens *inside* the soul it-
self – with its *a priori* knowledge and its faculties – nothing “new” hap-
pens, but only the unfold for us of a knowledge *in itself* contained in
soul. For example, the knowledge of the similar (that is contained in the
soul *ab origine*) in itself points both towards the knowledge of the unsim-
ilar and towards the knowledge of its depending on the couple same-dif-
ferent. This requires, for us, a long philosophical enquiry that Plato hints
at in the second part of the *Parmenides*.

Our work consists precisely in clarifying such concepts, finding their
place within complex structures that stabilize this knowledge. But the
soul in itself already possesses all this knowledge, that later emerge by
philosophical research. If this was not the case, it would not have since
its origin the knowledge of the similar, but rather it would acquire it
thanks to something else, which would mean there is not such thing as
*anamnesis*. From this point of view, it is therefore right to qualify this
knowledge as *episteme*, perhaps adding (by borrowing Aristotle’s termi-
nology) that it is such *potentially*.

It appears, at this point, that Plato is a rigid rationalist, basing every-
thing that matters on an *a priori* structure that forces itself upon reality
and confirming the soul in its absolute centrality, because it is the only
one that really has knowledge. This is not at all the case, because every-
thing starts from the senses! Plato, in the *Meno*, first shows us a very par-
ticular case (the example of the slave), then highlights the normal process of knowledge. This is better explained in the *Phaedo* (73A7-B2): true knowledge (τὴν ἐπιστήμην, 74B4, C8) is reached starting from sensitive perception:

if, seeing one thing, from seeing it you conceived another, whether similar or dissimilar, necessarily this was a recollection (ἀνάμνησιν) (74C13-D2).

One perceives, therefore knows (γνῶ, 73C7) something; at the same time another comes to mind, different from the first, and this is anamnesis.12 Even later, when speaking of an important abstract concept like the sameness in itself, that we come to know as it is in itself (74A-B), it is reaffirmed that when we see things that are identical, starting from those things (ἐξ ὧν, 74B4; ἐκ τούτων, 74B6; ἐκ τούτων τῶν ἴσων, 74C7) we think that the sameness in itself is different from all identical realities because it cannot appear as different, as may be the case with those things. Plato, at this point, goes one step further: the sameness of things is less perfect than the same itself, but in order to say – in order, that is, to perceive the differences within things that are identical – one must have known the same in itself before. At the end he summarizes: to have such knowledge, we start form sensorial perception, that makes us think the difference from the same in itself, of which we therefore must have knowledge before sensorial perception happens – that is, before we are born (75B-C).

In short, we have to reaffirm what we have stated multiple times. We know reality, and this is possible because of a complex intertwining of all of our ways of knowledge, that allow us to grasp the stable elements in an unstable reality. There is a perfect parallelism: knowledge has this stability because it refers to Ideas in themselves perfectly stable, that the soul possesses a priori but that are reactivated thanks to unstable perception; the universe has this stability from the Ideas themselves that, starting with mathematical entities, are inscribed in matter (the Receptacle) thanks to the work of the Demiurge. A lot could be said, at this point; we will be content with a formula that, in my opinion, well expresses Plato’s vision of reality, and therefore of knowledge:

12 Cf. ἀνεμνήσθη 73C9, D9; ἀνάμνησις, 73D8, E1; ἀναμνησθῆναι, 73E6, E7, E10.
it is better to affirm, as we have often said, that in the all there is much unlimit and sufficient limit (ἀπειρόν τε ἐν τῷ πάντι πολύ, καὶ πέρας ἴκανόν), and, above them, a Cause of not little power, which, by ordering and regulating years, seasons and months, can be rightly called wisdom and intelligence (σοφία καὶ νοῦς) (Philebus 30C3–7).
Are there any “youthful” and/or socratic dialogues? Some reflections on the Apology of Socrates

I must take it for granted that the reader recalls 1) what Plato states in the Phaedrus about philosophical writing as an important “game”; 2) that Plato was Socrates' pupil and tried hard to preserve his master's educational, maieutic approach, 3) that is: the view that philosophy is not taught, but practised; and, consequently, that it is the duty of a good teacher to lead his interlocutor to think, through the spoken and written word.¹

1. The order of the dialogues

In the modern age, the sequence of Plato’s works has emerged as a crucial question for dealing with the “contradictions” in his writing. Actually, a wide range of arbitrary and diverse solutions to the problem of the reading order of the dialogues have been put forward since Antiquity. To avoid this outcome, modern hermeneutics has identified two objective tools by which to establish a sequence for the dialogues.

1) The first method is the “stylometric” one,² based on the presence of particular expressions and words,³ stylistic features whose frequency is statistically calculated starting from the Laws, which are certainly the last work. This analysis makes it possible to classify the texts into differ-

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¹ See the first essay (How Plato Writes) and the fifth (The Phaedrus’ Polyphonic Structure), in this book.
² The insights of L. Campbell (1867), F. Blass (1874) and C. Ritter (1888) became a hermeneutic paradigm in the work of W. Lutoslawski 1897; (a masterful analysis of the debate in Stefanini 1949 pp. LXXII-LXXXI); for a more recent version of this kind of research, see Ledger 1989; Brandwood 1990 (and the interesting assessments in Kahn 1999 pp. 36–100).
³ For instance, Dittenberger (1881) draws attention to connecting particles, Ritter (1888) calculates the frequency of certain phrases, and Lutoslawski focuses on the frequency of 500 stylistic features, which he arranges into four groups according to their rate of occurrence (from accidental to very frequent).
ent sets, in agreement with the hypothesis of an evolution in Plato’s thought put forward by K. F. Hermann (1839). This scholar’s attempt was based on questionable interpretations of the contents of the dialogues, but the stylometric method has provided an objective basis for his hypothesis. Consequently, the 20th century witnessed the predominance of evolutive interpretations over unitary ones, according to a standard model: “Socratic” dialogues, middle and mature dialogues, and late dialogues. However, we are actually dealing with two very different questions: the succession of the dialogues and the alleged evolution of Platonic thought are two problems that are best kept distinct.

The evolutionary interpretation would appear to have entered into crisis today for a number of reasons⁴ – some intrinsic to the hypothesis itself,⁵ others connected to the increasing affirmation of a unitary view of

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⁴ It is important to note that what we are dealing with here are two separate elements: 1) the succession of the dialogues; and 2) the development of Plato’s thought. The crisis of the evolutionary model has engendered a negative feedback on stylometric, whose results must instead be accepted, since they derive from independent investigations. These, however, never yield identical results. This, however, is typical of statistical methods, which always entail a variability index. It is necessary, therefore, to accept a classification into groups without seeking to establish the precise order of succession of individual dialogues. Statistical computation always implies a certain margin, whereby on the one hand it is impossible to define which of two “neighbouring” dialogues comes first and, on the other, it is possible to rule out a significant gap between the two. Confirmation of this comes from the following fact: there is almost complete agreement when it comes to dialogues written after the Republic, since the statistical computation is more effective when applied to dialogues closer to the final point of reference represented by the Laws. By contrast, the discrepancies are greater when it comes to the early texts (it cannot even be ruled out that alterations were made to them at a later stage). Finally, it is not particularly useful to determine the exact position of individual dialogues: within a succession of thirty-odd dialogues, the fact that a particular one is no. 3 or no. 8 makes little difference.

⁵ The aim of stylometric is clear, but there is little agreement on ways to achieve this goal (cf. Ledger 1989, p. 1). Indeed, there is no way of knowing whether the features taken as a model are those which best grasp the evolution of Plato’s style. However, the fact that the results are quite even (and even “logically justifiable”) cannot be ignored (by contrast, any calculation that radically diverges from others only shows that it has taken data “with varying degrees of reliability” as a point of reference).
Platonic thought. The problem is that this has led many scholars to question the reliability of stylometry. However, the results of stylometric studies cannot be doubted, because they have been reached by different researchers independently. No doubt, stylometric analyses never yield identical results, as is bound to be the case with any statistically based research. Moreover, one must accept a classification by sets and forgo any claim to establish the place of individual dialogues. This is impossible because a statistical method always entails a certain “range”. Therefore, while it is impossible to define which of two “neighbouring” dialogues comes first, we can rule out chronological attribution that diverges too much from the stylometric calculation. Finally, there is one element that confirms this conclusion: scholars almost universally agree on the succession of dialogues posterior to the Republic. This result is quite obvious: stylistic calculations are more effective for dialogues close to the point of reference, namely the Laws. By contrast, in the case of early texts it cannot even be excluded that they underwent later revisions.

There is also a second method to order Plato’s works. The dialogues are written in dramatic form, as theatrical texts, but seven of them (Protagoras, Euthydemus, Lysis, Charmides, Symposium, Phaedo, and Republic) are written in a narrative form, i.e. with the recurrent use of expressions like “said”, “replied”, and so on. If we consider the order established stylometrically, we find that the dialogues written in direct form occur at the beginning and at the end, while those in a narrative form fall in the middle.

Therefore, at some point in his writing career, Plato opted for the indirect form, only to then revert to the dramatic one. In both occasions, after having made this choice, the author – like a good teacher – offers an explanation that a careful reader cannot fail to grasp. In Republic III, 392C-398B, Plato distinguishes between three kinds of writing: narrative writing, where the author steps in to report a character’s words using indirect speech; imitative writing, where the character is brought on stage, where the author steps in to report a character’s words using indirect speech; imitative writing, where the character is brought on stage,
so to speak, and the author writes in direct form (this is the typical form of comedy and tragedy); and, finally, mixed writing, which switches between these two forms, as in the case of epic. Direct and imitative writing is rejected for general reasons: we must carry out only one task if we wish to carry it out well: it is rare, if not impossible, for someone to imitate many different things well (394E-395B); moreover, we must imitate only virtues and values, so as not to acquire negative habits (395B-396C).

Therefore, an honest man can imitate the words of another honest man; he will not do so gladly in the case of a man who finds himself in a difficult situation because of disease, passions, or misfortunes; and he will refuse to do so in the case of a man worse than himself, “unless it is a game” (396E2). An honest man, then, must devote himself to the mixed form, leaving little room for imitation. Plato repeatedly affirms this, even though he acknowledges that the most fascinating form is direct writing (397D) and that a poet capable of imitating every model must be revered as a divine man (398A). Hence, Plato recognises the beauty and effectiveness of the direct form of writing, but sets clear ethical limitations to purely imitative art: he does not completely reject it, both because the mixed form is possible, and because the hypothesis of a “game” is always open.

As already noted, if we consider the list of the final dialogues (Phaedrus, Parmenides, Theaetetus, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus, Critias, Laws), we find that they are all in direct form, creating a remarkable literary game: Part 1 of the Parmenides is narrated, while Part 2 is in direct form; this transition is made without any explanation whatsoever, creating the impression that we are reading two different texts that have been grafted together. In the Theaetetus, instead, Plato begins with the indirect form and then switches to the direct (143B-C), so as not to weigh the dialogue down with boring expressions. Indeed, the second part of the Parmenides, consisting of complex arguments, would be almost unreadable with the constant insertion of expressions like “said” and “replied”. Moreover, the “ethical” limitations seem less compelling here: in the last, “difficult” dialogues there is no room for “negative” characters and “immoral” theses.

The concurrence between these two ways of reconstructing the succession of the dialogues and the “logical” order which this order reveals (and which has reinforced the “evolutionary” hypothesis) makes it possi-
ble to suggest a sequence not as a chronological arrangement (though, roughly speaking, this is a plausible order), but rather as an interpretative hypothesis that makes no claim as regards the placement of individual dialogues: 1) eight introductory dialogues, all in direct form: Apology, Ion, Euthyphro, Crito, Laches, Hippias Minor, Hippias Major, and Alcibiades I; 2) eight in-depth critical and theoretical texts, four in indirect form, Charmides, Protagoras, Lysis, and Euthydemus, and four in direct form, Gorgias, Menexenus, Meno, and Cratylus; 3) four major theoretical dialogues, the first three in indirect form, with a return to the direct form in the last dialogue: Symposium, Phaedo, Republic and Phaedrus; 4) four dialectical texts: Parmenides, Theaetetus, Sophist, and Statesman; 5) five final dialogues: Philebus, Timaeus, Critias, Laws, Epinomis.\footnote{So far I have spoken of a relative chronology for the succession of the texts. As far as the absolute chronology is concerned, which is to say the dating of the dialogues, traditional suggestions are based on data with no objective foundation. A classic case is the Gorgias, which according to many scholars is to be dated to around 387 BC, as Plato apparently displays a psychological state shaped by his voyage to Syracuse. However, no one has ever been able to quote a single line from this dialogue that might suggest a connection with Syracuse or Plato’s journey. The interpretation of the text based on the alleged psychological condition of the author is not scientifically correct. Indeed, the Phaedo – a dialogue describing Socrates’ death, which must have occurred many years earlier – shows that an artist is capable of reliving a given psychological state regardless of temporal conditions. But even if we were to take the year 387 as the terminus post quem, it would be a trifling acquisition, since all other hypotheses are untenable. This is always the case: all dates that may be inferred from the dialogues are either hypothetical or insignificant. So it is better to desist from this fruitless game.}

The problem of the meaning of this sequence needs to be addressed. Even if we discard the evolutionary hypothesis, we are left with the fact that there is a logic in this succession of the texts. The order we have cannot be a random one, so we must posit a protreptic-educational choice on Plato’s part, who thereby proves to be Socrates’ pupil. It is a matter of fostering a process of philosophical development that leads from a series of “simple” dialogues, through some very beautiful ones with a complex structure, to denser texts that pay little attention to the aesthetic dimension and appear to be increasingly reserved for philosophical readers almost exclusively interested in dialectics, which is to say theoretical questions (as Plato himself, a true teacher, explicitly states in Statesman...}
286D-E).\textsuperscript{8} We are dealing not with an evolution, but with the construction of an itinerary for the philosophical development of a potential reader.

2. \textit{The “youthful” dialogues}

At this point we can delve into the heart of the matter. The underlying problem, namely the protreptic nature of Platonic writing, far exceeds the scope of this short contribution. However, there is a widespread view among scholars that might usefully be brought under critical scrutiny: the idea that Plato wrote his first dialogues in a “youthful” phase, so much so that many scholars speak of a “Socratic” phase. These dialogues would present not the philosopher’s own thought, but that of his master. But if it is possible to argue that Plato had already developed the views on writing which he presents in the \textit{Phaedrus} by the time he started penning his first dialogues, and if it is possible to show that the latter are the work of an author already confident enough of his thought to engage in very bold “games”, then the hypothesis about youthful dialogues no longer holds water or must be radically redefined: these are no doubt “youthful” texts, but only insofar as they were written by a fully mature philosopher for “young readers”, with the aim of leading them on the path of philosophical reflection. Proof of this claim requires the analysis of different dialogues and hence a volume that I hope to publish... some day. For the time being, for the sake of example, I will only offer a little food for thought based on a concise analysis of the \textit{Apology}.

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\textsuperscript{8} Plato must clarify the \textit{criteria} according to which the value of a philosophical text is assessed. In philosophical reflection pleasure must be considered an accessory, the elegant resolution of the posed problem is ranked second, while the dialectic is presented as the highest good. Indeed, this is the defining feature of the last dialogues, which are far from being the most aesthetically pleasing, but are very important for dialectic, which is to say philosophy.
The Apology, one of the earliest Platonic texts, is not actually a dialogue. The narrative focuses on Socrates’ trial, held in 399 BC, and the only voice we hear is that of the philosopher himself, who even imagines a dialogue with Meletus, a poet unknown to us. The latter had submitted the accusation, but the real instigators were Anytus, a politician, and Lycon, an orator. In this work Plato carries out a series of operations that can only be understood in the light of the “games” mentioned in the Phaedrus, and makes a series of statements that a “youthful” philosopher could never have made.

It is worth briefly recalling the three speeches that Socrates delivers to the judges. In the first (17A-35D) the philosopher recalls that the accusations have two remote causes: 1) the action of a comedian who described Socrates as both a naturalist and a sophist – the reference here is almost certainly to Aristophanes’ Clouds, a work written in 423 BC, 24 years before the trial; 2) the effect of an oracle by the Delphic Apollo, who had told Chaerephon that there was no one wiser than Socrates. The latter, who deeply respected the words of the god but knew that he was not wise, enquired as to the meaning of this response. To this end, he chose to question learned people: politicians, poets, and craftsmen. In such a way he realised that the god, who alone is wise, praised Socrates because the latter knows that human wisdom is worthless. Unfortunately, this investigation attracted the enmity of many individuals who did not appreciate Socratic mode of questioning people by putting them in a tight spot.

Socrates then moves on to discuss the charge itself: corrupting the youth and introducing new gods into the city. In a fictional dialogue with Meletus, the philosopher is accused of being an atheist. This claim contradicts the accusation and at the same time suggests something that the whole of Athens knows to be false: for Socrates practises philosophy at the god’s behest, encouraging citizens to improve themselves.

However, Plato shows that he is perfectly familiar with the dialogue technique and even uses it in this complicated situation because Socrates imagines some dialogues: between Socrates and Callias (20A-B), between Socrates and Meletus (a very long dialogue: 24C-28A), and between the Athenian citizens and Socrates (29CE), in addition to the conversation that the Pythia has with herself (21B) and citizens’ reflections about the gods (23B). In a way, the third discourse as a whole may be read as a dialogue.
The second speech is delivered after the first round of votes, which found Socrates guilty (35E-38B). The Athenian judicial system allowed the person on trial to suggest an alternative punishment from that suggested by the prosecutors – in this case, “death”. However, the philosopher does not consider himself guilty and makes a series of almost provocative claims: 1) what he deserves is not punishment, but a prize for the good he has done to the city; 2) he cannot suggest an alternative punishment, because he has never harmed anyone and cannot do so upon himself by bringing a sentence now even though he is innocent; 3) whatever the judges’ decision, he will never cease philosophising, both because he wishes to comply with the divinity’s will and because a life devoid of research is unworthy of being lived. Be that as it may, since he is poor, he might suggest a fine of just three minae; but given that his friends will insist to cover the cost, he suggests thirty.

The last speech is delivered after the second round of voting (38C-42A), which sentenced him to death, and it features some lofty reflections. Those who believe they have done away with a dissenting voice will be disproved, as others will take Socrates’ place. Then, addressing the “true judges”, those who have acquitted him, he argues that what is about to happen is probably a good thing, as is shown by the fact that his daimon has never stepped in. Death is not an evil in itself, since it is either a long, dreamless sleep or a journey to a world where it is possible to meet the great men of the past. In any case, nothing bad can happen to Socrates, as the gods take care of those who are good. Socrates can therefore bid everyone farewell (40C-41C).

In order to identify some of the “games” played by Plato in presenting this Socrates, we must start from two elements: 1) the author is dealing with a State trial, so he could not lie and get away with it; the event had occurred a (relatively) short time earlier and some of the witnesses were certainly still living. Plato informs us that he was present at the trial, which is significant since he refers to himself only here (twice, 34A; 38B) and in the Phaedo (to say that he was not present). So in a way he presents himself as a witness to the facts he is recounting. As we shall see, the narrative contains no lies, but neither does it give us the stark truth: in fact 2) we are dealing with a philosophical, not historical, work, as is shown by the topics addressed.
The charge

The first “game” concerns the indictment, preserved by Diogenes, II, 40, 1–7:

The affidavit in the case, which is still preserved, says Favorinus, in the Metron, ran as follows: “This indictment and affidavit is sworn by Meletus, the son of Meletus of Pitthos, against Socrates, the son of Sophroniscus of Alopece: Socrates is guilty [1] of refusing to recognise the gods recognised by the State, and of introducing other new divinities. He is also guilty [2] of corrupting the youth. The penalty demanded is death.

Xenophon (Memorabilia, I, 1, 2–5; Apology, 10–11) states the same thing: the main charge is a “religious” one, while the charge of corrupting the youth is, in a way, consequent upon it. In Plato the charges are the same, but the order is inverted. Socrates himself points out that he is not quoting the exact words of the prosecutors’ statement:

It states more or less (ἔχει δέ πως ὧδε): “Socrates is guilty because he corrupts the youth and does not believe in the gods the city believes in, but in other new gods” (24B8-C1).

However, Plato shows that he is aware of how the charge was formulated:

But nevertheless, tell us, how do you say, Meletus, that I corrupt the youth? Or is it evident, according to the indictment you brought, that it is by teaching them not to believe in the gods the city believes in, but in other new gods? Do you not say that it is by teaching this that I corrupt them? (26B2–6; cf. 23D1–7)

Plato repeats the same game in Euthyphro, 3A-B: first Socrates recalls the charge of corrupting the youth; then Euthyphro asks him how he does so, according to Meletus; at this point, Socrates recalls that he is being accused of inventing new gods and scorning the old ones, and that this is the charge brought against him.

Plato does not lie but by inverting the factors at play, he makes education (and the contrast between different ways of life, which enables him to present the figure of the “philosopher”, as we shall see) the main theme on which to focus, as opposed to the theme of Socrates’ relation-
ship with the gods, with regard to which the author wants to propose a much more elaborate reflection (that of the *Euthyphro*). However, this “second” theme, which cannot of course be ignored, is circumvented through a remarkable game.

The gods

Before defending himself against Meletus, Socrates recalls the accusations which the judges heard when they were young. He fears these more than the charges currently brought against him. These are widespread rumours, also reported in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (18D):

Socrates is a criminal and [1] a busybody, investigating the things beneath the earth and in the heavens and [2] making the weaker argument stronger and [3] teaching others these same things (19B4-C1).

Here the charge of teaching constitutes a sort of aggravating circumstance with respect to the two main charges. The accusation is explained, confirmed and integrated at the end of the exposition about the research which Socrates has conducted with politicians, poets, and craftsmen:

As a result, therefore, those who thus offended are angry with Socrates, and say [A] that Socrates is a most abominable person and is corrupting the youth. [B] And when anyone asks them “by doing or teaching what?”, they have nothing to say, but they do not know, and that they may not seem to be at a loss [C] they say these things that are commonly said against all philosophers,[1] “the things in the air and the things beneath the earth” and [2] “not to believe in the gods” and [3] “to make the weaker argument the stronger” (23D1–7).

In these texts, therefore, we find the charge 1) that Socrates is a physicist – indeed, Anaxagoras’ name is mentioned later on (26D); 2) that he is a sophist, or rather a Protagorean; 3) that many people have concluded that he “does not recognise the gods”, i.e. that he is an atheist.10 This leads Meletus into “contradiction”, because either Socrates has invented

10 This is a “logical” consequence, given the cases of Anaxagoras and Protagoras, which Socrates was associated with.
new gods or he is an atheist. In the fictitious dialogue, Meletus repeatedly “replies” that Socrates is an atheist. «That is what I say, that you do not believe in gods at all» (26C7); «But, by Zeus, do you think this of me, that I do not believe there is any god? – No, by Zeus, you don’t, not in the least» (26E3–5).

Therefore, Meletus contradicts himself, for he accuses the atheist Socrates of inventing new gods, arguing that the philosopher at the same time believes and does not believe in gods. But the contradiction is not found in the charge itself: Plato has devised it. In such a way the philosopher succeeds in postponing the discussion of the topic of the gods, which requires a more sophisticated treatment (that provided in the *Euthyphro*) compared to the one he could offer by following Socrates’ self-defence. Moreover, by presenting the two crucial themes, those of education and ways of life, Plato can begin to construct the figure of Socrates as an “embodiment of philosophy”, which is one of the aims of his writings.

Socrates’ defence

Yet it is precisely the presentation of this figure, combined with the need to respect the trial proceedings, that engenders a new contradiction. After receiving his sentence, a person on trial could suggest an alternative punishment from the one proposed by the prosecutors – in this case, the maximum penalty: death. Diogenes Laertius, II, 42, informs us that Socrates first suggested a penalty of 25 drachmas (while noting that according to Eubulides he offered 100); then, when this caused an uproar among the judges, he suggested that he deserved to be maintained at the Prythaneum. As a consequence, Socrates was sentenced to death by 360 votes against 140.11 We do not overestimate the reliability of this source, but the narrative – at least in its general outline – is a logical and consistent one. The same is not true of Plato’s narrative (35E-36A), which states the same things, but then reverses the sequence, making it less logical and – most importantly – less consistent.

11 The astounding thing about this vote is that 80 “judges” who in the first round had deemed Socrates innocent sentenced him to death in the second round.
In the Apology, instead of suggesting an alternative penalty, Socrates offers a reflection on what is just and best for him: as a benefactor, he deserves to be maintained at the Prythaneum at the public expense far more than any Olympic winner. Socrates is aware that he might come across as haughty and, in attempt to clarify his point of view, he repeatedly states:

I am convinced that I never intentionally wronged anyone; but I cannot convince you of this (37A5–6).

Since, then, I am convinced that I never wronged anyone, I am certainly not going to wrong myself, and to say of myself that I deserve anything bad, and to propose any penalty of that sort for myself (37B2–5).

Shall I choose one of those things which I know to be evils? (37B7–8).

Out of the three evils mentioned, however, he only establishes that exile and imprisonment are genuine evils, whereas his judgement on the possibility of a fine is far more vague. Still, Socrates confirms:

I am not accustomed to think that I deserve any punishment (38A8–B1).

This is an unequivocal stance, worthy of the figure of the philosopher that Socrates embodies here. However, immediately afterwards he contradicts himself:

If I had money, I would have proposed a fine, as large as I could pay; for that would have done me no harm. But as it is—I have no money, unless you are willing to impose a fine which I could pay. I might perhaps pay a mina of silver. So I propose that penalty; but Plato here, men of Athens, and Crito and Critobulus, and Aristobulus tell me to propose a fine of thirty minae, and they will stand as guarantors. So I propose a fine of that amount (38B1–8).

The question here is that of harm, whereas the previous claims centred on the contrast between good and evil, between committing an injustice and avoiding it. Socrates had stated that he did not wish to commit any wrongdoing against himself, which is what he ultimately does.

This contrast between “two Socrateses”, the historical Socrates and the ideal philosophical one, also occurs on different levels, such as the episte-
mological. On the one hand, we have a Socrates for whom human knowledge is of little worth and who does not pass any judgement because he “does not know”; on the other hand, we have a Socrates who shows he knows many things, including one that is described as true (alethes) (41C-D). The most evident contrast concerns the way in which the afterlife is judged. Those who fear death behave as though they were wise, when in fact they know nothing at all:

For no one knows whether death be not even the greatest of all goods for the human being, but they fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And is not this the most reprehensible form of ignorance, that of thinking one knows what one does not know? Perhaps, men, in this matter also I differ from other men in this way, and if I were to say that I am wiser in anything, it would be in this, that not knowing very much about Hades, I do not think I know (29A6-B6).

What we are dealing with here is not generic Socratic non-knowing, but a specific claim, so much so that immediately afterwards Socrates states:

But I know that it is evil and disgraceful to do wrong and to disobey him who is better than I, whether he be god or man (29B6–7).

So the Socrates who known he does not know, knows something that concerns the very relationship between gods and human beings. Nor is this a one-off case. The philosopher has other certain opinions (30C-D): he does not believe that a death sentence is an evil, because a better man cannot be harmed by a worse; death and exile are not great evils for him, whereas putting a just man on trial is. This does not apply to death, «about which I say that I do not know whether it is a good thing or an evil» (37B 6–7). At the same time, however, Socrates states that he knows well that all other punishments, such as imprisonment and exile, are evils.

Thus the text ends on a problematic note:

But now the time has come to go away: I go to die, and you to live. But which of us goes to the better thing is known to none but God (42A2–5).

Yet in his third speech to the “judges”, Socrates states something quite different, based on an amazing fact (θαυμάσιον τι γέγονεν, 40A3), namely
that his *daimon* has not stopped him; hence, the sentenced inflicted upon him cannot be ranked among the greatest evils (*ἐσχάτα κακῶν*, 40A8):

This which has happened to me is doubtless a good thing, and those of us who think death is an evil must be mistaken. A convincing proof of this been given me; for the accustomed sign would surely have opposed me if I had not been going to meet with something good (40B7-C3).

He continues:

Let us consider in another way also how good reason there is to hope that it is a good thing to die. Now being dead is either of two things: either it is virtually nothingness, so that the dead man has no consciousness of anything, or it is, in accordance with the things that are said, a sort of change and migration of the soul from this to another place (40C3–9).

In both cases the outcome is positive: in the former, we will experience something akin to a sweet, dreamless night; in the latter, we will meet true judges, like Minos and Rhadamanthus, and live in the company of Orpheus, Musaeus, Homer, Hesiod, and other great men of the past.

And the greatest pleasure would be to pass my time in examining and investigating the people there, as I do those here, to find out who among them is wise and who thinks he is when he is not. What price would any of you pay, judges, to examine him who led the great army against Troy, or Odysseus, or Sisyphus, or countless others, both men and women, whom I might mention? To converse and associate with them and examine them would be immeasurable happiness. At any rate, the folk there do not kill people for it; since, if what we are told is true, they are immortal for all future time, besides being happier in other respects than men are here (41B5-C7).

Socrates ends by adding a certainty to this hope:

But you also, judges, must regard death hopefully and must think that this is true (*ἀλήθες*), namely that no evil can come to a good man either in life or after death, and that the gods does not neglect him (41C8-D2).
Indeed, Socrates is certain that nothing occurs by chance and that to die is the best thing for him (βέλτιον, 41D5).

In brief, in the text we find both a Socrates who does not know and one who does, a situation that also occurs in other dialogues, and which is influenced here by the actual unfolding of the legal proceedings. This does not stop Plato, because his aim is to present Socrates as someone who has been sentenced unjustly and yet continues to uphold a way of living that is also put forward in many other dialogues.

Post-eventum prophecies

There is another element which cannot be ignored. Socrates repeatedly states:

For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another, like me, whom the god has fastened upon the city (30E1–3)
Another one like me will certainly not easily arise for you, men (31A2).

Socrates fears that the Athenians will sentence him to death and continue to “sleep”, «unless God, in his care for you, should send someone else to you» (31A6–7).

In the third speech, the question crops up again. Indeed, we find a kind of a response, as Socrates addresses those who have sentenced him to death by uttering a real prophecy:

And now I wish to prophesy to you, who have condemned me; in fact I am now at the time when men most do prophesy, the time just before death. And I say to you, ye men who have slain me, that punishment will come upon you straight-way after my death, far more grievous, by Zeus, than the punishment of death which you have meted out to me. For now you have done this to me because you hoped that you would be relieved from rendering an account of your lives, but I say that you will find the result far different. Those who will force you to give an account will be more numerous than hereto-

12 The Greek has an aorist optative, which seems to suggest both a possibility and a wish.

3. The Apology

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fore; men whom I restrained, though you knew it not; and they will be harsher, inasmuch as they are younger, and you will be more indignant. For if you think that by putting men to death you will prevent anyone from reproaching you because you do not act as you should, you are mistaken. That mode of release is neither possible at all nor noble. Instead, the best and easiest kind is not by cutting others’ words short, but by making yourselves as good as possible. So with this prophecy to you who condemned me I take my leave (39C1-D9).

How could a young Plato formulate a prophecy such as this, which clearly alludes to “pupils of Socrates’” committed to carrying on his mission in Athens? Is it not more reasonable to assume that this “prophecy” was written by the founder of the Academy?

Platonic elements

We then have some specific contents that should not be underestimated. The first element – already mentioned – is Plato’s awareness that he must discuss the question of education and the topic of religion separately. In addressing the first topic, Plato must tackle the main issue, namely the science of the virtue of man and the citizen (20B). In his “dialogue” with Meletus, Socrates asks who helps youths to improve. First Meletus gives no answer and then says: the laws. But Socrates notes that he did not ask “what” but “who”, confirming that this person must first of all (πρῶτον, 24E2) know the laws. The answer is judges, so Socrates concludes that all Athenians except Socrates are capable of educating the young. Plato is here outlining a topic on which he will return again and again: citizens are poor educators and a training in virtue is necessary, but it is more problematic than what the sophists believe.13

Socrates does not say who such person might be, but takes the opportunity to emphasise that such a person differs from rhetoricians and sophists. He repeatedly denies (19D-20E, 31B-D, 33A-34B) that he wishes to teach others and receive money from them, unlike the sophists (he mentions Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias, significantly omitting Protago-

ras). The most radical contrast actually emerges from Socrates’ very first words: the accusers’ speech was wonderful and so convincing that he almost forgot himself. However, it was not a truthful speech (ἀλήθες, 17A4). In particular, the accusers lied by stating that he is a good speaker, which is false

unless indeed they call a clever speaker the one who speaks the truth (τάληθή); for if this is what they mean, I would agree that I am an orator – but not after their sort. Now they, as I say, have said little or nothing true (ἀλήθες); instead you shall hear from me the whole truth (πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν). Not, however, men of Athens, speeches finely tricked out with words and phrases, as theirs are, nor carefully arranged, but you will hear things said at random with the words that happen to occur to me. For I trust that what I say is just (17B4-C3).

We might think that what we have here is simply an autobiographical reference, but the text confirms that this is a theoretical element occurring in numerous dialogues: the contrast between a kind of rhetoric that is merely designed to persuade and one that respects the truth. As usual, Socrates will speak so that his listeners may consider whether what I say is just (δίκαια) or not; for this is the virtue of a judge, while the orator’s virtue is to speak the truth (τάληθή) (18A4–6).

The contrast between different ways of life

Finally, Plato embarks on a lengthy discussion that has no direct connection with the charge brought against Socrates. Someone might ask Socrates whether he does not regret having devoted himself to a pursuit that has exposed him to the risk of death; to such a person Socrates would answer:

You do not speak well, my friend, if you think a man in whom there is even a little merit ought to consider danger of life or death, and

14 According to Diogenes Laertius. II, 40–41, Socrates turned down the speech Lysias had written for him (Xenophon too recounts that Socrates refused to prepare a speech).
not rather regard this only when he does things, if they are right or wrong, and acts of a good or bad man (28B5–9).

Therefore, in accordance with the truth (τῇ ἀληθείᾳ, 28D6), a man must remain wherever he has chosen to station himself or has been stationed, be it by his commander in battle or by the will of the gods. This was the case with Socrates, who had to live as a philosopher. Had he refrained from philosophising out of fear of death, he would indeed have proven himself to be an atheist and someone who disregards the oracle’s words (29A). Philosophy, therefore, emerges as a way of serving the God and the city, starting with the Pythias’ response. This point is reaffirmed when he addresses the citizens of Athens, who – Plato surmises – might possibly be willing to disregard Anytus’ accusation if only Socrates agreed to cease philosophising:

Citizens of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up philosophy or stop exhorting and warning anyone I may meet, saying in my accustomed way: “Excellent man, you are a citizen of Athens, the greatest of cities and the most famous for wisdom and power: are you not ashamed that you care for the acquisition of wealth and for reputation and honour, when you neither care nor give thought for wisdom and truth and the perfection of your soul (φρονήσεως δὲ καὶ ἀληθείας καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς)?” (29D2-E3).

If anyone disagrees, Socrates will submit him to elenchos, and he will do so because there is nothing more important than this service to the God:

For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls, or even so much; and I tell you: “Virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money and all other good things to man, both in the private and in the public sphere” (30A7-B4).

Socrates further confirms that he cannot relinquish philosophy:

For if I say that such conduct would be disobedience to the god and that therefore I cannot keep quiet, you will think I am jesting and will not believe me; and if again I say that to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and ex-
amining myself and others is the greatest good to man, and that a life without research is not worth living by a human being, you will believe me still less. Yet the things are as I say, men (37E5–38A7).

Again in the second speech Socrates states that he has never entered politics because this would soon have led him to death, which would not have been of much help to anyone:

instead I devoted myself to conferring upon each citizen individually what I regard as the greatest benefit, as I said, by trying to persuade anyone that in order to become really good and wise you don’t have to take care of your own things before yourself, and likewise not even the interests of the city before the city itself, and so on for other things (36C3-D1).

Most significantly, Socrates here foreshadows a distinctly Platonic theme which links virtue, philosophy, and happiness. Socrates deserves the Prytaneum more than any Olympic athlete:

For he makes you seem to be happy, whereas I make you happy in reality (36D9-E1)

Finally, we have the distinction between divine wisdom and human knowledge (the man is always exclusively philo-sopher). The moment Socrates attempts to pinpoint the causes of the slander against him, he displays his wisdom – a human form of wisdom, whereas the sophists possess “higher” wisdom, if they know virtue and are capable of teaching it. Socrates’ enquiry, therefore, is precisely designed to show the limits of this “human wisdom”. It is in such terms that Socrates interprets the Delphic oracle:

but the fact is, men, it is likely that the god is really wise and by his oracle means this, namely that human wisdom is of little or no value. And it appears that he does not really say this of Socrates, but merely uses my name, and makes me an example, as if he were to say: “This one of you, human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he is in truth he is worth nothing with respect to wisdom” (23A5-B4).
Hence, Socrates has chosen to come to the god’s aid (23B7) by showing that no one is wise (in an absolute sense) – as Plato will argue again in the *Laws*.\(^\text{15}\)

4. Conclusion

Obviously, not one of the arguments presented here constitutes an adequate demonstration. Indeed, no argument could. “Demonstrations” in hermeneutics are miracles, and as such they are necessarily very rare. The real problem lies elsewhere. Given the data I have schematically highlighted, which is the most likely hypothesis: 1) this is a youthful text written by a philosopher who is searching for his path, and who shows himself to have certain limits and to be closely dependent on his master; 2) this is a text through which a mature Plato addresses the citizens of Athens in order to recall the crime committed, to assert his role in carrying on the religious-educational function of his master, and to start outlining some of the underlying themes in his own thought?

My answer is clear, particularly in the light of the “game” involving Meletus’ charge and that strange “prophecy”, but especially because I am capable of performing the same operation on all the dialogues from the first period. Regrettably, I can only hope that the Good Lord will give me the time and means to write that text *too*.

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\(^{15}\) On this crucial co-presence of two concepts of knowledge and truth, absolute and relative, see the seventh essay in this book (*A Hermeneutic Paradigm for the History of Ancient Philosophy: the Multifocal Approach*, pp. 110-130) and Migliori 2018.
The *Phaedrus* Polyphonic Structure

1. A paradoxical situation

The question that arises in the attentive reader who has finished reading the *Phaedrus* for the first time is: "What have we talked about?". In fact, the question is so legitimate that it is also proposed by those who, after several readings, try to have an organic vision of the dialogue.

The subtitle with which it was transmitted to us, *Phaedrus, On Beauty*, does not seem to tell us much, because there were already several other subtitles (*eros*, rhetoric, the good, etc.), as evidence of how the ancients already found themselves in difficulty in defining the exact content of the text. Therefore, the multiplicity of interpretations\(^2\) that have been given in recent times is not a surprising novelty.

A first block of scholars (Taylor, Thompson, Robin, Kucharski, Jaeger) come to indicate in *eros* simply an occasion theme, chosen for rhetorical reasons: «that as subject of the speech is chosen *Eros* is well explained by the frequency of the theme in school exercises of this type».\(^3\) In essence, a substantial part of this Platonic text would be philosophically insignificant, with little respect for the god and the reader. This hypothesis conflicts paradoxically with the conviction, shared by many authors, that the *Phaedrus* represents «the quickest synthesis of Plato's ideas on the relationship of writing, word and thought»\(^4\). In fact, as we shall see, if the philosopher had written a work letting himself be so conditioned by the rhetorical tradition, he would have contradicted what he himself says in this text on the correct way of communicating.

A second group of scholars (Stefanini, Wilamowitz Moellendorff) considers the eros as the central theme, understood as an irrational force highlighted in poetry, divine madness (*mania*) that allows the ascent to a higher world. With this hypothesis we come to affirm that here Plato re-

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1. On the various titles given at work since antiquity, cf. Thompson 1868, p. XIII.
2. See for a review of various interpretations, Bonetti 1963.
evaluates the poem after the harsh condemnation received in the Republic.5

A third group (Bonetti, Reale, Friedländer) believes that this theme of love goes intrinsically connected, as in the Symposium, with philosophy: «the ascent to the ideal world is therefore not accomplished for Plato first in love and then in the philosophy, or now in love and now in philosophy, but in love that has its actuality in philosophy».6

Leaving aside other particular interpretative frameworks, it seems to us that these proposals have in common a double flaw. First of all they suffer too much the charm of the Symposium. The relationship between the two dialogues is undeniable, since the treatment of beauty in the Phaedrus is a sort of summary of the much more articulated discourse of Diotima. Now, eros is certainly a central theme in the discussion of the Symposium. In fact, if we ask ourselves what it is for Plato "eros", we find in that dialogue a series of precious indications, conceptually rich and articulated precisely on the nature of this desire. The same thing does not seem to be able to be said of the Phaedrus, which revolves around an erotic situation, though the question «what is "eros"» almost never arises. In fact, the answer we find in the text is extremely short and inadequate to the complexity of the topic.

Secondly, all these scholars seem to start from the conviction that there is one (and only one) interpretation7 that gives meaning to the Platonic dialogue. This observation immediately refers to another question. If a dialogue deals with so many subjects, and so different from each other, the problem of its unity inevitably arises, precisely at the level of the structure of the work. In fact, the Phaedrus was very criticized also from this point of view: there is no lack of those who found it «disordered and rhapsodic»8 or even ill-structured, a sign of senility.9 The situation becomes paradoxical if one thinks that in this dialogue Plato expresses his convictions on the correct drafting of a written and oral discourse, giving us a very strong indication in this regard:

5 Wilamowitz Moellendorff 1959, p. 384.
6 Bonetti 1964, p. 576.
7 Of course there is no lack of interpreters who strongly emphasize the multiplicity of aspects of dialogue (see for example Smith 1991, p. 233, Pinnoy 1983, p. 64, Plebe 1964, p. V).
9 Raeder 1905, p. 267.
Every speech must be put together like a living creature, with a body of its own; it must be neither without head nor without legs; and it must have a middle and extremities that are fitting both to one another and to the whole work (Phaedrus 264C2–5).

A similar phrase can be interpreted according to two coordinates: on the technical level (each speech must have an introduction, a conclusion and an appropriate central part, so as to constitute a harmonic complex) or on the structural plane (the whole determines the value of the parts that must also be well crafted). The two interpretations are not in principle opposed but make a chaotic writing of this dialogue highly unlikely. Instead, any discovery of great complexity in the text will not disprove, but will confirm this Platonic indication, since the correct subdivision of a body into three or more parts does not hide the elementary truth that each of these is, in turn, further structured. It is a "complexity" on which the dialectical references of the Phaedrus draw attention.

We therefore propose to verify if and how it is possible to reconstruct the unity of the dialogue on the conceptual plane as on the structural one. Also in this case, as in previous studies, we intend to distinguish three elements:

a) the dominant motif, the unitary axis of text which Plato continually reminds;

b) the thematic centre of the work, the philosophically decisive question, the one that "judges" the dominant motive itself and/or gives it the appropriate meaning;

c) the most important issue, the highest element which, in all cases, can’t ignore.

We will see if the application of this model to our dialogue will be able to produce some clarifying effect on the basic question: the unity of the dialogue.
2. Introductory elements for reading the dialogue

The *Phaedrus* is generally considered to be written in dramatic form. Strangely, the three long speeches that are found there, that of Lysias read by *Phaedrus* and the two pronounced by Socrates, have led some scholars to suppose that the form is mixed: it plays in this judgment a probable confusion. As we know, there are indirect and "narrated" dialogues and dialogues in dramatic, theatrical form. The "read" discourses, like that of Lysias, do not change this scheme: the form is and remains direct, completely devoid of the intercalations typical of the narrative one.

The significant fact is that the dialogues in narrative form are all close to the *Republic* and come after a long series of dialogues written in an imitative form. This "evolution" can not be underestimated: Plato imposes a very clear ethical bond to imitative art (cf. *Republic* III, 392D-398B). But, in the last dialogues, which are very difficult to understand, the author returns to dramatic dialogue. All this is important to place the *Phaedrus* after the works written in a narrative form, together with the "dialectical" writings. This is also confirmed by the stylometric studies, which showed an affinity between *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides* and *Phaedrus*. We will see that also the philosophical content, in particular the clear references to dialectics, confirm this collocation.

However, we will also have to put, so to speak, this dialogue "out of list", as it is a work that is in some ways unique, in terms of style, character, and content.

The reader is placed directly in the presence of Phaedrus and Socrates on the banks of the Ilisus: «We are alone, in a deserted place» (236C8). It may seem that there is also Lysias, seeing that Socrates speaking to the rhetorician says to Phaedrus: «It may seem that there is also Lysias, seeing that Socrates says to Phaedrus: «If Lysias himself is present, I'll never be willing to offer me for your oratory exercise» (228E1–2). However, Lysias is not there and in fact a) can not defend his speech from the attacks of Socrates; b) at the end (278B) Phaedrus is instructed to bring him a message to inform him of the outcome of the discussion.

10 Cf. the fourth essay in this text, *Are there any “youthful” and/or Socratic dialogues? Some reflections on the* Apology of Socrates, pp. 50-69.
Now, the fact that they are only two in discussion is not particularly strange,\footnote{There are other examples of dialogues in which Socrates has only one interlocutor: \textit{Euthyphro}, \textit{Critone}, \textit{Ion}, \textit{Chitophon}, \textit{Menesenes}, \textit{Alcibiades I}, \textit{Alcibiades II}, \textit{Hipparchus}, \textit{Minos}, \textit{Hippias Major}.} while the characters, especially this Socrates, and the location are extraordinary, as the \textit{Phaedrus} is the only dialogue that takes place outside the city.

Phaedrus, the interlocutor of Socrates who gives the name to the dialogue, is also present in the \textit{Protagoras} and the \textit{Symposium}. In the first text it is little more than an adolescent, one of the auditors of sophist Hippias; in the \textit{Symposium} (the action is imagined in 416 B.C., he must have surpassed the thirty years) he confirms his passion for the speeches that was, evidently, his characteristic trait. This repeated presence probably involves an implicit political-social judgment that we are not able to fully understand. Phaedrus, whom Plato always presents as an excellent person, has been a controversial figure,\footnote{He was accused of having profaned the Eleusinian Mysteries and of taking part in the mutilation of the Hermes on the eve of the departure of the Athenian expedition to Sicily. All the goods were confiscated, he was sent into exile; on his return he found himself living in a state of poverty. Of all this nothing transpires in the dialogues that give us an image that is always positive, not so much on the level of its "scientific" abilities as on that of the personal attitude. His limits of lover of discourses are evident, and yet it is not possible to see a negative judgment, which would also contrast with the tone of the dialogues. Moreover, as in the \textit{Symposium} he is the one who provokes the oratory \textit{competition} in honour of \textit{Eros}, so in the \textit{Phaedrus} it is he who shows himself ready to do anything, in order to keep Socrates talking (236C-D).} but in the \textit{Phaedrus} Socrates treats him with affection, with paternal expressions that underline the difference of years, as if he were a boy (\textit{νεανία}, 257C8; \textit{παῖ}, 267C6), while he is an adult (242A-B).

This relationship has two explicit consecrations, in recognition of their great friendship, first by the mouth of Socrates: «Oh, Phaedrus, if I don't know Phaedrus I forgot who I am myself!».\footnote{228A5–6. In turn, shortly after Phaedrus: «Socrates, if I don't know Socrates, I forgot who I am myself!» (236C4–6).} Then, in the end, after the old philosopher's prayer, in the last words that Phaedrus says in the dialogue: «Make it a prayer for me as well. Friends have everything in common» (279C6–7).
But Socrates is the real surprise of dialogue: on the one hand he retains all his characteristic traits: he walks barefoot (229A), proves his argumentative ability, shows experience in matters of love (227C), invokes the Delphic maxim «Know yourself» (229E), even feels his "divine sign", his daimonion (242B); on the other he is invaded as it does not happen in any other dialogue: he invokes the Muses (237A), speaks in metric (238D, 242E), uses those long speeches that has always declared not to appreciate, suffers the charm of the place (238C-D), just him who does not like being outdoors (230D).

3. The structure of the dialogue

The dialogue is divided into five major parts, three minor and four interludes, two of which are placed in sequence to signal the passage from a first part to the second (in the scheme the major parts are indicated by a capital letter, the minor parts are indicated by a lowercase letter, the interludes are reported as such):

a) The prologue (227A-230E)
   A) The speech of Lysias (230E-234C)
   Interlude: the judgment on the speech of Lysias (234C-237A)
   B) First speech of Socrates (237A-242B)
   Interlude: Socrates must be purified through a palinode (242B-243E)
   C) Second speech of Socrates (243E-257B)
      Theoretical interlude (257B-258E)
      Poetical interlude (258E-259D)
   D) Analysis of the discourses and identification of the criteria for the correct formulation of the speeches (259E-274B)
   E) The problem of communication and the superiority of orality over writing (274B-278E)

b) Evaluation of the rhetoric of time and final message to Isocrates (278E-279B)

c) Prayer to Pan (279B-C).

A good interpretation must account for all these steps and their connection, however, as a first approximation, we must recognize that the scheme appears logical and well thought out: three speeches (A, B, C:...
first part) on the basis of which it is possible to face concretely the judgment on rhetoric and communication (D, E: second part).

Indeed, this is certainly the common thread that holds together the whole dialogue, which constitutes its skeleton: the reflection on rhetoric, which, however, must be understood in the broadest sense, as a science of effective communication.

4. The dominant motif: the technique of oral and written communication and the responsibility of the teacher

We now have to verify the extent of what has just been said, to see how this "dominant motive" actually works and thus to check if it really can be understood in this way, that is, it constitutes the backbone of the dialogue architecture.

That the motif is the art of communicating is already clear from the Prologue, which presents Phaedrus and Socrates as two lovers of discourses. Everything revolves around Lysias, who set up a banquet of his orations (227B), and to the underlined passion of Socrates for the discourses. The philosopher, in fact, a) quotes Pindar (The Isthmian Odes, I, 2) to say that he prefers to any other commitment to feel what Phaedrus and Lysias have said (227B); b) he is arranged for this to follow Phaedrus up to Megara (227D); c) he is sick of the passion to listen to discourses (228B); d) he will not let Phaedrus go before he has listened to him (228C).

It is also emphasized that it is better to read the written discourse rather than relying on the memory of Phaedrus to hear what Lysias claims (228E). So the text immediately points out the importance of the writing and its irreplaceable: Phaedrus himself was practicing on the text that he would gradually learn by heart, but he could do it precisely because the author gave him a roll. In fact, Plato is aware of the fact that only the reflection on writing has allowed the birth and development of rhetoric: to elaborate rules it is necessary to analyze something stable and "analyzable", as it is only a written text.
It follows the reading of the speech of Lysias\(^{14}\) which is obviously paradoxical. This speech deals exclusively with "vulgar" love and does not present any argumentative growth. In short, the central element, or in any case the one of greatest importance, which should lead one to feel compassion towards lovers rather than admiration (233B), is their state of illness.

The judgment on the speech of Lysias is absolutely positive regarding the beauty of the text. The scholars, convinced that Socrates always judges only on the level of truth, are practically unanimous in arguing that here there is "irony", but there is no trace of it in the text. The fact is that we move on a legitimate terrain, that of a beauty, to which the Greek spirit was particularly sensitive, made of sounds and images, typical of a culture still soaked in orality. On this (certainly partial) level Socrates shares the judgement of the youngest friend. The philosopher himself says it repeatedly:

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14 Is this an authentic composition of Lysias or a reconstruction made by Plato reproducing the methodical procedure and style of the rhetorician? It is a thorny problem that has divided the criticism into two opposing camps (for example, Blass, Wilamowitz, Taylor, Robin, Rowe are in favour of authenticity, while Reale, De Vries, Bollack are contrary). Although it is not possible to say a definitive word, I propose for authenticity on the basis of the following topics. A) the ancient sources are for the authenticity of the speech; Diogenes Laertius (III, 25) states that Lysias' speech was reported in the *Phaedrus* word by word; also according to Hermia (35, 19 ff.) the speech should be considered authentic; he even adds that, in the collection of the *Letters* of the Rhetorician, the discourse was a well-known piece. B) twice Socrates stresses that Lysias is present (228E 1–2, 263E 5); this would be a excessive forcing if the text was "apocryphal". C) if the work were not from Lysias, the criticisms made in the dialogue by Plato would be almost insulting. D) if Plato wanted to legitimately criticize a speech done "in the lisyan manner" he could easily make it repeat by *Phaedrus*, thus granting himself an area of freedom that, with the reading of the text, is denied. E) a comparison with the *Symposium* does not stand for this reason: there the talks are referred to on the basis of a series of transfers, which justifies any inaccuracy; moreover, the speeches of the *Symposium* all have an essentially content and non-formal value, so it was enough to respect the general approach of each individual guest, without problems of "literal" respect; F) there would be no justification for such an invention, since Plato could certainly choose in the enormous Lysian production various discourses suited to his purposes.
I paid attention only to the speech's style. As to the other part, I wouldn't even think that Lysias himself could be satisfied with it (235A1–3).

In short, the disregard with which Lysias developed his considerations led Socrates to believe that it was only an aesthetic-rhetorical operation. In fact, about the content he even manifests wonder:

What? Must we praise the speech even on the ground that its author has said what the situation demanded, and not instead simply on the ground that he has spoken in a clear and concise manner, with a precise turn of phrase? (234E5–8)

The two positions appear irreconcilable, because the judgment of Phaedrus is opposite:

That is in fact the best thing about the speech: He has omitted nothing worth mentioning about the subject, so that no one will ever be able to add anything of value to complete what he has already said himself. (235B1–5).

So we have a contrast on the meaning of "beautiful": here for Socrates "beautiful" can only be said of the form, while for Phaedrus the speech is beautiful because it is appropriate to the subject. Socrates knows that it is not, for having heard him (that is, to have read it) from men or women of ancient times. As we can see, Plato tells us that 1) you also listen to the voice of the ancients, even if not really, as it is possible to read them; 2) that a philosopher can learn from (great) poets or even from unidentified prose writers; 3) that we are talking about rhetoric in the broad sense.

At this point the figure of the lover of discourses returns: Socrates is not driven to speak either by the promise of a golden statue to Delphi nor by the threat of the use of force; when, however, Phaedrus swears he will no longer hear him the speeches that only he, rich, could bring him, Socrates yields to blackmail:

Oh horrible man, you've really found the way to force a lover of speeches to do just as you say! (236E4–5).

From the speech of Lysias we pass to the speech of Socrates because of a judgment on the discourses through a threat that concerns the speeches!
The first speech of Socrates seems to retrace the same path of Lysias, but in reality it radically changes the subject: 

15 we no longer have the unlikely act of a non-lover, but on the contrary a cunning individual who tries to seduce the other by pretending not to be in love and arguing accordingly. So the theme is the same, but the situation is not paradoxical: we are faced with a deception. In fact, Socrates speaks with a veiled head.

It is necessary to agree on the nature of the object in order not to fall into contradiction. Therefore, three issues are identified: what is love, what is its power, whether it brings benefit or harm. But since Socrates accepted the rhetorical challenge and therefore the imposition of the theme, eros has only a negative value, it is

the unreasoning desire, that overpowers the opinion that leads to do right, drawn towards the pleasure of beauty (238B7-C1).

Socrates feels more and more invaded and speaks by dithyrambs: in this state he deals with the description of the advantages and disadvantages that the choice determines, organized according to the classic tripartition: soul, body, and heritage. 

16 The text emphasizes that the inspiration is not

15 These are the points of the Socratic treatment: 1. it is necessary to agree on the nature of the object before starting a discussion, to avoid falling into contradiction, so it is necessary to define love. 2. Love is a desire, which manifests itself according to two fundamental tendencies that guide men: the acquired opinion that tends towards the greater good, supported by reasoning, and the desire for pleasures, which is innate. If the first tendency dominates we have the "temperance", if the second the "debauchery". 3. Irrational desire, achieved the victory over reasoning, led to the pleasure of beauty and, vigorously reinforced by desires, takes its name from its strength (ῥώμης) and is called "eros"; 4. The disadvantages that derive from those who rely on the lover.

16 These are the points of the Socratic development: 1. The slave man of pleasures, being sick, can not bear what he opposes, that is, who is superior or equal. The beloved sought by the lover will therefore always be inferior. 1.1. Therefore the lover feels pleasure in the ills present in the soul of the beloved, indeed he even tends to increase them; 1.2. He will be jealous and will keep his beloved away from all the companies, even those that could benefit him. 1.3. Above all he will want to distance him from that divine company which is philosophy, even at the cost of making him remain ignorant. 2. As far as caring for the body is concerned, there can be no advantage in following pleasure instead of good; 3. As for possessions, the lover wants his loved one to be deprived of it: 3.1. if it 

subjected to the control of the subject: now there is, but suddenly it can
go away, because it is a gift from the Muses.

But the speech of Socrates is interrupted abruptly even if the inspira-
tion is not lacking (the philosopher claims to have passed from the
dithyrambs to the epic verses). Yet, at the beginning he himself had cor-
rectly set the speech:

now we have said what it really is; so let us keep that in view as we
complete our discussion. What benefit or harm is likely to come from
the lover or the non-lover to the boy who gives him favours (238E1–
2)?

Instead, the discussion has concerned only the disadvantages that in-
volves going with one who is in love and not the benefits that are ob-
tained from one who is not in love.

For this reason, in the interlude, Phaedrus objects and emphasizes this
evident incompleteness, but Socrates responds hastily: it is enough to
overturn the previous argument. We said enough, he does not want to do
something too big.

We must anticipate the profound meaning of this interruption. In fact,
Plato can not make his teacher utter an objectively false speech. The
made speech, in fact, is not true, but neither is it false: it is one-sided and
therefore deforms reality. In the moment in which it will be possible to
show that it is only a part of a more complex discourse, the truth will be
re-established, keeping those affirmations in their (partial) truth. Instead,
the situation would have become irreparable if the philosopher had also
developed the other aspect of the speech, making the praises of the de-
ceiving seducer presenting himself as not in love. This is why Socrates
tries to escape. But the deity calls him to his duty: the truth must be re-
stored.

4. The dominant motif

has riches, it will not be easy to conquer, 3.2. if he has loved ones, like parents,
relatives or friends, they will take time away from their love. 4. In addition, the
lover is both ruinous and unpleasant, also imposing the different age of the
two. 4.1. At the end of the relationship the situation becomes hateful from vari-
ous points of view: the ex-lover, no longer dominated by madness, gives way to
escape; only at that point the beloved young man understands the mistake and
discovers that it is better to grant his favours to those who are not in love and
have good judgement, since the friendship of those who are in love is born only
as a desire for food, in order to satiate.
So Socrates must also stay because of insistence of Phaedrus, young "divine" (242A7) for his ability to provoke speeches. In this way the philosopher can understand, reflecting, that his speech has offended the god. This is his fault, but also the fault of Phaedrus! The danger of the situation could not be clearer: the same character, Phaedrus, can be called divine and be judged guilty of terrible effects on the same ground, that of production and dissemination of discourses.

We are therefore at the second speech of Socrates, which will be completely true and will also recover the first, clarifying the limits. The intent is clear from the premise: it is not true that they should be granted their favours to those who are not in love, because those in love are in a state of _mania_, which is a multifaceted gift of the gods. We have in fact various types of _mania_, among which the one caused by the Muses, which take possession of a sensitive soul to create hatreds and poems, instructing posterity; only the poetry of those who are invaded by the Muse must be considered valid and it obscures that of those who believe they can make poetry without having the inspiration. There is therefore an inspired poem, gift of the gods, which has a truth that must be communicated and learned, and a poetic technique, which has none of these qualities.

To confirm, we examine what is one of the most beautiful myths of Plato, long and complex, a masterpiece of platonic poetry. Inside we find a sort of classification of reincarnations (248D-E): the soul that has contemplated the greatest number of beings will be transplanted into a man who must become a friend of knowledge or friend of the beautiful or friend of the Muses and eager to love.17 So the friend of the muses, the inspired poet, and the friend of beauty are placed on the same level as the lover of knowledge, the philosopher, while the unpowered versifier is on the sixth, immediately before the workers and the couple sophist – tyrant.

17 The second is a king or a man destined for leadership, the third a politician or an expert in finance; the fourth is this who practices gymnastics or takes care of the healing of bodies; the fifth is who makes the fortune-teller or deals with mysteries; the sixth this who practicise imitation, like the poets; the seventh is a farmer or a craftsman. The souls who come by eighth and ninth will incarnate respectively in a sophist and a tyrant.

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The theoretical interlude that follows rotates on the logographic name given to Lysias to blame it. According to Phaedrus, in fact, those who enjoy a certain reputation within the city are ashamed to write, either for fear of the opinion of posterity, or for fear of being called a sophist. But, as usual, he is wrong: the opposite is true: Those who have great political power in the city love to write also because they hope for judgment of posterity. The truth is that, in itself, it is not bad to write speeches, but to do it in a bad and ugly way. This confirms A) that Plato recognizes the importance of writing, both for rhetoric and for diachronic communication, B) that rhetoric and poetry are polyvalent terms, if not equivocal, for which reason rhetoric is not condemned a priori.

It is then necessary to see how a good discourse can be written, analyzing the statements of Lysias or political or private writings, in prose or verse. And Phaedrus, enthusiastically accepting this proposal, emphasizes the nature of spiritual pleasure, as opposed to material ones:

You ask if we need to? Why else should one live, I say, if e not for pleasures of this sort? Certainly not for those you cannot feel unless you are first in pain, like most of the pleasures of the body, and which for this reason we call the pleasures of slaves (258E1–5).

The poetic interlude is, from our point of view, less relevant, but in all cases shows how using a mythical figure we can conclude that we must continue to discuss.

We proceed to the analysis of the discourses and the identification of the criteria for a correct rhetoric, immediately clarifying that it can never be just a problem of form: who composes the speeches, besides worrying about writing them well, must know the truth about what he writes. However, Lysias is not criticized for this, which is obvious given that his speech has already been falsified by the second intervention of Socrates. This time he moves technical remarks: he seems to have proceeded without any order, putting things in writing as they came to mind (264B).

Those who, like Lysias, make speeches and are wise in speaking and make others wise to the young Phaedrus appear to be royal individuals but Socrates can not call them dialectical. However, the rhetorical art without dialectics should not be despised, rather we must remember the parts that constitute it and of which we have news through the manuals written on these topics. Then follows a quick discussion of the parts of the speeches and the various contributions of rhetoricians and sophists.
Immediately thereafter the weakness is reiterated due to philosophical shortcomings. However, we must be indulgent towards them that they are sure to know an art while they know only the initial part. This knowledge should not be rejected, but one must be aware that it is only a preliminary knowledge. True rhetoric, however, is another thing: one must have an innate predisposition strengthened by science and exercise (269D). It is then necessary to have theoretical experiences that are not necessarily philosophical, but similar.

A second fact is then brought to light: whoever creates a discourse must know the soul of the person to whom the discourse directs itself, that is, one must know its nature: if the soul is one or multiform, if it has the capacity to act and on what is it if it suffers and from what; from what discourses it is persuaded and from which it is not (271A-272A).

At this point we understand why Socrates has so insisted on the myth about the different destinies of souls. Precisely because the souls are of different kinds, different are the men who possess them and different are also the discourses that are addressed to them in order to persuade them. Every good speaker must therefore take into account these rules and above all use them in practice, knowing even when it is appropriate to speak or to be silent, when the time has come to pronounce a speech capable of moving or a concise or indignant speech. Therefore, a theoretical knowledge and a practical attitude are needed.

According to the rhetoricians like Tisias, one must stick to "the likely" to speak with art. This is born in most people for resemblance to the truth, so those who know the truth find it easily. Only on the basis of all this knowledge can know the art of discourse, that requires a long application and a long process.

Now we can tackle the problem of communication and the superiority of orality over writing. Renouncing to face the many problems that the discussions of the last twenty years have highlighted, we can say in summary that for Plato: 1. writing does not strengthen the memory, but serves to recall the things already know on which the writing; 2. the writing does not answer the questions; 3. the writings roll into anyone’s hands and do not know when to speak and when to be silent; 4. the writing does not know how to defend itself, but it always needs the help of the father, the author. There is, however, another discourse, legitimate brother of written speech but more powerful than this: it is the discourse that is written in the soul of those who learn, who knows how to defend
themselves and who knows who to talk and with whom to be silent; it is the living and animated speech, of which the written one is only an image.

Therefore, there is no contraposition, but a difference, profound and meaningful, between "two brothers", one of whom is alive and capable of operating correctly, what the other is not able to do. Therefore, those who want to make speeches that know how to defend themselves and who can bring relief to themselves and those who have planted them, speeches that can generate others, like a seed that generates immortal fruits, will not write them, but will sow them directly into the soul of disciple. To write speeches is certainly a very nice game, made for old age or for those who follow our footsteps, but the other is much more beautiful.

So we have three types of relationship: a) the game worthless, the pure fun; b) the writing, which is a serious game; c) the direct relationship with the soul of the disciple. Therefore, one can and must write, as a reminder and also for those who follow our steps, that is, that come after us: posterity. Socrates recapitulates the discourses made before: we need to know the truth about the things we are talking about or writing; we must define everything in itself and then divide it into its species, until it is no longer divisible; it is necessary to know the nature of the soul and then to address it a corresponding discourse, simple for a simple soul, complex for a complex one (277B-C).

In written discourses there is, in reality, much of the game and the best of them are written to exercise the memory of those who already know; true clarity, completeness and seriousness in synthesis, is only in discourses written directly in the soul, which focus on right, beautiful and good. That man who will realize that the speeches pronounced in this way are like his legitimate children and that, after being aware of it, he will send all the other talks for a walk, that man is exactly the one who Phaedrus and Socrates wish to become. On the speeches, Socrates concludes, it was joking enough; now it is simply necessary to say that whoever wrote a speech (be it Lysias, Solon or Homer, i.e. a speaker, a legislator or a poet)

18 Thus the interlude on the "logographer" Lysias and on posterity acquires all of its meaning: you can write for friends who are far away in space and time.
19 The reference to dialectics, even in this brief summary, is very clear.
if he has composed these things with a knowledge of the truth, if he can defend his writing when is challenged, and if he can orally demonstrate the weakness of the writings, then he must be called by a name derived not from these writings but rather from those things that he is seriously pursuing... To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems to me too much, and proper only for a god. To call him wisdom's lover – a philosopher – or something similar would fit him better and be more suitable to him (278C4-D6).

On the contrary, he who does not possess things of greater value than what he writes can not be called otherwise than a poet, a composer of discourses or a writer of laws.

In short, it being understood that man is always and only a philosopher, he will write knowing the limits of the operation he performs, no matter if it is poetic, political, oratory or technically philosophical. Therefore, the link between those who express the truth by their own merit or by the gift of the gods, as opposed to those who make beautiful speeches, is reaffirmed.

The evaluation of the rhetoric of time and the final message to Isocrates is therefore obvious. For this one, who is still young, Socrates foresees a great success: in fact, he shows a noble character. Because of these characteristics, therefore, it is wholly superior to Lysias; it wouldn't even be surprising that one day he devoted himself to greater things, since there is a certain philosophy in his thought. Socrates wants to let know these things to his beloved Isocrates through the gods of the place, while Phaedrus will tell Lysias the others. So, with a post-factum prophecy Plato expresses a true appreciation for Isocrates and nothing leads us to suppose that there is irony: in fact Isocrates seems to embody what has been said because he is a teacher, spiritually rich and endowed with a "certain philosophy".

Then there is the beautiful prayer to Pan, which, however, tells nothing about our subject.

As I hope to have shown, the whole arc of dialogue carries out the reflection on communication: it classifies two different kinds of rhetoric/poetic and specifies the two grounds that must be respected, the soul of the interlocutor and the true. In all cases without knowledge it is not possible that there is true rhetoric.
5. The central theme of the dialogue: the true between philosophy and mania

Let’s now go over the entire dialogue to see if this is the philosophically strong element, which judges rhetoric and therefore supports the entire construction, without however having the compactness and continuity of the dominant motif, which defines its architecture.

Already in the Prologue we find a strong philosophical underlining. Against the "scholars" who lose time to reflect rationalistically on the myths, Socrates confirms his philosophical approach: he is much more concerned with knowing himself than with adapting the myths to human reason. This conviction is emphatically underlined by recalling the inscription on the facade of the temple of Apollo in Delphi: γνῶθι σαυτόν, know yourself. So we immediately meet a central theme of the Socratic philosophy, which in the Platonic re-elaboration gives rise to the question of the soul and the anamnesis.

Obviously, there is nothing philosophical in the speech of Lysias, while in the judgment on the speech of Lysias we see that, if beauty conquers Socrates, however, he remains a philosopher and therefore able to objectively judge a content that is inadequate and wrong; at the same time, he claims to have learned from the ancient poets (235C), proving that there is a wisdom that is not only of philosophers.

As for Socrates’ first speech, the philosopher has accepted to make the rhetorician, not to be himself: and yet he lets himself go to the mania that pervades the place. In fact, invokes the Muses, with a beginning which is the classic formula of the dithyramb. But it must not be overlooked that this "inspired" Socrates retains his lucidity: in fact his progress is constantly accompanied by a sort of counterpoint with which he himself comments on this mania, this his talk for dithyrambs before, with an almost epic style then, this inspiration that exists but could at any moment end (238C-D, 241E).

20 This motto is quoted by Plato in other dialogues (Alcibiades I 124B, Charmides 164D, Protagoras 343B, Philebus 48C, Laws XI, 923A) and commonly becomes a symbol of the Socratic philosophy.
21 “It is a prelude to two concepts that will soon assume an essential role in the Phaedrus and around which most of the others will gravitate: that of reminiscence and that of the immortality of the soul” (Plebe 1964, p. 9).
22 De Vries 1969, p. 82.
Soon after, we find another typical Platonic movement, in the relationship between multiplicity of names and functions: debauchery has as many names as the forms it takes, in eating it will be called greed, in drinking drunkenness, and so in all other cases (238A-B). All this shows how even Socrates' discourse remains a philosophical act. But the most evident confirmation is found in the setting of the discourse and above all in the premise of the need to define the essence of what we must speak about.

The importance of philosophy is confirmed by the greater guilt of the "sick" lover: he will keep the beloved from the divine company that is philosophy (239B).

Nothing significant seems directly to emerge in the interlude, but can not be underestimated the fact that, if the daimon's voice put Socrates on the warning, is his reflection that makes him discover the nature of the error.

Then, in the Second speech of Socrates, we find a broad philosophical reflection, starting from the etymological game, which in this case links mania to the "mantica"; then there is even a sort of diairesis to distinguish three different aspects of mania: the erotic one, that of all those who, using the mantica of divine inspiration, predict many useful things, that which derives from the Muses.

In order to prove that the gods send love to the soul of lovers, not to benefit themselves, but to us, follows the beautiful myth of the chariot. The treatment of the soul begins with the demonstration of immortality, based on the distinction between what moves by itself and what is moved by something else (245C-246A). This is one of the main Platonic arguments to support the immortality of the soul.23

In the myth emerge a series of relevant statements, first of all the need to recognize that the human being is called mortal, as a synthesis, and immortal as a soul. This cannot be defined solely on the basis of a rational discourse since it belongs to a sphere we do not know sufficiently (246B-C). Therefore, on the same man a duplicity of judgment is always possible, since every individual from a certain point of view is his soul, on the other is the synthesis of soul and body, an important key to understand Plato's many alleged aporias.

As for the soul, everything seems done to underline the multiplicity that characterizes the human condition: different chariots, different ascent and different vision of the higher reality; the existence of twelve processions, one of Zeus and other eleven of gods and demons, determines different temperamental structures of the subjects; then there are struggles that can ruin the chariot; finally the events of life further complicate the situation.

The metaphysical vision that emerges from the myth is clear: the higher reality is the being that truly is, devoid of form and not visible, which can be contemplated only by the intellect, as the object of true knowledge. God knows all of this perfectly, having pure intelligence and knowledge, not so the souls of human beings. A hiatus is then established which has a partial exception: to the philosophers, those who have managed to approach the divine condition, the wings come back after only three thousand years (if they have chosen this life three consecutive times), and after this period they can fly away.

It remains therefore their primacy, which however is also connected to a *mania*, the fourth form of *mania*, the phenomenon for which an individual, seeing the beauty and remembering the true beauty already seen, he becomes eager to put his wings so far as to be laughed at by others. Only a few souls, with a sufficient memory of the Ideas, when they see something that is the image of those beings, are affected.

Since Wisdom and supreme realities arouse love in themselves, if they were all seen, they would raise too great loves. For this reason, only Beauty, among these realities, is visible and lovable. Beauty, therefore, is of great importance, but it is only one aspect of the higher realities and is by no means the most relevant idea.

This "erotic" state determined by the Beautiful has nothing to do with the carnal and vulgar love of the first speech of Socrates, which at this point, however, is true as the description of a partial and negative condition. Eros is, therefore, this twofold result provoked by the same beauty: who is already corrupted does not rise to the higher sphere when he contemplates beauty in our world. On the contrary, he who has long contemplated the higher realities, at the appearance of a face that embodies the idea of beauty, feels the chills and venerates this individual as a god.

The palinode is accomplished: if they made disrespectful speeches about Eros, the fault must be attributed to Lysias who was the father of the speech. But this sort of condemnation is followed immediately by a
subdued prayer to Eros, because he converts him to philosophy so that Phaedrus can simply devote his life to Love through philosophical discussions (257B). Eros is therefore, also in this case as in Symposium 204A-B, a philosopher, and philosophy is the form of redemption to which the rhetorician can aspire.

We pass over the theoretical interlude and the poetic interlude. In analyzing the discourses and identifying the criteria for correct rhetoric, the question of truth is the first criterion that must be kept in mind by those who write speeches. Phaedrus recalls that some rhetoricians consider important to know not so much the true as the likely, because it is from this and not from the truth that comes the persuasion (259E-260A). Socrates moves two objections: a) if an orator does not know the truth, he can not get good results; b) oratory would be a practice without art, because there can not be an art that does not know the truth.

To persuade, you need to know the truth and know how to speak. In fact, in the tribunals and in the popular assembly, the same things are now called good and now bad, as Zeno, the Eleatic Palamedes, did when he made the same things appear both one and many, both similar and dissimilar, both at rest and also in motion. More generally, to identify the likely and even to deceive without being deceived one must know the truth.

As for the two discourses, if the analysis of the text of Lysias confirms the importance of the writing that makes possible a detailed and "rhetorical" examination, based on the rereading of the work (263E-264A), that of Socrates serves to clarify the concepts. In particular, a second diairesis is formulated. Of love as a mania there are two kinds: one human and one divine.24 In this dialectic key the partial truth of the first Socrates intervention is also recovered. Since his two discourses, as noted earlier by the philosopher himself, said conflicting things, it is now a matter of understanding how we have gone from blaming to praising (265C). The two forms of speeches must be carefully considered. In the first case it is a matter of bringing everything back to the unity of an Idea, taking in an overview the things dispersed in many ways, to clarify and define what

24 The divine is divided into four parts: the divinatory inspiration (attributed to Apollo), the mystical inspiration (attributed to Dionysus), the poetical inspiration (attributed to the Muses), the amorous inspiration (attributed to Aphrodite and to Eros), which it is the best.
we want to talk about; the other way of proceeding consists in dividing according to the Ideas, trying not to break any part of them. These ways of proceeding, both in speaking and in thinking, are division and unification. So the first discourse considered the negative part of love to blame it rightly; the second discourse instead considered the other part of love, that which is divine and worthy of the greatest praise.

As we can see, decisive passages of the Platonic dialectic are mentioned, which will be taken up and analyzed in later works. Here, for example, the need to divide ideas according to ideas already emerges well.25

The procedure is reconfirmed in the delineation of the weakness of the rhetorical technique: true knowledge implies an appropriate connection of all the parts, connected to each other and to the whole. It is therefore necessary to have theoretical experiences that are not necessarily philosophical, but of similar cut, which allow us to understand the nature of the intellect and of reason, that is, the dialectical method itself. This has a universal scope and must apply to the study of everything: one must always see if the reality to be studied is simple or complex; if it is simple enough to analyze what is its power to act and to suffer (key concepts of the ontological vision of Plato);26 if it is made up of many forms, after having enumerated them, we need to study for each of them what we see when it is a unity i.e. what it can by nature act and suffer and from what.

The theme of philosophy is also central to the problem of communication and the superiority of orality over writing. In fact, a philosopher is one who knows the limits of writing; analogously in the evaluation of the rhetoric of time and final message to Isocrates, it is claimed that this very young rhetorician could do great things, since in his thought there is a certain philosophy.

But also the moments of the final prayer to Pan refer to philosophy, given that Socrates asks 1. to be beautiful "inside" and to behave in manner consistent with what he is; 2. to consider wisdom as a true wealth; 3. not to appreciate the riches. In short he wishes to practice the philosophical mania to the end.

25 Cf. Sophist 253B-E, Philebus 16C-E, and above all Statesman 262E3–263B1; see also Migliori 2013 pp. 344–347.
6. *The most important theme: the soul and the relationship between man and God*

That the most important problem is that of the relationship between man and god and therefore of the soul, the divine part that exists in us, is revealed by the same “excessive” weight that this theme has with respect to the rhetoric to which it is necessarily connected.

Already in the *Prologue* are quoted (without any reason) the myth of Borea and Orizia to criticize the efforts of the rationalists who de-myth-i- cize the myth by referring it to rational explanations. These “wise men” are capable of “ingenious interpretations”, but their wisdom appear to Socrates like the one of those who have time to waste in the useless attempt to bring back to a rational explanation, to the normality, the myth- ical tradition. To this approach Socrates contrasts his “investigation of himself”, in which the philosopher sets up an alternative, which concerns the soul, if it is a multifaceted beast,\(^\text{27}\) or a more meek and simpler living being. It is an obvious bridge thrown immediately towards the great myth that will highlight precisely what we can define the “complex sim- plicity” of the soul.

The subsequent detailed description of the place seems to want to stim- ulate all the senses:\(^\text{28}\) the sight is struck by the beauty of the place, the smell is satisfied by the chaste tree in full bloom; the touch is stimulated by the very fresh waters, felt with the foot, and by the grass; the cicadas' singing pleasantly hits the hearing. The thing is doubly relevant as this is the only dialogue set in the countryside and the thing is underlined. Phae- drus himself remembers that Socrates does not like to get out of the city and the philosopher explains:

> I am devoted to learning; landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me, only the people in the city can do that (230D3–5).

But it would be wrong to read this environment as "natural" in the mod- ern sense of the term: the place is full of gods, as is immediately underlined by the presence of images and statues, which make it look like a sa-

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\(^{27}\) Like the monster Typhon, son of Gaia and Tartarus, who had a hundred heads of dragon throwing fire.

cred environment. But the divine is everywhere, in every tree, as shown by the oath of Phaedrus on the plane tree:

I swear to you... by which god, I wonder? How about this very plane tree? I swear that, if you don’t make your speech right next to this tree here, I shall never again recite or utter another speech to you (236D10-E3).

Nothing emerges obviously in the speech of Lysias, beautiful in words but not inspired and therefore not true. In the first speech of Socrates religious elements stand out too. It is emphasized that whoever is subjected to such love is a slave to pleasures, ill, attracted to the body, while it is the soul that is the lady and the owner of the body. The importance of the soul is immediately confirmed in the identification of the damages that an old man in love procures; in fact he will be devastating to the soul, which is and will always be the most valuable thing to gods and men (241C4–6).

Moreover, Socrates claims to be inspired, that is, to find himself in a kind of divine state, almost invaded by the Nymphs, divinities of the place, which are evidently identified here with the inspiring Muses (238C-D).

In the following interlude Socrates would like to escape but stops for two reasons: a) it is noon and Phaedrus persuades him to stay and wait when it will be cooler, b) above all the divine sign, the divine voice that manifests itself in him when he must be restrained from doing something wrong. This time, in fact, he forbids him to cross the river before he had purified himself, as if he had been guilty of an offense against the divinity. The soul, which has a divination capacity, is there ready to point out the error: he has not bothered to commit a fault to the gods to receive honours from men.

His error is therefore a religious fault: Socrates affirms for four times, in these few lines, the fact of having been guilty of a fault, twice underlining that it was towards the gods (242C3; C6; C9; D2). The fault must be really serious, if Socrates points out a sentence that involves both speeches:

Phaedrus, that speech you carried with you here...it was horrible, as horrible as the speech you made me give! (242D4–5).
In fact, the philosopher has made a speech that he defines as “foolish and close to being impious” (242D7). Foolish because he, philosopher, accepted a rhetorical engagement, impious because Eros, denigrated in the two speeches, being the son of Aphrodite, is a god, or at least something divine. This is why Socrates feels the need to purify himself with a palinode. We remain therefore in a strongly religious context.

And religious is also the first statement in the second speech of Socrates, which recognizes the divine origin of *mania* given to prophets and prophetesses, which, thanks to their state of delirium, have predict many useful things. But also the other form of *mania* comes from the Muses, who take possession of a sensitive soul to create odes and poems, *instructing posterity*. It is therefore a positive activity, a real gift. So the *mania* can not be considered something negative, since the greatest goods are granted to us precisely for this divine way. In fact, Plato specifies that the divine *mania* is superior to the wisdom of men (244B-E).

The same discourse evidently applies to eros, when the human soul, mindful of the vision of Ideas, is able to use its gifts. This is another reason why the theme of the soul must be dealt with in depth, immediately highlighting its "supernatural" nature: the soul as the principle of movement is immortal. But Plato immediately states that speaking of the idea of soul would be a very long and divine one; it is therefore better to say, with a brief human exposure, what it resembles (246A). We therefore have the myth, in which it emerges that the soul itself is composite, with two different natures, represented by man and horses. The thing had been announced since the beginning of the theme:

"We must first understand the truth about the nature of the soul, divine or human, by examining what it does and what is done to it (245C2–4)."

Furthermore, it is emphasized that the horses and the charioteers of the gods are all good and deriving from good, while those of men are mixed. In fact there are two horses, one of which is beautiful and good, while the other is opposite. Consequently, the guide of the chariot can only be difficult and uncomfortable.

The whole narration wants to show this connection, of closeness and distance, with the gods, this participation in the divine, which is beautiful, wise and good. And in the description of the processions, the nature
of God is emphasized: Zeus puts all things in order and takes care of them (246E4–6).

If we have to skip the theoretical interlude, the poetic interlude confirms that the gods watch over the lives of men: the human beings are watched over by the cicadas, who refer to the Muses.

But it is the analysis of the discourses that clarifies how the entire commitment identified in the dialogue has a "divine function". At the end of the theoretical discussion on rhetoric, Socrates argues that the goal is not social, but religious: a sensible man will make this laborious effort not in order to speak among human beings, but so as to be able to speak in a way that pleases the gods as much as possible. A reasonable man must try to being pleasant not to his fellow slaves but to his masters, who are wholly good. (273E-274A).

Then, in dealing with the problem of communication, the link and distinction are confirmed: the human beings are only philosophers, that is to say lovers of wisdom, while they can not be called wise, because this word competes only to the gods.

Finally, of course, the prayer to Pan constitutes the almost necessary accomplishment in a dialogue full of God. Socrates presents very human requests to Pan and to all the other gods of that place. The three requests reproduce the order of values: the soul that guides the body, the choice of life of a wise man, the sufficient external goods for a virtuous man.

7. Conclusion

The *Phaedrus* is a dialogue on rhetoric, that is, on all forms of communication, on prose and poetry, rhetorical and poetic too, and lives on three great discourses and a beautiful myth to highlight an articulated series of judgments on the correct form of both written and oral communication.

Poetry inspired by the divine *mania* is exalted. The condition of the true poets is comparable to that of the philosopher. The situation is quite different in the case of the versifiers, who devote themselves to an imitative activity of little value. We have therefore no substantial modification of judgment with respect to the Republic or to other works, because "po-
etry" is an equivocal term to which two Ideas correspond, and two human conditions radically different.²⁹

In this context, Plato does not at all despise the written form that allows us to know and learn by heart. However, the author stresses its limits with concern. It is certainly necessary to write, especially for the posterity, but using with all the necessary cautions a rigid structure, which prevents a true dialogue, which can give illusions about knowledge, which can not defend itself from any misunderstandings.

But to be good rhetoricians it is above all necessary to know. Knowing the technical rules, certainly, is a necessary but not sufficient premise for this technique. We must therefore distinguish: a speech can be beautiful from the point of view of sounds, but ugly from the point of view of the structure and very bad from the point of view of the content. It is necessary to know that the same technique must have a development articulated according to the rules of dialectics. Philosophy is the main way for a rhetorician who wants to build a technique and not an empirical practice, more or less effective.

Then we need the knowledge of the object treated, but even more of the soul, both in its binary, human and divine nature, and in the complex destiny that then sees it associated with the human body. It is a theoretical-practical knowledge, which must be concretized in the argumentative choices that the true rhetorician makes on the basis of the nature of the interlocutor in front of him. This reaffirms with even greater force the limits of written communication.

But the theme of the soul itself necessarily refers to a reflection on the sphere of the divine, which is already imposed by the poetical mania. The immortal soul binds human destiny to that of a divinity that follows the vicissitudes of men, to whom it reserves care and gifts. The philosopher himself is conditioned by eros, a divine gift that makes him sensitive to the charm of beauty, and from the otherworldly story, preserved and witnessed by the anamnesis. But divinity appears omnipresent in this dialogue and explains its tone and the setting. Everything happens under a

²⁹ Even in the Gorgias, often cited as a dialogue hostile to rhetoric, Plato strongly affirms the duplicity of this technique, a tense to pleasure and the other to good (Gorgias 503A-B). The continuity between the two works is perfect: the Phaedrus completes the Gorgias, as it indicates what good rhetoric must do and what distinguishes it from the bad one.
plane tree, but this tree is a god. Here two friends, both lovers of discourses and of beauty and therefore of eros, intertwine their souls and conclude the day with a common prayer, which reaffirms the choice of philosophy:

Socrates: O dear Pan and all the other gods of this place, grant that I may be beautiful inside and that all my external actions are in harmony with what I have insides. That I consider the wise man rich. As for gold, let me have a quantity of money which no one could take or take away, except a temperate man. Do we need anything else, Phaedrus? For me, I prayed in the right measure.

Phaedrus: Also associate me with these prayers, because the things of friends are common.

Socrates: Let's be off. (279B8-C8).
The Statesman explains adequately the role of laws in Plato

1. Some preliminary remarks

The interest for politics is a structural feature of Platonic philosophy; important works, such as the Republic, Statesman and Laws, but also other dialogues like the Gorgias, prove it. But, first of all, Plato's political vision is completely different from ours. There is no separation between social and political ambit in classical thought. There is no theoretical figure of the state separated from civil society, that "God on earth" (Hobbes) who has the task of building order to prevent the inevitable social conflict from having destructive effects. Consequently, classical thought holds together elements that for us are irreducibly detached and grasps in the citizen of the polis the figure that best expresses the identity of a Greek man, male and free. Thus politics constitutes a philosophy of the human being. The different aspects are distinguished on the basis of the relationship that the subject establishes with specific areas: the politics operates in the agora, the economy in the administration of the house, the ethics in personal choices.

All this explains the presence of two very different definitions of politics in Plato: care of the soul and care of the polis. A good policy can and must achieve both results. This ambivalence is structural and is maintain in the dialogues to the end:

knowing the nature and conditions of men's souls, then, is one of the most useful things for that art designed to treat them; and this, I would argue, is precisely the task of politics (Laws 650b6–9).

1 For a systematic reconstruction of Plato’s political philosophy, see Migliori 2013, vol. II, pp. 1018–1142; on the Statesman, see Migliori 1996; for a reflection in parallel with the one developed here, see Migliori 2018.
2 This conception is the basis of some junctures of Plato’s political reflection. For example, the parallel between the soul and the polis in the Republic without this would only be a game of rhetorical parallels.
Secondly we must not overestimate the Platonic proposal. Plato has no illusions about the human capacity for action on the real, because for him

the deity directs all human affairs, and, besides God, the fate and the favourable occasion (τύχη και καρός). Mitigating the judgment, it must be admitted that these are followed by a third factor closer to us, namely the technique. For I believe that having the help of an expert captain in a storm is more advantageous than not having it (Laws 709B7-C3).

In short, the Author emphasizes both the advantages of human action and its radical limit.

Thirdly the polis is always in danger. Mindful of the terrible events of the Peloponnesian War, Plato is extremely worried, most of all by the lack of unity. No city is worthy of its name, since it is not one but many. In particular, there are always two cities at war with one another: the city of the rich and that of the poor. The greatest ill is that which divides the city and makes it manifold instead of one; the greatest good is that which binds the city together and makes it one (Republic 462A-B). Nevertheless, social fragmentation is something inevitable. The state springs from the multiplicity of needs (Statesman 274B-C), the complexity is intrinsic to the social dimension (Statesman 287B-289C), a far more complex picture than the one that is usually attributed to Plato on the basis of the Republic. Indeed, in Book VIII of Republic Plato describes the degenerative process of a good polis to a bad form such as tyranny as almost natural and/or inevitable; the justification is “metaphysical”, linked to the contingent nature of the object:

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3 Really Plato presents the triadic parallel between the soul and the city as a simplified picture (Republic 368C-E; 545B). A scholar should make an effort to pick up all the clues which Plato leaves behind to suggest that the question is a more complex one. For example, the list of the five kinds of state presented in Book 8 – aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny – does not directly fit within a triadic system. Moreover, when discussing the processes of degeneration, Plato brings into play a range of different factors that show just how complex socio-political reality is.
because everything that comes into being must decay, not even a constitution such as this will last forever, but it will dissolve (Republic VIII, 546A2–3).

On this basis it is not clear why Plato has committed herself on this issue.

2. *The politeia in the Republic*

A central problem in Plato’s political philosophy is the "utopian" paradigm. In this regard the opinion of many scholars is that Plato proposes a utopian "model" in the *Republic*, and a different model in the *Laws*. But, as we will see, my opinion is very different.

*From a certain point of view* it is impossible to deny that the model presented in the *Republic* has some typical characteristics of a utopia: the nature of the state model, created only rationally, the division of the citizens into three classes, based on a natural fact connected to the nature of the soul; the state management by the philosophers; the educational proposal that includes an articulation of complex experiences; the same opportunities for males and females with regard to the activities in which sexual difference has no direct effect; the sharing of wealth; the destruction of the family and, consequently, complex mechanisms to determine the mating and selection of births. However, there are a number of facts that can not be underestimated and that lead to the opposite judgment, which implies the need to seek another point of view.⁴ Above all there is a fact: the text of the *Republic* presents evident ambiguities about the existence of this “politeia“. Of these ambiguities the author is certainly aware. In fact Plato affirms that we must not define this city as impossible

if it were so, we would be justly ridiculed for building castles in the air (499C3–5).

Later, this possibility is reaffirmed (502C); also sometimes the text manifests a “suspect” emphasis; for example, at the end of the discussion on the role of women, Plato defines the proposal “not only possible but ex-

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⁴ For example, Aristotle seriously discussed at length the Platonic proposals in conjunction with other real experiences which were certainly not utopian.
cellent” (457A3); later, he says that this proposal is “possible and useful” (457C2). Even more emphatically he states that this city is real and possible:

If, then, in the infinite past time, or even today in some unknown barbarian country, or in the future some need has forced, forces or will force outstanding figures in philosophy to take care of the polis, we are ready to support with reasoning (τῷ λόγῳ) that the constitution which we talked about was, is and will be only when this philosophical muse controls the city. It is not impossible that this exists and we are not speaking of impossibilities. That it is difficult for it to happen, however, we agree ourselves (499C7-D6).

This is a very strange assertion because of 1) the reference to the barbarian country which could have a government of philosophers; 2) the application to all forms of time, 3) a logos that seems to want to justify (or affirm) the existence of a fact. This logos, really, identifies only the necessary and sufficient condition that made, makes or will make possible this realization. It seems that Plato wants to do precisely and only this: to give plausibility to the whole proposal and to avoid confining it within the (utopian) dreams.

Secondly, in many ways the Author suggests the idea that the real issue is not the concrete realization of this model. As when to defend justice it is not necessary to find an absolutely just man, but only one who participates fully of the justice (472B-C), as when the value of a painter does not depend on the existence of the beautiful man who he painted (472D), so for the polis it is necessary only to find something that is very close (ἐγγύτατα, 472C1) to the paradigm (παραδείγματος, 472C4). The paradigm is taken as a reference point to determine what is most similar to it (ὁμοιότατος, 472D1), «not in order to show that these things are achievable» (472D2).

From this perspective, says Plato, we rationally (λόγῳ) create the paradigm (παράδειγμα) of the good city (472D9-E1). The proposed reasoning holds in itself and does not lose value if we can’t prove that it is possible to direct a state like this (472E). Therefore, it is necessary to create a useful paradigm to realize a government as similar as possible to the model. Also, it is important to remember that the practice is not the same as theory:
Then, you must not force me to show that what we have expounded in the argument (τὸ λόγῳ) is realised exactly in reality. Instead, if we can discover how a city could be governed in a way very close (ἐγγύτατα) to what has been argued, you must say that we have discovered that possibility of realisation which you demanded (473A5-B1).

The situation is very strange: we propose a paradigm that must be possible, but it is not necessary to show that it can be realized, though it is useful to realize a city similar to the model.

3. The help of the Laws

The Laws can help us to understand this with three data.

1. Plato makes clear the human impracticability of an ideal perfection. The Athenian recalls the principle that is the basis of the model, the need for stronger unity among the citizens, but says it must concern not only wives and children, but also the eyes, the hands, the thinking, as if they were a single being (739C-D). Plato asserts that the laws that lead to this goal are the best, but this form of unity is excessive and not credible, and Plato seems almost to mock it. He claims that if gods or sons of gods occupied such a state, they would find their authentic happiness (739D). This is a “superfluous” emphasis that makes us think that this city is not human. Furthermore, in terms of feasibility, it is reiterated the problem of the relationship between practice and theory:

   It seems difficult, my friends, to find undeniably valid constitutions both in practice and in theory (ἕργῳ καὶ λόγῳ)» (636A4–5).

In fact, the complexity of human reality implies the prevalence of differences: what is good for one person is bad for another. This explains the impossibility to realize all the conditions required for full implementation of the model:

   We have to think in any case that the arrangements described now will never find such favourable conditions that it all turns out precisely according to theory (745E7–746A1).

Plato even says that a moderate and fair power is unlikely (711D-E). We must almost hope for a miracle: if the city has a virtuous tyrant and an
appropriate legislator, we must say that «God has done all that he does when he wants to treat a state with particular favour» (710D1–3).

2. Plato makes it clear that we have not only one political model, only one paradigm, but we have several. The Athenian declares that he is going to make an unusual move that will surprise:

It will be clear to those who think and have experience that we are founding a state that is second compared to what is the best. Maybe someone will reject it because he is not used to a legislator who has not tyrannical powers. However, the most correct procedure is to propose the best constitution and then the second and the third, and finally leave it to those who have the power to build the city to make a choice (739A3-B1).

However Plato does not renounce the first model; this is proposed again as necessary to achieve an imitation of it:

One should not look elsewhere for a city model (παράδειγμα) but, by keeping this, try to create a constitution that is like to it at the highest possible level. What we have made now, is in some way the most similar (ἐγγύτατα) to the immortal model, and therefore is one at the second level. Later, we will describe a third, if God wants it. But, for the present, let’s talk about this second (739E1–6).

This second model, however, it is also an ideal paradigm. This is confirmed by the fact that also in this case many people will argue that the legislator appears to operate «speaking as almost in a dream or shaping the city and the citizens like wax» (746A7–8). The legislator, in turn, will rely on the right to create the model (παράδειγμα, 746B7) based on what is really beautiful and true. If there is a second model, it is less beautiful and less true then the first model; however, the second is certainly, compared to the third, more similar to the first; therefore the paradigms are created not as an absolute and utopian reality, but as something useful.

The model proposed in the *Laws* 1) reduces the theme of philosophical leadership, but reiterates that the policy must be rational (not in the superior form of the philosopher-king, but in weaker form of the nocturnal Council); 2) it reaffirms the principle of the maximum possible unity, stressing the importance of the sharing of women, children and wealth (739C-D), but saying that it necessary to try to achieve it not only for a specific class, but for the whole city and as much as possible (ὅτι μᾶλιστα,
739C2), that is not absolutely. In fact this "second" model, unlike the first, must take into account the limits of human nature because

we are not like the ancient legislators who, according to the stories told nowadays, issued laws for heroes and sons of gods. They themselves were sons of gods, and legislated for others who had the same origins. Instead, we are human beings and the laws we issue now are for the seed of men (853C3–7).

Therefore we must remember the natural weakness of the human race in all its aspects (853E10–854A1).

3. Furthermore in the *Laws* the ideal model is related to the divine sphere. Cronus, knowing that humans can not govern themselves, acted as a pastor. He dominated human beings, like we exercise power over the animals, since we have a better nature (γένος, 713D5). These are two cases of ontological superiority, which involve a form of perfect control over all the aspects of life of the dominated. Cronus entrusted the human beings to demons; under their rule the human beings avoided evil. The result was positive and therefore we must take this perfect model «of which the better governments are an imitation (μίμημα)» (713B3–4).

A fundamental concept, that of imitation, emerges here. Plato immediately emphasizes the limits of it, explicitly and emphatically:

Even now this logos teaches us, saying the truth (ἀληθείᾳ), that cities can not escape from evil and suffering when the ruler of a state is not a god but a mortal. However, we should make every effort to imitate (μιμεῖσθαι) the life attributed to the age of Cronus and, by obeying in our public and private activity to that part of us that is immortal, govern the houses and the cities. We give the name of “the law” to this guiding action of intelligence (νοῦ) (713E3–714A2).

So, it is stated emphatically that we have to 1) imitate the divine model; 2) follow the instructions of the *nous*, the immortal (i.e. divine) part of the human soul, that is the pure rationality; 3) this allows the identification of reason and law, that is, we have to follow rational rules 4) both in the individual and in the social sphere.

The *logos* itself forces us to recognize the condition of human beings: they know a perfect and divine model that they will never realize because of their limits, but that they must imitate with the help of reason.
The context of Plato’s political philosophy is finally clarified explicitly in the Statesman. This separates explicitly the ideal paradigm and the six classic human constitutions that must be considered apart from the seventh [divine]: that, in fact, must be separated from all other forms of government, as a god by men (Statesman 303B3–5).

There is an ideal model, but it is “divine”, so it must be separated from human constitutions so it is not one of those that we can realize in practice. This divine model is the only true form of government; human constitutions are just imitations, more or less valid (i.e. more or less rational), of that:

of all of them the other of which we speak, we must affirm that they are not legitimate, non-true forms of government, but imitations of the right constitution, and those that we say have good laws imitate it better, the others worse (293E2–5).

In fact, it is impossible to manage the state "scientifically" (Statesman 295A-B). The indications of a science, such as medicine, are adaptable and vary from case to case; instead the law is rigid: it is impossible to give a rule which applies to all human beings and for all the various moments of their lives. The politician can not stand close to each person in order to continuously vary their instructions. He will have to give general rules, indicating what is best in most cases; one will have to use laws, that are not adaptable instruments.

This sense of human limits is essential to understanding why Plato in the Statesman asserts that it is not possible to realize a perfect model of a state even when the figure of a political scientist (as the philosopher-king of the Republic) emerges. The pure scientist is not only rare, but he himself, who is above the law, accepts the respect of nomos so as not to open the door to a much greater evil: the tyrant or the sophist who falsely represent themselves as scientists. We can tolerate good or less good laws, but one can not accept an imitator of the scientist, inexorably condemned to error or deception (Statesman 300B-E). Nevertheless, the limits of this weak instrument call for a careful evaluation:
Indeed the differences between human beings and between actions, and the fact that no human thing ever remains static, so to speak, prevent any art, whatever it may be, to establish in any sector something that is simple and valid in all cases and at all times... But we see that the law aims precisely at this, and that it is like an authoritarian and ignorant man, who does not allow anyone to act contrary to his will or to question things, even if this person has found some innovation that constitutes an improvement compared to the logic he has imposed... Is it not impossible, then, to apply what always remains simple to what is never simple? (294B2-C8).

This text may seem to stand in glaring contrast to the positive role that the law is expected to play. The whole operation is conceived in such a way as to bring out the following problem:

Why, then, is it necessary to pass laws, given that the law is not the most just thing? We must discover the reason for this (294C10-D1).

It is certainly impossible to govern the state “in a scientific manner”, but this answer is not enough: it makes the law out to be a “lesser evil”, whereas Plato argues that it is a good. The fact is that Plato's deliberately complicated exposition conceals the presence of two kinds of law: the “imitative” laws are laid down by an assembly, written by wise men, put to the test of experience, based on knowledge and studied in every detail. Therefore, in their particular areas these laws will be imitations of the truth, as far as this is humanly possible (300C5–7). The other laws are haphazard, cannot be verified and run contrary to art and science. After describing these laws, Plato concludes that their presence increases the irrationality of human choices, to the point of making life, which is already difficult in itself, quite unbearable (298A-299E). It is this system of norms that may be described as authoritarian and contrary to all improvement, characteristics that cannot be attributed to a legislation designed to imitate the ideal model.

In short, 1) while the “perfect” (ideal) politeia does not need laws (in fact there are not in the Republic), because it is based on science, the imitative constitutions, to save themselves, they must write laws. The law is to be commended because it proposes a structure of rules that imitate, for better or worse, the system of scientific norms that constitute the paradigm. This polarity of judgment can be understood as the distinction between very good (= divine) and adequate (= human): very good is the
ideal state and the application of science, adequate is the state that is closest to that paradigm, that is able to trigger the virtuous process that has as its “utopian” goal (but not utopian as guiding star) the model itself. 2) The ideal paradigm is necessary and useful in itself because it allows us 1) to rationally construct other models, which can be classified as second or third, etc. according to their proximity to the paradigm itself; 2) to guide the behaviour of the true politician, in his rational effort to develop laws; 3) to evaluate the system of laws in their relation to the ideal paradigm. In every passage the fundamental concept is that of imitation, which comes in two forms: the second model imitates the first, with a number of modifications due to the renunciation of the absolute freedom of the legislator; the concrete legislative choices imitate one of the models. The ideal paradigm is necessary and useful as a model, without which these imitations would be impossible. This is what Plato proposes in the three examined dialogues. He places a first model, which must 1) not be called impossible, because in this case it would be just a useless dream; 2) not be mechanically applied; 3) be taken as a paradigm for creating other models in order to offer to the politician a range of possible choices.

5. Law and Politician

So in any case it is impossible to interpret Plato taking only one point of view. In fact the city, to have good laws, must have a good politician for a “systemic” reason: while the individual is able to know and to act from himself, the city knows and acts only when it receives the inputs of knowledge from someone, that is, “by some deity or a person who has knowledge” (Laws, 645B6). Unlike the individual who is self-conscious, the city needs an intervention, external or internal, divine or human, even if it is just to recognize itself in the laws that constitute it. But, of course, divine intervention is rare: this is, for Plato, a job for human beings. That is why Plato repeatedly emphasizes the presence of two eide:

5 On the "systemic" nature of Plato’s philosophy see Migliori 2018a.
In fact, there are two constitutive forms of the city (δύο πολιτείας εἴδη): the attribution of political offices to people and the laws related to the public offices (Laws 735A5–6).

Two forms (δύο εἴδη) take place in the ordering of the city: first, the establishment of the offices and related magistrates, how many there should be and how to have the elections; then the connection of laws to each office, identifying the type and the number and the nature of laws that is suitable for each of them (Laws 751A4-B2).

Laws and politicians are the two factors that have to work in perfect harmony to trigger a process of constant improvement of the real city. But this is a complex relationship, as we see when the text proposes the figure of "servants of the laws" already established in the Crito (δούλος, 50E4).

Now, I have not called the "servants of the laws" (ὑπηρέτας τοῖς νόμοις) what are called “magistrates” to invent terms, but because I am convinced that especially in this resides both the salvation and the ruin of the city (Laws 715C6-D4).

If the salvation of the city depends on the close connection between politicians and the laws, it is up to the law, from one point of view, a kind of primacy, as the politician must obey the law. But Plato is well aware that, from a second point of view, the politician has the primacy because one of his primary functions is to be a legislator:

It is quite clear that, in some way, the art of the legislator belongs to that of the king. But the thing that is most valuable of all is not that the laws should have force, but rather that the man who is king possesses wisdom (Statesman 294A6–8).

The difficulty of the relationship between these two eide, different and mutually conditioning, makes difficult, not to say unlikely, the existence of a good city.
6. Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will

All this explains the pessimism of Plato:

*My dear Glaucon, there can be not cessation* of ills for cities or, I fancy, for mankind, unless the philosophers rule our cities or those whom we now call our kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately, and there is a conjunction of these two things, political power and philosophy, in the same person (*Republic* 473C11-D6).

For these reasons, which we had foreseen and feared, we declared, compelled by the truth, that neither city nor polity nor even a human being would ever be implemented until either the fate compels those few philosophers who aren’t evil, now judged useless, to care (ἐπιμεληθῆναι) for the city, whether they wish it or not, and the city to obey them, or before a *true love* for the true philosophy takes possession either of the sons of the men now in power and sovereignty or of themselves by some divine inspiration (ἐκ τινος θείας ἔπιπνοίας) (*Republic* 499A11-C2).

Once again, the “solution” is a sort of miracle. The same judgement is passed, in essentially the same terms, in the *Seventh Letter*:

*Mankind, then, will have no cessation from ills until either a generation of genuine philosophers attains political power, or else those who hold power in the cities, for some divine intervention (ἐκ τινος μοίρας θείας), do not devote themselves to philosophy* (326A7-B4).

If a state is entrusted to suitable individuals who abide by good laws, the citizens too will become good. This, however, requires rational politicians, who are capable of enduring the pressure of the passions, and can be guided by difficult philosophical arguments. There is no “before” and “after” here, but only a virtuous circle starting from a situation which is positive enough to trigger the whole process.

But if these models are so difficult to implement, because Plato has committed herself on this issue? There is a first obvious answer: because the result of this change in the *politeia* would have a great effect on the whole life and the public and private morality of human beings (the policy is both city management and care of the soul). Such an attempt is so
justified, even because Plato hopes for “a revolution from above”: we need a change of those citizens that have the power.

There is a second less obvious reason, linked precisely to God's role. The *Euthyphro* is the dialogue that is interested in the human being's relationship with the gods. The final question of the dialogue is: Since the pious man must co-operate to the gods project what is what God wants? What is this project? The dialogue does not give the answer, but all Plato's philosophy shows that God wants order. From this derives the pious man's need to create order both in his soul and in his city. As the texts that we have quoted today have repeatedly affirmed.

Finally, the Plato's proposal is for happiness and it is based on three assumptions: 1) we are rational beings and only a continuous research gives meaning to our life; 2) we are social beings and only in the ordered city a human being, even the philosopher, can fully realize his potential; 3) the concrete analysis must concern not the part but the whole (cf. *Laws* 903C1-D3).

The ideal to which Plato tends, in a correct way from the point of view of a systems theory, is that of a happy whole with happy parts, as described in the conclusion of the *Statesman*:

Let us say, then, that this is the end of the finely woven web of political action: when the royal art, taking the behaviour of bold men and that of restrained men, leads them to a common life, in concord and friendship, and creating the most glorious and best of all textures, clothes with it all other men, both slave and free, who live in the states, holds them together by this fabric, and governs and directs them, without neglecting absolutely nothing of what is necessary for the city to be, as far as possible, happy (*Statesman* 311B7-C5).
A Hermeneutic Paradigm for the History of Ancient Philosophy: the Multifocal Approach

The Greeks discovered that the world we have in common is usually regarded from an infinite number of different standpoints, to which correspond the most diverse points of view.


1. A peculiar situation

Let us set out from the following fact: the studies published last century have identified a range of contrasting statements in the works of both Plato and Aristotle. In order to make sense of this, the same hermeneutic key has been suggested in both cases: the evolutionary paradigm. The situation is a paradoxical one for a number of reasons:

1. coincidences of such an extent are unlikely;
2. the texts of the two authors
   2.1. differ in nature: Plato’s texts are dialogues written for publication and often addressed to a broad public, whereas Aristotle’s may roughly be described as “school” texts, which were intended to have an internal circulation and which pay little attention to the stylistic elegance;
   2.2. display a different approach to philosophical problems: whereas for Aristotle we have a *Physics*, a *Metaphysics*, a *Rhetoric*, etc., no Platonic dialogue may be confined to a single philosophical area, since they always present a range of different themes that are brilliantly intertwined.

It seems odd, therefore, that the same evolutionary paradigm has been adopted for both philosophers, a paradigm that today appears to no longer hold true for either of them.

The underlying theme for Plato is that of the succession of the dialogues. The problem of the order in which these texts ought to be read has been the object of the most arbitrary and varied interpretations since
antiquity. To avoid this outcome, modern hermeneutics has identified an *objective* tool to determine the sequence of the dialogues: the “stylometric” method.¹ The result is then used to arrange the texts into groups. This method has been easily associated with Hermann’s hypothesis of an evolution in Plato’s thought; this scholar posits a distinction between early Socratic works, dialectic or megaric texts and structural and mature ones. The 20th century thus witnessed the predominance of evolutionary interpretations over unitary ones.

This evolutionary interpretation would appear to have entered in crisis today for a number of reasons: 1) the attempt to explain the “contradictions” between the dialogues in such terms clashes with the fact that the same contrasting positions may also be found within the same text;² 2) what we would have is a sort of miracle: a philosopher who was busy embarking on challenging enterprises such as his mission to Syracuse found the time to leave us a perfect “diary of his philosophical journey”; 3) increasing evidence is being adduced in support of the unitary character of Platonic thought.

For Aristotle too we must acknowledge the crisis of the historical-genetic paradigm, which has been the dominant one for many decades. The starting point is the crucial study by Jaeger,³ which «has marked an epoch as few other studies have, insofar as it has created a genuine paradigm, alternative to the dominant one».⁴ Jaeger’s suggestion is rather complex,⁵ but his “evolutionary” interpretation has shaped the research for decades: he interprets the differences to be found in the Aristotelian texts as traces of a development from a Platonic stage to one marked by empirical interests, with the forsaking of the previous perspective. This

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¹ Cf. for a more in-depth discussion here, in *Are there any “youthful” and/or Socratic dialogues? Some reflections on the* Apology of Socrates, pp. 50-69; Migliori 2013 pp. 142–163.
² For example, in the *Phaedrus* the soul is presented according to a unitary, binary and ternary model; for an investigation of the topic, see below and Migliori 2013, pp. 725–858, esp. pp. 747–754.
³ Jaeger 1964.
⁴ Reale 2006, pp. XIX-XX.
⁵ In opposition to the dominant paradigm of his day, which sought to provide a “strong” reconstruction of Aristotle’s system, by underplaying or ignoring the many variations presented by his oeuvre, Jaeger offers the model of an “open” system, which marks a break with the rigid models of the past.
suggestion has a range of negative consequences. First of all, in the absence of any objective data, the only possible criterion is the theoretical one; hence, it is always possible to formulate new hypotheses – as has de facto been the case. Moreover, the method runs up an endless range of difficulties when it comes to the physical and ethical works; in particular, by breaking the texts, it makes it impossible to develop a coherent discourse on Aristotle’s thought. Finally, it is difficult to understand how these texts, which were certainly put together in different ways, may have preserved a stratification of conceptually contrasting approaches without the author (or editor) doing anything to eliminate them. Against this practice of “segmenting” a text into anterior and posterior parts, one may invoke Aubenque’s methodological suggestion: unless an author disowns a work, its content must be attributed to him or her; “this is all the more the case with Aristotle’s esoteric works, which never left his hands, and which he was therefore free to touch up and rearrange as he deemed fit. Had the philosopher regarded those courses, or parts of them, obsolete, he would certainly have removed or altered them”.

In conclusion, the outcome of this approach has been so disappointing on the hermeneutic level, and the objections raised against it have been

6 These have been analysed in an exemplary fashion by Reale 1961.
7 Not even Aristotle’s relationship with Plato provides any chronologically certain elements: on the basis of the «researches that have been done on the certainly youthful works of Aristotle, especially on the Protretticus,... it has been shown that these... already reveal a critical attitude towards some doctrines of Plato and the awareness from Aristotle of his autonomous philosophical position» (Berti 2004, pp. 170–171).
8 Jaeger «believed that Aristotle’s thought had evolved from an initial adhesion to Platonism to a final landingplace for empiricism. Consequently he was inclined to consider youthful the works that in his opinion appeared closer to Platonism and old the works that instead appeared more distant. On the contrary von Arnim and Gohlke attributed to Aristotle an completely opposite evolution, that is, from a youthful empiricism to a return to Platonism in old age. Consequently they assigned to the various texts collocations opposite to those established by Jaeger» (Berti 2004, p. 169).
9 Aubenque 1962, pp. 9 ff.
10 Reale 1974, p. 4.
so strong, that the model would appear to have been largely abandoned today, yet in a way that is neither linear nor coherent.12

2. A different choice and its implications

This is how things stand: we have two authors offering a range of different approaches to the same problems. We must therefore adopt an interpretative key suited to the situation: the evolutionary paradigm has constituted an earnest attempt and its failure forces us to develop a different hypothesis. It is necessary to see whether the differences we find in the texts represent an alteration of the author’s Weltanschauung or whether it is possible to come up with an explanation for such “contrasts” internal to the philosopher’s specific “system of thought”. For years this topic has been a focus of research for the ancient philosophy work group at the University of Macerata: Prof. Arianna Fermani, Dr Lucia Palpacelli and the present writer; recently, Dr Francesca Eustacchi has also joined our team (not to mention the contribution of many post-graduate students, whom I cannot list here). The work we have been conducting is based on analytical studies, on account of the need both to have a

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11 «After half a century of studies conducted with the genetic method, it was very clear that esoteric works cannot be considered as collections of different texts and that, if we insist on reading them as such, they become completely devoid of philosophical meaning» (Reale 1974, pp. 42–43).

12 I emphasise this because at times we find eminent scholars surreptitiously resorting to such an approach when faced with this difficulty, or devoting many pages to establishing the priority or posteriority of individual passages for no plausible hermeneutic reason. This is quite evident in the case of those scholars who avoid a strict interpretation of Jaeger’s paradigm, such as for instance Düring 1966: in the “Relative chronology of the works” (pp. 60–65) we find a marked segmentation of Aristotle’s texts, with suggested dates for possible revisions and a series of psychological observations that lead to very questionable claims: consider, for instance, the author’s verdict regarding the works from the Academic period – dated to the years between 355 BC and Plato’s death – which are «overflow with vitality and self-confidence; we may consider this period as the high point of his life» (p. 63). Understandably, the author himself repeatedly stresses the hypothetical nature of many of his claims.
methodological rigour, and to discover some basic distinctions. For instance, the approach can vary depending on one’s point of view, or the different meanings that the same concept can acquire, or the areas investigated. Only an analytical study can allow us to address the questions we are faced with: why do the authors under investigation offer one solution in one context and a different solution in another context? Why do they not regard this practice – in our eyes, an unacceptable practice – as a problem, but rather proceed as though they were unaware of what they were doing? We are led to wonder here whether we may not be dealing with one of those “apparent absurdities” that – as Kuhn teaches us – enable a real understanding of ancient thought.

One first result of our investigation has been summed up in a small collected volume which highlights an element already noted in many analytical studies: «this is... a crucial difference, which makes it so difficult, at times, to understand the thought of Plato (and Aristotle). I express this difficulty through a formula: whereas modern thought, sprung

13 One must resist the widespread habit of adopting brilliant explicative models that rest on many supporting elements but also clash with many opposite data (that scholars seldom choose to ignore).

14 Aristotle thus defines metaphysics as the science of causes and first principles, as the science of being qua being, as the theory of substance, and as the theological science: see Reale 1993, v. I, pp. 53–152.

15 If the area of investigation changes, so do the questions and consequently the answers. The issue of the origin of cosmic motion differs depending on whether it is addressed on the physical level or on the metaphysical one: for it is one thing to ask what principle accounts for movements within the cosmos, and quite another to ask why movement exists. For textual evidence illustrating this example, namely the reference to ether in *De Caelo* and the notion of Prime Mover in the *Metaphysics*, see Palpacelli 2013, pp. 287–307.


from “clear and distinct ideas” (to quote Descartes), tends to think in terms of “aut... aut”, which is to say of the opposition between irreconcilable positions available as alternatives, Classical thought, and particularly Platonic-Aristotelian thought, thinks in terms of “et... et” (which obviously also includes the – rare – possibility of “aut... aut”); in other words, it tends to broaden the framework and structure of its analysis so as to include the highest possible number of elements. Classical philosophers do not seem interested in producing an intellectual system, a vision, a definition; instead they want to develop – within a well-defined conceptual horizon that is so strong at times as to constitute a paradigm – a range of schemes and models that cannot be juxtaposed and indeed often stand in contrast to one another, and yet are capable of explaining aspects of reality that would otherwise escape us. Ultimately, Classical thought is designed to understand the world, which is so complex as to require a range of different tools. From this perspective, some apparently contradictory positions may be found to actually be mutually consistent or at any rate compatible.¹⁸

This outlook, which is so aware of the complexity of a reality that resists any human attempt to identify a perfect order, rests on a range of factors. The first is the very experience of that strange thing we refer to as the «Hellenic people»: a sum of often very different realities, further divided into poleis that at most chose to unite into “leagues”. What we have are many contrasting elements, but also a kinship identity that is constantly reaffirmed by tracing all these realities back to a single mythical father, Hellen. Unity and multiplicity, union and division: it would be a mistake to stress only one of the two aspects, even when dealing with an extreme case such as that of the Dorians, who were as hated as they were esteemed.¹⁹ This diversity that goes hand in hand with an equally deep unity – most notably celebrated in the Olympic games, an exclusive   

¹⁸ Migliori 2013, pp. 163–164.
¹⁹ The dramatic Doric invasion left a lasting mark, as is shown by a 5th-century inscription from a temple at Paros: “The Doric stranger and the slave may not enter”. We then have the episode involving one of the great Spartan Kings, Cleomenes I. When he was visiting Athens around 500 BC, he was stopped on the Acropolis by the priestess of Athens, on the grounds that no Dorian could enter the temple. Even more significantly, the impasse was solved when the king stated that he was not a Dorian but an Achaean, since he descended from Hercules!
event by which the Greeks even reckoned the years – is also reflected in religion, where we find a single yet varying pantheon of divine figures, which are made the object of frequently conflicting narratives.\(^{20}\)

This interplay of unity and multiplicity is already detectable in the earliest Greek thought, which seeks to justify the unity of experience (i.e. of the world that we experience) based on a principle that is “dual” from two points of view: 1) the elements these ancient philosophers refer to (water, air and fire) are certainly not those we can empirically experience (as is confirmed by Anaximander’s notion of *apeiron*); 2) the principle (*archè*) is both that *from which* things derive and that *of which* they are made up. In an equally coherent way, the *logos* takes the two opposite forms of becoming and being, with a further dynamic twist: Heraclitus affirms all the various possibilities through the famous image of the river,\(^{21}\) whereas scholars have often privileged only one, ignoring the whole question; Parmenides affirms the absoluteness of being and at the same time strives to save phenomena by means of an (impossible) third way that may justify the opinions of mortals.\(^{22}\)

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20 The very figure of Hellen takes a number of different forms: either *the son or brother* of Deucalion, he had three sons, Dorus, Xuthus and Aeolus, to whom the Dorians, Ionians and Aeolians were traced back. The eponymous hero of the Ionians, however, is Ion – the son of Xuthus according to some sources, that of Apollo according to others; his brother Achaeus is the eponymous hero of the Achaeans, who according to other sources, however, is the son of Poseidon, or Zeus, or Haemon, Thessalus’ father; likewise, some sources present Aeolus as the son of Poseidon.

21 The widely known statement «it is impossible to step into the same river twice» (B 91) would appear to be contradicted by the statement that «ever-newer waters flow on those who step into the same rivers» (B 12), whereas a third statement clarifies that we are dealing here with different kinds of relations: «Into the same rivers we step and do not step, we are and are not» (B 49a).

22 See Reale 1995, v. I, pp. 127–130. The attempt to deny this third way and to reduce the phenomenological treatment of the poem to a pure list of errors runs up against what is in my view an unsolvable puzzle: why should a Goddess who is revealing the truth of being waste so much time (i.e. most of the poem) to listing irreparable mistakes?
3. **The emergence of the multifocal approach**

The failures encountered by early Greek thought – from the discovery of the irrational to the constant development of new hypotheses within the same strand of research (let us think of Mylesian school) – did not lead to defeatism, but rather to a renewed inventiveness (let us think of the Pythagorean school), with the Eleatic school marking a genuine turning point. This school emphasised the fundamental driving force behind early philosophical thought: the need to go beyond phenomena in order to identify a principle that could account for reality as a whole – and serve as its foundation. The opening lines of Parmenides’ poem may be viewed from this perspective: the narrator is led by the Daughters of the Sun onto the deity’s path, beyond the gates separating Night and Day, where the Goddess reveals the truth to him.

However, as the second generation of the so-called Eleatic philosophers reveals, Parmenides’ attempt to “save phenomena” fell short of its goal: if, in order to explain phenomena, an interplay of opposites is required, and if these opposites are both associated with being, which is the only point of reference for reality, then the opposition itself does not hold, since the two opposites can no longer be distinguished. Significantly, Parmenides’ disciple Zeno attacked the established view of reality as motion and plurality, while Melissus of Samos brought the investigation full circle by developing an absolute monism that regarded the whole of experiential reality as an illusion.

**The sophists’ contribution**

The above position is explicitly opposed by the leading sophists: «the main exponents of this breakthrough are Protagoras and Gorgias, whose themes may be intertwined: they are two “post-Parmenidean” thinkers who are openly opposed to Eleatism²³. The two sophists take up again the phenomenological need against Eleatism, as is clear from the title of

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²³ Though less explicit, Prodicus of Ceos and his synonymic art also undermined the Parmenidean identity of being-thinking-saying, by revealing the gap between thought and language that arises from the semantic multivalence of words (a very significant aspect that we shall consider below).
the Gorgian booklet (Περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ἢ Περὶ φύσεως), overthrowing that of Melissus (Περὶ τοῦ ὄντος ἢ Περὶ φύσεως), and from the Protagorean maxim that places homo mensura as the underlying basis for the enquiry into «the things that are and (...) the things that are not», thus in clear contrast with the words of Parmenides’ Goddess.24 The two authors reject the enquiry into physis in the Eleatic sense by taking different approaches: Protagoras acknowledges the failure of the Eleatic proposal and with homo mensura he forthwith abandons the dimension of absolute knowledge by accepting the limits of human cognitive forms; Gorgias highlights the need to forsake the Eleatic logic that he tackles head-on, assuming its category system and then driving it to absurdity» (Eustacchi 2016, pp. 33–34).25

The most important outcome of the sophists’ reflection, however, lies not in its critical dimension but in its positive content. Contrary to a widespread opinion, «Protagoras’ position cannot be defined as relativistic ... Protagoras’ homo mensura cannot be understood as the onto-epistemological foundation of reality, for that would imply a metaphysical interest that is utterly unknown to him. We had better limit ourselves to focusing on the paradigm shift he brought about with regard to the Eleatic reflection. In fact, he underscores aspects that are specific of the human dimension, such as feeling and empiria» (pp. 34–35).26

Within this context, the example of Epitimus the Pharsalian proves particularly revealing:

A certain athlete had hit Epitimus the Pharsalian with a javelin, accidentally, and killed him, and Pericles squandered an entire day discussing with Protagoras whether “in the strictest sense” (ὀρθότατον) it was necessary to attribute the cause of the disaster to the javelin, or

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24 In Parmenides’ On Nature it is the Goddess who shows man the way: «Come then, listen to my word and take heed of it: I will tell you of the two roads of inquiry» (DK28B2).

25 Likewise, we may acknowledge that «Gorgias is not a nihilist: the statement “Not-being is” only serves as a transition towards the conclusion “nothing exists” which serves to highlight the aporetic nature of the Eleatic theorising. This is an anti-Eleatic provocation» (Eustacchi 2016, pp 41–42; in this case too I will refer the reader to the succinct analysis provided in this text: pp. 40–44).

26 For a succinct, yet no doubt more satisfactory, justification of this statement, see Eustacchi 2016, pp. 34–40.
rather to the one who hurled it, or the judges of the contests (Plutarch, *Pericles*, 36.3=DK80A10).

The episode shows how «the different explanations are not equivalent, but the one that works best can be found. Also, the event doesn’t matter in itself, but needs to be judged through logical parameters that allow the different causes to be ranked according to the most sound argument logically» (Eustacchi 2016, p. 45). An attempt is made to find what is truly the most correct argument (the superlative form ὀρθότατον is used) with respect to the cause of Epitimus’ death, which is not easy, since one cannot speak of a single cause: «If raised with a doctor, so looking at it from the point of view of a forensic examination as to the causes of death, the answer would have been: the javelin. If brought before the court, and thus from the point of view of criminal responsibility, the answer would have been: the javelin thrower. If raised with the head of the administration, and thus from the point of view of the duty of care that officials entrusted with law and order must guarantee, the answer would have been: the overseers». 27 All three explanations are correct, depending on our point of view and the relation we wish to consider. Yet this does not lead to relativism, since: 1) the text identifies only three acceptable causes starting from the fact under investigation (there is no fourth possible cause); 2) each point of view identifies only one cause; 3) the points of view and related causes are not all equally valid and may be ranked, depending on the kind of investigation we wish to carry out.

In this respect, it is possible to argue that the peculiarity and, at the same time, value of ancient thought «lie in its ability to offer a wonderful wealth of “unsortable” explanatory models of reality, and (drawing upon its amazing flexibility) to come up with a kind of a multifaceted yet faithful replica moulding of reality. In this regard, the likeness of the moulding ought not to be sought in the unchangeable and motionless accuracy of the contours, let alone in its attempt to foist itself monolithically upon its object, in a desperate bid to replicate it unequivocally; on the contrary, it should be sought in the flexibility of its profiles and in its ability to accommodate little by little the many diverse strains of reality that is de-

27 Rensi 1921, p. 118.
scribed through a plurality of voices and tones “quietly” and “proudly” focusing upon its own object of enquiry.\textsuperscript{28}

From the sophists’ polemic emerges the importance of relations: things and arguments must not be evaluated in themselves, but in the context of their relations, in the light of which they may be regarded as more or less useful, opportune, and so on. Particularly from a practical standpoint, this gives rise to a multifocal view of reality: «this cultural movement has turned out to be fairly homogeneous with regard to a number of themes recurring in many of its representatives... and for the use of the multifocal approach, which can be said to have its inception here. As we have seen, this approach is less about opposing the flat-out statements of Eleatic stock than about assuming the closely-knit web of relations that characterizes reality. The Sophists acknowledge a kind of phenomenological evidence of complexity that justifies the diversity of opinions about the same things: indeed, these are involved in different relations, in which they take on changing values, senses and meanings... The different examples of relations and judgements that have arisen represent the very richness that is at the heart of sophistry’s multifocal approach. It is not an arbitrary game, but it is phenomenologically and/or logically justified, and thus, in a way, subject to constraints. The identification of specific relations hinders us from freely saying anything: all is unstable, yet at the same time everything changes within a specific relation. Therefore, a judgement on a single fact or concept could vary greatly, depending on all of the following: the kind of relation that is being analyzed (e.g. binary or ternary), the point of view that has been adopted (responsibility for a death or its physical cause) or the paradigm that has been accepted (that of absolute truth or of likelihood)» (Eustacchi 2016, pp. 63–65).

The Platonic experience

In the light of the picture just outlined, we can understand Plato’s “dogmatic system”, which nonetheless affirms the intrinsic weakness of all cognitive degrees (including that of epistemic knowledge) and the irreducible otherness of the “object” with respect to knowledge:

\textsuperscript{28} Fermani 2009a, p. 6.
For each being there are three means by which epistemic knowledge is acquired (epistemic knowledge itself is the fourth, while the object of knowledge itself, which is to say true being, must be posited as the fifth). The first of these means is the name (ὄνομα), the second is the definition (λόγος), the third is the image (εἴδωλον), and the fourth is epistemic knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) (Seventh Letter 342A7–342B3).

The object, then, stands as a fifth element, after the four levels of cognition, determining an inevitable break between the ontological level and the gnoseological one. This impossibility of fully accessing the object of knowledge finds a counterpart in the intrinsic endlessness of the process described in the Phaedo 96A-102A, and Parmenides.29 The ascent from things to the Ideas, and from the latter to the first Principles, is followed by a return to things, with the discovery of new aporias, identified precisely in the light of what has been gained; in turn, this engenders the need for a new ascent, leading to a practically endless procedure which is nonetheless always complete, as far as this is possible: for the truth that is acquired at each stage30 cannot be denied,31 but must always be “rethought”. In this respect, the Platonic model may be regarded as a well-defined yet at the same time open system, which is to say a system that is always required to put itself to the test by engaging with the boundless variety of reality. From this perspective, we can understand why Plato affirms the existence of an absolute knowledge reserved to the deity, which the human soul may attain in the afterlife, once it is free

29 For a more in-depth investigation of this topic, see Migliori 2013, pp. 195–202, 325–328.
30 Contrary to what many scholars suggest, Plato’s research, while emphasising the limits of human knowledge, does indeed reach an outcome. Let us think, for instance, of how the soul is said to grasp the truth in Phaedo 65B9 (ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς ἀληθείας ἅπτεται): the verb used is ἅπτω, which in the middle form means “to touch”, “to grasp”, “to take”.
31 See e.g.: «Socrates – I instead say they are most wretched, and those who pay the penalty, less so. Do you wish to refute this as well? Polus <sarcastic> – In fact, Socrates, this is even harder to refute than the other! Socrates – It is not just harder, but impossible: for the truth can never be refuted» (Gorgias 473B6–11); «it is the truth, dear Agathon, that you cannot contradict – Socrates you easily may» (Symposium 201C8–9).
from the body.\textsuperscript{32} In this life knowledge is always “human” and so it is necessary to resort to the \textit{multifocal approach}, a mode of knowing objects that is never complete and final, and yet is true and epistemic \textit{kata to dynaton – as far as this is possible}.\textsuperscript{33}

We may thus consider the many different ways in which Plato develops his view of sense perception (cf. Migliori 2016, pp. 87–99), for instance, or of the function and nature of the soul (pp. 99–113). Limiting our enquiry to the latter example, in the \textit{Phaedrus} we find all three ways in which Plato presents the soul: «it clearly demonstrates how the view that considers them as instances of an evolution in Platonic thought is deeply flawed. Hence: 1) at first the word \textit{soul}, \textit{ψυχή}, is found (241C5; 242C7; 245A2) in a unitary view, with nothing to hint at a possible tripartite division; the proof of the immortality of the soul (245C-246A) makes no reference to parts and refers to a single reality; 2) yet at 245C2–3, before commencing the proof, the soul divine and human is mentioned, that is to say, a distinction is drawn in a binary perspective that is never remarked upon again here; 3) the winged chariot represents the most classic ternary figure. Now, if all this is found in a same dialogue, within the space of a few pages, one had better take note that these are not alterna-

\textsuperscript{32} From the point of view of the acquisition of knowledge, the body constitutes an obstacle: the soul reasons far better when the senses are not involved; it can thus know – \textit{as far as this is possible} – justice, beauty, etc., which is to say the essence of things, that which makes them what they are (\textit{Phaedo} 65D-66E). In this passage, which is mistakenly adduced as evidence \textit{against} the possibility for man to acquire knowledge, Plato uses very particular terms: he speaks of absolute truth (\textit{τὸ ἁπλότατον}, 65E2), of the purest knowledge (\textit{καθαρώτατα}, 65E6); the text is redundant and full of superlatives. The conclusion is bound to be a radical one: «So, if it is impossible to know anything \textit{in a pure way} while the body is with us, one of two thing must follow: either knowledge cannot be acquired at all or it is only possible to acquire it when we are dead, for then the soul will be by itself apart from the body, but not before» (66E4–67A2). \textit{While we live}, we «will be very near to knowledge» (67A3), but we will only possess knowledge after death, when we become pure: for what is impure cannot grasp what is pure (67B). This leads Socrates to speak of «the great hope – harboured by him who reaches the place to which I am going – of attaining in a suitable way, if this is indeed possible anywhere, that which has been our chief object in our past life» (67B8–10).

\textsuperscript{33} On this formula, which is truly paradigmatic of the sense of limit inherent in Platonic thought, and which appears in countless guises throughout many passages of the dialogues, see Migliori 2013, I, pp. 304–307.
tive models, but three different approaches to the same soul. Otherwise one would have to blame Plato for making a complete mess of things in the very dialogue that lays down the rules for constructing well-crafted speeches... In summary, if we accept Plato’s multifocal approach, we find that (on the whole) when he sets out to explain the nature of the human being, or to prove the immortality of the psyché, the Author shows no interest in telling the parts from one another. When he speaks from an ontological perspective on the structure of the soul, he often presents it in a binary form, because the fundamental issue is the distinction between the divine immortal part and the human mortal part. Finally, a more careful description of the operational aspect requires the ternary model» (Migliori 2016, pp. 105–107).

What explains this wide range of approaches is Plato’s view of reality: «he assumes a highly dynamic vision of reality that he sees as a framework of well-structured relations regulating a relentless and ever-present disarray. His vision is expressed by a formula that is paradigmatic, in my opinion: «it is better to say, as we have often said, that there is in the universe a mighty infinite and an adequate limit, and above them a presiding Cause of no mean power, which orders and arranges years and seasons and months, and may be justly called wisdom and mind» (Philebus 30C3–7). This passage underlines the weakness of the ontogonic process, for the infinite is quantitatively far superior to the adequate limit... Still, given the strength of the Limit that is manifested in different ways at different levels of reality, the real world is both orderly and marked by disarray; it is one as much as it is many. This leads to a multiplicity of one-many entities that are connected in a manifold (and, on a physical level, changeable) order of things that always appear “complex”. The fundamental expression of this complexity is the view of each entity as a whole: a being endowed with a constitutive logic that connects and unifies the parts of which the whole is necessarily formed. This pervasive pattern also touches on the “perfect and stable” dimension of Ideas, which in fact feature a number of multiple relations and a complex structure – as that marvellous “rational provocation” that is the long example in the second part of Parmenides has striven to get across. Thus a vision of reality is configured that appears close to modern complexity theories. Yet if reality is to be conceived thus, evidently there is a possibility, or indeed a necessity, to apprehend it from different points of view. Sure, these are not of equal value, but are nonetheless capable of sketching a suffi-
ciently comprehensive picture of a reality that is always one-many» (Migliori 2016, pp. 84–87).

Aristotelian developments

In line with the slant he gives his “lessons”, Aristotle is led to develop the multifocal approach even further, in the light of his awareness of the various spheres of human knowledge:

And we must also remember what has been said before, and not look for precision in all things alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much as is appropriate to the inquiry. For a carpenter and a geometer investigate the right angle in different ways; the former does so in so far as the right angle is useful for his work, while the latter inquires what it is or what sort of thing it is; for he is a spectator of the truth (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 7, 1098 a 26–32).

«As expressly stated by Aristotle, there are many perspectives from which to observe a single object and, consequently, many “schemas of interpretation”, or frames, capable of “reading” and of classifying the different profiles of the same notion, as the essays herein will show through a broad range of examples. The claim of beholding reality from only one perspective, and then expecting to apply always the same yardstick and to keep contemplating the world through the same lenses, is plain wrong and even silly: “precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts … We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits”… The true philosophers are those who can skilfully balance and fine-tune their own cognitive tools, acknowledging

34 Fermani 2016b, p. 154.
that the constraints set by their own anthropological limitations along with the unfathomable nature of certain domains of reality make it impossible to apprehend every subject-matter of enquiry accurately or thoroughly» (Fermani 2016, pp. 13–14).

Far from promoting a sceptical or defeatist position, all this leads Aristotle – and Plato before him – to acknowledge that the same reality, when viewed from different perspectives, appears to be both one thing and the other, with sometimesbewildering results. There is one passage of the *Metaphysics*, in particular, that Fermani often quotes, as it perfectly illustrates this perspective:

motion is clearly an act, yet it is an incomplete act; and precisely for this reason it is difficult to understand what motion is. It cannot be reduced to privation or potentiality or pure act; hence, the only possible explanation is the one we have given: *motion both is and is not an act*, and it is difficult to understand, but possible (*Metaphysics* XI, 9, 1066 a 20–26).

The same reality, therefore, is *A* and, at the same time, is *non-A*, *albeit from a different perspective*. This was certainly one of the central features of the teaching imparted in the Lycaeum, as is clearly illustrated by *Metaphysics Delta*. Palpacelli has investigated this text in depth by focusing on one of its many key concepts, that of *physis*, or nature: «What is striking about this plethora of meanings is that Aristotle effortlessly lays out in sequence three such disparate definitions: *in one sense* nature *is form*, *in another matter*, and *in another still* synolon and substance; the undertaking involves no hardship as Aristotle carefully maps out the different senses that he brings into play... This multifocal characterization of *physis* is fully endorsed in the somewhat more suitable and more technical context of Aristotle’s *Physics*. Throughout chapter 1 of Book II Aristotle reiterates his accounts of “nature” as applying to matter and form. Also here such meanings are closely bound to the concept of nature as the principle of motion... In this case too, and fully consistent with *Metaphysics* V, Aristotle clarifies how *physis* may be construed in one sense as that matter which has in itself the principle of motion, and in another sense as form or species» (2016, pp. 127–128).

Aristotle puts forward two models that further define the multifocal approach. The first is the “*in itself and for us*” model, which «adds a further element of “dynamization” and problematization to the epistemo-
logical framework relating to the philosophers under review» (Fermani 2016, p. 23). On her part, Palpacelli shows how according to Aristotle’s Physics «time in itself is infinite, although time may be assumed to be finite according to one’s perception of it: so, for us there is a time that is finite and continuous» (Palpacelli 2016, p. 200).

The second model consists in the “in relation to” perspective. This «formula was invented by Aristotle (though conceptually already present in his forerunners in a more or less embryonic form) ... Once again we are confronted by a clearly prospective and multifocal approach that, by shifting its focus from one viewpoint to another of a same reality, makes it possible to express very different, if not opposite, evaluations of that same reality. A most telling example of this movement is the passage below from Topics VIII, 11, 161b38–162a3: “Clearly, then, not even the argument itself is open to the same adverse criticism when taken 'in relation' to the proposed conclusion and when taken by itself. For there is nothing to prevent the argument being open to reproach in itself, and yet commendable 'in relation' to the proposed conclusion, or again, vice versa, being commendable in itself, and yet open to reproach in relation to the proposed conclusion, whenever there are many propositions both generally held and also true whereby it could easily be proved”» (Fermani 2016, pp. 26–27).

Because of time constraints, I will leave out the examples provided by Fermani in Some Examples..., where the multifocal approach is used to reconstruct the various ethical treatments of the notions of friendship, vice and suicide, and the treatment of time which Palpacelli offers in Time.... In this text the author also discusses the issue of the animation of the stars, which reveals «a second and more radical use of the multifocal approach <that> occurs when Aristotle, as well as adding the number of meanings, goes so far even as to multiply the explanatory paradigms before a given reality, reaching conclusions that may be seen as bordering on contradiction. The question of the animation of the stars and the cosmos actually brings to the fore such a use of the multifocal approach, showing the actual implementation of two fundamentally different explanatory systems: a physical and metaphysical one» (Palpacelli 2016, pp. 205–206).

«From the brief analysis outlined in this paper it is evident that, when set side by side, the physical and the metaphysical discussions presuppose a different starting point: in his De caelo Aristotle seems to go to great
lengths to eschew the metaphysical plane and proceeds from the first physical cause; whereas in *Metaphysics*, his analysis shifts over to the Unmoved Mover as he postulates his cosmological theory from this other point of view, thus underlining the finalistic quality of the movement. It seems safe to say that the argumentative tensions in *De caelo* stem from a few instances in which the metaphysical encroaches upon an explanation that would rather stick to the physical, but cannot and is unable to do so. The ether not only cannot exclude, but must actually imply, the divine nature of stars, hence, the concept of life and, ultimately, that of purposive movement, a “soul that strives towards...”. The *De caelo* therefore presents us with a scenario bordering on the contradictory, as it fosters the rise of metaphysical tensions, which the doctrine of ether as the first divine body fails to eliminate or explain altogether; instead, said tensions are located in a metaphysical setting in which, conversely, the premises of the physical world (the ether) seem to have no role to play. However, the issue that emerges most clearly from this comparison, namely the relationship between ether and Unmoved Mover, seem to not have been addressed by Aristotle at all, either in the context of physics or metaphysics. This appears to substantiate the belief that he regards these two discussions as *distinct in their own right*, and justifies any changes with the different point of view brought into play, without worrying about linking one level to another. In the final reference to the metaphysical plane, Aristotle shows his willingness to share and embrace the Platonic theory according to which the sensible world finds its ultimate purpose in a metaphysical reality. Even though the metaphysical level may remain the ultimate horizon of explanation, it is evident upon evaluation that Aristotelian physics features a *joint presence of different levels of perspective*. Amid these levels, an explanatory level abides which is *purely physical* and, as such, stands out and is separated from the metaphysical momentum, in that it responds to other principles and follows its own method of development. The physical is only *one of the possible points of view* applicable to reality. While more fitting to the reality at hand, by nature of its being physical, it sometimes cannot help being affected by the metaphysical reconstruction – acting as ultimate explanation – lingering in the background» (Palpacelli 2016, pp. 217–219).
4. The contemporary value of this view of ancient philosophy

Some interesting elements emerge from this approach to the philosophy of the ancients. First of all, the rejection of all self-justifying theoretical frameworks: the aim is to understand reality, by multiplying the points of view and interpretative models. This is almost inevitable: for these thinkers «philosophy is essentially a form of life and not a set of doctrines. Socrates could serve as model for the philosophic life because (in Plato’s eyes) he was wholly committed to a life of strenuous search and inquiry, summed up in the phrase “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Apology 38A)».36 Hence, the philosophers we have been dealing with endeavour to approach reality in all possible ways: this is an effort connected to the very life they have chosen to lead.

Reality is complex and calls for a careful use of methodological tools, the respecting of factual evidence, and great open-mindedness. Aristotle clearly illustrates this in De generatione et corruptione, where he criticises the vague method that Empedocles uses to investigate the topic of motion:

it was necessary, then, to give some definitions, or build some hypotheses, or suggest some demonstrations to be later carried out either in a rigorous manner or in a weaker one or in any way at all (B, 6, 333b24–26).

This makes it possible to also investigate issues that are remote from everyday experience, while always consciously emphasizing the “limits” that the research is bound to be subject to, insofar as it is “human”. Plato has Simmias clearly state this in relation to the soul:

For I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do yourself, that it is either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about such matters in this life. And yet he is a weakling who does not test in every way what is said about them and persevere until he is worn out by studying them on every side. For it is necessary to do one of two things: either learn from others the truth about such matters, or discover it on one’s own; or, if this is impossible, accept whatever human reasoning is best and hardest to disprove and, embarking upon

it as upon a raft, sail through life in the midst of dangers, unless one can make one’s voyage more safely and securely by sailing upon some stronger vessel, which is to say some divine speech (Phaedo 85C1-D4).

If you can not get any better, we must rest satisfied with those arguments which are the best and the hardest to disprove. The only possibility that is ruled out is that we abandon our enquiry because the matter is too difficult and too remote from our experience: for we must be willing to face some risks. Socrates himself, in the Phaedo, confirms this attitude when he poses the problem of fate and of the destination of the soul after death:

Now it would not be fitting for an intelligent man to confidently maintain that all this is just as I have described it; but I think that he may properly venture to believe that this or something like it is true concerning our souls and their abodes, since the soul is shown to be immortal, and that it is worth running the risk of believing that things are so – for risk is nice (Phaedo 114D2–6).

Paradoxically, this view ties in with the problems investigated by contemporary epistemology: the fact that the truth always presents some limits and always exists within a web of relations does not mean that we should forsake the truth itself, but only the idea that it has an absolute character. It is necessary to acknowledge that the same reality will appear different depending on the point of view we adopt and/or paradigm we bring into play and/or question we wish to investigate. «In this sense the Ancients have taught us that truth always necessarily manifests itself in perspective, and their thinking works as a relative thinking, in the sense of “topical”, which falls exactly within the meaning Aristotle gives to the term topos: “point of view” ... If it can be said that all is relative in the perspective of the Ancients, then it can also be said that in the same philosophical horizon nothing is relativistic, since they are never about forsaking truth... The ever-changing dynamics of relationships can only occur under a given set of clear rules and within fixed borders... Here, the affirmation of multifocality, being an approach that underscores the predominance of the relationship and of the relative in an effort to understand reality, ... has nothing to do with relativism» (Fermani 2016, pp. 28–29).
Our incapacity to attain (divine) perfection does not prevent us from searching for a human truth, which laboriously yields a richer view of reality through many partial reconstructions.
1. **Premise**

The writer of this article has been working for years in the field of History of Ancient Philosophy; he applied his efforts on a very selected field, using the professional tools required by his discipline. He has, therefore, experienced the transformations that have happened over the last decades. Scholars of his generation used to undertake their labours under the delusion that one could not write one book on history of philosophy without having read everything; this was what a Master expected when the typescript of the thesis or of the book was handed over for supervision and (at times) publication. That world is over, and no one nowadays can work by such standards unless they focus on an extremely narrow and unexplored field.

On October 5, 2004 the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* reported a conference held in Turin by Giovanni Sartori\(^1\) about Norberto Bobbio and the theoretic reasons of the crisis of democracy. Sartori ended by stating that in the last 30 years he has witnessed with horror – and he insists: “yes, horror” – the decay of theoretic research: «Bobbio and I are among the last few scholars that believed and still believe in the transmission of knowledge (which is for me the first mission of the educated man) and that, before they write, read those who wrote before them. Younger authors, on the contrary, have a growing tendency to write books with no bibliography, spontaneous offspring of their own genius. Their (scarce) readings are, with few exceptions, from 20 years before, and they mostly quote coetaneous peers and jolly fellows as inexperienced as themselves».

Decay is obviously not only quantitative. The “fundamentals” or ABCs of a discipline – may it be etiquette or sports – can be lost this way.

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\(^1\) Giovanni Sartori (1924–2017) was one of the most famous experts in political sciences on an international level, and the most important Italian political scientist.
I will not presume here to reinvent the fundamentals: but given the horizon I have depicted, one can forgive me if, moving towards some conclusions, I will suggest some indications of my own methodological convictions. The main point I want to state is a reflection on the peculiar intertwining between the primacy of the text and the necessity of an aware use of the paradigm that one, as a scholar, is *de facto* adopting.²

2 These are, indeed, the two capital elements of hermeneutics: to be questioned by the text itself and to acknowledge and to accept one’s own presuppositions as essential to all readings (cf. Gadamer 1983 pp. pp. 312–340). One has to enact both procedures, however antithetical they may seem, incorporating them in a circular system that verifies and enriches them both “at every round”: the point is to give no space to an innocence of view which is not possible nor, at the same time, to a hermeneutic of pure invention that answers only to the interpreter’s intellectual skills. On the contrary, hermeneutical circle suggests a double operation concerning 1. the text and 2. one’s presuppositions. This leads to paying particular attention to the relation between the two elements, without unilaterally taking sides, thus keeping in mind and highlighting the need to monitor and therefore modify the presuppositions themselves, to the point of being available to radically challenge it if necessary.

2. The underlying problem

I will choose as my interlocutor, albeit somehow instrumentally, R. Brandt (1998), who introduces an actual problem to which he gives, in my opinion, an unsatisfying answer. His aim is to react to decades of relativistic excesses, that deny – *de iure* and/or *de facto* – that it is possible to somehow “certify” the content of a text, thus leaving absolute freedom to the interpreter. Now, as much as one can be eager to reaffirm objectivity of text, it is impossible to completely rule out subjective intervention, as Brandt strongly underlines: In fact the attribution of any meaning completely depend on the subject: the object is, therefore, both given and not given (p. 11).

A double negation is then necessary: both pure subjectivism and pure objectivism are deemed simplistic. Objectivity can be reaffirmed only by measuring itself against all obstacles that deny and oppose it. In this respect, method appears as a point of paramount importance: an assertion is objective when results from a methodical analysis of the text; the object is the product not of arbitrariness of the interpreter, but of his
Objectivity then totally depends on method. Brandt seems so confident in the power of a universal and perfectly formal method that he comes as far as stating that reader should free themselves of his subjective assumptions so that the text can be transmitted with no modifications to the tabula rasa of his conscience Brandt thus expresses an indiscriminate attack on all forms of hermeneutics.

3. Two different hermeneutics

A role in this attack is, first of all, to be attributed to a difficulty in distinguishing between historical readings of a text and explicitly theoretical reworking without reducing the former to a philosophically irrelevant activity.³

The theoretician’s problem

Brandt (p. X) critically quotes a statement by Habermas (1981, pp. 154–155), who bluntly affirms that his way of appropriating other philosophers’ ideas results, despite his efforts, brutal. Even when he makes use of quotes what he said has sometimes very little in common with the opinions of the quoted authors. Brandt, linking Habermas to Gadamer and Heidegger, accuses this attitude of being an arbitrary reading, a way of colonizing the authors. Actually, Habermas is only stating the elementary truth that when a theoretician works on another philosopher’s text, the theoretician is in the end, regardless of all quotes, the only one speaking. This can be done in a stronger or weaker fashion, more or less brutally, but it has nothing to do with the radical forms of interpretative relativism. Habermas’ statement in fact denies any relativistic grounds, since he acknowledges an explicit distance from a correct interpretation of the text.

³ For an overview on the Italian debate in the 1970s on the relation between theoretical and historical interpretation – not casually correlated to the Italian translation of the seminal work of Gadamer 1983 – cf. Piaia 2007 pp. 12–14; this text is also recommended for further bibliographical references (on the subject of philosophical historiography, see in particular pp. 41–73).
In comparison with a widespread praxis that presents as “historic” what is, in fact, “theoretical”, Habermas’ attitude appears correct, since he recognizes the fact that the meaning of any statement is modified by the historical and/or theoretical context in which it is placed. It is in this perspective that one should weigh the “violence” that, inevitably, all theoreticians perform. In the context of philosopher K the statement that “a is b” is linked to a series of concepts 1, 2, 3, 4 that qualify both “a” and “b”; if philosopher F takes that same statement and brings it inside his own system, he places it in a relation to another series of concepts 5, 6, 7, 8 that qualify both “a” and “b” differently; therefore, the meaning and philosophical weight of the statement “a is b” is more or less radically modified depending on the theoretical and semantic distance between sequences 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, 6, 7, 8.

This situation is the same also if the statement is presented in an essentially historiographical form, within which we distinguish two different possibilities.

1. Philosopher F says that “for K, a is b”; if “a is b” is not to be found in K’s works, F’s statement is false and/or mistaken; therefore, a theoretician cannot avoid the historical dimension, the exact reconstruction of the text and context he refers to; only from this unavoidable starting point can the theoretician’s “inevitable violence” be applied;

2. Even so, the fact is that regardless of “a is b” being stated by K or not, when it is quoted by F its weight and meaning immediately change, because it is placed in a different conceptual frame that modifies value of both “a” and “b”.

Let K be Kant and F be Fichte, and the example will become immediately clear.

Quoting another author has, in fact, its precise functions that should be investigated in each singular case. Merely as an introductive example, we could distinguish the two following situations:

1. Sometimes the quote has an essentially rhetorical value, supporting and/or reinforcing an argument to which it adds nothing substantial. It is a very widespread and somewhat legitimate use, that pays a tribute or points to a significant coincidence of views; but it should also be regarded with some suspicion, since it can use an auctoritas to cover analytical or argumentative weakness. In some traditions, such as Marxism up to a few decades ago, the sometimes-unaware carelessness in the use of quotes can be quite embarrassing.
2. In other cases, a quote is used to recall and deepen another philosopher’s argument, underlining its value (which is given by the new context). In this case, we are not talking of a tribute but of a common reflection and/or a discussion with a “distant” philosopher, whose method is adopted or criticized. Even a radical critique of the older text is actually directed towards giving value to something else, i.e. something stated by the interpreter. Substantially, we are not moving within the frame of the interpreted text/author, but within the frame of the philosopher-reader who is philosophizing by means of the reading and discussion of a text.

There is, although, a “historical” version of this way of operating, that has been described by O’Brien. He wonders whether a scholar is allowed to qualify a certain statement in a certain way «even if Plato does not present it as being so... <certain authors> think to do Plato a favour by stringing together series of numbered propositions, culled from different places in the text, and then looking to find their logical coherence or lack of it. Such a procedure almost inevitably blurs the distinction between what might, or might not, have seemed cogent enough to Plato (or what Plato might, or might not, have wanted to present as persuasive at any one point in the course of his dialogue) and what the modern critic judges to be logical or illogical» (O’Brien 2003 p. 70).

This reflection can be broadened: even before introducing contemporary thought, statements change for the simple fact that they are decontextualized. For this reason, the widespread praxis of selecting one single page of Plato inquiring its philosophical sense regardless of what the author himself says in the preceding or following pages comes off as philosophically and historically wrong, and sometimes even ridiculous: if the philosophical question to be found is that of the philosopher-writer, the philosopher-reader would benefit more from inquiring how the author “somewhere” answered it – or not – instead of focusing on demonstrating how many fallacies and misinterpretations the author committed. The risk one faces is to be blatantly belied by other pages from the same author. As Plato teaches it is the whole that determines the meaning of the parts and not the other way around (we will come back to this later).
The problem of historian and theoretician

It should be acknowledged that the concept of “truth of a philosophical text” means two very different things to the historian and the theoretician. First of all, the historian holds as important the correct interpretation of the text as an object, whereas the theoretician is more interested in the truth that manifests itself within the text. This divergence leads to different behaviours. To be rather schematic, and willingly simplifying, we can say that, according to whether they are faced with a “true” or a “false” statement, theoreticians should always act in two different ways; historians, on the contrary, do not need to have two different reactions, because they always focus on giving a correct, adequately documented interpretation of the argument, that will therefore appear in its true or false nature (which is not philosophically irrelevant).

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4 I agree on this with Garin 1959, p. 127: to do history of philosophy, or to do philosophy by means of a historical confrontation with ancient thinkers, «does not at all mean simply establishing texts or gathering data: it means fidelity and constant respect towards every concrete individualization and every real situation within the whole of the historiographical act».
that were later separated or 3. extra-theoretical reasons. It is clear indeed that each answer implies a different meaning of the text. Therefore, theoretical tools are at work also in the reconstruction of the argument (in our example: the logical system at the author’s disposal and our assessment based on more recent innovations; theoretic distinction between concepts the author did not distinguish; simultaneous presence of theoretical reflections and pragmatic or environment-derived conditioning). If one of these elements is missing in the interpretation, the reading is incomplete from a historical point of view.

What we are saying will appear obvious once we approach it from another direction: if a historian wants to interpret the text in its objectivity the text should be reconstructed as according to its intrinsic nature, as poetry if it is poetry, as philosophy if it is philosophy. If a “philosophical” text does not exhibit philosophical contents, rather appearing as an “anonymous and neutral” text, then it has not been reconstructed as that object that it was and that it was meant to be. So, a “historical” reading of a philosophical text, exactly because it is a specific and correct reading, cannot avoid “philosophizing” and trying to put a theoretical system at work, while keeping in mind all the “historical” problems that can occur – if nothing else because of the diverging epochal and conceptual presuppositions that separate the author of the text from the contemporary reader.

So the distinction between historian and theoretician should be held as an indication of method that points towards the two poles between which the whole range of philosophical readings take place – because there is no philosophical interpretation that avoids the historical dimension (no one can legitimately read Plato as though he were our contem-

5 “Presuppositions” holds here a double meaning: 1. those elements that constitute an epoch’s or culture’s conceptual system, and that can be partially made clear and transcended but not modified; 2. that more or less conscious choice of the elements starting from which our interpretation of phenomena starts. Although “presuppositions 2”, the interpreter’s guiding hypothesis, is obviously influenced by “presuppositions 1”, we will mostly refer to “presuppositions 2” when dealing with method while we will often address “presuppositions 1” when explaining our general views on hermeneutics, since it offers evidence of the impossibility of full transparency of the text. We could have used a different terminology – such as “paradigm” or “reading hypothesis”, but this would have led to deeper confusion.
porary), nor a historical reading can reconstruct a philosophical argument without conceptualizing and questioning about the truth of the argument.

Some differences between the two hermeneutics

What we have tried to say is that there is a continuous intertwining between historical and theoretical – which should not make us forget there are some strong differences. A theoretical reading of a text needs no particular external legitimations, because it constitutes a moment of the philosophizing activity of someone who cannot at this point be reductively depicted as being only an interpreter. The historical one, instead, only finds legitimation outside itself, in its capability of disclosing the sense of the text and bringing us as close as possible to what the author meant.

On the level of method, as well, we have substantial differences. For example, a historian has to individuate and respect the order of the text, because it’s the text that should be the one talking and it’s of paramount importance that we understand in what order it wanted to express its content. Philosophers do not have to obey this rule, because what looks like a quote is actually a step in their own argument and should therefore fit in the correct order within the argument – not within the original text: every choice is justified within the new text, not within the old one.

Also on the level of “truth of the argument” we have two different meanings of “truth”: 1. the truth the text wants to express (we have to read Plato in the light of his own views on science, separating what “in his eyes” is absolutely true from what is only mostly true, or just highly

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6 Following different paths, analogous conclusions are reached in Piaia 2007 pp.16 – 17: it is necessary to «knowledge – on the basis of their different motives, methods and aims – the autonomy and equal dignity of two distinct disciplines, philosophical hermeneutics (as a seminal moment in theoretical research) and history of philosophy. It does not seem legitimate to speak of “correlated unity” between these different approaches to the past... at the risk of polluting historical analysis or downgrading it to hermeneutics’ “handmaid” ... This is true, at least, as long as the historian is moved by trying to reconstruct philosophical theories by contextualization... whereas the philosopher is drawn towards the past under the pressure of a contemporary problem». 

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likely or simply very convincing); 2. the truth it still holds in the interpreter’s time. These two are not necessarily alternative to one another, but they are very different, and they determine the philosophical fortune of a text. For an extreme example, think of the truth of the arguments in Plato’s *Timaeus*, when, for instance, he depicts the heavenly bodies as deities. This text has had an enormous impact on the following centuries, but nowadays it is difficult that someone who is not a historian of philosophy will find it to be interesting.

Philosophers have, although, another possibility: they can say that the argument is, in its nature, false, but he can at the same time reassess it as valuable by giving it a new context. For example, a philosopher could be interested in re-formulating Plato’s reflection on Ideas not on a metaphysical level but rather on a methodic-dialectical one, re-thinking Plato’s scientific paradigm.

First conclusion

We can close by drawing another distinction: everyone should do (1) an *explicative* reading, concerned with the “meaning” of the text, to which according to one’s interests one can add (2) an *assessment* reading aimed at the truth the text tried to have in its original context and/or (3) a *theoretical* reading such as one concerned with truth and/or argumentative validity within context of the reader’s knowledge and logics.

We could therefore propose three patterns:

1.1 Within *historical hermeneutics* the explicative reading is most important; the assessment reading accompanies it as a necessary complement, whereas the theoretical reading will be extremely limited;

1.2 Within *theoretical hermeneutics* the theoretical reading is clearly predominant; the assessment reading accompanies it as a necessary complement, whereas the explicative reading can be limited to what is strictly required to avoid mistakes or trivialities.

2.1 The *theoretician* has to always make a stand within his own expository structure, since he cannot positively absorb a proposition that he holds as false or soundly mistaken;

2.2 The *historian* has no problems of this sort.

3.1 The *theoretician* especially pays attention to truth-falsehood, or argumentative usefulness of the formulated *thesis*.
3.2 The *historian* especially pays attention to truth-falsehood of the proposed interpretation.

The difference between the two attitudes also manifests itself, obviously, on a “behavioural” level. While we can/must postulate that philosophers consider a philosophical text because of the interest it holds and as a moment of their own personal research, historians can work on a text that they consider of *very low theoretical interest* but that must be studied for different reasons, for example in order to complete a historical picture, to fill a gap in knowledge or to heed a somewhat “internal” challenge within the historical context (on the model of: “no one has yet managed to resolve the problem of…”). In any case, historians should avoid imposing their theoretical judgments on the interpretation of the text and pay maximum attention to the risk of unwillingly doing so.

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7 A historian’s first aim is not to judge, or even worse condemn, but to understand what the author did and why. If one begins with a negative judgement on a philosophical operation, considered useless or flawed or anyhow unacceptable, the risk is to constantly force one’s own thought on the author’s “logic” architecture.

8 Therefore, we can agree with what Berti says (1989, pp. 50–51) while criticizing, with balance and theoretical preoccupations, proposals by the Tübingen-Milan School. He does not radically disagree with what he calls, in accordance with Cassin, “appropiatiion strategies”, or «the attempt to use some aspects of ancient philosophies as corroborating contemporary philosophical positions» but he asks that some conditions be observed «that are not always respected. It does not seem to me, in particular, that it is correct to read ancient philosophers starting from a contemporary problem, applying our own conceptual patterns to their thought and destroying their unity in order to use the fragments in an extraneous context»; one should, instead, «start from the perspective of the philosopher that is being studied, trying to find unity in his thought and, when it is the case, separating within it what is born of the culture of his time and what is original, always keeping in mind the sense of each part – meaning its function in the general economy of a certain philosophy. To do this, it is necessary in the first place to perform a historical reading, capable of placing the philosopher in his own time, freeing him of interpretations that have been given in following periods and returning its original meaning to his thought». 
4. The problem of method

As we have seen, the problem of respecting the text’s objectivity cannot be denied even by the most radical theoretical approach. This applies *a fortiori*, then, *from the standpoint of historical hermeneutics.*

The impossibility of a pure reduplication of thought

As we said, Brandt moves from the conviction that method can be universal and completely de-subjectivized ad de-historicized: one simply has to show the formal rules that make objectivity possible, so that the method disappears at the same moment it makes its appearance. Brandt shows no doubt on the possibility of this total transparency and formality concerning not only its logical formulation, but also its application, the method in its actualization.

The point is, though, that it’s not clear how a specific interpreter can apply a method whatsoever irrespective of personal precondition, of objective constraints and of historical conditionings. And yet the German scholar holds that the interpreter’s critical activity, can and must follow the other author’s thought, following the same path followed in the author’s philosophical reflection (pp. 12–13). It is not, then, about (tentatively) going back to the genesis of a thought, because this would imply going outside the text and reaching an intention: rather, according to Brandt, a reader can *always* follow backwards all the passages of the text just the way the author placed them there. But this vision, even on a merely historical level, faces a number of problems.

Brandt suggests a path that has to be followed by a specific reader, that sets in motion complex cultural systems and historical conditionings. His (or her) universe of meanings and experiences, structured by language, conceptual system, culture and all other factors that form thought in their interactions, cannot remain external to the reading. In short, it is impossible to follow the same philosophical itinerary because the word “follow” sets a radical change: activating a mechanism of verification on a theoretical proposal implies a different conceptual operation than the one enacted in discovering and stating the proposal itself. The philosopher A, that thinks (1) trying to solve a problem he is faced with, it is different from the “interpreter philosopher” B that thinks both (2) trying
to understand how A entered and came out of that situation or (3) verifying, and perhaps criticizing, that very same path. The object of thought remains in all three cases substantially different, even when one succeeds in giving them formally identical appearances.

This situation reaches its apex when time passes, bringing innovations, or anyhow a deep modification, in philosophical structure: what could be said before a conceptual distinction cannot be thought once this achievement has been reached; lost innocence cannot be regained and what used to immediately make sense appears insufficient (when not senseless) afterwards. It is a situation that who studies ancient thought is constantly faced with, having to deal with distinctions earned later in the history of philosophy. A basic example will be Parmenides’ *logos*, which he describes as spherical: we cannot “understand” it if not by analogy, because it implies *identity* between material dimension, logical-hermeneutical principle and ontological First Principle: three levels we immediately conceive as separated. We can understand the sense of Parmenides’ operation, which then does not seem absurd from the stage of philosophical maturity he had reached, but we cannot follow his same path because we cannot think as united concepts that our presuppositions necessarily and immediately hold as distinct. So only in an “abstract” and/or analogical fashion we can follow the steps that ancient thinkers made linearly, and only with difficulty we can say what they were perfectly at ease in saying.

The alleged univocity of the text

The (alleged) absoluteness of the method implies, for Brandt, the assumption that it is possible to univocally determine or at least circumscribe the content of texts (p. XI). The ambiguity of this formula – to univocally determine or at least circumscribe – can be explained by keeping in mind that one of the targets of his criticism is interpretative anarchy: both expressions are effective against it because they both assert that rules exist. From a moderate and aware hermeneutical point of view, on the other hand, the two words appear to describe completely different perspectives. Within a circumscribed range of meanings, obtained by exclusion of what is impossible or unacceptable, a variety of legitimate interpretative hypotheses can (and will) be disclosed; among these, one can separate more or less effective, complete, or likely ones. Not only does this rule
out the possibility of a univocal meaning, it also poses methodological problems that are radically different from those concerning definition of such univocal meaning.

Univocity, indeed, implies 1. total transparency of the text, regardless of how the author wrote it;\(^9\) 2. perfect functionality of language, that will not veil the meaning, even in the case of translations from ancient languages to more contemporary ones; 3. total absence, or irrelevance, of specific preconditions or presuppositions. A hermeneutical attitude, on the contrary, essentially tries to single out those meanings that can be set out against such limitations and, as much as possible, force them towards a progressively more correct interpretation of the text.

Brandt’s argument then appears to be based on a false dichotomy, that ends up denying what he had in theory conceded: either the text expresses itself in all of its pure univocity or there are some presuppositions that superimpose the interpreter’s subjective point of view on the text. In this second case, no interpretation would be different from a “fixed idea” (p. 9), i.e. a completely subjective idea that resists any objective restraint: this is the reason for which Brandt needs to postulate a \textit{tabula rasa} of the conscience as a starting point for his method.

An excessive disapproval

Some of the reasons that push the German scholar towards this attitude are legitimate: the diffusion of hermeneutical relativism and the underestimation of the necessary degree of historical precision have paved the way to many forms of mistake and actual “betrayal” of the text; fragmentation of analysis has determined the loss of a holistic view; even the most mature forms of hermeneutics too often underestimated methodological issues, limiting themselves to recall the necessary honesty and attention of the interpreter. This way, the concepts of “objectivity” of the text and of the interpretation seem to be facing a crisis.

All of this does not, anyhow, justify the conclusion that all hermeneutical premises, no matter how carefully and critically they are formulated, make textual objectivity impossible. It is not possible, according to

\[\text{9 The exact opposite of what Plato thought of the act of writing, which he always regards as ambiguous and limited.}\]
Brandt, that presuppositions can also be a tool that discloses an array of contents “held inside” the text. But this has consequences on Brandt’s own methodological reflections.

Brandt cannot deny factual evidence of continuous progress in interpretation throughout time, so he has to justify it with the technique of external comparison; such comparison must, although, rule out any possible sign of “influences” from outside the text and should therefore limit itself to what is explicitly required by the text, because a relation that cannot be traced back to the text exists only in the mind of who conducts a subjective interpretation (p.93). Having thus exorcised the presence of the subject, a range of possibilities is disclosed: “semantic of concepts”, “debates” in which the text takes part, mentions of older statements by the author and so on, that explain the continuous progress of interpretation with the income of new data: it is possible to modify an interpretation on the basis of identities and differences between old and new data. It is clear that Brandt is trying to prevent external comparison from compromising the purity of the text. But even if we were to accept this methodological imposition (which can be useful, albeit not exhaustive) the result does not guarantee the absolute objectivity of the text for two reasons:

1) interpreter includes a factor (external to the analyzed text) and therefore enriches the interpretation, finding elements “in the text” that they would not have seen without that comparison; the objective reality

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10 Some of these proposals require careful assessment, because a rigid hermeneutical setup risk oversimplification of the interpretative proceeding. For example, Brandt, p. XXIV, says that the objective interpretation always starts from a mistake that must be removed; this apparently rules out the common and important experience of reading the text for the second time not in order to correct a mistake but, rather, to further understand what has been discovered. Each procedure, including the one imagined by Brandt, takes place in time and does not happen all of a sudden. For this reason, all interpreters know it is always possible that a very well-known text turns out to hold a meaning that had not been noticed up to that moment. Although we cannot know when or whether this will happen, we can never rule out the possibility for new discoveries. For this reason, and not for correcting a mistake, we keep going back to texts we hold as important. This (real and frequent) process can be “described” only if one does not start from a perfectly objective (and therefore unilateral) view of the meaning of the text, leaving space to a correct whole-part relation (on which we will soon say more).
of the text that thus emerges is always necessarily mediated by this comparison, that is something the subject decided to add.

2) if a comparison justified by the text modifies the interpretation, any other conscious or unconscious comparison acts in a similarly “immediate and indirect” way; an interpreter has read other things before and these “other things” are related to the text: the lector unius libri or the unspecialized reader does not see in a text what a learned or specialist reader sees.

The inability of fixing the method

It is significant that not even Brandt himself can manage to follow the method he theorized, since he unknowingly adds integrations and presuppositions.11 One particularly evident emerges just at the beginning of his discussion of the interpreter: according to Brandt (p. 5) Plato’s Meno was allegedly written for a public interested in the Academy, whereas the Philebus was directed at members of the Academy and introduced an abdication of the doctrine of Ideas. I do not wish to discuss the content of these statements, which I find to be unacceptable, but I do want to highlight how they express the author’s opinion and find no confirm whatsoever in the text itself; they are not, in fact, born of any text at all: they are just the product of a widespread narrative of the whole development of Plato’s thought (a development not certified by any text), an example of those “inventions” that, as Kuhn says, all groups of scientists come up with in order to facilitate their interpreting job. There is, this way, the risk that interpreter is conditioned by presuppositions that will be strengthened by its being unacknowledged. It is exactly in order to prevent this terrible outcome that interpreters need to be conscious of the paradigm they adopt. When they underestimate this issue, by denying it in the name of an “objective” method, they are paradoxically exposed to otherwise unexplainable phenomena of blindness.

11 Brandt’s historiographical stands are often questionable; they would deserve a chapter, but I chose not to discuss actual effects of his model in order to focus on criticizing the method itself.
A clarification on the actual situation

I think it is clear that the writer of this article acts under the intention of being a historian that wants to state the objectivity of text without falling for positivistic delusions. On the other hand, in order to avoid misunderstandings, it is necessary to say something that might appear trivial: nowadays, especially in the Anglosphere, there is no risk of this sort of excess; on the contrary, there is the risk of not separating theoretical and historical attitude, thus performing continuous violence on the text: this is the position of those who «even though they are following the purpose of a reconstruction of ancient philosophies, have acted with assessment criteria that come from their own theoretical orientations... The reconstruction thus obtained will be flawed because of a series of preliminary choices, completely alien to historical method, heavily interfering with the research ... one has to... acknowledge that, in general, the activity of speculative history of philosophy has too often resulted in a massive operation of colonization of the past, subjugation of ancient thinkers to opinions and views that were alien to them, indiscriminate “exploitation” of certain authors and doctrines and misunderstanding of others... an enquiry on ideas of the past has often given an excuse for smuggling one own’s ideas while under disguise of figures of prestige, in an ambiguous status between history and speculation» (Piaia 2007, p. 19).

5. The possible objectivity

It is precisely for this reason that it is necessary to turn back to the issue of an objective interpretation of the text that, at the same time, keeps in mind all the limits.

The issue of the reader

It should be self-evident that it is impossible to read a text according to how a writer from, say, 4th century BC would have wanted his public to read it: there are too many things we do not know and the way we think is too different.
First of all, in any text there are a lot of things that remain untold because they are perceived as superfluous: the multitude of facts and knowledge that constitute the common possession of a generation and an environment are not written. Therefore, in a specific environment, a sentence has a certain value, for example allusive, that is completely undetectable in the absence of indications.

For this reason, one is baffled by Brandt’s suggestion of relating to the reader of that time, who is a significant element in any hermeneutical reading but becomes here of paramount importance in the method of “objective” reading, because it should save the text from the deforming relation with the reader of today. But, even if one was willing to accord central importance to this figure, three insurmountable obstacles arise:

1) it is not possible to adequately reconstruct this reader, that is bound to a universe of expectations, thoughts, widespread cultural elements, that cannot be simply assumed, because they constitute problems that are often not only irresolvable but also unthinkable, since we ignore much (and understand very little) of any other context;

2) even if it was possible to reconstruct such figure, this should be done through other texts, thus giving course to an infinite process or a circular argument;

3) also in the case that a text provides information of who its intended readers are and what intentions it has, this (important) factor would not be enough since:

3.1) this part of the text would be the only premise to the reading of the whole text, including that part itself

3.2) it would not immediately prove useful on an interpretative level, since it expresses the attitude of the writer towards the problem of the “reader”; not only could his true intention be different from what he writes, but especially it could be different from what he is conscious of.

Therefore, it may be true that one should also deal with the problem of the reader, but certainly this problem raises more questions than the ones it answers: who decides to move on these grounds will face a never-ending series of preconditions and interferences, and elements that often are never to be found in any ancient text.
The issue of the author

Brandt, in his attempt to ensure the objectivity of the text, does his best to limit the author within the boundaries of textual elements, denying him (or her) an empirical-psychological subjectivity. Yet, even though it is true that our attention should be focused on the text, two things must be kept in mind:

1) inside the text there are traces of who the empirical subject was, because his stressing certain things, inferring others, paying more attention to others are all born of his personal history and sensibility;

2) the picture we are trying to reconstruct is also – and sometimes especially – tied to the entirety of the author’s oeuvre, as we are about to see in the next paragraph; this makes it necessary to gather information not only concerning the texts as such, but also the history of the author (a text may have different meanings if it was written in an early or late moment of his intellectual life, before or after meeting another philosopher’s thought and so on).

Brandt, instead, thinks that information concerning the author’s biography is always useless or even capable of misleading the interpreter’s judgements and the links he (or she) draws (p. 26). The author is a figure that cannot be ignored (p. 28) only in that he is the unifying element of everything the interpreter works on. The limits of this view can be showed starting from the very example Brandt uses to explain himself: an author, he says, can be accused of not knowing something by looking at what he wrote; if the text lacks “something”, one can legitimately infer the author ignored that thing. To this we can easily move the following objection: if other sources tell us that he had knowledge of that “something” when he wrote, the interpretation cannot obviously ignore this information. Furthermore, to fully accept this argument we should assume that each and every time the author writes he feels the urge to reveal all aspects of his thought, including the ones he might regard as trivial because abundantly covered in plenty of other writings (that might be lost to us).

Anonymous texts are particularly interesting in this regard, because one starts from the text and tries to infer the context and even the author – which shows how deep one can dig into a text. In summary: the issue of the author has many nuances that cannot be ignored.
A short excursus on Plato

What we have said until now will be made clear by this short excursus on Plato, that Brandt describes as an example of an author who completely excludes himself from his texts (p. 32). This already faces us with the impossibility of adhering to the “objective” method, because Brandt shifts his focus from the text towards the author’s intention, an intention that is not “written” anywhere but, rather, “inferred” from the text. In the choice that Brandt (mistakenly, in my opinion) ascribes to Plato one can read the choice of the empirical subject, Socrates’ disciple, that is the origin of the text and writes it with intentions that determine its nature. So according to what we just said, if we want to understand the text we should understand such intentions.

Moreover, the problem is dealt with moving from a contemporary sensitivity that looks for the subjective presence of an author that expresses his thought in a “first person” form. Thus, one misses the central element of a dramaturgical structure deliberately designed to activate an autonomous cognitive procedure in the reader. This implies a superabundant presence of the author that heavily influences the reader with his choices (starting with characters, frames and scenes).

Obviously, one should be cautious about stating an author’s intention, paying great attention to what can be demonstrated and giving no space to those (easy) integrations that are often to be found in historiographical readings. It is therefore correct to stress that it is wrong to move from the sphere of biography to that of textually verifiable thought. But this does not justify turning this operation upside down, thus ruling out all mentions of the empirical subject.12

12 Here too there is the risk to loosen critical attention: for example, in assessing “indirect sources” Brandt (p. 53) and many others put on the same level testimonies about Plato coming from Aristotle, that was his contemporary and disciple, and Plotinus, who lived in Alexandria and Rome more than 600 years later.
The necessary rigorousness on the topic of presuppositions

If acknowledging and paying attention to one's own's presuppositions is of paramount importance, this operation is only possible by means of a progressively more detailed comprehension of the text, which in turn can only be understood in relation to the presuppositions themselves. This succession of steps, difficult to explain and to perform correctly, implies a never-ending process of approaching the truth, constantly working on the text while knowing that it is impossible to definitely grasp the object, and at the same time never giving up the will to earn a higher level of comprehension, as a tool to purify, as much we can, our method: within one unitary process we need to both correct the paradigm we apply and get to know the text more in depth and more completely.

If one of these conditions is not satisfied, the hermeneutical operation will not be totally correct: we will only have the explanation of a thesis that was never modified by the interpretation. This raises the question of whether we have actually allowed the text to speak to us. What have we actually discovered, if the paradigm remains unaltered? We must acknowledge that in the end we only know what we already knew at the beginning. This “illustrative” procedure (that has, as such, its own dignity and space of legitimacy) can occur regardless of the paradigm being declared or not, but usually manifests itself in this latter case, because in this situation the scholar’s self-control is most required.

The point is that one should have a “critical” attitude towards presuppositions and their purpose: not in order to deny them, but to manage them correctly while recognizing them as inevitable. Indeed, whatever attitude the interpreter chooses, this “choice” always makes itself evident. Let’s take, for example, our relation to ancient authors. Exactly because the distance is evident and it should be clear that it is impossible to precisely and faithfully follow their steps, Brandt has to stress and exploit what is common between them and us: he not care that this common world is only a projection of our present culture and historical interests; the interpretative praxis moves from the assumption that its objects are always identical and are never merely projections (p. XXV).

Once again, I am not interested in the specific theme of this statement – therefore exploring what is meant by such “identity of the objects”. The point is that, even if we accepted this suggestion, we would still have
to admit it is the *choice of one specific premise* among three possible ones:

1) the one (Brandt) that maintains that objects remain identical to themselves;

2) the one that sees objects as radically different from time to time, according to epochal discontinuities;

3) the one that states that in this relation there is a thick intertwining of similar and dissimilar elements, that requires moving very carefully towards assessing each data in its specificity, avoiding “general, well-rounded” solutions.

It is enough to say, at the present moment, that we are talking about a *choice* that will generate a reading method with consequences on the following interpretation. This is not pure subjectivism, because the validity of one’s choice needs to be tested.

As for the content of this choice, I think one should always keep in mind how Kuhn 1977, pp. X-XII, tells the story of the beginning of his theoretical investigation. As a very young Physics student at Harvard, he approached Aristotle in 1947 while studying the epoch-changing turn from Aristotelianism to Newton’s physics. He was shocked to discover that Aristotle was a sharp and respectful observer of reality in the study of biology and politics, but seemed to lack of these qualities completely when it came to the study of motion. Aristotle was certainly wrong, yet it seemed impossible to Kuhn that he might have made such crass mistakes. Finally, «one memorable (and very hot) summer day those perplexities suddenly vanished. I all at once perceived the connected rudiments of an alternate way of reading the texts with which I had been struggling». Kuhn discovered that it is precisely by reflecting on those “apparently absurd” passages, i.e. by asking oneself how a great thinker could have written them, that it is possible to grasp the peculiarity of Aristotle’s vision, which is to say bring out the underlying motivations that led the philosopher to reason in a way that seems quite incomprehensible to us.

Finally, once one gives up seeing each and every “paradigm” as a statement of subjectivism, it becomes possible (and necessary) to highlight the procedure by which one can use certain keys to interpretation that make different meanings of the text available to the reader. But the first step should be to focus on the presence of both elements, presuppositions and objectivity, keeping them separated during the critical analysis, and con-
stantly and correctly (as much as the problems allow it) moving from the former to the latter and back again.

To defend textual objectivity from relativism it is necessary to think about the elements that structure our reading: 1) the chronological dimension according to which a thought inevitably belongs to a certain epoch, 2) a rigorous method of textual enquiry, 3) the choice to adhere to a theoretical paradigm that defines the background against which the object (period, school, thinker) is set, 4) the single interpreter’s own suggestions on the matter.

As for the paradigm, it is necessary to remember that 1) it is a choice, 2) it is an interpretative key, 3) its method should be activated in a way that also allows to verify 3.1) acceptability and 3.2) usefulness of such “postulate”; 4) this is necessary because some perspectives “hide” the text while others clarify it and only a careful assessment of the results allows assessment of the paradigms; 5) furthermore, since no perspective is absolute, one needs to pay particular attention to those elements that the adopted view tends to obscure (with all the problems that such effort can meet).

One last note: paradigms are mutually exclusive, and such is their adoption, but only in the sense that it is not possible to use them at the same time, else one will mix different logics. It is possible, although, to use different paradigms in different situations, choosing rational criteria for adequacy of one or the other. A playful example can be the one that follows: a loving couple of astronomers will describe the movement of the Earth around the Sun in a strictly Copernican language, but they will talk about a romantic sunset in our common, Ptolemaic way. Which is correct, since it is more effective.

6. A hypothesis on method

We will now examine something more technical and more empirical, starting from the sketch we drew up to this moment.

The first important issue is the order in which we proceed, given that choosing the right starting point in an operation including progress and circular verification is of paramount importance. If one starts, for example, by ignoring any ordered sequence and thus takes on text, context and presuppositions all together, since they are all intertwined and some-
the synergy between context and presuppositions, amplified by literature, easily acts as an (often undetected) distortion that has a negative influence on the reading process. A different way of proceeding could perhaps provide some “defence” against a number of possible mistakes.

The first moment consists in isolating and considering carefully presuppositions: what one thinks, what one knows (both about text and context), the elements one uses, the solutions one is looking for, the hypotheses one has. The point is to admit (to oneself, in the first place) this structure, so that it is clearly laid out and it can be constantly examined in order to find mistakes and to question its illuminating and/or misleading power.

The second defining moment is analysis of the text, with all available tools. This is where the paradigm should display its power to explain what would otherwise go unexplored. For this reason, like classic authors taught us, we first of all have to look for aporias and paradoxes that the text faces us with. The goal is to show, much as Aristotle nearly always does, that the solution one offers is the best, more complete, more resistant etc.

The third thing we ought to do is to verify the result in order to assess the efficiency of the adopted reading hypothesis and analysis technique. This obviously requires more than one passage, according to the hermeneutical circle: a continuous process of purification of the interpretation and discovery of the meaning or meanings of the text.

To sum up the advantages offered by this method:

1. There is a verification operated on the text, that has to be conducted with technically adequate tools, but without the illusion of an impossible transparency;

13 Obviously, this effort will be conducted on two levels in accordance with the two meanings of “presupposition”: the reading hypothesis or interpretative “paradigm” we choose can be well determined, whereas the “epochal” dimension in which we find ourselves remains largely undetected and cannot be transcended.

14 This is a radical problem: «there cannot be a concept of philosophy elaborated by the historian and held as an absolutely adequate parameter, but one that changes through the epochs and has to be detected from time to time» (Piaia 2007 p. 21).
2. Our critical attention must be two-sided, since it also needs to give mind to our presuppositions; we need to assess whether or not an interpretative paradigm works, meaning that we have to assess

2.1 risks and advantages of the adopted interpretative praxis;

2.2 the effects of our presuppositions on the specific case and

2.3 whether or not the presuppositions themselves were modified, which is important because if a research (a thorough, complex and well-articulated one, not a limited and very partial one) has not modified the paradigm or the interpretative frame, we must conclude we are facing either

2.3.1 an exceptional case of perfect confirm of our expectations,

or

2.3.2 a simple operation of adjustment of the text to our presuppositions.

An important thing to keep in mind: if the fundamental question addressed to the text is «what do you say?», “weird” answers, leaps, problems are the ground for verification: more the emerging sense of the text is complete, coherent, articulated, more the proposed paradigm turns out to be "verified" at least in its usefulness. For example, let's consider three logical and legitimate interpretations, radically diverging from each other, with a clear relation to text and that can be considered both to be the cause and the effect of a certain reading of single dialogues:

1. Plato expresses his opinions through Socrates or the dialogue’s wise figure;

2. Plato expresses his opinion through the question-and-answer game internal to the dialogue;

3. Plato, by means of narrative devices, addresses the reader with an array of problems/solutions in order to push him towards an active practice of philosophy.

A scholar should verify the effects of these three readings, to see which one better discloses a coherent meaning of each dialogue and of all dialogues as a whole. This is the element of our work that appears to be lacking nowadays: verification is too rare a procedure within the humanities.\textsuperscript{15} Hermeneutics are often content to make “research” coincide with

\textsuperscript{15} And yet it should always be done. In 2013 a young Economics student, Thomas Herndon, has confuted (opinion of Nobel in Economic Sciences laureate Paul

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“originality” rather than “objectivity”, and the historian appears to enjoy the freedom of a thinker or a poet.

I believe we should, instead, adopt some technical priorities. Two themes seem central to me in this regard, that of relation with the whole and that of relation with critical literature.

The whole and the part

What we consider to be the whole almost always appears as given by presuppositions, but exactly for this reason the problem requires to be closely considered. The whole can be a historical period, a philosophical school, the thought of an author, a work, a section of a work. This means it is possible (as always) to identify a variable set of wholes and parts, since (almost always) a whole is a part of a greater whole and is, in turn, composed of parts. The choice of which whole to focus on is not without consequences and should always be justified and kept under control, since it could turn out to be misleading: a part of a work can be a whole, but not any part can be considered as such, because certain pages hold no meaning when considered on their own. Therefore, the choice cannot be “free”, given that there are (there could be) two wholes: the reader’s and the author’s. This distinction must be kept in mind because the decisive whole, on a historical level, is the author’s and not our own.

There is also the problem of how to distinguish, without keeping them separate, the analysis of the part as part of a whole from the analysis of the part as a whole in itself, an “autonomous” system. Each of these

Krugman) one of the most quoted studies in the last few years while writing his PhD thesis. This study was an article by prestigious Harvard professors Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff, establishing a “scientific” correlation between exceeding a 90% foreign debt to GDP ratio and difficulties in economic growth. This study had already been criticized by great New Keynesian exponents such as Krugman and Stiglitz, but the discussion was only theoretical. The young student did something different: he did scientific verification. He verified all passages and found a series of mistakes (including a mathematical one due to bad alignment of numbers on Excel), that ruled this “scientific demonstration” out of the list of tools available to the greatest international Economics organizations. All this within a science that feels very at ease in using mathematical tools.
readings has its own logic, so one cannot simply apply them together assuming (and forcing on the text) the idea that these readings are one and the same – which is sometimes the case, but not always. To force on each platonic dialogue an interpretation derived from the set of all dialogues is just as misleading as it is to assume that the whole picture will appear out of the simple addition of partial interpretations. There is no reason for the meaning of single parts, each considered as holding an autonomous sense, to coincide with the meaning of the whole; and even where there is such a coincidence, one cannot aprioristically exclude that some works, given their particular nature (posthumous or unfinished publications, writings meant to be kept secret etc.) or a deliberate choice of the author, can represent a variant, something that would like to stand out of the crowd, offering resistance to the application of this pattern.

Anyway, if there is such a thing as a logic of the whole, it is here that the ultimate sense of the parts is determined, and not the opposite. A whole dominates the parts with its logic, but it is the whole that it is only because of parts being functional to it. Therefore, this pattern appears to be appealing, on an operational level,\(^\text{16}\) because it forces some questions on us about the peculiar situation we are faced with both in a holistic and an analytic perspective.\(^\text{17}\)

When we are dealing with a single, complete and autonomous work, the matter is not particularly complex. The starting point is to assume that the text is complete, but this assumption must be carefully evaluated by means of 1) corroborations or falsifications provided by the text or 2) a conceptual architecture that involves the entire work. A whole is, in fact, not a mere set, but rather a meaningful structure that “qualifies” and “connotes”, as such, the parts of which it is composed.

When looking for this architectural structure one must always keep in mind that it is possible for single connections and articulations to prove

\(^\text{16}\) This method is not challenged by discovery of internal contradictions in the text (as Brandt states, instead, p. 83) because these appear as contradictions exactly because they are placed within that interpretative frame. They represent a success for the interpretation of the reader, who found a mistake in the author’s claim to truth.

\(^\text{17}\) Briefly, imagining an extreme example: reading of a anonymous book x is (more or less radically) modified by discovery of it belonging to author B, of whom it represents a somewhat anomalous product that cannot be related to other works of B. This forces us to re-think author B as a whole.
“not functioning”: in this case the whole emerges as something merely hypothetical, something the author attempted and failed to realize. The architectural dimension, however, remains like the ruins of a church whose ambitious structural design was unable to sustain the weight of the dome: the church collapsed on itself, but its architectural structure and its style remain legible.

But the structure of a text is not a univocal dimension, because it has two aspects: compositional and rational. The first is mainly formal, as it aims to single out parts of the work and connections among them; the rational one is more substantial, aimed at exposing the argumentative structure on which the whole work is based on. Since these two can be described in different ways, we should keep in mind that a conclusive reconstruction of the theoretical frame must be able to mediate between them.\(^\text{18}\)

Context and literature

It is clearly fundamental to engage in comparison with critical literature. But the proliferation of contributions on each single topic, often the result of a merely academic logic, alongside the crisis of the “objectivity of text” has made this field increasingly more autonomous thus leading to two “dangerous” outcomes: there are works that 1) only analyze the literature, keeping a very feeble connection with the primary source; 2) limit their analysis to the text, while avoiding all mentions of the literature and enacting an explicitly partial and almost subjective reflection (unless

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\(^\text{18}\) For example – although the nature of the work, which is not an actual book but a collection of lectures, makes it difficult to read adequately – if we take Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* we will clearly see that in the architecture of the book the issue of theology is absolutely marginal, given that the author only deals with it in less than half of book XII; at the same time, the architecture itself reveals that without this issue, not casually present at the end of the book, the whole Aristotelian system would implode on the subject of foundation of movement as passage from potentiality to actuality that would remain unexplained, with devastating effects also on his physics. From this “contrast” we can deduce a series of reflections on the nature of Aristotle’s interests, on the weight of ontology of the physical world in his system, on the (residual?) role of platonic theology and so on. All of these things have to be subsequently verified against a new reading of the *Metaphysics* and other Aristotelian books.
they full under the category of works that silently appropriate someone else’s interpretation).

To keep far from both extremes, the centrality of text must be reaffirmed in order to confirm the absolute subordination of critical literature, that must nonetheless be carefully examined in order to consent:

1) an investigation of the text that embodies (honestly acknowledging intellectual paternity) all that has been highlighted by others;

2) a verification of the explicative power of diverging paradigms.

In this regard, a high profile and relevant historical work (i.e. of wide scope and dealing with important issues) should give proper space to a series of cross references that, starting from and always coming back to the text itself, allow to build an adequate interpretative map. But the discussion should always be focused on the text and never (or almost never) become an autonomous treatise on the interpretative debate. The historian needs critical literature only as a vehicle towards the text and as a tool to verify his own interpretation, by means of comparison with and discussion of different positions. What often happens, instead, is very different: one only analyzes the discussion (and perhaps chooses where to stand) and subsequently verifies whether the text supports one position or another.

Overestimation of the literature holds well known consequences. The most trivial is fuelling already lengthy and articulated discussions that end up forgetting the textual problem from which they aroused. The most frequent is the diffusion of a history of historiography, that shifts the focus from philosophical texts to critical studies. This leads to the point where some scholars seem to think their only option is to list diverging interpretations without even taking a stand.

I think it is right to highlight some consequences of all this on the procedural level. First of all, I think that as a general principle it is not right to begin with the critical debate; one should always and only start from the text, because only this allows to verify whether the current debate on the matter is interesting or it convoluted around self-referential problems or, even, it came to a dead end because it took an erroneous line. Indeed, a simple reflection on phases (if one does not want to say trends) in the interpretation of ancient philosophers such as Plato could show how many times this trivial situation occurred.

Only after interiorizing an explicative and expositive hypothesis for the text one can engage with the literature, since it is at this point possible to
enquire whether the text justifies or not that particular mode of formulating the problem – even before evaluating the proposed solution. Without this compass, it is easy to be the victim of a disruptive excess of interpretations, that often are kept alive by reciprocal support (whether in the form of conflict or convergence). The great strength of prevailing opinions is not only the effect of brutally academic logic, but also of a very obvious psychological situation: those who really do research experience moments of true “anguish” when faced with a text they “do not understand”; a shared view often represents a lifeline, a lifeline, and therefore holds great fascination; which is the equal and the opposite of the fascination of being original at any cost.

This has nothing to do with being not interested in the literature, which is luckily a rare problem in the field of Ancient Philosophy studies; what we are here saying is merely that critical literature, since it is text-oriented, should only be used in well-aimed and useful ways for a reflection on an issue; this usefulness should obviously be proved in opere operato and not merely assumed to be the principle that orients one’s study.

In the end, it is the whole that can save us. Any statement, evaluation or argument can be subject to many different hermeneutics, not always compatible with each other: it is within the evaluation that the statement can be read in one way or the other; it is within the sentence that the evaluation is balanced; it is within the empirical situation – be it written text or oral communication – that the sentence gains its meaning. This is always true. In our studies we are rarely faced with absolutely implausible or rash statements; this does not make them all acceptable, because one’s reading of some philosophical pages should be able to endure comparison with other pages from the same text and, in the absence of adequate reasons to think otherwise, ultimately with the whole thought of the author.

Ancient Philosophy

At last, we would provide a quick mention of the peculiarities of applying this method to ancient philosophy. The first thing one must accept is that we move among ruins, knowing that too much has been lost and it is therefore methodologically wrong to fill in the huge blanks with the product of our own ingenuity. When it is strictly necessary to complete
what we are missing, it is necessary that we highlight our intervention so that it cannot be confused with the original. As I have often stated in my analytical works, when one does not proceed this way the integration easily becomes a strong element of the way the thought of the ancient philosopher is presented: which it never should be.

As for the technique, Brisson (2002, p. 87.) well synthesized it by explaining Cherniss’ method: «a) read the texts in ancient Greek and try to translate them; b) place these texts in their proper context and connect them to all other related texts from the considered author; c) never consider a text or an author in isolation, but rather place them in their theoretical and historical background; d) at last, study the literature on the subject in order to avoid bias».19

To these points one should add that it is important to avoid “a certain reductionism”, consisting in the search for one single resolutive element. What emerges, for example, in Plato or Aristotle is the multiplicity of approaches the author proposes to engage a reality of which he accepts the complexity.20 From this point of view, reductionism is a hermeneutical catastrophe, leading towards two positions: either a text is bypassed, or else it is used to prove there has been an evolution from incompatible positions. On the contrary, those steps not conform to the reductionist criteria should be used for more complex reconstructions.

Reductionism also has a “quantitative” version. Sometimes, on the basis of a single element, one claims that an assumption can be considered as proved. Proof should be exhibited, instead, on the basis of a critical mass of elements and an overall reading that makes one’s hermeneutical proposal (highly) plausible. At the same time, a good interpretation should have a high degree of homogeneity and cannot be an inconsistent and fragmentary collection of a thousand different inputs: a thousand different inputs can indeed be present, but organized (that is, forced) in a neat structure.

19 Therefore, the problem is not to suspend judgment but rather to remember there is always another interpretation and that, therefore, the strength of one’s hypothesis must emerge by comparing results.

20 On this issue see Cattanei-Fermani-Migliori 2016 (cf. the title of the contributions on p. 114 n. 17); cf. in this volume: A Hermeneutic Paradigm for the History of Ancient Philosophy: the Multifocal Approach, pp. 110-130.
In short, what I want to claim in this article is, on the one hand, the need for a rigorous method, on the other hand a critical reception of paradigms, that leads to their critical verification, in order to carefully verify them and prevent presuppositions from becoming a matter of fact and thus operating undetected. The goal is to detect and solve as many problems as possible, which also represents the real tool to control one’s work. To be absolutely schematic, the point is to have a scientific attitude as well described by Kuhn’s (1969) image: normal science as puzzle solving.

This attitude is necessary within hermeneutics, because each part of a philosophical text is open to a wide array of possible interpretations, drastically reduced by context (the whole of the text, the chronological position, the author’s specificities and so on). To solve the puzzle – the whole – is to read single parts and single works and single authors in a way that composes a frame that makes sense and gives adequate explanation and proper place to, at least, the vast majority of pieces.

A never-ending work is thus outlined for the researcher, who is reminded of objective limitations to all interpretation: one begins with presuppositions, proceeding to identify problems and solutions that modify the paradigm and disclose a new and interesting path to explore the text.

Without this attitude one risks Gadamer’s delusion: to think it obvious that the preliminary project is continuously corrected. This is, sadly, not true. It is not correct, on a methodical level, to leave it to a scholar’s intellectual honesty. Popper (1969, pp. 113–114) rightly stated that it is wrong to assume that objectivity of science depends on objectivity of the scientist. What can be called scientific objectivity only resides in the critical tradition. In other words, scientific objectivity is not the matter of single scientists, but it is a collective matter of their reciprocal criticism, the division of work between scientists, their cooperation and their contrasts.
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