

PLATO'S 7th LETTER

Philosophical practice and theory

Tradition has handed down several letters said to be by Plato although modern scholars are unable to agree as to which, if any, are genuinely written by him. The seventh letter is considered to be the most likely to be genuine, and certainly the concepts within it are closest to those found in Plato's dialogues: in the ancient world the most insightful Platonists were not only convinced of its provenance, but also of the historical accuracy of its details and the wisdom of its insights. The letter begins with an explanation of why Plato went to Syracuse at the request of Dion who was hoping that Plato would assist the attempt to bring about the truly philosophic transformation of Dionysus his nephew and the future ruler of the Greek colony of Sicily. Later the letter moves on to consider some important aspects of philosophy as the art of self-transformation.

"PLATO to the Kindred and Associates of DION - Prosperity.

You write to me, that it is requisite to think that your sentiments about politics are the same as those of Dion; and that I should be exhorted to join with you as much as possible, both in word and deed. Indeed, if you have the same opinion and desire with him, I shall certainly join with you; but if you have not, I shall think more than once about it. But his thoughts and desire were not such as you conjecture. I, however, as knowing them, can clearly relate what they were.

When I first came to Syracuse, I was nearly forty years old, and the age of Dion was then the same as that of Hipparinus is at present. He has likewise always persevered in the opinion which he then entertained; I mean, that the Syracusians ought to be free, and that they should be governed by the best laws. So that it is by no means wonderful, if some god has caused Dion to accord with him in opinion respecting a polity.¹ But the manner in which this was effected, is a thing which deserves to be heard both by young and old."

323e-324b.

(Plato then relates his own experience, from the initial desire to engage in politics to his disappointment).

"On perceiving these things therefore, together with the men who had the management of political affairs, and their laws and manners, the more I considered them as I advanced in years, by so much the more difficult did the right administration of political concerns appear to me: *for this cannot be accomplished without friends and faithful associates.* But at that time, it was not easy to find these: for our city was then no longer governed according to our fathers' manners and pursuits." "At last I perceived that all the cities existing at present were badly governed. For as to what relates to laws, they are nearly in an incurable state, without the assistance of some wonderful apparatus in conjunction with

¹ Polity = a constitution, together with all the apparatus that supports it.

fortune. I am therefore compelled to say, praising *genuine philosophy*, that through this we are enabled to perceive such political concerns as are just, and all the affairs of private individuals. *Hence, the human race will not be liberated from evils, till either the genus of those that philosophize with rectitude and truth obtains the government of political affairs, or those that govern in cities, from a certain divine allotment, truly philosophize.* With this conception, I first came to Italy and Sicily. But on my arriving thither, I was by no means pleased with the life which is called happy; a life full of the Italian and Syracusan tables, and which consists in repletion twice a day, in never lying alone by night, and such other particulars as follow a life of this kind: for from these manners, no man under the heavens would ever become wise, if he is nourished in them from his youth, however admirable his natural disposition may be: nor will such a one ever become temperate. And the same thing may be said respecting the other virtues." **325c-326d.**

(Plato finally sees a favourable moment to put philosophy into social and political action).

"However, I affirm that the beginning of all the transactions was my journey to Sicily. For I associated with Dion who was then a young man; and in my discourse, explained to him, and advised him to do, such things as appeared to me to be best for mankind; not knowing that certain persons were then secretly contriving a dissolution of the tyranny. For Dion being very docile,² both with respect to other things, and what was then said by me, he so acutely apprehended, and readily embraced my doctrines, that he surpassed all the young men with whom I was ever acquainted. He was likewise determined to pass the remainder of his life in a manner superior to many of the Italians and Sicilians, *viz.* in pursuing virtue, rather than pleasure and luxury. Hence he was hated by those, who lived conformably to tyrannic institutes, even till the death of Dionysius.

After this he perceived that the very same conception, which he had framed through the assistance of right reason, did not subsist in him alone, but in certain other persons, though they were not numerous, among whom he thought was Dionysius the younger. He likewise hoped that if this were the case, both his own life, and that of the other Syracusians, would be transcendently more blessed. On this account he thought that I ought by all means to come with the utmost celerity to Syracuse, that I might assist them in their undertakings; remembering how easily, by my conversation, he was inflamed with the desire of leading the most beautiful and best life. If he could but enkindle this desire in Dionysius, as he was attempting to do, he was in hopes that a happy and true life, without slaughter and death, and the evils which exist at present, would flourish through every part of Syracuse." **327a-327d.**

"Hence, while I was considering and doubting whether I should go and comply with his request, or not, it at the same time occurred to me that I ought to go; and that if ever any one thought of attempting to give perfection to laws and a polity, now was the time to

² Taylor is using the word docile in its original sense, which is descriptive of one who is easily taught.

make the attempt. For I considered, that if I could only persuade one person, I should sufficiently produce every good. With this conception and this confidence, and not from the motives which some have thought, I left my home; feeling at the same time in myself the greatest shame lest I should ever appear to myself to be nothing more than a man of words, and should never voluntarily accomplish any thing in deeds. " **328c-328d.**

"He [Dionysius] behaved therefore to me with increasing kindness every day, and was delighted with my manners and habits. But he wished me to praise him more, and to consider him as my friend in a far greater degree than Dion: and this he strove to accomplish in a wonderful manner. However, he neglected the most beautiful means of effecting his purpose, if it could have been effected, I mean associating and becoming familiar with me, by hearing and learning discourses on philosophy. But this he was fearful of doing, lest, as was asserted by my calumniators, he should be impeded in his designs, and Dion should have the entire management of affairs. However, I endured every thing, persevering in the opinion which I entertained when I first came to Syracuse, and trying if by any possible means Dionysius could be brought to a desire of a philosophic life. But he rendered my endeavours ineffectual by his opposition. And such are the particulars of my first voyage to Sicily." **330a-330c.**

(Plato hesitated a lot before his second visit to Sicily because he had seen the limits of Dionysius regarding to philosophy and its application. His visit gave him the confirmation that one should never insist on imposing even the best advice to someone who does not listen and is unwilling to commit himself).

He says: "if those that consult me live according to an established mode which is pleasing to themselves, but not to me, I would not hate them, because I had admonished them in vain, nor yet flattering be subservient to them, and afford them those means of gratifying their desires, which, if I were to embrace, I should not wish to live. With the same conceptions respecting his country, a prudent man ought to live, exposing its errors, if it appears to him not to be well governed, when this can be done, without speaking in vain, or losing his life. But he should never by violence effect a change in the government of his country, when it cannot be brought to the best condition, without the expulsion and slaughter of the citizens, but in this case, leading a quiet life, he should pray for the good both of himself and the city." **331c-331d.**

(Plato and Dion kept on hoping to see the young Dionysius come closer to the ideal of a philosopher-king. The advice towards the same ideal are now given to Dion's friends who have, at the time of the letter, the upper hand in Sicily).

"I therefore and Dion advised Dionysius to procure himself friends from his associates, and such as were his equals in age, and who unanimously cultivated virtue, since, through the situation of his father's affairs, he neither cultivated learning, nor had proper associates. But we particularly advised him to accord with himself. For we asserted that he was in a wonderful manner deficient in this respect, not indeed in perspicuous terms

(for this was not safe), but in an obscure manner, contending in our discourse, that when this is the case, every man will become the saviour both of himself and those whom he governs; but that when he does not accord with himself, he will cause the very contrary of this to take place. If therefore, as we said, he was consistent with himself, and acquired prudence and temperance, and if afterwards he restored the desolated cities of Sicily, and bound them together with such laws and polities, that they might be friendly both to him and to each other, in resisting the incursions of the Barbarians, then he would not only double, but in reality multiply his paternal kingdom." **332c-333a**. "I give you likewise the same advice as before, and address you in the same words the third time, *viz.* that you should neither subject Sicily, nor, in my opinion, any other city, to despotic men, but to the laws; for this is neither better for the governors nor the governed, nor for their children, nor their children's children, but the experiment is perfectly pernicious. But little and illiberal souls delight to seize gain of this kind, understanding nothing of things just and good, human and divine, whether pertaining to the present time, or to futurity." **334c-334d**.

Plato reminds that philosophy is far from a superficial entertainment in the court of a tyrant: "it is requisite to show that philosophy is a thing of the greatest consequence, and that it is only to be obtained by great study and mighty labour. For he who hears that this is the case, if he is truly a lover of wisdom, and is adapted to and worthy of its acquisition, being a divine person, will think that he hears of an admirable way, that he ought immediately to betake himself to this path, and make it the great business of his life. After this, he will not cease exciting both himself, and the leader of this way, till he either obtains the consummation of his wishes, or receives a power by which he may be able to conduct himself without a guide.

Such a one, therefore, will so live, that all his actions may accord with these conceptions. But before all things he will be perpetually intent on philosophy, and will daily procure for himself such nutriment, as may especially render him docile, of a good memory, and able to reason; living soberly, and hating intoxication.

But those that are not lovers of wisdom in reality, but are coloured over with opinions, like those whose bodies are burnt by the sun, when they perceive what a multitude of disciplines, what mighty labour, and what temperate food are requisite, to the acquisition of philosophy, such as these, thinking that philosophy is a thing difficult and impossible for them to obtain, cannot be brought to make it the object of their pursuit. But some of these persuade themselves, that they have sufficiently heard the whole of philosophy, and that they require nothing further". **340b-341b**.

(Then Plato, having heard that the young Dionysius has unscrupulously written about important philosophical teachings he should have kept secret, warns about the limits of writing).

"Thus much however I shall say respecting all those who either have written, or shall write, affirming that they know those things which are the objects of my study, (whether they have heard them from me or from others, or whether they have discovered them themselves,) that they have not heard anything about these particulars conformable to my opinion: for I never have written, nor ever shall write, about them. For a thing of this kind cannot be expressed by words like other disciplines, but by long familiarity, and living in conjunction with the thing itself, a light as it were leaping from a fire will on a sudden be enkindled in the soul, and there itself nourish itself." **341c-341d.**

"But if it appeared to me that the particulars of which I am speaking could be sufficiently communicated to the multitude by writing or speech, what could we accomplish more beautiful in life than to impart a mighty benefit to mankind, and lead an intelligible nature into light, so as to be obvious to all men? I think, however, that an attempt of this kind would only be beneficial to a few, who from some small vestiges previously demonstrated are themselves able to discover these abstruse particulars. But with respect to the rest of mankind, some it will fill with a contempt by no means elegant, and others with a lofty and arrogant hope, that they should now learn certain excellent things. I intend, therefore, to speak further about these particulars: for thus perhaps I shall say something clearer respecting them than I have yet said. For there is a certain true discourse which is adverse to him, who dares to write about things of this kind, and which has often been delivered by me before, and as it seems must be delivered by me at present.

There are three things belonging to each of those particulars through which science is necessarily produced. But the fourth is science itself. And it is requisite to establish as the fifth that which is known and true. One of these is the name of a thing; the second its definition; the third the resemblance; the fourth science. Now take each of these, desiring to learn what we have lately asserted, and think as follows concerning them all. A circle is called something, whose name we have just expressed. After this follows its definition, composed from nouns and verbs. For that which everywhere is equally distant from the extremes to the middle, is the definition of that which we signify by the name of a round, and a circumference, and a circle. But the third is the circle which may be painted, or blotted out, which may be made by a wheel, or destroyed. None of which affections, the circle itself, which each of these respects, suffers, as being of a different nature. But the fourth is science and intellect, and true opinion about these. And the whole of this again must be established as one thing which neither subsists in voice, nor incorporeal figures, but is inherent in soul. It is therefore manifest, that this fourth is different from the nature itself of the circle, and again different from the three we have previously mentioned. But among the number of these, intellect, by its relation and similitude, proximately adheres to the fifth, while the rest are more remote from its nature."

"But the greatest thing of all, as I just before observed, is this, that since there are two things, essence and quality, when the soul seeks to know not the quality of a thing, but what it is, unless it first investigates each of these four, and sufficiently discusses them by a reasoning process and sensible inspection, and this continually through every thing which is asserted and shown, it will be filled, as I may say, with all possible ambiguity and obscurity.

In such things therefore, as through a depraved education we are not accustomed to investigate the truth, but are contented with an image exhibited to our view, we do not become ridiculous to each other, when being interrogated, we are able to discuss and argue about those four. But in such particulars as we are compelled to separate that fifth from other things, and evince its nature, he who wishes to subvert what we have evinced, vanquishes, and causes him who explains this fifth, either by speech, or writing, or answers, to appear to the multitude of his hearers entirely ignorant of the things about which he attempts either to write or speak; men sometimes being ignorant, that it is not the soul of the writer or speaker that is confuted, but the nature of each of the above-mentioned four particulars, when it is badly affected. But the procession through all these, and the transition to each upwards and downwards, scarcely at length produces the science of that which naturally subsists in an excellent condition, in the soul of one naturally well affected. But when any one is naturally ill affected, as is the case with the habit of soul possessed by the multitude, who are badly disposed, with respect to learning, and whose manners are depraved, not even Lynceus himself can enable such as these to see. But in one word, neither docility nor memory will confer on any one the power of perceiving things of this kind, who is not allied to them: for they are not inherent from the first in foreign habits. So that those who are not naturally adapted and allied to what is just, and other things that are beautiful, though they may be docile, and of a good memory with respect to other particulars; and again, those that are allied to the just and beautiful, but are indocile and of a bad memory, will never learn, as far as it is possible to learn, the truth pertaining to virtue and vice. For it is necessary to learn this, and at the same time the falsehood and truth of the whole of essence, with all possible exercise, and a great length of time, as I said in the beginning. But after agitating together the several names and reasons, and sensible perceptions of these things, confuting in a benevolent manner, and employing questions and answers without envy, then striving as much as is possible to human power, prudence and intellect about each of these will scarcely at length shine forth." **341d-344c.**

(After having left Sicily, Plato met with Dion at the Olympic games. Dion suggested to take vengeance for Dionysius' behaviour towards both of them).

"But I said, as to myself, since you have forced me after a manner, together with others, to become the companion and guest of Dionysius, and a partaker with him of sacred rites, he will doubtless think that I ought to conduct myself as an equitable medium between both parties, especially since, when I was accused by many of forming stratagems in conjunction with you against him and his tyranny, he did not put me to death, though he was not prevented from doing so by fear. To this I added, that my age rendered me unfit to engage in the concerns of war; and that I should act as a mediator between them, if at any time their friendship would require the assistance of a conciliator. But I informed them, that as long as they were averse to each other, they must call others to their assistance." **350c-350d.**

(Even Dion, who was temperate in general, fell into an error underestimating the evil force of his opponents. He was not convinced of the inefficiency of violence in order to achieve justice).

In the eighth letter Plato writes after Dion's death to his former associates and suggests to them that if Dion was still alive he would be offering them much the same advice that he himself recommends – to dismiss ambitions of seizing tyrannical power, and seek to establish "kingly law."³ He continues:

"Above all else, O ye Syracusans, accept such laws as do not appear to you likely to turn your minds covetously to money-making and wealth; but rather – since there are three objects, the soul, the body, and money besides, – accept such laws as cause the virtue of the soul to be held first in honour, that of the body second, subordinate to that of the soul, and the honour paid to money to come third and last, in subjection to both the body and the soul. The ordinance which effects this will be truly laid down by you as law, since it really makes those who obey it blessed; whereas the phrase which terms the rich "blessed" is not only a miserable one in itself . . . but also renders those who believe it equally miserable. That this exhortation of mine is true you will learn by actual experience if you make trial of what I am now saying concerning laws; for in all matters experience is held to be the truest test." **355a.**

³ The difference, as Plato sees it, between a king and a tyrant is that a king is subject to law, whereas a tyrant sets himself above the law and makes himself the dispenser of arbitrary power: "Those of you who are rushing after despotic power I exhort to change their course and to flee betimes from what is counted as "bliss" by men of insatiable cravings and empty heads, and to try to transform themselves into the semblance of a king, and to become subject to kingly laws, owing their possession of the highest honours to the voluntary goodwill of the citizens and to the laws." – 354c.