

## PLATO BETWEEN ORALITY AND WRITING

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### ABSTRACT

*UNDERSTANDING PLATO'S THINKING MAY BE ACHIEVED ONLY BY STANDING IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS LANGUAGE. THE LANGUAGE OF PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY IS UNDER THE FUNDAMENTAL DISTINCTION MADE BY PLATO HIMSELF BETWEEN ORALITY AND WRITING. OUR TEXT ASKS QUESTIONS AND SEEKS ANSWERS ON THIS DISTINCTION. WHY DID PLATO CHOSE THE DIALOGUE AS A FORM OF HIS WRITINGS? WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORALITY AND WRITING ON THE ONE SIDE AND COGNITIVE AND ONTOLOGICAL AWARENESS ON THE OTHER SIDE? WHAT IS THE COMMUNICABILITY OF EACH OF THE TWO? THE CHOICE FOR DIALOGUE IS INTENTIONAL. THE ESSENCE OF LANGUAGE IS THE DIALOGUE WITHOUT WHICH WE MAY NOT CONCEIVE ANY KIND OF LANGUAGE OR COMMUNICATION, AND OF COURSE NO KIND OF UNDERSTANDING. THIS MEANS THAT FOR PLATO THE DIALOGUE IS PRIOR TO THE SAYING, AS ORALITY IS PRIOR TO WRITING. SYNTHESIS IS PRIOR TO ANALYSIS AS IDEAS (THEY ARE EXPRESSED BY AND ARE IMPRINTED BY WORD / SPEECH) ARE PRIOR TO THINGS. IF WE HAD TO CHOOSE ONE WORD THAT DESCRIBES THE BEST THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLATO, IN TERMS OF ITS SETTING, WE CHOOSE "IN BETWEEN".*

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**KEYWORDS:** PLATO, LANGUAGE, ORALITY, WRITING, THEORY OF IDEAS, BETWEEN

### INTRODUCTION

The subject of our discourse is the distinction that Plato makes between orality and writing. We will ask some questions and seek answers to clarify this distinction. The questions are entirely ours. The answers are partly ours - on the one hand, since they involve our own interpretation and on the other hand, since we take the arguments and answers from the writings of Plato.

We know that there are interpreters of Plato's philosophy supporting the existence of an unwritten / esoteric doctrine and others who reject this hypothesis. We will not enter into this dispute. We believe that Plato's philosophy is expressed in and by dialogues. We may not say that they would not express the true thinking of Plato. We may say that his

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writings do not include all his thoughts (as the philosopher does not put in writing his most valuable thoughts)<sup>2</sup>, but not that he would have thought to mislead us. Even if Plato does not fully expose his thoughts, we believe that the much disputed esoteric doctrine is not only outside his written texts, but it is also present (implicitly, not explicitly) within the dialogues. A possible esoteric Platonic philosophy may not be different from that expressed by and imprinted in the dialogues. His unexpressed thoughts add and / or explain, but do not deny the content of the dialogues. We will approach the writings of Plato as a whole, while we accept that it is possible that he does not reveal everything. We believe that when Plato conceals something, he does it just with the intention of adapting the knowledge / message to the cognitive and ontological awareness of the interlocutor (since not everyone may understand anything, anywhere, anytime). All the more so, philosophical speech may be misunderstood, "*The philosophical discourse always remains exposed to the risk of misunderstanding*"<sup>3</sup>. Plato warns us of the danger that the great truths may come within the reach of any novice and be misunderstood.

Finally, the research on Plato's thinking may not exclude his writings; however, we may speculate about the possible unwritten / esoteric teaching, but until we have "documentary evidence" about it, the basis of any interpretation of his philosophy shall be his dialogues.

What we want is to get a proper understanding of the philosophical content of Plato's writings. What is the message of the dialogues?

Why the dialogue?

Why did Plato chose the dialogue as a form of his writings? We believe that Plato intentionally chose the dialogue as a form of his writings. We may not separate the form from the philosophical content of the dialogue. The dialogue is more than just a monologue, and contrary to the first impression, it is even prior to the monologue. The monologue is actually a dialogue with oneself (when one speaks to oneself and for oneself) or it is a speech for another. We believe that the desire to make us be aware of the unity between speech and thought is one of the reasons why Plato prefers writing dialogues. In the *Sophist* he says, "*Are not thought and speech the same...*"<sup>4</sup>. We understand here that if there is no dialogue, there is no thinking, no meeting, no communication and hence no

<sup>2</sup> Platon, *Opere, IV*, "Științifică și Enciclopedică" (Publishing House, Bucharest, 1983), *Phaidros*, 278d,e

<sup>3</sup> Szlezak, Thomas A, *Cum să îl citim pe Platon*, (Grinta Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2008), 170

<sup>4</sup> Platon, *Opere, VI*, Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1989, *Sofistul* 263e-264a

language (logos). The logos, be it mono-, dia-, or multi-logue is from the very beginning a unity between one and many. The logos is a "link", it is the word, speech, discourse, thought, reason, etc. Of the thoughts previously expressed, our option for the language as a principle of understanding may be determined. In this respect, we agree with Gadamer "Then, I found myself in front of a fact which would take me to a fundamental problem of hermeneutics: the dependence of understanding on language"<sup>5</sup>. We believe that another reason why Plato wrote dialogues is to emphasize the need for the presence of logos in understanding (provided that the speech, reason, dialogue may be interpreted as synonyms).

We may also notice the preference for dialogue in his criticism of the writing<sup>6</sup>. Thomas A. Szlezak considers that this criticism of Plato on writing is the starting point for the research on Plato's philosophy – „ *In my opinion, the criticism of the written form represents the true line to begin with and to be followed by anyone who wants to be concerned with the study of Plato. Unfortunately, many do not see this and think that they have their own compass. I do not need my own instrument as Plato has already given us one...*”<sup>7</sup>

In this regard, the dialogue as a form of expression and written print leads us to the speech. Plato's intention is to lead us to dialectic, to be aware of its value as a thought exercise and experience. The dialogue experience also offers us the expertise of the dialectic. The anamnesis (analogue of the cave leaving), the return to verticality, the road up may be achieved by experimenting the meeting of the opposites (dialectic) of Heraclitus (we emphasize their meeting, not the separation - that characterizes the way down). The dialectic facilitates our understanding of the unity of opposites and the preparation for the contemplation of the Good.

For Plato, (following the teaching of Parmenides “*as thinking is the same as being*”<sup>8</sup>) the language is an *analogon* of reality<sup>9</sup>. Along the history of philosophy, we may also find the idea of the unity of being and language to other authors. For example, we may

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<sup>5</sup> Gadamer H.G, *Griechische Philosophie*, vol 7, text translated by Noveanu, Alina, *Platon Triumful Întrebării*, (Grinta Publishing House, Cluj- Napoca, 2008), 122

<sup>6</sup> Platon, *Opere, IV*, (Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1983), *Phaidros*, 278d,e și Platon, *Scrisorile. Dialoguri suspecte. Dialoguri apocrife*, (Editura IRI, București 1996): *Scrisoarea VII*

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Thomas A. Szlezak, in the magazine *Slagmark*, nr 45, 2006, 123-147, text translated by Noveanu, Alina, *Platon Triumful Întrebării*, (Grinta Publishing House, Cluj- Napoca, 2008), 51

<sup>8</sup> *Presocraticii. Fragmente Eleaților*. Bilingual edition, (Teora Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998), 121

<sup>9</sup> Platon, *Opere, VI, Theaitetos 222b-224*, (Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1989)

say that for Hegel there is a unity of being and thought in his concept of absolute idea<sup>10</sup>. Also, we find that Humboldt places the language within the essence of the being "languages have grown up in inseparable association with man's inmost nature."<sup>11</sup> Also for Humboldt, the language definition is placed at the genre level: „ *Its true definition can therefore only be a genetic one. For it is the ever-repeated mental labor of making the articulated sound capable of expressing thought*”<sup>12</sup> and the same idea expressed from another perspective: „*Nothing can be excluded from it, since it embraces everything*”<sup>13</sup>. Thus, we may notice that Plato's vision has not remained singular.

Besides, the great importance that Plato gives to the logos may also be pointed out of the fact that he gave us the first philosophy treaty on language, “... *all the major problems of the language theory are contained in Plato's Kratylos, rightly considered the first philosophy treaty on language that we have*”<sup>14</sup>. The essence of language is the dialogue without which we may not imagine any kind of language or communication, and of course no kind of understanding. This means that for Plato, the dialogue the prior to the statement, as well as the speech is prior to writing. Synthesis is prior to analysis as ideas (they are expressed and printed by word / speech) are prior to things. Anamnesis (recollection / recall) is possible only because the mnemo (memory) has already taken "place". This "place" is place-d in the so-called world of ideas.

The orality and writing related to the cognitive and ontological awareness

We are separated from Plato's philosophy through history and by language. We are separated by the social-political, economic, cultural contexts, specific for classical Greece. We may become aware of "all" that divides us, we may strive to understand Plato and his writings in the specific context, and yet, we will not be able to "close" him in a standard, unique and final meaning. By this, we attempt to show that the meeting in writing is a tele-meeting (a remote meeting), an indirect meeting, unlike verbal encounter that offers an opportunity of an immediate, direct meeting.

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<sup>10</sup> Hegel, G. W. F, *Prelegeri de istorie a filosofiei*, (Publishing House of the Academy of the P.R.R., Bucharest, 1964), 265-271

<sup>11</sup> Humboldt, Wilhelm von, *Despre diversitatea structurală a limbilor și influența ei asupra dezvoltării spirituale a umanității*, ( Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008), 76

<sup>12</sup> Wilhelm von, *Despre diversitatea structurală a limbilor și influența ei asupra dezvoltării spirituale a umanității*, 82

<sup>13</sup> Wilhelm von, *Despre diversitatea structurală a limbilor și influența ei asupra dezvoltării spirituale a umanității*, 78

<sup>14</sup> Wald, Lucia, *Pagini de Teorie și Istorie a Lingvisticii*, (All Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998), 59

The meeting only offers the opportunity, as the body / biological proximity does not necessarily imply cognitive and ontological proximity. According to Plato, people are not at the same level of knowledge and being<sup>15</sup>, the *anamnesis*<sup>16</sup> meaning not only a cognitive way (a transformation) but also an ontological way (transformation). This means that genuine speech, namely the one that may deliver a full message, happens only in the case of the meetings of people who are / or are able to be at the same cognitive and ontological levels. Therefrom, we conclude that although we speak the same language, yet "do not speak the same language". In modern language, this might be translated by the fact that we have different meanings of the words that we use and we think. The semantic content of the words of a language is much richer than we think, and accessing the most appropriate meaning in a given context makes us prefer the speech, as in the speech the possible update of the questions and responses is mutual. By mutual, we understand that our interlocutor is present (as speaker) not only in potency (as a writer).

Most often, Plato is interpreted as a dualist, insofar that he splits (or "separates") the world of ideas from the world of contingency. In our opinion, the word separation may cause confusion as we understand (because of the objectification filter) two objects in different locations and possibly in opposition. Such an applied understanding of Plato is wrong. "The two worlds" are not only separated, but also united "*However, we have to notice that for Plato, the two worlds do not appear only as being separated; they are separated but at the same time in unity*"<sup>17</sup>. Plato's philosophy is realistic and idealistic at the same time as his reality given by ideas. As ideas are prior to things and their possibility, we may not speak of a clear separation between ideas and things. Things may not exist without ideas and the relationship between them is a vertical one (while the reality of things is minimal, the reality of ideas is maximum, culminating with the idea of the Good). The difference between ideas and things is one of degree / level. For Plato, the unity of reality is necessary and prior to any multiplicity<sup>18</sup>. Thus the contingency world is the posterior expression of the world of ideas and not its opposite (the opposition is a concept applicable only to contingency, being the result of objectification). The two worlds are not distinct and opposite objects, but the extremes of the same reality; in this case, we

<sup>15</sup> Platon, *Opere, V, Republica*, (Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986), 508,509, 511, 516, 517

<sup>16</sup> Platon, *Opere, II, Menon*, (Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1976) and Platon, *Opere, IV, Phaidon*, (Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1983)

<sup>17</sup> Muscă, Vasile, *Introducere în filosofia lui Platon*, (Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 1994), 73,

<sup>18</sup> Baumgarten, Alexander, *Pricipiul Cerului, subcapitolul Primatul unului asupra multiplului*, (Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008), 27-31,

may talk of opposition only if we maintain our attention to the fact that this field is not object oriented, there are just parts of the same being (on) with ontological differences (for the intensity of being) and therefore reality.

Plato's ideas have intentions and extensions of various degrees / levels of universality / generality / understanding / comprehension / coverage, not meaning their topographical location. They are neither beyond (outside), nor here (inside). Any confusion of ideas with phenomenality or contingency leads to misunderstandings. Contingency is horizontal while ideas are vertical, structured on the four levels exposed in the *Republic*<sup>19</sup>.

Understanding Plato's thinking involves awareness of the presence of this vertical dimension<sup>20</sup>. The truth, reality and good are thought of as having a vertical dimension. *Anamnesis* involves an interior movement (vertical) of reminding<sup>21</sup>. The prefix "ana" expresses and imprints a vertical and up direction. Plato's criticism of writing involves the criticism of vertical movement downwards, the way the river of forgetfulness flows (*Lethe*). Plato draws attention on the presence of various levels of knowledge and being and upward and downward movement. Writing is harmful as far as it keeps people at lower levels of being and knowledge. Writing encourages and develops *hypomneza*<sup>22</sup> unlike the speech that accesses and enhances *anamnesis*, inner self (verticality). Writing is a support for a horizontal inside-outside duality, and therefore has a tendency to objectification (and thus we become dependent of objects). For the speech, we depend on dialogue, relationships. The speech indicates verticality, here, there is a duality in unity; vertical up - down is the only reality / being, while interior-exterior duality (horizontal) is further to objectification. In reading - writing we may forget that "behind" the text there is an author, we may have the illusion of self-sufficiency. The speech "forces us" to be aware of the presence of otherness, the need for dialogue<sup>23</sup>. So, we may notice that a genuine dialogue occurs only in a vertical movement, by adapting the cognitive and ontological plans. For Plato, communication, intersubjectivity is genuine only by means of verticality, by the presence / action / participation of the vertical, otherwise it is just sophistic, it does not give

<sup>19</sup> Platon, *Opere, V, Republica*, (Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986), 508,509, 511, 516, 517

<sup>20</sup> Nicoară, Marius Marin, *Adevărul la Toma d'Aquino în contextul viziunii ierarhice asupra lumii și subiectivității, în Studii Tomiste II*, Zeta Books, Bucharest, 2010, 155-183

<sup>21</sup> Platon, *Opere, VI, Theaitetos*, (Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1989), 143

<sup>22</sup> An excellent analysis about the difference between *anamnesis* and *hypomnesis* and involves each of these two Greek terms may be found in Cornea, Andrei, *Scriere și oralitate în cultura antică*, (Humanitas Publishing House, București, 2006)

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer H.G, *Adevăr și Metodă*, (Teora Publishing House, 2001), 720

any knowledge or reality. The source of all reality and all knowledge is *To Agaton = the Good*, and the anamnesis is both a cognitive movement (undertaking) and an ontological movement (undertaking). We may conclude that the connection between people (the logos) is not / does not occur on the horizontal line, but on the vertical one, otherwise, the two abstract otherness / two completely separate subjects may not and shall not ever meet. This, as far as we postulate / assume that there could exist the mass of absolutely separate entities. Although not stated explicitly (in writing), as Aristotle, we believe that Plato was also aware that the human being is social from the beginning, so he is not alone (solipsism problem does not arise), but *one and multiple*. Man is man only as people (one and many), in and through people. One is multiple from the beginning.

#### Orality and writing in communicability

If we read Plato through Wittgenstein's eyes<sup>24</sup> we may discover the applicability of the difference between to show and to tell on his philosophy<sup>25</sup>. Following this application, we find that the speech may show, in the speech, we may get additional answers to our questions / lack of comprehension on what it was said. In the speech, the feedback is possible. In writing, the feedback is not possible. We may not resort to Plato to explain his words, phrases, sentences. Anticipating perhaps the difficulties of our understanding, he developed his writings in the form of dialogues (an oral writing).

Any understanding takes place in a language, in a logos; and any "log" occurs only in dialogue. Any connection involves at least two entities. Any relationship is simultaneous with the two related entities. In our relationship with the writing, we neither enjoy the author's answers to our uncertainties, nor his confirmation on those we think we have understood.

The logos is prior to any understanding, because we may perceive only things that are already connected to us, the perception of things is subsequent to their connection with us. Something existing completely outside, with no relation to us, may not be seen / discovered. The same way, communication may be achieved only when we already have something in common (the same language, same meaning) otherwise, communication is impossible. Communication and community are prior to any separation as synthesis is prior to analysis. The unity is assumed in any multiple. So, without logos there is no reality or things.

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<sup>24</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2001

<sup>25</sup> Nicoară, Marius Marin, *An Analytical View on Writing and Orality in Plato's Philosophy*, The Scientific Journal of Humanistic Studies, 2012, <http://www.ebscohost.com>

Communication is possible when we have a community of meanings. The meanings of words / phrases of Plato are also possible, provided that we will never get a single convention, universally valid on his philosophy. We do not even think that it would be possible. *The one who imagines that he could or should have the last word is not a good hermeneut*<sup>26</sup>. Any transmission (except for the speech) is a translation and no translation may ever extract / exhaust / give completely the original. The speech delivers by showing, not just telling. According to Plato, transcendence is known / experienced only in dialogue, namely, the speech. In the absence of the author, our verifiability of his words will never be complete. So, our interpretations may be very divergent, and the controversies are natural.

We have seen that for Plato, people are not on the same level of knowledge and being<sup>27</sup>. We may see what it is shown to us if / when we are in the same cognitive and ontological space. The words are actual (in the act / now). The fact that the meaning / meanings of something said may be accessed or not, shows that we are not in the same *now* (act). Our potencies and actions are different. At the same time, the transformation in knowledge necessarily implies a corresponding transformation of the being<sup>28</sup>.

Human communication through articulated language implies a common sense ("objective") of the words we use in the language. The objective meaning is given to a community, by a subjective agreement. That which may be communicable and intersubjectively verifiable / testable is objective. We know that there are scientific sentences that are verifiable by the common man only after a period of training. Also, communicability of objective scientific sentences depends on education, understanding of the meanings used in these sentences. Without having the conceptual device of science we may not test scientific sentences. Even in the ordinary case when we want to get along with persons who speak another language, first it is first necessary to appropriate the meanings of the words / sentences in that language. We begin to understand each other only when we talk with a meaning in agreement. This means, when we give the words / phrases the same meaning as our interlocutor.

## CONCLUSIONS

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<sup>26</sup> Gadamer H.G, *Adevăr și Metodă*, (Teora Publishing House, 2001), 701

<sup>27</sup> Nota 5 și Platon, *Opere, V, Republica*, (Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986), 519

<sup>28</sup> Platon, *Opere, V, Republica, Cartea VII 514a-521b*, (Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986)

The word that may describe the best the philosophy of Plato, in terms of its setting is the word "*between*". If we start the study of Plato's philosophy with the criticism of writing as suggested by Thomas A. Szlezak, we may find that it is situated *between* orality and writing. The preference for dialogue provides another *between*. The dialogue is a link (a logos) between two entities.

In Greek, *dia* (of dia-log) also has the meaning *through*, this meaning indicating another *between*. The *through* used in many contexts also shows the principle, which is a "*something*" with the ability to go *through*, to be between / among, to be present *among* all the elements of this principle. The type is the general present through, between, among. The principle and the origin are potentially present in all points afterwards. Plato's concept of participation signifies *between* ideas and things. If it is *between*, it is also *through*, and therefore the interpretation of the reality duplication by Plato is wrong, as the ideas being among things, obviously they are also in things. Surely, this idea will be expressed clearly and explicitly only by Aristotle (in rem). In contrast, Plato considers that ideas are prior to things (ante rem). Plato also has the variant of logos post things, meaning that of the language controllable and manipulable by the man, the world of sophists world and thus, the world of true-false opposition (post rem). Logos as such is a *between*. The modern meaning of the term dialogue implies a horizontal relationship between two objectified inner selves. In Plato's meeting, *between/ amongst* necessarily implies the presence of verticality. If we look into the study of Plato, we may immediately notice a lot of *between*: between being and non-being, between one and many, between state and movement, between transcendence and contingency, between true and false, between the world of ideas and the world of objects, etc. All *between* of Plato show vertical directions. Plato's duality is vertical and necessarily entails unity, unlike modern duality, which is horizontal and does not necessarily imply unity. The preference for dialogue, dialectic, orality/speech, anamnesis indicates his preference for the *upwards*.

As a natural result, as we would say, of the thoughts expressed here, we may say that the dialogue and logos are principles by which we may understand the meanings of Plato's philosophy. Simultaneously to this entry, our understanding will depend on the ability to adapt and transform the being properly to Plato's being, so that we may live and so communicate in his orality.

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