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978-1-009-50617-5 — Plato's Unwritten Doctrines
Carl Séan O'Brien
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1 What Are the Unwritten Doctrines?

1.1 Introduction

To assert that a philosopher and a literary artist like Plato, who left such a significant and extensive corpus of works behind, had unwritten doctrines – *agrapha dogmata* – (i.e. doctrines not discussed at length in his corpus) might initially seem like a strange claim. Even if one accepts that Plato did present an oral teaching strictly within the confines of the Academy, there is a further methodological problem: at this distance in time from Plato, how could one convincingly advance a case for such doctrines or reconstruct his oral teachings? Surely it would be self-contradictory to extract evidence for unwritten doctrines by examining Plato's writings.

This Element examines the interpretation of Plato presented by the Tübingen School, which, while largely 'unfashionable' in Anglo-American scholarship, has proven influential outside the university town from which it derives its name.[1] Whether or not we choose to accept the conclusions drawn by the Tübingen School, its approach brings into sharp focus a number of key issues. Are Plato's own dialogues exempt from his criticism of writing? What is Plato's characteristic doctrine? How do we explain those passages in the dialogues where Plato's Socrates hints that there is something more that he could reveal, but yet he explicitly chooses not to? How do we explain the attempts to systematise Plato among his original heirs, the Old Academy, which at first glance seem to display only a loose connection with the philosophy expounded in the dialogues? What does it mean to study Plato? Do we focus solely on the dialogues themselves or should we be open to considering the tradition surrounding him (as revealed in various testimonia)? How useful are these testimonia as a source for the views of Plato and his disciples? How were the dialogues originally used? Were they intended for a wider circulation among the general public or were they only employed for teaching within the confines of the Academy among Plato's inner circle? If they were widely published, then how do they relate to philosophical study within the Academy? The Tübingen School provides a coherent overarching solution to all of these questions, and by reflecting on these issues we can come to a deeper understanding of Plato.

1.2 What Are the Unwritten Doctrines?

Aristotle alerts us to Plato's ἄγραφα δόγματα ('unwritten doctrines', by which he means doctrines not treated explicitly in the dialogues) at *Physics* 209b11–209b16:

[1] Hösle 2019: 328 points out that this honour highlights the achievement of a small group of scholars.

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> On account of this Plato says in the *Timaeus* that matter and space are the same. For the participant and space are one and the same. It is certainly true that what he says there about the participant is different from what he says in what is called the 'Unwritten Doctrines'. Nevertheless, he declared place and space to be the same. For while everyone claims that place is something, only Plato attempted to say what it is.[2]

This passage is of particular interest since Aristotle explicitly claims an oral doctrine for Plato which differs from his views in the *Timaeus* (a late dialogue and therefore reflective of Plato's mature opinions).[3] How should we interpret the dialogues (Plato's own published work), then, in light of such testimonia (claims made by others on his behalf)?[4] This raises the obvious question of how reliable a witness Aristotle is. Given the length of time he spent at the Academy, however, it seems that he would be well placed to know the teachings of the master (see Section 5.2).

What are these Unwritten Doctrines? Although not discussed explicitly in the dialogues, these doctrines are not actively concealed.[5] The Unwritten Doctrines, according to this evidence, primarily consisted of a Theory of Principles as well as views on the Form-Numbers and the essence of the soul. There are two principles: the One, τὸ ἕν – the First Principle – and the Indefinite Dyad, ἀόριστος δυάς – or the Great-and-Small, μέγα καὶ μικρόν.[6] The One is the principle of unity, while the Indefinite Dyad accounts for multiplicity (see Section 3). These principles are the causes of everything else and serve to explain how the multiplicity of the cosmos can be derived from unity. (It is essential that the ontologically prior principle is simple and therefore exhibits unity or 'oneness' since if it were a composite, it could always be split into its component parts, which would be prior to it.) Plato's principles reflect his own intellectual inheritance: the One of the Eleatics and the Many of the Ionians.[7]

This Theory of Principles may be, in fact, the most characteristic and central Platonic teaching, not the Theory of Forms. Famously, Plato himself raises doubts about the Theory of Forms in the *Parmenides*, but yet it is a prerequisite for understanding the *Timaeus*, generally thought to be a later dialogue. It is therefore difficult to maintain that Plato himself abandoned the Theory of Forms. Such claims regarding Plato's core doctrines are significant since they have implications

[2] Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.
[3] This dating was challenged by Owen 1953, who claimed it as a 'middle' dialogue.
[4] Obviously, there is a distinction between what 'publication' in antiquity involved compared to today.
[5] Cf. Broadie 2021: 106 for a treatment by a non-Tübingen scholar.
[6] Aristotle identifies the Great and Small with the Dyad at *Met.* 1088a15 and with matter at *Physics* 187a15–187a20.
[7] Hösle 2019: 340. Cf. the somewhat different emphasis at Krämer 1990: 78.

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for whether our view of his work is unitarian (displaying a systematic unity across the dialogues, the dominant view in antiquity) or developmentalist (revealing a shift in Plato's philosophical position over time, popular since the nineteenth century following Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834)).

The Theory of Principles raises a string of further questions. How does Plato derive all other entities from these two principles, and how do these principles relate to each other? If Plato posits two principles, is he a dualist? Alternatively, if one principle outranks the other, is he a monist (see Section 3)? For the moment, we are concerned with just one central issue: how do the Unwritten Doctrines relate to the philosophy of Plato which we can derive from the dialogues? One approach is to accept at least some of Aristotle's testimony, but to marginalise the principles by confining them to the final years of Plato's life.[8] This allows everyone to save face: Aristotle is treated as credible and, due to the claim that Plato never managed to reflect the new insights offered by his Theory of Principles in any dialogue, we can continue to read his corpus without bothering about the principles.[9]

The weakness of this approach is that it does not resolve challenges raised by the Platonic dialogues themselves. (A further consideration, which I leave aside for the moment, is that without accepting the Theory of Principles as a commitment throughout Plato's philosophical career, it becomes difficult to understand the attempts made in the Old Academy – particularly by Plato's immediate successors, Speusippus and Xenocrates – to move from Plato the philosopher to Platonism the philosophical system.)[10] These challenges suggest that many dialogues were written with the contents of the Unwritten Doctrines in mind; Plato regularly hints that there is a superior approach to the problem under discussion which is not going to be immediately revealed. If this superior approach is understanding the principles via dialectic (only hinted at in the dialogues), this would make it a central feature of Plato's thought, rather than a late and peripheral development.

The most significant of these challenges is raised by Plato's own criticism of writing at *Phdr.* 274c–277a. On the face of it, this seems like a strange criticism to emanate from such an accomplished writer. It has been widely claimed that this is why Plato chose the dialogue form (rather than a philosophical treatise or poetry) and that his own writings are exempt from this criticism since they recreate (or mimic) orality.[11] But is this really the case? One of the criticisms of

[8] For example, *Physics* 209b, cited earlier in this section, which simply concerns a divergence between Plato's views discussed within the Academy and as expressed in the *Timaeus*.
[9] Cf. the discussion at Hösle 2019: 335–336.
[10] Cf. Dillon 2003: 16–22; Gerson 2013.
[11] It should be noted, though, that the philosophical treatise as a distinct genre developed only with Aristotle.

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writing raised in the *Phaedrus* is that a written text always says the same thing, and sadly – even if we can regularly gain new insights by repeated reading – this holds true for Plato's dialogues also. Similarly, a written text cannot choose the reader that is appropriate to it, but is accessible to everyone, even those incapable of fully understanding it; Plato's works are not exempt from this either.

The *Phaedrus*' criticism of writing is not an aberration. Rather, it is only one of a number of passages within the dialogues themselves that explicitly state or imply that there is a better way to achieve philosophical insight, rather than simply reading philosophy books (even those of Plato)! These so-called deliberate gaps (see Section 2) reveal that Plato, the author, and Socrates know more on specific topics (specifically the issues addressed by the Unwritten Doctrines) than they are prepared to say. The silence is explained either because Socrates' interlocutor (suggesting the reader too) would not be capable of following or because the only way to approach these insights (via oral teaching or via dialectic more specifically) necessarily cannot be replicated by means of a written text. These deliberate gaps are found across such a wide range of Plato's dialogues (e.g. *Rep*. 506d2–507a2, 509c1–509c11; *Tim*. 48c2–48e1) that it becomes untenable to simply dismiss them as marginal to Plato's thought. The explicit concealment of knowledge actually forms a significant recurring motif across the corpus.[12]

Another noteworthy document for advancing the claims of Plato's Unwritten Doctrines is the *Seventh Letter*, the authenticity of which is disputed. While I shall consider the evidence for a Theory of Principles in the *Seventh Letter* (341b1–345c3) in Section 2, it is clear that one does not need to rely on this text (or indeed solely on the testimonia) in order to advance the cause of the Unwritten Doctrines. Rather, similar commitments are indicated in various ways within the dialogues themselves. Even if the principles are not so explicitly treated in the dialogues, the *Philebus* comes close to expounding them (see Section 3).

1.3 The Tübingen School

This particular interpretative approach – the attribution of Unwritten Doctrines to Plato, assigning them a particularly central role in his thought and the resulting emphasis on the Theory of Principles – has become primarily associated with small pockets of southern Germany (the Tübingen School) and northern Italy. The inaugural work was Hans Joachim Krämer's (1929–2015) *Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles* (*Virtue in Plato and Aristotle*, 1959), followed by Konrad Gaiser's (1929–1988) *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre* (*Plato's Unwritten Doctrine*, 1963).

[12] Szlezák 1999: 9–11 examines the extent to which this explicit concealment defines the *Euthydemus*.

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Another highly influential volume was Thomas Szlezák's (1940–2023) *Platon lesen* (1993; *Reading Plato*, 1999). Other important scholars from the Tübingen School include Jens Halfwassen (1958–2020) at Heidelberg and Vittorio Hösle (born 1960) at Notre Dame. The influential work of Giovanni Reale (1931–2014) has led to the partial adoption of the term *Tübingen–Milan School*. The Tübingen–Milan School is actually less geographically restricted than its name might suggest – spreading, for example, via Reale's student, Maurizio Migliori (1943–2023), who taught for many years at Macerata, as well as via Reale's influence in Latin America, supported by the translations of his works into Spanish, such as his volumes with Dario Antiseri, *Historia de la filosofía* (by Juan Andrés Iglesias, Maria Pons Irazazábal, and Antoni Martínez Riu).[13] Additionally, Reale's *Toward a New Interpretation of Plato* (1997) made his views accessible in North America.[14]

While the scholars of the Tübingen School present an original interpretation of Plato, it should not be seen as a break in the continuity of Platonic scholarship: claims of Plato's oral teaching can be found in Dietrich Tiedemann (1748–1803), Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann (1761–1819), and (outside the German tradition) Léon Robin (1866–1947).

It is not my objective to provide a detailed analysis of the contributions of each individual scholar of the Tübingen School. Indeed, certain views often associated with the Tübingen School have been developed or adopted by scholars outside this area, notably John Niemeyer Findlay (1974) and Lloyd Gerson (2013; 2014). My aim is primarily to clarify the difficulties which the Tübingen scholars (and earlier Platonists) identified in interpreting Plato's legacy and to examine the merits of the solutions which they propose. Whether or not we accept their conclusions, we still have to respond to the same challenges of interpretation. First, Plato can be a difficult philosopher to pin down; he chose to leave us a corpus consisting largely of dialogues[15] and clearly not every view expressed in the dialogues is Plato's.[16] Second, although Plato was an accomplished literary craftsman, several passages in the dialogues hint at (or explicitly argue for) a more thorough approach for reaching philosophical insight than that contained within the dialogues themselves.

The history of Platonic scholarship can be viewed as consisting of two interpretative methodologies: the 'Protestant' approach, which sees the dialogues as the sole authority for Plato's thought (*sola scriptura* – the text alone interpreted

[13] On Migliori's allegiance to the Tübingen–Milan School, see Migliori 2023: 9.
[14] Translation of the 1991 (tenth) Italian edition; see Reale 1997 and 2010.
[15] There are some exceptions: the *Apology* is presented as Socrates' defence speeches; the philosophical content of the *Timaeus* is delivered in the form of a monologue.
[16] An obvious example is Thrasymachus' claim at *Rep.* I 338c that justice is the interest of the stronger, which is subsequently refuted.

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by means of the text itself, *sui ipsius interpres*), and the 'Catholic' approach, which regards the entire Platonic tradition (including the testimonia which we find in Aristotle concerning Plato and the Old Academy) as a valid source of further evidence.[17] Nowadays, the fissure between these methodologies tends to follow linguistic rather than confessional lines: the Romantic approach of Schleiermacher, who, as a theologian, drew upon the methodology of Protestant biblical hermeneutics in his interpretation of Plato became (via Paul Shorey (1857–1934), Harold Cherniss (1904–1987), and Gregory Vlastos (1907–1991))[18] the dominant paradigm in the Anglo-American world.[19] From the alternative perspective of the Tübingen School's approach, once we decide to take seriously the possibility that Plato presented his core philosophical views outside of the dialogues, we then need to find a means to approach this philosophical core (e.g. through the testimonia). For this reason, we should not think that the Tübingen School subordinates the dialogues (Plato's actual writings) in favour of approaching Plato via the comments of a somewhat disgruntled former student, Aristotle (as is sometimes portrayed in the scholarship of its rivals). Rather, it adopts the testimonia on Plato's Unwritten Doctrines as a legitimate response to Plato's own comments within the dialogues.

If Plato's view of the higher core of philosophical knowledge was dealt with outside the dialogues, this leads to the question of what function the dialogues themselves served (since, in this case, it would clearly not be the transmission of higher philosophical knowledge). The dialogues could be regarded as exoteric, intended for use by a broader public outside the Academy, while the Unwritten Doctrines would be esoteric, revealed to an inner core within the Academy itself.

This Tübingen claim of 'esotericism' is often portrayed negatively and unfairly.[20] Our modern understanding of knowledge is that it should be made public, although other societies prefer to keep knowledge secret as the source of power (e.g. the Eleusinian Mysteries in Plato's day). Yet Plato's Unwritten Doctrines – both the fact that they existed and the content of the Theory of Principles – were not actively concealed. Furthermore, the esotericism claimed by the Tübingen School is often unfairly confounded with the esotericism

[17] Krämer 1990: 14–16; Gerson 2014: 397–398.

[18] For example, Cherniss 1944 – although earlier than the first Tübingen School work: Krämer 1959 – and Cherniss 1945, as well as Vlastos 1963, a review of Krämer 1959. Shorey 1903 is strongly Schleiermachean and Cherniss was famously presented as a half-Schleiermacher (*Schleiermacher dimidiatus*); cf. Krämer 1990: 37. For context on the approaches of Shorey and Cherniss (as Anglo-American unitarians) and Vlastos (reading across sections of dialogues), see Gill 2002: 147–156.

[19] Cf. Gerson 2014: 399–401; Szlezák 2019a: 499–500 and 2021: 496–497.

[20] Vlastos 1963: 654 presents the Unwritten Doctrines as crediting Plato 'with a private (and secret!) philosophy meant to supersede the one which he published in the dialogues'.

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propounded by Leo Strauss (1899–1973):[21] the notion that the Platonic texts have both an exoteric meaning and a hidden esoteric one (only accessible to Strauss and his followers).[22]

The Tübingen School does not argue for esotericism in the sense of 'hidden' or 'secret', but rather distinguishes between Plato's exoteric productions in the sense of writings which were intended for a broader readership, including those outside the Academy and his esoteric activity: his oral teaching for his own students within the Academy itself. It is for this reason that Tübingen School publications often refer to 'inner-Academic' activity rather than to 'esotericism' to avoid being confounded with Straussian esotericism.[23] The dialogues were probably intended for distinct groups of readers: as a mnemonic for members of the Academy who had already been exposed to the Theory of Principles (as suggested by *Phdr.* 278a), as well as fulfilling a protreptic or hortatory function among the broader public, encouraging it to turn to the study of Platonic philosophy.[24]

The testimonia are of varying significance. They can be broadly categorised into three groups: (1) Plato's 'self-testimonies' (*Phdr.* 274b6–278e3; *Prt.* 356e8–357c1; *Meno* 76e3–77b1; *Phd.* 107b4–107b10; *Rep.* VI 506d2–507a2; *Rep.* VI 509c1–509c11; *Parm.* 136d4–136e3; *Soph.* 254b7–254d3; *Plt.* 284a1–284e8; *Tim.* 48c2–48e1; *Tim.* 54c4–54d7; *Laws* X 894a1–894a5);[25] (2) the testimonia of Aristotle (*Physics* 209b11–209b17, 209b33–210a2; *NE* 1095a30–1095b3; *Met.* 1018b37–1019a4, 1054a20–1054a32, 1061a10–1061a15, 1091b13–1091b15; *EE* 1218a15–1218a28); as well as (3) testimonia from commentators on Aristotle (Alexander of Aphrodisias, Aristoxenus, Sextus Empiricus, Simplicius).[26]

The varying reliability of the testimonia presents one challenge to the Tübingen School; there are others. It is not my objective here to account for why the Tübingen School approach has met with limited success in Anglo-American scholarship, although I shall briefly outline some significant obstacles which it faced.

1. The ascent of the Schleiermachean approach to Plato (via the dialogues rather than the tradition) occurred at major North American universities: Chicago, Johns Hopkins, UC Berkeley, and Princeton.[27] The two scholars

[21] Hösle 2019: 345n55.
[22] E.g. an exoteric reading of the *Republic* is that philosophers should become kings, whereas the esoteric Straussian reading is that Plato did not view this as feasible. Cf. Strauss 2000.
[23] One of the major concerns with Strauss' approach is his use of non-philosophical keys to decode philosophical dialogues. Cf. Gerson 2014: 398n2.
[24] Szlezák 1999: 20 argues for the possibility of three separate groups of addressees.
[25] Krämer 1990 categorises *Epist.* VII 340b1–345c3 as a self-testimony.
[26] These are all contained in Krämer 1990, although I depart slightly from his categorisation.
[27] I distinguish the Schleiermacheans from the broader spectrum of anti-esoteric approaches; see Section 5.1.

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dominant in North America at the time, Cherniss and Vlastos, were (at best) dismissive of the concept of the Unwritten Doctrines, which rendered it acceptable to ignore the problems that the Tübingen School emphasised (see Section 5). Krämer's groundbreaking 1959 study was dismissed by Vlastos;[28] this lent support not so much to attempts to refute his views, but – of far greater concern – simply ignoring them altogether.[29] Vlastos' significance for the dismissal of Krämer's work is illustrated by Krämer's response to Vlastos' *Gnomon* review, which itself triggered another negative response from Vlastos.

2. On a practical level, most of the significant Tübingen–Milan works were published either in German or Italian and there has been relatively little available in English.[30] This certainly accounts for its limited diffusion across the Anglosphere, but does not fully explain it. Findlay, for example, independently addressed similar issues in his English-language monograph.[31]
3. Beyond the arguments drawn from Plato, the Tübingen School approach utilises an understanding of ancient mathematics, as well as an interpretation of the history of philosophy which is indebted to German Idealism; culturally, this is a reading of philosophy which is more intuitive for many German scholars.[32] Yet we must consider to what extent other approaches actually respond better to the challenges raised by the Tübingen School than the notion of Plato's Unwritten Doctrines does and how much is simply based on cultural or academic preferences which cannot be defended from Plato's own texts.

Sextus Empiricus' report is particularly contentious since the Tübingen School claims it as evidence for the Theory of Principles which is independent of Aristotle, an assertion denied by Vlastos.[33] Additionally, Vlastos objected to Aristotle's reliability as a witness and the claim that the *Phaedrus*' criticism of writing applies to Plato's own work.[34] Furthermore, Vlastos attempted to downplay the significance of the Theory of Principles. Consider Aristoxenus' report of Plato's oral teaching on the Principles, his disastrous and ill-fated lecture (or lectures; see Section 5.3) on the Good:

[28] Vlastos 1963 and 1973. [29] Gerson 2014: 400 attests to Vlastos' negative influence.
[30] The situation is changing: e.g. Krämer 1990; Reale 1997; Szlezák 1999; Nikulin 2012b; Gerson 2014; Hösle 2019; Migliori 2020 and 2023; Halfwassen 2021; O'Brien 2021a and 2021b.
[31] Findlay 1974.
[32] For example, Halfwassen's reading of the Theory of Principles allows for a greater continuity between Plato, Speusippus, Plotinian Neoplatonism, and Hegel. Cf. Section 4 and Halfwassen 2021.
[33] Cf. Vlastos 1963: 643. Szlezák 2021: 518 suggests that it indicates the structure of Plato's lecture(s) *On the Good*.
[34] Cf. Hösle 2019: 342–343.

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