

Plato's unwritten doctrines: a discussion

The Editor has received a letter from prof. Thomas Szlezák in connection to prof. Tanja Staehler's paper *Theuth versus Thamus: the esoteric Plato revisited*, published in this *Journal* vol. 7 1 2013. We reproduce here both his letter and her response to it.

(i) Tanja Staehler and the homonym „esoteric“

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In her article „Theuth Versus Thamus: The Esoteric Plato Revisited“ (Journal of Ancient Philosophy, Sao Paulo, v.7., n.1 pp. 65-94) Tanja Staehler presents a discussion of Leo Strauss's approach to the Platonic dialogues together with that of the so-called Tübingen School, addressing thereby the „two main esoteric approaches“. Obviously she has not realized that the word “esoteric”, if applied to these two ways to approach Plato, is a mere homonym.

Let us leave aside the well-known fact that the label ‘Tübingen School’ is not a very helpful one, since there has never been in Tübingen anything like a ‘School’ with a leader at the top and faithful followers working under his supervision. But as the originally polemic use of this label has given way in the last two decades to a more neutral and descriptive one, I'll too use it on the following pages for the sake of brevity.

Staehler seems to believe that Krämer and Gaiser (and the numerous other adherents of the Tübingen School, which is by now an international enterprise with representatives in over a dozen of countries) recommend, as Friedrich Schleiermacher and innumerable others, among them Leo Strauss, did in the German (Schleiermacherian) tradition, a method of “esoteric reading”, i.e. of detecting hidden meanings “between the lines” or “behind the text”. But supplementing the Platonic text with a meaning not openly expressed is not what the Tübingen scholars aim at. They are rather concerned with the “Testimonia Platonica” (as collected and edited by Konrad Gaiser 1963 and by Marie-Dominique Richard 1986), more specifically, with their historic reliability, and with their philosophical significance and above all with their compatibility with the dialogues. Thus the Tübingen approach focuses both on

the dialogues themselves and on the “indirect transmission” of Plato’s philosophy, which testifies for an “esoteric” teaching in the Academy (which had of course nothing to do with any sort of “reading between the lines”).

Hence the confusion with regard to the term “esoteric”.

Stahler’s misunderstanding of the term “esoteric” is, on the one hand, so simple, and on the other hand, so widespread among those who do not take the trouble to read anything by Krämer or Gaiser, that it would not make sense to single out her article for a detailed examination of her numerous misconceptions. What prompts me to write a few remarks on that article is the presence of a number of statements about the Tübingen School that are presented as objective information, but are incorrect – i.e. not a matter of dispute or interpretation, but *simply false*. Here are some of them.

(1) “Unlike the Tübingen School authors, Strauss is not exclusively a Plato scholar” (Stahler 74). As if Hans Krämer and Konrad Gaiser have not worked on any other themes than those in the narrow field of Platonic scholarship? Krämer has developed his own philosophy of ethics (*Integrative Ethik*, 1992) and of hermeneutics (*Kritik der Hermeneutik*, 2007), moreover he has worked on modern anthropology and aesthetics (*Anthropologie der Kunst*, 1994) and on post-Platonic ancient philosophy (*Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik*, 1964). If we compare Krämer and Strauss, as Stahler does, it is not unfair to say that Krämer’s philosophical horizon is broader, his intellectual achievements more original than those of Strauss. – Konrad Gaiser was a leading expert on Menander and the 4th century New Comedy and published important contributions to Thucydidean scholarship and other chapters of the Greek History of Ideas.

For both Krämer and Gaiser there exist printed and internet bibliographies. It is surprising that a scholar of the younger generation should degrade Krämer and Gaiser – two giants of 20th century *Geisteswissenschaften* – to “exclusively Plato scholars” without consulting information easily accessible from a personal computer. (As to the third representative of the Tübingen School, against whom Stahler’s article is mainly directed (69) – namely the author of the present remarks –, I leave it to the reader to find out whether he, at least, is “exclusively a Plato scholar”.)

(2) “The traditional representatives of the Tübingen School, Krämer and Gaiser, do not provide a detailed interpretation of the critique of writing” (Stahler 81). This too is simply wrong. Platonic scholarship owes to Konrad Gaiser a detailed and most valuable interpretation of the critique of writing in his Naples lectures of 1982: “Platone come scrittore filosofico”, Napoli 1984, 77-101, the original German text of which has been available for the

past 10 years (Konrad Gaiser, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2004, 29-41). (Stahler doesn't list this important volume, indeed an indispensable tool of research, in her bibliography.) Krämer had discussed Plato's critique of writing already in his 1959 dissertation (*Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles*, 393-396), then came back to it in *Museum Helveticum* 21, 1964, 148-154. Concise as Krämer's observations are, they are more detailed and fruitful than Stahler's wholly inadequate discussion of the critique of writing on pp. 85 ff.

(3) Stahler repeatedly describes the method of Krämer and Gaiser as a "turning away from the Platonic dialogues" (72, 82), or claims that they "turn away from the dialogues (or turn to them mainly in order to point to inconsistencies with the "unwritten doctrine")" (68). Krämer and Gaiser turning away from the dialogues? The above quoted "*Gesammelte Schriften*" of Gaiser are enough to prove the contrary (but Stahler obviously never came across this volume). Krämer's *Collected Platonic Studies* are going to appear in 2014 – but to find at least some of his numerous interpretations of specific passages in the dialogues should not be too difficult even without this forthcoming collection. What is more: the only two volumes by Krämer and Gaiser that made it into Stahler's rudimentary bibliography, namely "*Arete bei Platon und Aristoteles*" and "*Platons ungeschriebene Lehre*", devote, each of them, more than half of their contents to careful interpretations of the dialogues. How can somebody who has access to these books maintain that their authors "turn away from the dialogues"? Even more surprising is the second claim that the Tübingen School turns to the dialogues, if it does so at all, "mainly in order to point to inconsistencies with the 'unwritten doctrine'". As everybody knows, one of the main arguments of the Tübingen scholars for the authenticity of the Aristotelean (and other) reports about Plato's oral philosophy of principles is their full compatibility with the dialogues. See e.g. Th. A. Szlezák, "The Idea of the Good as *Arkhē* in Plato's *Republic*", in: D. Nikulin (ed.), *The Other Plato. The Tübingen Interpretation of Plato's Inner-Academic Teachings*, SUNY Press 2012, 121-142.

(4) "The Tübingen School in particular tends to read the critique of writing as demanding a dismissal of writing" (Stahler 90). One wonders which text (if any) of a representative of the Tübingen School Stahler might have had in mind when she wrote this. (She abstains, as usual, from giving a reference.) According to the Tübingen interpretation, the *Phaedrus* nowhere dismisses writing; it just shows its limits as a tool of philosophical communication.

(5) Several times Stahler attempts to sum up the hermeneutical position of the Tübingen School as an attempt to ascribe to Plato an intention "to hide something", or "to conceal certain messages" (71, 77, 78, 79). She believes this tendency to be common to the

“two esoteric approaches”, viz. the Straussian and the Tübingen approach, and at the same time something which would separate them from the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher (70 f.). Here the confusion is complete: none of the three hermeneutic positions is being represented correctly by Staehler. It was Schleiermacher who believed that Plato wanted, by the method he dubbed “(Plato’s) indirect communication”, to conceal certain messages, so that they can only be grasped by the alert reader, and not by the unphilosophical one (see Schleiermacher’s “Einleitung” to the first volume of his “Platon, Sämtliche Werke”, Berlin 1804, pp. 16 and 30). This belief we find also in Strauss – small wonder, since it was the standard Schleiermacherian creed of German Platonists in the 1920-ies, when Strauss received his academic formation in the universities of Marburg, Frankfurt, Berlin and Hamburg. Staehler has not understood that Strauss is, from the hermeneutical point of view, one among the German emigrants who found jobs in the United States and remained faithful to what they had learnt in their youth. (What is peculiar about Strauss is his political message, not his hermeneutics.) The Tübingen School, on the other side, is not part of the Schleiermacherian mainstream. Its representatives do not believe in Plato’s “intention to hide something”. Plato does not “hide” his theory of principles, he keeps it out of his writings, refers it to a different context, namely to the context of orality. The semantic difference between “to hide something” and “to keep something out of something” or “to refer something to a different context” should be clear: when an author wants to hide something, he will not point to the content he is about to hide (and Schleiermacher understood the allegedly Platonic “indirect communication” precisely in this way). Plato’s procedure is different: he makes Socrates claim that he does have an own view on the *ti estin* of the Good, and at the same time he lets him stop short of communicating this view (Republic 506 e). It would be utterly misleading to speak here of Plato’s “hiding a certain message”. Instead, we should acknowledge that Plato refers in this and in all similar passages the philosophically most important question to another context: to the context where the author would, as the “father of the logos” (*patēr tou logou*), orally (*legōn autos*) expound his “things of greater value” (his *timiōtera*). See Phaedrus 275 e, 278 cd.

I stop here, although there are many more erroneous statements in Staehler’s article. Particularly annoying is her attempt to construe a “traditional Tübingen School” that would be opposed to my position, and her constant allegation that her opponents give an uncomplete exegesis. It is she who says nothing on Phaedrus 276 b – 278 e, nothing on the Seventh Letter (except for a footnote “explaining” why she shuns an interpretation), and finally nothing on the Aristotelean reports about Plato’s theory of principles, which are for her nothing but

“short, rare, and overall not very elucidating remarks of other ancient authors” (72). Can we be sure that Staehler has ever studied either the *Testimonia Platonica* or Léon Robin’s coherent and fascinating interpretation of these “short and rare remarks” in his splendid “*La théorie platonicienne des idées et des nombres d’après Aristote*” (Paris 1908)?

Although one of Krämer’s books, one of Gaiser’s and one of mine are listed in Staehler’s bibliography, the overall impression left by her portrait of the Tübingen School is that her knowledge of this ‘School’ is derived from other sources than these three books. Books that contain close interpretations of the dialogues should not be denigrated as “turning away from the dialogues”.

(ii) Response to Szlezák

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Szlezák accuses me of using the term “esoteric” as a mere homonym. In fact, the approach of my article is open to such an outcome since it is the purpose of my article to trace similarities and differences between the Straussians and the Tübingen School. Yet despite the fact that there are quite a number of crucial differences between the two approaches, the outcome is nonetheless that the usage is not that of a homonym. More precisely, I introduce “esoteric” by way of Szlezák’s own definition (“conveying knowledge in a way which is strictly orientated toward the needs of the addressee” (*PSP*, 406; cited on p. 69)), and it seems to me, based on the examination conducted in my article, that this definition certainly works perfectly for the Straussians as well.

Yet even if the outcome had been that the two approaches are referred to as esoteric but turn out to hold an entirely different meaning of this term, it would not have been detrimental to my article. In general, it was the purpose of my essay to begin from the traditional understanding or perception of these approaches and investigate them. This common perception was also the basis for my claim that the Tübingen School representatives are mostly Plato scholars, unlike Strauss who holds a much more diverse and problematic reputation. Yet it is true that I should have formulated more carefully at that moment, differentiating between “being” and “being perceived as”.

In general, it seems to me that in relation to most of Szlezák's points of criticism, it is important to bear in mind that my article represents and examines (a) a common conception which is submitted to a (b) comparative perspective. While there might be problems with comparative studies in general and in particular, it is quite important to consider the comparative aspect of my article since it helps clarify some of the statements Szlezák picks out as problematic. For example, when I speak of "turning away from the dialogues", I do not mean a complete turning away, by any means, but turning away more so than the Straussians, and also more so than Szlezák himself whom I single out as a much more successful reader of the Platonic dialogues than his predecessors. In short, it seems to me that even though Krämer and Gaiser certainly do not turn away from the dialogues entirely, they attend to them mostly as texts which they relate to the ideas of the unwritten doctrine. In this sense, the unwritten doctrine emerges as the framework of reading and the standard for the dialogues *as texts* whereas attending to the dialogues *as dialogues* allows attending much more fully to their rich, lively, multi-faceted nature in which, for example, the ambiguity of writing can be discerned.

Particularly interesting is to my mind the topic of hiding. Szlezák states that the Tübingen School never assigns such hiding of insights to Plato, but Szlezák himself writes, for example, that Plato "held back certain important insights" (*PSP*, 340). Szlezák states that there is a crucial difference between "'to hide something' and 'to keep something out of something' or 'to refer something to a different context'". Yet it seems to me that if something is kept out of something and the reader is referred to a different context, yet not told what or where this context is, this comes quite close to a phenomenology of hiding – even more so if it turns out, as it does in this case, that the Tübingen scholars, with the help of other scholars, have *found* what was kept out.

The role of Schleiermacher in relation to these two approaches is indeed a complex one; but I have pointed out quite explicitly that Strauss is closer to Schleiermacher (p. 77). The remainder of my discussion of Schleiermacher's approach is done very much on Szlezák's terms (pp. 69-71), including the discussion of a certain tension in Szlezák's work that emerges from integrating some Schleiermacherian elements while rejecting others (p. 72).

When it comes to the issue of a detailed reading, I do not believe that 12 pages in Gaiser and 9 pages in Krämer qualify as detailed. Of course, I also do not believe that my article, which is already doing a bit too much, could provide such a reading. To my mind, detailed readings have been provided by scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger (esp. Gesamtausgabe vol. 19). My background is admittedly a phenomenological-

hermeneutical one, but it seems to me that assessing the two main esoteric approaches from a certain distance rather than belonging to one of them proves useful, and would in fact be the only possible starting point for such a comparison.

A detailed reading is also provided by Szlezák himself, and I am sorry to have “annoyed” Szlezák by singling out his work as far more successful than his predecessors, in terms of clarity, accessibility, explicit methodology, and close attention given to the dialogues (p. 69 etc.). His rejection of the separation created by me between his work and those of Gaiser and Krämer might at least serve to confirm a certain unity among the Tübingen thinkers. His perception that I see the representatives of the Tübingen School as my “opponents” is misplaced. In particular, I do not argue “against” Szlezák, as he puts it, but actually for him, ascribing to him a “return to the dialogues” (p. 73). But I understand that this is not what Szlezák desires me to do, and I will refrain from such attempts in the future. The misunderstandings debated here could, to my mind, at least serve as a general reminder that an interpretation that focuses on author’s intentions can easily be flawed, especially if it ascribes intentions of arguing “against” somebody when there are none.