

Maurizio Migliori

Lifelong Studies in Love With Plato



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Coverpicture: Katsushika Hokusai, The Great Wave off Kanagawa

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Preface

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 text¹ 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).

3 Cf. Migliori 2013 pp. 392–402.

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 shameful... But I think that it is wrong to speak and write in a non beautiful 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 middle 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 addressed 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 famous 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 διδασκῆς, 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,⁵ 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

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;⁶ 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"⁷ (344C1-D2).

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 literary 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).⁸

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 *συμκρὰ ἐνδειξις* and each disciple, instead of taking note of it, conquers it (341E). They are references to the *ποιητικὸν πρᾶγμα* of the Academy, as well as to the dialogues often governed by various proceeding through allusions».