THE WEAKNESS OF WORDS:

IMPLICATIONS OF FOUCAULT’S LATE LECTURES FOR REFLECTING ON THE PLATONIC DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

A central claim in Foucault’s 1982-1983 lectures, published as *The Government of Self and Others* (2008), is that Plato, in wanting to escape the possibility that his philosophical discourse would be “mere *logos,*” ultimately conceived of philosophy’s “reality” or “veridication” in terms of its capacity to facilitate the “work of the self.” This thesis argues that Foucault’s analysis positions us to read Plato’s dialogues as philosophical “deeds” that aim to advise the reader with respect to his or her “mode of being.” I corroborate the analysis that leads to Foucault’s highly suggestive conclusion that a text like the *Republic* or the *Laws* must in some respect not be “serious” works and are, therefore, discursive “games” whose aims lie elsewhere than in the formulation of political prescriptions. In so doing I link Foucault’s characterization of Platonic philosophy as being informed by a “weakness” in *logos* to the claim, put forth by scholars attentive to the dialogic form, that Plato’s dialogues are written in deference to the obstacles that the written and even spoken word presents for the transmission of his philosophy. I claim that some of the key concepts of the later Foucault’s “ethical turn,” namely *askēsis*, the arts of life, and ethics construed as the work and formation of a relationship of self to self, are helpful when trying to discern not only the content of Platonic writings, but also the purpose behind their form. To the extent that the elaboration of theoretical knowledge in discourse inhibits the awareness that the subject must form a practical relationship with his or her own self, and to the extent that such a work is the fundamental task of philosophy to which the acquisition of theoretical knowledge plays a secondary role, the *logos* of philosophical discourse must be modified in order to facilitate this *ergon* “of the self.” I claim that, when we consider Foucault’s understanding of what philosophy ought to do we are equipped with a basic set of criteria for evaluating the aims and benefits of the dramatic and dialogic form of Plato’s writings and I show that an extant body of scholarship verifies such criteria are met.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………….......iv

Abbreviations…………………………………………………………………………….vii

Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………...viii

Introduction: Word, Deed, and Dialogue………………………………...………………..1

Chapter 1: *Logos* and *Ergon*……………………………………………………………………………………..14

Chapter 2: The Weakness of *Logos*……………………………………………………………………………………..46

Chapter 3: Ambiguity, *Mathēmata, Dogmata………………………………………………………………………………………….…*80

Chapter 4: Experiencing the Dialogues………………………………………………………………………………..109

Conclusion……..…………………………………………………………….………….133

Bibliography…………………………………………………………………………….137

ABBREVIATIONS

The principal text of Foucault’s that I use is *The Government of Self and Others* while that of Plato’s is the *Seventh Letter*. Only these two works will be cited in the body of the thesis without indicating their title. The page number is given for the *Government of Self,* while citations from the *Seventh Letter* are distinguished by Stephanus number. Other works by Foucault will be indicated by an abbreviation, whereas the title of the Platonic dialogue will be listed. All other works will be cited by using the author’s last name.

**CT:** *The Courage of Truth*

**HSJ*:*** *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*

**UP*:*** *The Use of Pleasure*

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Introduction: Word, Deed, and Dialogue

Foucault’s portrait of Plato’s philosophy turns on his identification of a problematization made by Plato of a gap between word (*logos*) and deed (*ergon*), and how the need to address it results in defining philosophy’s fundamental task as that of the self’s work on itself. From Plato’s problematization of that gap Foucault extracts a *technē tou biou*– an art of life–that can express the content of philosophy’s “true discourse” in a medium other than words. In Foucault’s analysis, this philosophically inflected “art of life,” which makes critical use of the uncritical arts of existence extant in ancient Greek society before the advent of Plato’s philosophy, was foundational for how philosophy after Plato understood its mission; that is, until its appropriation, modification, and eventual eclipse by Christianity.[[1]](#footnote-1) Foucault’s uncovering of the arts of existence– the surprising culmination of his analysis of the history of the social technologies of subjection[[2]](#footnote-2)– also amounts to the beginning of his own positive articulation of the aims and possibilities of philosophy for the present.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The discovery of the management of existence in the realm of practices– of *pragmata*– as the real concern of philosophy, leads to a certain demotion of *logos*, at least as expressed in written and oral form. Ancient philosophy, Foucault concludes, was not about “the truth of truth,” (229) though it is about the problem of striving for “the true life.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The verification of verbal propositions about the nature of reality by recourse to yet more discourses and verbal maxims was not true philosophy for the ancients, as Foucault came to understand it, if it ever was for anyone. In Plato’s view, as Foucault shows, there is a weakness in words that prevents them from being capable of accomplishing philosophy’s aim when taken alone. The discourse of philosophy, in order to acquire and retain the sort of legitimacy to which it aspires, requires that it not remain mere discourse (*monon logos*) but that it also somehow become *ergon*. Ultimately, in Foucault’s view, this *ergon* proves to be the work of the subject on itself.

In the course of the analysis briefly sketched above, Foucault executes a skillful interpretation of Plato’s writings and uses them to show that what is essential for philosophy is beyond what is capable of being transmitted in written or spoken discourse. Yet, there is little reflection by Foucault on how the medium of writing must operate for Plato in the light of these conclusions about philosophy’s supra-verbal reality, reflections that seem especially pressing considering that Plato is the most artful writer of all the philosophers of antiquity. Might writing itself be a *technē* (an art) for Plato? If so, how might an art of writing relate to an art of life? Are we led to conclude that Plato’s writings (*logoi*) are carefully crafted “works”(*erga*) that answer for the weakness of *logos*, “works” written for the purpose of philosophy’s “fundamental task” as Foucault construes it? I argue that Foucault points us to such a conclusion.

There are probably many reasons why Foucault did not feel that it was necessary to investigate seriously the relation of Plato’s writings to the *logos-ergon* problem he identified as a Platonic concern, even though Plato’s highly curious claim in the *Seventh Letter* that what is serious in philosophy is never written down (344c-e) serves as the hinge on which Foucault’s history of *parrēsia* becomes an investigation of philosophy’s “reality.” One obvious reason might be that this question of Plato’s writing was simply not within the scope of his stated research interests. Foucault is hardly claiming to offer an exhaustive account of Plato’s philosophy and he is certainly aware that his analysis, which is subordinate to a historical survey beyond the 4th century B.C.E., opens up a variety of pathways that Foucault is content to imply others may explore. With respect to that reason, I am not criticizing Foucault. Rather, I argue that the portrait of Platonic philosophy that he offers in connection to the weakness of words and the gap that divides them from deeds yields insights that, if true, compel us to acknowledge that Plato’s writings should be read in a certain way. Primarily, I argue that Foucault sets us up to see that Plato’s writings should be characterized as a type of the deeds that true philosophy’s criteria demand, deeds whose art consists in self-consciously inscribing the awareness of word’s weakness back into words themselves, and orchestrated in such a way as to direct the reader to this supra-verbal reality that is philosophy’s “real” concern. In doing so, Plato understands himself to be assisting, as far as possible, what is lacking in *logos* and reclaiming the power of written discourse for the service of “true life.” In essence, such a characterization of Plato’s writings is not a novelty on my part. As I will show, there is already a tradition of similar readings. What constitutes my contribution, then, is to show how Foucault’s own novel reading of Plato directs us toward such an understanding of the Platonic art of writing.

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Leo Strauss wrote near the start his analysis of Plato’s *Republic* in *The City and Man* (1964) that “the Platonic dialogues are dramas, if dramas in prose. They must be read like dramas” (Strauss, 59). This interpretive principle laid down by Strauss informed his unconventional readings of Plato’s writings, readings that remain controversial to this day. The concern has been that such attention to the dialogic and dramatic form of the writings leads, Charles Griswold says, to “unprincipled interpretation[s]” and to “the reduction of philosophy to a sort of literary sensibility substituting for genuine philosophical argument” (Griswold 2008, 206).

Despite his own disagreements with Strauss, Griswold himself wrote that, “in modern times the problem of interpreting Plato– and with it, the problem as to why Plato wrote dialogues– has not received the attention it deserves” (Griswold 1988, 3). The anthology of essays he edited, *Platonic Writings/ Platonic Readings* (1988) is a major contribution to analyzing that question. This was a question that already occupied Griswold’s attention when, for example, he wrote *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus* (1986), a work that, pertaining to the question of the dialogue, shares an “interpretive maxim with a number of other Platonic scholars” (Griswold 1986, 10), including that of Strauss as formulated in *The City and Man* and quoted above.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Today, several decades after *Platonic Writings/ Platonic Readings*, the climate in Plato scholarship has significantly changed. Griswold wrote relatively recently:

“It was once thought that attention to the ‘dramatic dimension’ of Plato's literary-philosophical productions was the province of two much despised schools of thought: ‘the Straussians,’ and ‘the Continentals’” (Griswold 2008, 205). However, this is evidently no longer the case, as he claims that the label “Straussian” has since been decoupled from “the emphasis on the importance of the dialogue form when interpreting Plato” (Griswold 2008, 207). The point is not so much a criticism of Strauss or contemporary Straussians, so much as it is the validation of a principle that underlies, at least in part, Strauss’s unconventional readings of Platonic philosophy without endorsing all his conclusions.

How far the rapidly growing acceptance of this interpretive principle has impacted our understanding of Platonic philosophy is difficult to say without undertaking a study to answer that question specifically. Leon Craig writes that the significance of the dialogic form is “not obvious to every modern reader” since we have generally been “weaned on quite different expectations regarding written communication” and that “most people, including many philosophic scholars…do not know how to engage a Platonic dialogue in the most profitable manner” (Craig, 67). He connects this to our expectation that philosophy systemically formulates a world-view so that one can claim either to accept or disagree with an author’s ‘doctrines’ or ‘philosophy’ (Craig, 67). At the level of scholarship, however, the principle that establishes the importance of the dialogic and dramatic form is entrenched sufficiently enough that Stanley Rosen need only to express his agreement with it as “a matter of form” at the start of his *On Plato’s Republic: A Study* (2005).[[6]](#footnote-6)

In an example slightly more recent than Craig’s comments, Martha Kendall Woodruff (2007) partly challenges Robert Gooding-Williams’ reading of Plato found in his *Zarathustra’s Dionysian Modernism* (2001)on the grounds that Plato’s dialogues must be read as “dramas of many voices” (Woodruff, 63). We must, she claims, extend to Plato and his characters the same courtesy that Gooding-Williams extends to Nietzsche and Zarathustra: i.e., recognizing that the assumption any character of the author’s serves as “[his] mouthpiece” is “far too simplistic” (Woodruff, 5)[[7]](#footnote-7). Woodruff’s essay, which in applying the principle that Plato’s dialogues ought to be read as “dramas of many voices” challenges commonly held opinions about the relationship between Nietzsche’s thought and Plato’s, is one example of how attention to the dramatic dimension of the dialogue has and continues to undermine the equation of Plato’s thought with a system of thought called “Platonism.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The conclusion that Plato is a “Platonist” is being undermined on several fronts. John R. Wallach, in his *The Platonic Political Art* (2001), seems to suggest that the question of why Plato wrote dialogues might be receiving more attention than it ought, but this is not the case. While he writes that, since E. N. Tigerstedt’s book *Interpreting Plato* (1977), “scholars have made the second-order question of how to interpret Plato as important as, if not prior to, first order questions about the substantive meaning of his dialogues” (Wallach, 19), he also notes that attention to the dialogic form has resulted in “substantive consequences” for our understanding of many dimensions of Plato’s thought. It is nonetheless the case that, in his opinion this trend exhibits a failure to generally address “the political significance of the issue” (Wallach, 19). Wallach’s analysis, which seeks in part to rehabilitate a Platonic conception of critical reason for contemporary democracy, relies a great deal on the intellectual developments that, in giving increased attention to the dialogic form, have discredited the portrait of Plato as a political idealist/ proto-totalitarian thinker. For Plato, he claims, “there was no such thing as Platonism” (Wallach, 30). Wallach claims that if his view is correct–that Plato’s dialogues “interrogate the character of the dialogues *we as readers have*”– then Plato looks “less like a doctrinal Platonist and more like a critical, political theorist” (Wallach, 29).

Another example connected to the trend of the study of Plato in political theory is that of S. Sarah Monoson in her *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements* (2000), in which sheclaims that “the compelling body of literature on why Plato wrote dialogues” supports her view that “defining aspects of Plato’s thought have roots in Athenian democratic practices” (Monoson, 10). In her view, the dialogic form is “not simply a clever way to express a doctrine that could have been more easily stated in systematic exposition, but a mode of writing that allows Plato to craft for the reader the unusual experience of philosophic inquiry” (Monoson, 10).

I am unable to contribute to Wallach’s desire to press the insights produced by the question of why Plato wrote dialogues toward “the political significance of the issue.” However, the fact that Wallach has found that Plato in no sense intended to found “a substantive philosophical ideology or exclusive school of thought” resonates strongly with some of the findings of Foucault’s late lectures and the implications I claim they have for understanding the purpose and the content of the Platonic dialogue. As we will see, the portrait of Plato that emerges from Foucault’s lectures is a completely different sort of philosopher than the rigid dogmatist who would have us ruled directly by a philosophical elite within a closed society. Understanding the dialogue as I claim Foucault implies would be indispensible for understanding his positions as a political philosopher.

In *Questioning Platonism* (2004), Drew Hyland examines the way that Platonic texts are analyzed in the thought of several continental philosophers. He focuses on those who “tend to be critical of Plato in the sense that they find in his work the doctrinal source of the metaphysical tradition they wish to call into question” (Hyland, 13). Hyland links the failure to regard the dialogic form of Plato’s writings to what he considers to be misinterpretations of Plato’s thought. Where Foucault himself stood in relation to that metaphysical tradition is no secret. “Foucault’s anti-Platonism,” writes Thomas R. Flynn, “is well known” (Flynn, 531), for he opposed “the metaphysical notion of truth” in favor of a “Nietzschean project” that would “unveil the sheer multiplicity of truths that ‘truth’ was invented to contain” (Flynn, 532). Hyland’s book does not claim to be an exhaustive treatment of the assessment of Plato in the continental European tradition. It does not include a chapter on Foucault. He writes, “in no case that I know of have they [Deleuze and Foucault] had as their focal intent in an article or a book a consideration of Plato” (Hyland, 13). Hyland was writing before Foucault’s lectures (*The Government of Self*) at the Collège de France became widely available in either French or English. While Hyland writes largely to show how the failure to appreciate the dialogic form leads to misunderstandings of Plato, I write to show how Foucault’s lectures help us in understanding the Platonic dialogue. Even if the insights produced are comparatively late on the scene, the benefit is that they establish common insights between scholarship on the significance of the form of Plato’s writings and what has been called the ethical turn of the later Foucault. Sophie Bourgault, in her recent review of the *Government of Self,* reminds the reader that, despite his surprisingly newfound enthusiasm for Plato, “it would be a gross exaggeration to claim Foucault died a Platonist.”[[9]](#footnote-9) One of the consequences of this study is, I hope, if not to deny the assertion that Plato himself died a Platonist, then to show how Foucault is another voice that undermines the conventional reading of what a Platonist text intends to do.

Foucault has not made any important remarks on the significance of the dramatic and dialogic form of Plato’s writings, as far as I am aware, beyond his suspicion that the *Republic* and the *Laws* play “a game” (253). Certainly in the *Government of Self* such attention to the written form is given no mention when he discusses his methodology. Yet Foucault’s reading of Plato’s thought in his late lectures is also unconventional in important respects, yielding conclusions about philosophy’s “reality” that strongly resonate with those reached by scholars who claim Plato’s thought can only be discerned with attention to his writings’ dramatic form. Charles Griswold claims that “to ask why Plato wrote dialogues is to ask a philosophical question about the foundations of Platonic philosophizing” (Griswold 1986, 224). If the question of why Plato wrote dialogues leads to deep questions about the foundations of Platonic philosophy, it would not surprise that particularly skillful studies of Plato’s thought as it appears in his writings could lead to that same question of “why Plato wrote dialogues” from the other side– and with some answers already in hand. I think Foucault’s lectures are such a skillful study, the resonance of which with other scholars who have given such attention to that very question evidences the strength of both.

\*

The following is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, “*Logos* and *Ergon,*” will examine the manner that Foucault makes use of the word/deed dichotomy in his analysis of the *Seventh Letter* and will strategically position a summary of his analysis so that the criteria that characterize Foucault’s philosophical *ergon* will become clear with respect to how I it applies to the Platonic dialogue. The second chapter, “The Weakness of *Logos*,” continues a summary of Foucault’s study of the *Seventh Letter* with respect to its problematization of writing and language generally. From there, I introduce considerations taken from an essay by Hans-Georg Gadamer on what specifically makes language problematic for Plato as a medium and use it to reinforce, qualify and extend Foucault’s claim that we should see in the *Seventh Letter* an implicit understanding of philosophy as a an *askēsis.* Chapter 3, “Ambiguity, *Mathēmata, Dogmata*,” develops Foucault’s conclusion that philosophy according to the *Seventh Letter* cannot be primarily concerned with the elaboration of theoretical knowledge and brings it into dialogue with Rosemary Desjardins, Charles Griswold Jr., Jürgen Mittelstrass and others. I aim to strengthen the claim that Plato’s written works are characterized by his awareness of the weakness of language and use Foucault to articulate that awareness as one of a natural tension between the elaboration of formulaic knowledge (*mathēmata)* and the development of a disposition/ orientation achieved only by the work of the self. With the help of Desjardins especially, I hope to show that the claim that Plato relies on devices such as ambiguity, irony, and *aporia* to keep the reader from dogmatizing his words is done in order to prevent the reader from depending unduly on *logos* as a medium of knowledge and to maintain the link between philosophical thinking and the daily work of the self which any act of philosophical *ergon* must do. Finally, Chapter Four, “Experiencing the Dialogues,” looks at the benefits of the dialogues as dramatic works for fostering the free development of the reader, and as exemplary depictions of dialectical life.

Throughout my work I make reference to Edward McGushin’s *Foucault’s Askēsis* (2007), a work that gives the most thorough characterizations of Foucault’s conception of Platonic philosophy in his last lecture series to date, though considered in light of Foucault’s body of work overall. The benefit of McGushin’s work is that it gives some sense of how Foucault might have imagined the interpretation of Plato he was developing related to his previous studies.

One final note before we proceed. The purpose of this study is to extend Foucault’s insight about the Platonic problematization of *logos* into the claim that Plato’s writings, at least as determined when using the *Seventh Letter* as a starting point, are deliberately incompatible with a certain kind of doctrinal appropriation of his thought. It seeks to show that Foucault's insight into the priority of *askēsis* or “practices” for ancient philosophy should affect our view of what the dialogues are crafted to accomplish, not merely in content, as Foucault certainly realized, but also in form.

My study does not aim to prove that Plato had no doctrines, or what Christopher Rowe calls a “nexus of ideas” (Rowe, 32). I do not, for example, attempt to verify claims like that of Alan. C Bowen when he writes “the dialogues themselves are not witness to Plato’s philosophical thought” (Bowen, 59). E. N. Tigerstedt, for example, warns against making Plato's philosophy merely identical with the activity of philosophy as such (Tigerstedt, 102-103) and so suggests there are definite Platonic “teachings.” Claiming to give due regard to the relevance of the dramatic and dialogic form of Plato’s writings does not preclude a whole gamut of possible positions about what that means for Plato’s purported Platonism, but the claim will, among the sources I use, qualify and limit the amount of stress one may place on the importance of its alleged systemic character.

Questions of Plato’s system or doctrines aside, I will argue that the method by which Plato intended to impart his views will, in a certain sense, appear identical with the activity of philosophy as such. In this way I think the very form of Plato's writing corroborate Foucault's characterization of ancient philosophy as *askēsis* and exclude Plato's discourses from those “ludicrous” ones that try “from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them what their truth is and how to find it” (UP, 9)

Chapter 1: *Logos* and *Ergon*

“Plato did not want to appear to be merely *logos*, to be only discourse. Plato does not want to be merely *logos* and be thought of as such. He wants to show that he is capable of taking part and putting his hand to *ergon* (to action)”(218).

“…the reality of philosophy is not, is no longer anyway, is not merely *logos*” (228).

This conclusion about philosophy’s need to be more than a discourse, for example a discourse about the nature of things or what counts as truth, is one of the principal conclusions that Foucault draws from Plato’s *Seventh Letter.* This is the letter in which Plato explains his rationale for going to Syracuse in order to advise the tyrant Dionysius about the right manner of governing his kingdom. It is an example of Plato’s concrete involvement in a political situation of the sort he shunned in Athens.

That philosophy’s reality “is no longer” merely *logos* means that its reality was principally *logos* at some time; for whom and when Foucault does not say. Are we to take this as a development within Platonic philosophy? Perhaps only to the extent that this imperative to “put hand to action” is given a specific sort of political content in the *Seventh Letter*, as Foucault interprets it, a content that may not be implied by other texts in the Platonic corpus.[[10]](#footnote-10) Foucault writes that what constitutes *ergon* here “is to be a real counselor of a real politician in the field of the political decisions he really has to take” (219). For Foucault, the *Seventh Letter* shows that philosophy has an obligation to address “whoever it is who exercises power” (228). Why is this so? It is in order, he says, to test its “reality” (229), the meaning of which will be discussed below. Importantly, the basis of this imperative flows from a fundamental feature of Platonic philosophy as a whole. Foucault sees a correspondence between the *Seventh Letter* and the very first Platonic dialogues, in that he detects in the latter a need for philosophy to be understood as more than the transmission of learnable formulations. From the earliest texts, Foucault claims, Plato characterizes true philosophy as being especially “a mode of life, a way of being, a practical relationship to oneself” (219). This is what Foucault calls philosophy being not “merely *mathēsis* but also *ascēsis*” (219).

So there is a correspondence for Foucault between Plato’s personal concern about being a man of mere words about politics and a concern about philosophy at large being merely the transmission of teachings. The individual philosopher, if the opportune moment arises, must try to affect political reality by addressing the person who wields power; likewise, philosophy must above all involve its practitioner in a certain mode of life. Both are cases where *logos* requires *ergon*, however qualified. But does this suggest an empty caricature of whatever unnamed conception of philosophy, school of thought, or type of politics lurks behind this discussion waiting to be accused of being “mere discourse”? Is there anyone who would transmit teachings or ideas that they claim have no bearing on how life should be lived? Or are we really talking about something banal like hypocrisy, so that being “mere discourse” is an accusation thrown at someone who espouses a set of teachings that he does not follow, or a person who always claims to know how politics “should be” yet does nothing to effect the contemporary reality?

Obviously, if that were the content of Foucault’s insight into Platonic philosophy, it would be unremarkable. However, this is not the case. If learning/knowledge (*mathēsis*) and words (*logos*) stand on one side of an equation, while practices (*askēsis*) and works (*erga*) stand on the other, the anxiety of the relation between them is not, for Foucault or for Plato, simply a matter of lining them up so that they correspond, i.e., so that we do what we say, and we say what we know–though that is by no means an un-Platonic concern. Rather, the problem surrounds the access to the truth that would alone rightfully govern us since heeding it is what would bring our lives into an appropriate correspondence with “what is.” It almost goes without saying that Foucault is not truly looking for any kind of stable “what is” with which one might seek to harmonize oneself– his method of analysis requires, in his own words, “that every ontology [of a true discourse] be analyzed as a fiction”(310); though they remain provocative and stimulating fictions for all that.

Importantly, what Foucault finds striking in his study of ancient philosophy, beginning with Plato, is that access to such truth was not construed as a simple passage made by the reasoning subject by way of his or her inbuilt and stable capacity to know.[[11]](#footnote-11) It was not a matter of obtaining, through *logos,* what this truth is and then proceeding to live in harmony with it; rather, practices and works, in short, the whole project of the transformation of the self, was seen as a necessary component for rendering that truth accessible in the first place. Truth can only be purchased at the cost of putting one’s being to the test and in forging a certain sort of relationship to the self: this is the fundamental insight that begins *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, an insight that Foucault continues to apply in new ways throughout the *Government of Self*. The problem, then as Foucault began to see it, is not that of failing to put into practice what one already says and knows in words but rather of the need for practices and relationships that enable one to truly know at all.

With this in mind, we can turn to the question posed by the presence of the quotations that begin this investigation above: what is this insufficiency of *logos* implied by its constant appendage to the adjective “mere”? As we shall see, for Foucault’s Plato, it is the fact that *logos* is not *by itself* capable of transmitting a certain sort of knowledge: that there is a knowledge that escapes the net of *logos*. Since this claim about the insufficiency of *logos* is crucial to my argument about how Foucault positions us to read the Platonic dialogues, I will begin by clarifying the *logos/ ergon* distinction as I see it operating in Foucault’s understanding of the *Seventh Letter*. This will help us understand why, according to Foucault’s own lights, the Platonic dialogue should be understood as attempting to assist the feebleness of *logos* as it falters before the knowledge that the soul needs in order “to fare well.”

Since I claim that Plato’s dialogues should be read as a type of *ergon*, it will be necessary to first bring what Foucault means by *ergon* into view. At a glance, the notion of *ergon* might appear less integral to Foucault’s history of truth-telling (*parrēsia*) than is the case by virtue of the fact that the term is not introduced in the rudimentary definition of *parrēsia* given at the start of the lecture series, instead appearing about half way through the series in the course of his analysis of the *Seventh Letter* where it appears as a vocabulary item of the letter itself. Moreover, Foucault himself does not persist in using the term after his lectures on the *Seventh Letter*. However, by looking at his use of the term in the lectures between 9 February and 16 February, it is easy to see how the concept of *ergon* encompasses what Foucault means by the practices or “tests” of philosophy (*askēsis* or *ta pragmata*) that aim to establish a certain rapport with oneself, or the self’s rapport with the truth, in addition to encompassing a basic characteristic of *parrēsia* as a modality of truth-telling.

This characteristic is the dimension of risk-taking that necessarily defines the truth-teller (the parrhesiast) as courageous on the one hand, and *parrēsia* as abrupt and even violent on the other. What constitutes *parrēsia* as a particular mode of truth-telling is the “action” of the speaker whereby he binds himself to his speech and risks his own well-being in doing so (63-65). The *logos-ergon* of *parrēsia* always disrupts the comfortable familiarity of the scene in which it appears: it interrupts the *logos* to which we are accustomed and behind which we hide from uncomfortable truths. This is why *parrēsia* always incurs a risk for the speaker: its addressee may wish to exact revenge.

In all cases, what can be called *ergon* is not something understood as the binary opposite of *logos* but rather a (possibly) complementary “other” of *logos* capable of qualifying or “anchoring” speech in reality; complementary so that, reasoning on the basis of Foucault’s view, it should be possible to speak of deeds as a form of speech, or speech as a form of deed. The requirement that both deeds and speech be bonded together is an essential aspect of *parrēsia.* What, then, is this relation of speech to deed? We should begin with where Foucault raises the term.

Plato’s *Seventh Letter* is ostensibly a written response to a request placed on Plato by the friends of his own dear friend, Dion. This is a request for Plato’s help in “both word and deed” (324a) in a matter of Sicilian politics in which Plato had been involved previously while Dion was alive. Now, after Dion’s politically motivated murder, his friends continue to implore Plato’s help. Plato is reluctant and uses the letter as an occasion for, among other things, “recount[ing] what his real career as a political advisor has been and giv[ing] a theory of what a philosopher’s advice to a tyrant can and should be” (214). Interpretations of the implications of this letter for understanding Plato’s philosophy are diverse, just as is the analysis of Plato’s intentions for writing and crafting it as he did. Further, its authenticity is not beyond dispute. Important for my purposes, however, is the fact that Foucault treats the letter as authentic (210); second, that what interests him about the letter is its place in a genealogy of the conception of “philosophy as advice” (215) for political action. As we will see, for Foucault, advice can be *ergon* under certain conditions.

The question of what sort of relation the philosopher ought to take with respect to political action is raised by the letter on several fronts: in the first place, the letter presents itself as a response to a request for political help in real time. Second, the letter contains actual help in the form of political advice for its addressees from Plato’s pen, a philosopher himself. Third, it contains a lengthy account of Plato’s involvement in political affairs when he attempted to serve as an advisor to the tyrant Dionysius the Younger. Fourth, the letter discusses the reason for which Plato himself never entered the political field formally, though he desired to, choosing a life dedicated to philosophy instead. So the letter plays with the word/ deed dichotomy in an interesting way: its author was implored for help in both word and deed, although he gives help ostensibly in word alone, all the while discussing the context in which political deeds had become impossible and suggesting the conditions under which their possibility re-emerges.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Plato’s rationale for never becoming a politician interests Foucault for what it suggests about the relationship between philosophy and politics. In Plato’s own account, he put his ambitions for political life aside as a young man because the sort of politics to which he originally aspired in Athens were perceived as no longer possible to realize. He arrived at this conclusion through at least two formative experiences of Athenian politics: the first was the injustices perpetrated by the regime of the Thirty and the second was the execution of Socrates under the restored democracy. “Two experiences,” Foucault writes “– oligarchy, democracy– both negative” (216). The result of these experiences was, as Foucault summarizes it, the realization that “political action is no longer possible” (216); we are left with the conclusion that Plato had become utterly disenchanted with politics after successive regimes proved incapable or unwilling to be well ordered; indeed, one put to death the “most just man” at the time (324e). The diversity of the regimes compared with the singularity of their consequence–injustice–might have suggested to Plato that the political form of the city in itself guarantees nothing. Of course, by the impossibility of action, neither Foucault nor Plato mean that political action was not happening all the time or not possible in the basic meaning of the word. Rather, as Plato alludes, political action had become impossible for the *just person*, who would either be forced to become complicit in unjust deeds, be silenced, or be killed, as the case of Socrates attests. Plato specifically writes that he was disturbed by the “kind of men” who were active in politics at the time and he laments, as Foucault notes, the lack of friends necessary for political action. The situation is that Plato cannot find people with sound character. Foucault observes that it is this inability to find friends and the lack of an opportune moment (*kairos*) that stand as the conditions under which political action cannot be undertaken.

From this Foucault concludes, “the resort to philosophy in this text…is presented by Plato…as the consequence of an impossibility” (217). The failure of politics issues in the need for philosophy, which is not an escape from politics but rather an attempt to target the cause of this failure at its root. Foucault will tease from this a principle wherein philosophy is said to stand in *a necessary position of exteriority to politics*: philosophy, Foucault concludes, does not take politics as its direct concern, but rather operates in a space, and on a subject, that is not political in the direct sense (291-92). This does not mean that philosophy is apolitical, but rather that it seeks to rehabilitate a degenerate political field by operating on the conditions that give rise to that political degeneration and the attendant “impossibility” of action. Foucault gives attention to the image of philosophy as a kind of medicinal practice in connection to this: philosophy is a kind of medicine in the service of opening up new and foreclosed political possibilities. Philosophy is not itself a singular program of political action but rather the recovery of that which makes action possible. Consistent with this is the conclusion that philosophy is foremost a concern for the soul and the development of an art of soul-care or, in Foucault’s language, the conclusion that “the reality of philosophy is [the] work of the self on self” (242). The *Seventh Letter* clearly shows that, by trying to shape the souls of those whose words and actions compose political life, philosophy seeks to make political action possible (for the just person) once more; at the very least, where political action remains hopeless, it seeks the acquisition, preservation and growth of justice in the individual amidst corrupting influences.

As a matter of fact, Foucault gives no attention to the mention of justice present at the start of the *Seventh Letter*, which in my reading is absolutely fundamental and so worth bringing to the fore. Foucault’s analysis has replaced the mention of justice with the object of his historical analysis: *parrēsia*, so that in his account it is the parrhesiastic truth-teller who can no longer safely tell the truth in the political field (we hear nothing of the person struggling to see the nature of justice clearly so as to become just) and this impossibility has resulted in the Platonic turn to philosophy in order to restore the conditions for the type of truth-telling necessary for good governance. In Foucault’s history, Plato transforms the form of truth-telling (*parrēsia*) that had heretofore been operative in politics, the game of “political *parrēsia,*” rendering it “philosophical,” and this philosophical appropriation of the manner in which truth ought to be spoken constitutes Plato’s response to the degenerate condition of Athenian political life.[[13]](#footnote-13) Since Plato turns to philosophy as the consequence of the impossibility of “true” political action, the exteriority of philosophy does not mean philosophy must be apolitical; quite the opposite, it means that philosophy alone can tend over those practices and discourses that will ensure the truth can be spoken in politics at all. Foucault writes, “philosophical truth-telling and political truth-telling must be the same, inasmuch as none of the ways of conducting politics witnessed by Plato can assure the true functioning of this *parrēsia*” (217). Plato wants to assure the true functioning of *parrēsia* within the political field: philosophy, not politics, can do this.While philosophy, being exterior to politics, will not prescribe a political program or propose laws, it nevertheless has a relationship to politics– and a relationship of priority over the political field at that–since it addresses the condition of the possibility of a properly functioning political field: the quality of the character of political actors themselves. Foucault formulates this relation more precisely nearer to the conclusion of the lecture series: “philosophy’s question,” he writes, “is not the question of politics; it is the question of the subject in politics” (319). Philosophy takes care of the political actor, to whom belongs the burden of political acts proper.

I note, however, that Plato does not quite credit the impossibility of genuine truth-telling in Athenian politics as the cause of his conclusion that philosophy is the medicine political discourse needs. Rather, it is the impossibility of “discern[ing] what the nature of justice is” (326b) in a society such as Athens that leads him to say “in the praise of true philosophy…from her height alone” justice can be seen for what it actually is (326a). Plato describes philosophy as a “height,” below whose threshold an excess of instability and change make one– made Plato at least– too “dizzy” (325e) to acquire a sober view of the truth concerning what is and is not just.

The problem, then, really does surround the question of truth as Foucault says, but it is rather the problem of truth-seeing over that of truth-telling. One turns to philosophy not, first of all, in order to be able to tell the truth but in order to see it. Perhaps we receive a small hint here about Plato’s own existential anguish in trying to discern what the just and the fair really are, an anguish of the sort we see Glaucon and Adeimantus experience at the start of the *Republic*.[[14]](#footnote-14) This might appear to be a quibble: truth-seeing is linked to truth-telling to the extent that we need the help of others in discerning what the truth is, a point that speaks directly to the central concern of the lecture series: the role of truth in “the government of self and others.” Indeed, Plato refers political discourse to philosophy’s care because the former needs to be educated by the latter so that the nature of justice can appear clearly discernible within it. Only in a political discourse within which the nature of justice can be discerned clearly will there be no evident need for philosophy. Thus we might say that Plato really is concerned with truth-telling: he wants telling the truth about justice to become possible within a society that is presently too unstable and corrupt to permit the telling of that truth to be heard in its authoritative clarity. Second, it might well be argued that, with the Platonic appropriation of *parrēsia*, the just soul becomes the condition of *parrēsia,* or that struggling for the acquisition, growth and preservation of justice in individuals and in a city necessarily encompasses *parrēsia*. These would be excellent remarks. The point is not that Foucault’s mapping of *parrēsia* onto Plato’s concern for justice is any kind of gross error. Since the concept of justice is so polyvalent in Plato’s thought there are good reasons to claim that justice encompasses *parrēsia,* and so to claim that Foucault’s account of Plato’s role in that history is correct, though from the perspective of Plato himself, not a sufficient account of his own conception of what he was doing nor the experiences that led him to it.

If the Platonic turn to philosophy was done not in antipathy to politics but in order to rehabilitate politics from a sphere extrinsic to it, the philosopher’s relation to political action will share in this rationale. Foucault sees this rationale at work when Plato, despite his self-imposed exile from Athenian political life, accounts for why he travelled to Syracuse at the behest of Dion to serve as an advisor and educator of the tyrant Dionysius the Younger. One of the considerations that Plato lists when deciding whether to travel to Syracuse or not interests Foucault especially: this is Plato’s concern that he not appear “as a pure theorist, unwilling to touch any practical task” (328c). Plato goes to Syracuse because he perceives that not doing so would lay him open to the charge that he was “*monon logos,*” or “only *logos,*” which Glenn R. Morrow has translated as “pure theorist.” He can avoid this only through *ergon*, which Morrow has translated as “practical task.”

The obvious question is what would it mean for Plato to have been “only *logos*”? The question of the status of Plato’s dialogues is first raised here implicitly, since they belong clearly to the category of *logos* but not so clearly to that of *ergon*. The dialogue for which Plato is, perhaps, best well known has already been evoked by Plato’s remarks near the start of the letter: he writes that he turned away from a life of politics because he could see that “the ills of the human race would never end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power, or the rulers of our cities, by the grace of God, learn true philosophy” (326b). This sentence very closely approximates what Socrates calls the “third wave” in the *Republic* (473c-d) and is sometimes called the ideal of “the philosopher king.” Does Plato’s *Republic* contain a doctrine that Plato feels compelled to realize and which now propels him into the political field that he had heretofore avoided? Do Plato’s dialoguesgenerally contain directives that the philosopher must implement once the opportunity arises? The answers are not simple: for example, how might the lengthy and arduous formation of the philosopher-guardian in the *Republic–* an education so revolutionary that it ultimately requires the uprooting of the entire city in the form of the exile of everyone over the age of ten (*Republic*, 541a)– relate to the attempt to advise or educate a single and already (mostly) grown man like Dionysius?[[15]](#footnote-15) This is not quite Foucault’s question, though he observes the letter’s connection to the *Republic*. In Foucault’s reading, the conditions under which political action had become impossible have been partially revoked by the fact that, in Syracuse, Plato would not have to concern himself with the formation of the character of a whole city’s elite. Rather, he would only have to influence a single man since the regime was autocratic (224). Since Syracuse was not, like Athens, a democracy, and since Plato had already, at least in Dion, a friend, the conditions that prevented Plato from political action in Athens (lack of friendship and the opportune moment) would not seem to apply in Syracuse. Whatever the specific relation between Plato’s political action and the “program” of the *Republic*– Foucault does not inquire here– Foucault rightly notes that the singularity of Dionysius’ person is appealing to Plato, as Plato writes “what tipped the scales eventually [in his decision to go] was the thought that if anyone ever was to attempt to realize these principles of law and government, now was the time to try, since it was only necessary to win over a single man and I should have accomplished all I dreamed of” (328b). Thus Plato’s *ergon* is ostensibly an attempt to realize certain “principles of law and government,” the specifics of which are not clear, though they presumably involve the co-incidence of philosophy and political power. Are these the principles that Plato had *merely* talked and written about before, but which he can actually bring to bear on politics now? This would seem to be Foucault’s suggestion when he writes:

For Plato, it is clear that to be no more than the philosopher who is the author of the *Republic*, that is to say, who says what the ideal city should be, is to be no more than *logos*. Now the philosopher cannot be merely *logos* with regard to politics. To be more than ‘hollow words,’ he must take part in and put his hand directly to action (*ergon*) (218-19).

While this might appear straightforward, once we consider Foucault’s conclusion that philosophy is necessarily exterior to the political field, indeed, that philosophy attempts to shape that field by concerning itself with the subject of political action rather than political action itself, the meaning of this “hand directly to *ergon”* is unclear. If the *ergon* is enacted in order to escape being mere *logos* we might expect that this *ergon* is not yet more *logos*. However, what is here called *ergon* both by Foucault and Plato is obviously Plato’s attempt to educate Dionysius through– what else could it be?–*logos*. Foucault calls this *ergon* both an “address” and “advice” and evades the question I pose: if the *ergon* of philosophy is to address those who exercise power, whom do Plato’s writings address? And how might the content of these writings relate to the spoken *logos* that Plato felt obligated to deliver to Dionysius in the hopes of realizing certain “principles of law and government”? If, for example, we were to find that Plato’s writings also “address power,” on what basis would we differentiate a situation where Plato remained “no more than the author of the *Republic*” from the situation where his *logos* is qualified by *ergon* through a discourse addressed to someone like Dionysius? In characterizing philosophy’s *ergon* as a qualified type of advice, the possibility of an ergonic dimension in the dialogues is implicitly raised. Possible answers to this question begins to appear when we consider what Foucault calls “philosophy’s reality.”

Foucault claims that the *Seventh Letter* tells us something about “philosophy’s reality” (228). A somewhat unconventional use of the term, Foucault means by “reality” the “test” or task that philosophy undergoes in order to prove itself as being indeed a true discourse. He asks, “What is the reality that enables one to say whether what philosophy says is true or untrue?” (228). He answers:

The reality, the test, by which philosophy will demonstrate its reality is not the *logos* itself, it is not the game intrinsic to the *logos* itself. The reality, the test by which and through which philosophical veridication will demonstrate its reality is the fact that it addresses itself, can address itself, and has the courage to address itself to whoever it is who exercises power (228).

If philosophy’s *ergon* is its address to power then its *ergon* must be a modality of *logos*. What about this *logos* allows it to be understood as being *ergon* and not simply the “mere *logos*” that Plato feared?

The first reason why this *logos* would appear to be *ergon* is that, in addressing those who exercise power, it requires courage on the part of the speaker since true philosophy vehemently disavows flattery and is liable to make the (power-wielding) subject of political action uncomfortable, opening up the possibility of unspecified consequences. Addressing those who exercise power can draw the philosophic parrhesiast into the web of power games, which might become dangerous, as Plato’s disastrous experience with Dionysius proved. Not only was the education of Dionysius a failure but it also left Plato constantly flirting with danger.[[16]](#footnote-16) In the end, Dion was murdered at Athenian hands and the affair threatened to sully the reputation of Plato’s Academy. The idea that a risk is always involved in *parrēsia* and that it requires courage on the part of the speaker is part of the rudimentary definition of the concept as Foucault defines it at the start of the lecture series. The “real life situation” into which the speaker introduces his *logos* is part of the modality of its veridication, part of what “tests” and tries it as true.[[17]](#footnote-17) The risk the speaker incurs goes some length in signifying his seriousness about what he says and may indicate he really believes it. The criterion of courage in no way would exclude the authoring of the dialogues from being classified as parrhesiastic acts. Plato’s authorship of the dialogues was well known, writings through which he intended to influence the climate of the city’s politics by way of those he educated.[[18]](#footnote-18) That philosophical activity continued to pose a risk for the philosopher is evidenced by the fact that Aristotle left Athens lest the city “commit the same sin twice.”

Importantly, there is another aspect of this philosophical *logos* that qualifies it as *ergon*, an aspect that is intrinsic to the content of the *logos* itself and so whose examination will better help us consider the Platonic dialogue. This is the manner in which Foucault understands philosophy to stand in opposition to rhetoric.

Rhetoric, from the perspective of philosophy according to Foucault, is “no more than the instrument by which the person who wants to exercise power can only repeat what the crowd, leaders or Prince wants,” it is “a means of persuading people of what they are already persuaded” (229). Curiously, Foucault also claims the opposite when he says soon after: “rhetoric is precisely that which can both be deployed and be effective quite independent of the will of the listener” (236). What can it mean that rhetoric persuades people “of what they are already persuaded” while also operating “independent[ly] of the will of the listener”? The conclusion must be that people have more than a single “will.” As I understand the Platonic perspective on this matter, people have many desires which do not, of themselves, necessarily coalesce into a unified whole that serves their best interests; rather these desires must be constantly sorted, managed, purified and unified in accordance with the type of life one wishes to live and the sort of person one strives to be.[[19]](#footnote-19) Taking up the corresponding disciplinary practices may be called, as Foucault calls them, practices of self-care, whereas failing to reflect on one’s desires and manage them may be called self-neglect. Rhetoric is an instrument of *logos* that speaks to some desires and not to others in a person for the advantage of the speaker and often to the ultimate disadvantage of the listener. In this way, it can persuade someone of what they are “already persuaded,” and yet do so against their will. Rhetoric persuades by addressing and satisfying desires present in a person, yet over and against what should be their governing will. In contrast, Foucault claims that the “first characteristic” of “the reality of philosophy” is the fact that “it addresses itself to the philosophical will” (236) i.e., as I understand it, the will that, from the point of view of philosophy, should rightfully govern a soul in its interior multiplicity amidst the natural tensions that the requirement for unity entails.[[20]](#footnote-20)

If, time and time again, Socrates claims that the love of wisdom is the search for the model of the best sort of life, then “the philosophical will” that Foucault has spoken of must be the will that seeks out what is best for a person considered *as a whole.[[21]](#footnote-21)* The rhetorical speaker does not address the part of the self that seeks out what is truly best for it, for if he did the speaker would inevitably become a fellow companion with the listener on a common quest for the best model of life and the power dynamic of the rhetorician-listener relationship would no longer be determined by the speaker’s concern for producing an already specified effect that is agnostic to the listener’s total well-being. In contrast to rhetoric, Foucault claims, “the test of philosophy… is not its political effectiveness” (229). This means that rhetoric is an instrument of *logos* that shapes its words entirely according to the desired “political effect” that the speaker has in mind. The *logos-ergon* of philosophy, then, is not about persuasion; at the very least, not *fundamentally* about persuasion regarding specific courses of action, as might be a speech delivered in the assembly. Philosophic speech addresses itself to what in a person desires what is truly best for himself or for herself, that is to say, to the “philosophical will” in its Socratic meaning. This means that what the address aims to accomplish is already determined by the nature of that good; true philosophic speech may not just say anything for the purpose of persuasion.[[22]](#footnote-22) The ability to persuade a listener is not, then, the fundamental mark of what makes *logos* truly philosophical and therefore *ergon*. This, I think, is what lies behind Foucault’s statement that philosophy’s reality is “not the game intrinsic to the *logos* itself”(228). This cannot mean that the content of the *logos* is irrelevant or that it has a license for incoherency, but only that the *logos* receives its validation through an external criterion: it has to address the other as concerns his or her “total good,” which is the object pursued by a faculty or a desire not distinguishable from the “philosophical will.” The game “intrinsic to *logos”* is the appearance of rational coherency. The “reality of philosophy,” on the other hand, while not irrational, acknowledges that coherence in the medium of words is not identical with coherence in the soul (subject).[[23]](#footnote-23) Thus exacting statements aimed at verbal persuasion do not have a necessary relationship with philosophy’s aim (coherence in the soul). Being unable, at times, to find the right formulation for the object of one’s knowledge *may be* a sign of genuine philosophical activity. We will have to keep this in mind when we consider the Platonic dialogue as a drama and the frequency with which its characters remain unconvinced or with which the investigation falls into an *aporia*.

The fact that, in addressing power, philosophical *logos* must more specifically address “the philosophical will” is linked to another important feature of this *logos-ergon* for Foucault: this is the requirement that the person addressed be willing to listen. Foucault writes:

For a long time it was thought, and it is still thought, that basically the reality of philosophy is being able to tell the truth about truth, the truth of truth. But it seems to me that, anyway this is what is indicated in Plato’s text, there is a completely different way of marking or defining what philosophy’s reality may be… this reality is marked by the fact that philosophy is the activity which consists in speaking the truth, in practicing veridication in relation to power (229-230).

Again, this raises the question as to what “practicing veridication in relation to power” could mean. As we have seen, Foucault claims this philosophic speech does not find its reality in its persuasiveness– which, of course, does not exclude its intention to be persuasive–and so is not fundamentally about convincing people to take this or that specific course of action. Specific actions in the political field may be the effect of this address, but the content of that *logos* is not subordinated to the achievement of that effect at any cost; rather something else is at stake when the philosopher-parrhesiast speaks the truth to politics and that is, as Foucault ultimately finds, the subject of political action himself in his manner of life and his daily action: that which constitutes the subject’s “mode of being” (295)[[24]](#footnote-24) or what I think can be likewise called his “regime” or “*politeia*” (234-35).[[25]](#footnote-25)

If the philosopher addresses the subject of political action and, moreover, addresses him at the point of his “political” or “philosophical” will, then it becomes necessary, Foucault observes, that this will be fundamentally good (235). Foucault executes an analysis of the imagery of philosophy as a medicinal practice found in the *Seventh Letter* and elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, stressing that, in Plato’s view, no real physician would attempt to heal a patient who was not willing to undergo the treatments necessary to get well. Someone who refuses to see that they are ill or, seeing it, nevertheless refuses to abandon unhealthy living and submit to potentially painful surgery or distasteful drugs, is not a valid subject of the philosophical address. Philosophical *logos* cannot become *ergon* where it meets with a refusal to listen. He writes, “if [Plato’s] discourse in Sicily remained an empty *logos*, it is precisely because this listening did not take place” (236). Important for my later argument, I note that Foucault has introduced a subjective criteria for the “reality” of the philosophical *logos*: significantly, he leaves us to conclude that philosophical *logos* is more than mere words for some– for those with the appropriate will– and yet will be experienced as mere words for others– the obstinate or whoever, for whatever reason, is not suitable for the philosophical address at that time. This, I claim, coheres with a theme quite consciously chosen by Plato in his dramatic representations: the dependency of the caliber of the conversation on the maturity of the interlocutor, as well as that of obstinacy among Socrates’ interlocutors and the importance of the accusation that Socrates was himself a man of “only *logos*,” a type of sophist who could make “the worse into the stronger argument” (*Apology,* 19b).

It is with the discussion of medicine and the necessity of a good will that the theme of persuasion remerges, since, Foucault claims, part of the art of medicine includes diagnosing the illness properly by way of interlocution with the patient about his experiences of his body and then ensuring his assent to a prescribed regimen that aims at the restoration of health (232). He writes, “good medicine, the great, free medicine, is therefore an art of dialogue and persuasion” (232). So we see that the need for philosophy to be persuasive has not entirely disappeared; rather, it ought to be persuasive about what is necessary for the health of the subject. Foucault notes that health is defined here as a continuous state. The philosopher-physician is not concerned with healing a single ailment, but the entire regime that arises on account of, and yet regulates and conditions, the patient’s daily life. Second, if philosophy-as-medicine is an art of dialogue and persuasion about, not “the truth of truth” but rather about the *politeia* of the soul (subject), we are given a clear starting point for reflecting on the dialogic form of Platonic writing. Philosophy-as-medicine addresses the subject as he lives his daily life (232). This requires the subject be honest about the habits and actions that compose his daily life; it requires that his mode of life be clear. Moreover, it requires he be willing to get better and so be willing to listen**.** Kenneth M. Sayre notes that there are “few dialogues about their ‘officially announced’ topics” (Sayre, 109). This fact requires, he claims, that we maintain a “firm fix on the issues *behind* a given conversation” (109 [italics added]). As we will see, what is in many cases “behind” the issue ostensibly at stake in a dialogue is the “mode of being” of its participants, the admission of which mode Socrates skillfully aims at in the course of an investigation into a given topic.[[26]](#footnote-26) At the very least, how the question at hand bears on the mode of being one *ought* to take is frequently “behind” what might appear to be merely at stake intellectually.

From the fact that philosophical *logos* requires an open, philosophical will, Foucault begins to draw a rather controversial conclusion, writing:

Philosophy always presupposes philosophy; philosophy cannot talk to itself alone; philosophy cannot put itself forward as violence; philosophy cannot appear as the table of laws; philosophy cannot be written and cannot circulate as a kind of writing which falls into any every hand (235-36).

Philosophy cannot be written? Before we move to the consideration of the insufficiency of *logos* for expressing philosophical truths we should consider where the *ergon* that Plato needed to “put his hand to” finally ends up in Foucault’s analysis: in the *pragmata* of philosophy that no longer has any clear dependency on discourse (*logos*). He derives this conclusion from a problem presented by the requirement of the “patient’s” good will: how can the philosopher recognize that the addressee is truly willing to listen? To answer this Foucault quotes Plato: “one must show tyrants… what philosophical work is in its full extent, its peculiar character, its difficulties, and the hard work it demands” (238). In Foucault’s analysis of this portion of the *Seventh Letter*, Plato attempts to forefend the possibility that his lofty sounding philosophical discourse will be aped by those who merely want to appear philosophical *en logōi*  (in words) by showing them all the hard work that *real* philosophical activity involves– its *pragmata*. Foucault calls this *pragmata*, these practices, “philosophy’s reality” (242) once more. The practices are multiple and amount to a “path” that the aspirant must demonstrate his willingness to choose and prove he is capable of following (239). The practices, which are not specified, aim at the inculcation of philosophical abilities that will be applied constantly (240). Moreover, the practices, being in a certain manner *philosophy itself*, are nothing short of “ that *way* of life that gives…a ready intelligence, a tenacious memory, and skill in reasoning [340b]” (239, italics added by me). They are clearly components of an *askēsis*, or a rigorous exercise of the self on self.

Importantly for Foucault, philosophy as a way of life means philosophy is a *permanent* and “uninterrupted effort” that does not bring one out and “above” the quotidian world– as if out and up from a cave–to the contrary, it constantly engages it (240). In fact, Foucault makes this characterization of philosophy in deliberate contradistinction to what he sees as the implications of Plato’s *Alcibiades* (240-242)– a text that he later claims “marked the origin of Western metaphysics” (CT, 246). As Foucault understands the *Alcibiades*,[[27]](#footnote-27) philosophical activity consists in contemplating the nature of the soul and, with it and in it, the divine and the world of pure truth “beyond.” The *Alcibiades*, he claims,founded “the principle of the other world” (CT, 246). The relationship between philosophy and political action in such a scheme is one of ascent and descent: the philosopher is elevated above the mundane world of political activity, learns to behold the truth, and then returns having seen what is necessary for good governance. This is obviously the tradition that Foucault wishes to oppose. The *Seventh Letter*, however, evinces a completely different conception of philosophy. It involves no such ascent to an “other world.” The *pragmata* is permanent, an “arduous labor that must be maintained,” it is “the practice of daily life…[a] kind of day by day activity;” it is a “way and an application” (241). Soon after, he shows the theory of knowledge that underpins this *pragmata* is likewise an “exercise, effort, work” (254). The obvious implication is that, where a metaphysical “other world” determines the conception of philosophy’s reality, *this* world is left behind and philosophical activity risks becoming a static, not a constant, practice since it is capable of securing truth once and for all in a “vision.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Moreover, it equips the philosopher who returns from the world “above” to come down with laws already in hand, having seen the truth in its eternal stability.[[29]](#footnote-29) His task will be to translate what he sees above to what is below, perhaps above all by its formulation in *logos*.

The *pragmata* of the *Seventh Letter*, however, is not about a “conversion of the gaze”(241); it is not about a vision. It will not be a description or a formulation of the truth to be handed on; to the contrary, it is a practice of philosophy that is evidently done outside the realm of *logos*. Foucault writes,

Earlier, based on the previous passage, I referred to the circle of listening, which consists in philosophical truth-telling…presupposing the other’s willingness to listen. Here, we have another, completely different circle, which is no longer the circle of the other, but the circle of oneself. In fact, it is a matter of the reality of philosophy being found, recognized, effectuated, only in the practice of philosophy. The reality of philosophy is its practice. More exactly…the reality of philosophy is not its practice as the practice of *logos* (242).

What he further goes on to say is that at stake in these practices is ultimately “the relation to self, in the work of self on self” (242), which is a valid deduction from Plato’s remark that philosophy is “a way of life” that gives one the very abilities that make philosophizing possible.

How it might be that the same philosopher, Plato, elucidates two such different conceptions of philosophy is not a question Foucault raises here; why Plato might teach a “conversion of the gaze” in the *Alcibiades* but the silent practice of a “way” in the *Seventh Letter* should raise questions about the cohesiveness of Plato’s thought. It is not my purpose here to attempt to sort through Foucault’s multiple Platos, though it is safe to assume Foucault had reasoned answers for such a question. For my purposes, the opposition between the *Alcibiades* and the *Seventh Letter* is notable because it will factor into my argument in the next chapter, where I will show that the opposition between a metaphysical conception of philosophy and a practical one is not as stark as Foucault suggests, at least not on the basis of the *Seventh Letter*.

To resume: initially, Foucault had defined philosophy’s reality as the test it undergoes in its address to power. It turned out that this address was more like that of a physician than a lawgiver. Now, he defines its reality as its practices, not the modality of its *logos*. Does philosophy have two realities? Series editor, Arnold Davidson, phrases it as such when he writes in the Course Summary: “philosophy’s reality will be found in this active confrontation with power. Philosophy finds a second reality in a constant practice of the soul” (383). But are these two “circles”– one of listening and truth-telling, the other of “silent” practices–necessarily distinguished? Do we sense in them an opposition or a tension? When Davidson writes that Foucault finds in Plato “a silent work of self on self which disqualifies all *logos*, written or oral,” (383) are we left to conclude that philosophy’s “first” reality is disqualified by its “second”?

This is the fundamental consideration at stake as we move into Foucault’s discussion, now with the help of other scholars of Plato, about what Plato might mean by “disqualifying” *logos*, as the *Seventh Letter* certainly appears to do, and exactly how “disqualifying *logos,* written or oral” also amounts to qualifying *logos* in the form of the written *logos* of the Platonic dialogue. But before we move proceed, we should summarize what we have found about the philosophical *ergon* as it will pertain to the written dialogue: for Foucault, philosophical *logos* is always searching for an open “philosophical will” in another and, if it finds one, becomes *ergon* there when it addresses this other concerning his very manner of life– his relationship with himself– with a view to inducing him to engage in daily practices that will transform his very mode of being for the good. Both the practices themselves and the address that aims to induce them may be called “philosophy’s reality.” This philosophical *logos-ergon* is not fundamentally about persuasion, not about “the truth of truth” or the nature of things; if it speaks of such things, it might be reasonable to suppose they are spoken of to the extent they are relevant to the primary aim: to the extent they shape the possible modes of life one may adopt. Rather, this *logos-ergon* concerns the truth of the subject of political action, or perhaps the subject of action altogether. Philosophy is always looking for a receptive and inquiring soul that is willing to undergo “experiences” in the form of “practices” and discourses that will unsettle its previous understanding of the world to the extent such understanding belongs to and gives rise to the “mode of being” that philosophical discourse inherently challenges. If Dionysius needed philosophy, it was because he needed, as the subject of political action, to be changed into the sort of subject who could see and execute that action in accordance with “certain principles of law of government;” namely, the principles that flow from the true definition of justice that can be seen from philosophy’s heights alone (325a). However, the role of *logos* in searching for the truth, and the role of *ergon* and “practices” in discovering the want of that truth for the subject, do not easily sit side by side. They are in a tension, so that the need for one (*ergon*) can also be said to disqualify the other (*logos*). Whether the subject finds the truth he needs in the philosophical address, or in the “silent” practices that they induce, will have to be considered in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: The Weakness of *Logos*

One of the surprising outcomes of Foucault’s study in the *Government of Self* is its stark contradiction of Jacques Derrida’s thesis[[30]](#footnote-30) that Plato’s thought involves a “logocentrism” since become characteristic of the Western philosophical tradition. Foucault’s reading of the critique of *logos* in the *Seventh Letter*, which will direct him to those famous passages critiquing writing in the *Phaedrus*, leads Foucault to claim that Plato’s “great refusal of writing” heralds “not something like the advent of a logocentrism in Western philosophy” but rather signifies “a refusal” of *logos* made “in the name of something positive… in the name of a certain painstaking mode of relationship of self to self” (254).[[31]](#footnote-31)

Once again we can see the tension between the two “realities” of philosophy that Foucault claimed to uncover above: the “work” that is the *pragmata* of philosophy undertaken to alter the self’s modality necessarily involves a refusal not only of writing but of *logos* altogether. First, what is this “great refusal of writing” that Foucault speaks of?

It was mentioned above that Plato had a “test” that he would apply to people like Dionysius in order to see if they truly possessed an open “philosophical will.” This “test” involved showing such a person the demanding *pragmata* of philosophy. Foucault draws further attention to this when he notes that Dionysius, according to the *Seventh Letter*, failed this test on very interesting grounds: he failed in part because he was found to have written his own treatise on philosophy (246 [341b]).[[32]](#footnote-32) The reasons why Plato interprets this as a failure of the education of Dionysius are multiple and not all are connected to a problematization of *logos*. Nonetheless, in elaborating them Foucault finds in Plato “a particular theory of knowledge” (245) that has relevance both for his understanding of philosophy as an “art of life” and my understanding of Plato’s philosophical reasons for choosing the dialogue form.

The first reason that Foucault notes that Dionysius “failed” was his refusal to take that arduous “way” of philosophy since he already felt he “knew the most important things” (246). To expand somewhat on the passages Foucault makes use of: Plato himself notes that Dionysius was “extraordinarily vain” (338d) and ambitious, yet he was apparently indolent and unwilling to apply himself to the real work that philosophy requires. Dionysius’ character was probed by Plato over the course of two visits and, though he failed to become truly philosophical the first time, Plato eventually returned a second with the hope that his condition had improved. Dionysius had reportedly been exposed to many philosophical conversations (342b) and, having a natural aptitude for learning (338d), could easily appear knowledgeable to certain interlocutors whose heads were “full of…half-understood doctrines” (338d). Before such persons, Dionysius appeared to have mastered Plato’s thought (338d), though Plato seems to have later humbled him (338e) when showing him he in fact “had learned nothing during [his] stay” (338e). Yet, this appears only to have further pricked his ambition to appear philosophical, for even then, after accepting this rebuke, he persisted in the belief that he “knew the most important things,” and Plato did not “explain everything to him” nor “did he ask” (342b). It is after this admission–that Dionysius did not even request the fullness of Plato “teachings”[[33]](#footnote-33)–that Plato mentions he heard a rumor that Dionysius “wrote a book on the matters we talked about, putting it forward as his own teaching, not what he had learned from me” (341b). Plato is not certain whether that is true, but the reader is left with the impression, based on Dionysius’s character, that it is quite believable. In Foucault’s reading, Plato takes the report that Dionysius had written his own treatise on philosophy as a “sign *a posteriori*” (246) that the second attempt to habilitate Dionysius was bound to fail. Besides the fact that Dionysius had been presenting Plato’s teachings as his own, why was this a sign of failure? It is because, as Plato claims and Foucault notes, the knowledge Plato had been attempting to impart to him “is not something that can be put into words like other sciences” (341c).

The fact that Dionysius wrote a treatise on philosophy not only shows his vanity in thinking he was already a true authority on what philosophy is, it not only shows that his desire to *appear* philosophical took precedence over his desire to be so, but it also, and especially for Foucault’s purposes, shows he misunderstood *fundamentally* what sort of knowledge philosophical knowledge is. This interests Foucault greatly because it shows that the object of philosophical activity is not the production of something like a scientific discourse nor, in Plato’s view, can it be. Foucault does not note, though it seems highly relevant, that Plato further writes: “there are certain others [who have] also written on these same matters; but who they are they themselves do not know” (341b). What exactly Dionysius’s treatise was about, or what “these same matters” that others have also written about are in their specifics, we are not told by Plato.[[34]](#footnote-34) However, that these people, in so writing, show “they themselves do not know…who they are” evidently links self-knowledge to a certain prudence about what can or may be talked about and when. Dionysius’s writings were evidence of a form of self-neglect. In writing a treatise, if indeed he did, Dionysius proved to Plato he was lacking in self-knowledge, and from this we can infer that understanding what philosophical knowledge actually is, is also part of the enterprise of knowing oneself. Neither can the self, it seems, be understood in words like those suited for a scientific discourse (*mathēmata*).

The priority that Plato gives the teacher-pupil relationship in the delivering of a philosophical teaching is made clear here: this knowledge cannot be put into words like a science, “but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly like a light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself” (341c). While the following implication is something Foucault does not give attention to, we can see in this statement something that might inform the performance of Socrates’ “learned ignorance” in the dialogues: the teacher must also be in pursuit of the subject even while he is imparting knowledge to the student about it; his horizon must remain open.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Plato further writes, “there is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one” (341c). Moreover, lest we think Plato applies this only to himself, he writes further on in the letter that what is serious pertaining to “high matters” is never to be written down and that the person who does so is either not expressing his most serious thoughts or he has “lost his wits” (344c-e). Rosemary Desjardins, referring to these same passages and others in her essay, “Why Dialogues? Plato’s Serious Play” (1988), asks:

Even on a first reading it must surely seem odd that, whereas on the one hand we have Plato’s notorious strictures against all written works, on the other he has himself bequeathed to us a voluminous literary legacy. What are we to make of this? How can it be that Plato apparently worked and painstakingly reworked his dialogues[[36]](#footnote-36)– and yet at the same time maintained that every serious person in dealing with serious subjects carefully avoids writing? (Desjardins, 110).

Indeed, if Plato has written nothing “serious,” what are we to make of his dialogues? What could it mean to imply that they are not serious writings about “high matters”? Foucault, in bringing attention to the Platonic “disqualification” of writing found in the passages above, side-steps that obvious question; yet his analysis of this “disqualification” does exclude him definitely from at least one camp that seeks to answer such a question.

Kenneth M. Sayre, in his “Plato’s Dialogues in Light of the *Seventh Letter*” (1988), notes the problem above and that tells the reader that one of its solutions has been to assert that Plato reserved all his “serious teaching” for oral instruction alone “within the Academy” (Sayre, 93). Indeed, something like this might seem to be suggested by the priority that Plato has given to the teacher-pupil relationship, its necessarily oral character, and its role in the “long-continued intercourse” that causes knowledge to burst forth like a flame. That Plato kept his “serious teachings” separate from the dialogues, is a proposition held by the “esoteric position” on the content of Platonic philosophy and is defended by “the German scholars Gaiser and Krämer, among others” (Sayre, 93). According to the esoteric position, the primary source for what we can know about Plato’s esoteric teachings is found in the report of Aristotle, whose report of the principles of Platonic philosophy are evidently unlike anything found in the dialogues and so indicate he was the recipient of a separate oral instruction (Sayre, 93). In partial opposition to this, Harold F. Cherniss and others have claimed that Aristotle derived these principles from the dialogues themselves, albeit they claim he misunderstood those writings and so gave us a picture of Platonic philosophy that is actually incompatible with the dialogues. Others, like Sayre himself, claim that the portrait of Platonic philosophy given by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* is discernible from the dialogues *if one knows how to look* (Sayre, 94). In any case, two positions presume Plato attempted to impart, either orally, in writing, or both, a singular philosophical system. Sayre does not use the word system, but claims that Plato teaches a series of “principles” that are identified by Aristotle.

Yet another position taken, in the same anthology *Platonic Writings/ Platonic Readings* (1988) in which we find both Desjardins and Sayre, is that of Alan C. Bowen. Bowen claims that looking for a Platonic system of thought lying behind all the dialogues taken together is sought after in vain. He writes, “there is no compelling reason to require that philosophy be systematic” (Bowen, 59); “the dialogues themselves *are not witness to Plato’s philosophical thought*; they are not to be used as a means for constructing and verifying some conception of Platonic philosophy” (Bowen, 59 [italics added]). Rather, Bowen proposes that Plato’s dialogues be read under a dual disciplinary method: one method reads the dialogues as dramatic literature no differently from how one would study a Euripdean tragedy or an Aristophanic comedy (Bowen, 60). This he calls the philological approach. The second, and accompanying method, is a reflection on the philosophical value of the performed conversation; a reflection that is itself a dialogue with the dialogue, an interaction with all the characters about the explicit and implicit questions the dialogue is found to raise. Such a reflection *is itself an act of philosophy*. Bowen reminds: “neither [method] involves interpreting Plato’s philosophical thought: philologists interpret Plato’s texts and philosophers think with the text as a guide” (Bowen, 60).

This is a brief outline of only a few possible positions about deriving the content of “Plato’s philosophy” from writings whose author denies that philosophy may be “seriously” transmitted by the written word (or the word at all). As the reader can surely infer, trying to show “what Plato actually thought (and taught)” is to step into a minefield that I presently lack the means to navigate. As it pertains to Foucault, and as I have already noted, he does not outline his method for investigating Plato’s thought *as Plato’s* *thought* and it would be exceedingly difficult to classify him among a “taxonomy of positions” in “the history of Platonic interpretation.”[[37]](#footnote-37) We may, however, definitively exclude Foucault from the “esoteric position” on the basis of his own remarks and the content of his conclusions about what motivates the “disqualification” of *logos* and how such a disqualification relates to the rationale behind philosophy as an ascetic practice.

The “disqualification” of *logos* is evidently a consequence of Plato’s theory of knowledge, whose general outline is given in a somewhat perplexing passage that may raise more questions than it answers. From 342a to 344c Plato goes to “somewhat greater length” (342a) to explain why it is the case that true philosophical knowledge “cannot be put into words like other sciences” (341c). He writes: “there is a true doctrine that confutes anyone who has presumed to write anything whatever on such subjects, a doctrine that I have often expounded…For every real being, there are three things necessary if knowledge of it is to be acquired: first the name, second the image, third the definition; knowledge comes fourth, and in the fifth place we must put the object itself, the knowable and truly real being” (342a-b).

Foucault notes the difficulty of the text in question and is content to bring out only some aspects of it as it appears relevant “for our problem” (249) i.e., the *ergon* of philosophy as the “work of self.” What we can see in the above is that knowledge is the fourth category, for which Foucault notes Plato has used the word *epistēmē* and which Foucault himself calls “the science”. Importantly, there is a fifth category that designates the “being” (*to on*) of the thing and stands beyond its *epistēmē.* Foucault schematically traces Plato’s description of what is involved in each of the five categories, following Plato’s example of a circle. Foucault notes how, for each category– be it name (*onoma*), definition, (which Foucault calls “*logos* in the strict sense”[247]), image (*eidōlon*) or *epistēmē*–knowledge in the sense of “the being of the thing” does not reside. This is because “name, definition and image” are all “foreign to the actual nature of the [thing (the circle)]” (250) and the fourth (*epistēmē*), which results from the possession of the three (name, definition and image), “does not [actually] reside in the outside world” (250). Foucault continues, “words are sounds [i.e., name and definition], drawn shapes [i.e., the figure of the circle] are material things. This fourth element, *epistemē*, resides only in the soul” (250). Since *epistēmē*, and right opinion with it, are internal and, moreover, resultant of the elements which are in no way the “thing itself,” *epistēmē* cannot be knowledge of “the very being of the thing” which resides outside of the soul. How, then, might we have knowledge in the fifth sense? We, acquire it, Foucault observes:

Through the coming and going, the ascent and descent through the four other degrees of knowledge and through the instruments that characterize these other forms of knowledge. In this way, by rising from the name to the definition, from the definition to the image, and from the image to the *epistemē* (to the knowledge), and then going back down again, and then rising again, we will gradually succeed in grasping the fifth form of knowledge of the very being (the *to on*) of the circle and of the other things we wish to know (251).

This process of going back and forth, up and down, is a kind of rubbing that produces a “friction” whose imagery evidently refers back to the image of the self-sustaining “flame” of knowledge that Plato cited earlier (341c-d). The act of ascent and descent, a numerically unfixed repetition of *exitus* and *reditus* whose tension engendered by the movement will eventually burst forth in knowledge of being is, Foucault notes, what Plato calls *tribē* (friction). In the more general sense, Foucault writes, *tribē* “is also everything which is exercise, training. It is everything through which one gets used to something, practices something. Consequently”, he writes, “you see that the fifth kind of knowledge is absolutely different from the four other degrees of knowledge” and he continues “this final knowledge is arrived at and acquired only through a constant perpetual practice of rubbing or friction between the other modes of knowledge” (251).

We can see how Foucault is framing Plato’s theory of knowledge so that it appears consonant with his earlier comments on the *pragmata* of philosophy as a series of arduous, non-discursive practices that are engaged in the midst of daily life. I think he is correct in doing so. Foucault’s emphasis is on the reality of philosophy as an ever unfinished task, telling us that we have now come to what he calls “the third circle.” The first circle was philosophy’s reality as a discourse that is listened to, the second was its practices, the third is now the character of its knowledge, a knowledge arrived at “only through the unremitting and continuous practice of the other modes of knowledge” (252).

With the above we can see what would exclude Foucault from the “esoteric” position on the content of Plato’s philosophy: his analysis of these passages from the *Seventh Letter* shows that oral communication does not necessarily escape the problem inherent to the words (names, definitions) and images that compose the *epistēmē* that resides in the soul. The problem evidently resides less in the mode of the address of the philosopher than in the subject who would receive that address: unless he [the subject] engages in a continuous practice of going back and forth between all the elements that constitute knowledge, he will never grasp the being of anything. Consequently, we must infer that received spoken language is just as vulnerable to giving the mere *appearance* of communicating true knowledge as would written language be. The onus of acquiring knowledge lies on the subject of the philosophical address; and that, not only in his willingness to listen but also in his willingness to apply himself time and time again to the work that makes knowledge in the fifth sense possible. Clearly, this work would be experienced as destabilizing for the knowing subject, since it would require letting go, without losing sight of, the knowledge one thinks one has as one climbs back up the ladder to the beginning and then back down again, and so on, always testing each element against the next until knowledge of being blossoms forth. We may also conclude that this action in the pursuit of knowledge cannot but result in the problematization of action with respect to life in the world: if we do not know the being of something, we do not know how we ought to relate to it. Foucault’s discovery of the daily, earthly *pragmata* at the heart of the *Seventh Letter* does not resolve the tension between the paralyzing “action” of critical thought and life’s constant demand for immediacy.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Consequently, the implication is not that Plato saved his “true philosophy” for private lessons, the which were never to be written down, but that the “true content” of Plato’s philosophy only becomes apparent to those who have engaged in “the unremitting and continuous practice of…[all the] modes of knowledge” (252). The modus operandi of Plato’s philosophy begins to look like a series of discursive strategies that are aimed at inducing the subject to transcend the discursive field without abandoning it.[[39]](#footnote-39)The distinction between esoteric and exoteric knowledge begins to dissolve, since the depth might lie on the surface or the surface might be all that is encountered of the depth. To whatever extent Platonic philosophy is concerned with acquiring knowledge in the fourth sense (the true definition, the true opinion), this is not its highest aim. Since oral language, without the self-application of the subject, is, like the written, only able to communicate up to the fourth-level of knowledge, Foucault can reject Derrida’s conclusion about the logocentrism of Platonic thought: if Plato himself thought there were reasons to prize oral conversation above writing, nonetheless both written and spoken speech are found deficient in the problematization of *logos* itself that Foucault has found operating in the *Seventh Letter–* as Foucault concludes at the end the lecture on 16 February (254-44). Many scholars have come to the same conclusion.[[40]](#footnote-40) Furthermore, if the problem inherent to *logos* is present in both written and oral speech, then we are left to conclude the problem is equally inherent to that which makes use of both written and oral speech: the subject himself. The necessity of this conclusion is, I think, what ultimately enables Foucault to say that we see here “not the advent of a logocentrism” but rather “a philosophy whose very reality would be the practice of self on self” (254).

Yet we might wonder whether Foucault has adequately shown that it is the subject who is at stake with respect to Plato’s theory of knowledge discussed above. Has he really shown that Plato’s theory of knowledge has any bearing on the *pragmata* of philosophy beyond the fact that both involve a “constant practice,” which might, for all that, amount to a superficial similarity? What exactly is it about the subject that would unite the “practices” that amount to philosophy’s “way,” and which are aimed at transforming the “mode of being” and way of life of the practitioner, and the “unremitting” practice through the word, image and science that issues in knowledge of being? My suggestion about why the problem of knowledge relates to the problem of the self is that the “problem” with *logos* *is also* a “problem” with the subject. Foucault himself does not say this, though it is a conclusion I think we can deduce from his remarks and which I myself have reached through the assistance of an essay by Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Foucault’s unwillingness to make theoretically clear what the subject exactly is in his studies since at least *The Use of Pleasure[[41]](#footnote-41)* might be behind his failure to formulate a clear bridge between Plato’s theory of knowledge and the practices of self that Foucault would like to connect to it. An indication of how they connect *for Plato* might be found in an essay by Gadamer written in consideration of the same passages from the *Seventh Letter*. With the essay from Gadamer I aim to supplement the link that Foucault establishes between Plato's refusal of writing and Foucault’s claim that philosophy must become a “work of self on self.” Since it is obvious that the prohibition against writing cannot be absolute, Foucault's identification of a transfer of the onus of philosophy’s veridication from *logos* alone to its qualification in *ergon* raises the question not only of how a written text can successfully straddle the *logos/ ergon* divide so as to effectively be both, but also why this should be philosophy's task at all. As we will see, the two questions are connected. If it remains true, after all, that philosophy is a quest for knowledge, what actually prevents allowing it from being about “the truth of truth”? Why is it philosophy’s business to become practice in the world of action? Foucault’s lectures in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* claimed that, for ancient philosophy, the subject needed to modify himself in order to gain access to truth. Part of the advantage of reading Plato with Foucault then is that Foucault draws our attention to the awareness of such a need in Plato's thought; at least, for those of us who were inclined in our readings of Plato to let the *mathēsis* (the learning of teachings) cover over the requirements of *askēsis*. How Plato conceived of such a modification and why will help us understand how the dialogues strive to involve their reader in the “work of the self” that Foucault shows is at the heart of ancient philosophy.

Gadamer’s “Dialectic and Sophism in Plato’s *Seventh Letter,*” originally published in 1962 and appearing in English in the collection *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato* (1980), a collection originally published in German in 1968. For the sake of my argument I will only focus on a few claims. What is particularly pertinent in the essay are remarks on the *media* through which knowledge is obtained– what Gadamer calls “means, media, *momenta*” (Gadamer 99)– and which Foucault likewise gave some attention above when he noted that everything that composes the knowledge of a circle is “extraneous to the circle itself” (250). The name “circle” is arbitrary, the definition of the circle is made up “only of names and verbs” (250 [342b]), and the image of the circle traced, for example, in the sand is “made up of elements which are only short straight lines, which are obviously contrary to the nature of the circle” (250). Everything is foreign to the circle, yet it comes together as *epistēmē–*which itself resides, not extraneously, but only in the soul (250). Gadamer reflects on this more substantially than does Foucault. As Gadamer understands Plato in the *Seventh Letter*, that which renders the *logos* “weak” (342d) is no less than that which makes each of the *media* (words, images, *epistēmē*) weak. The problem is precisely that “all these means *assert themselves as whatever they are*, and in pushing to the fore, as it were, they suppress that which is displayed in them” (Gadamer, 105[italics added]). Gadamer writes that this is most easily understood when considering the example of the figure of the circle, which, as Foucault also notes, is drawn by straight, albeit short, lines: i.e., that which is absolutely contrary to what a circle is, is also that which composes it (343a).[[42]](#footnote-42)Gadamer writes:

Each of these four means has a tendency to bring a reality of a specific sort to the fore instead of the reality which was supposed to be displayed in word or discussion, intuition or insight. They all have an intrinsic distortion tendency, so to speak. In the process of bringing something else into (presence) they would assert themselves as whatever particular thing they are instead of fading out of view. For they are all something besides the thing they are presenting (Gadamer, 105).

The problem, evidently, is mediation. We “know” things only through the mediation of other things that are not that thing we seek to know. However, it becomes more complicated when we factor in the insight that we ourselves *are also a medium* and therefore necessarily *get in the way of ourselves*. Specifically, Gamader raises the problem of “the soul,” to the extent that it is the site of the residence of *epistēmē*, when he interprets Plato’s words as meaning:

Insights too do not belong to true reality, but to becoming (*genesis*). They are part of our intellect’s stream of life. They emerge and recede (Gadamer, 103).

*Epistēmē* does not amount to the knowledge of “true being” since the very material which it is pressed upon belongs to the realm of “becoming” and so is something like the reflection of the colors and shapes of trees on slow moving waters. The *epistēmē*, composed of already distorted elements, is itself further distorted through the deficiency of the medium by which it is grasped, i.e., the intellect in the soul. Gadamer writes: “even…our grasp of a mathematical theorem in our thought is not independent of our intellect. It is part of the latter and it is not certain that I can reproduce the theorem in my thought even if I do ‘know’ it. Like any thought, it takes part in coming-into-being and passing-away and in being other than itself. Unlike the thing itself, science in the soul is not timeless” (103). Thus he concludes,

The weakness of the logoi, which is the weakness of all four [*media*], is precisely the weakness of our intellect itself which depends upon them. They themselves offer no assurance that the thing itself is there in its true ‘disconcealedness’ (Gadamer, 105).

In Foucault’s language, we might say the problem of words has become the problem of the self and the question of what must necessarily be done in order for the subject to gain access to truth. While Foucault observes that access to the truth is contingent on the practices of the subject, Gadamer gives some indication of why this might be so. If the weakness of the *logoi* is also the weakness of the human soul,[[43]](#footnote-43) and if both are so because they equally participate in the movement of “coming-into-being and passing-away,” then we may conclude that the attempt to acquire knowledge of something “in its [stable] being” is also an attempt at human self-overcoming in our finitude. It requires the recognition of our limitations, but not in order to remain merely slack-jaw before them, but also to recognize the way in which they condition any attempt to overcome them. Just as the deficiency of words might be “overcome” through a certain inflected awareness of those words’ very deficiency (as I will argue the dialogues are intended to do), so might the becoming-soul strive after what has “being” in *a way* that duly acknowledges the becoming-status of the medium in which that “being” is sought after.[[44]](#footnote-44) The implication is that knowledge can only be sought in a *modality* that is conditioned not only by the awareness of the malleable and unstable quality of language, but also the malleable and unstable quality of the self. The continuous movement back and forth, up and down, through all the four *media* that compose knowledge is a constancy of movement that compensates for the lack of constancy in the nature of *what composes us* as well as everything in which we live and move.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Coming from Gadamer’s angle, Foucault’s emphasis on the earthly, quotidian and ascetic nature of the labor of philosophical activity in the letter– which he starkly opposes to the detached, celestial gaze of Platonist contemplation (240-241)– must look something like Foucault’s unwitting articulation of becoming as the practices of being. It cannot be ignored that the theory of knowledge on which Foucault relies in showing us that philosophy “refuses” *logos* in the name of the “positive” work of the self (254) clearly indicates that the object of knowledge is some “eternal verity,” whose contemplation Foucault protests is not entailed by the practices of philosophy he is uncovering (241). Foucault has simply allowed himself to use the language of “being” (251) when articulating the relevance of Plato’s theory of knowledge for practice without letting it trouble him precisely when it ought.[[46]](#footnote-46) The difference, however, between the caricature of Platonist contemplation as inactively bearing witness to the eternal truth, and the actual characterization of philosophical knowledge that the letter contains, is that the latter problematizes access to that truth to such an extent that there is no hope of “seeing” it unless one undergoes the rigorous program that Foucault has been teasing out. What I think Foucault has missed, but with Gadamer we can see, is the fact that the tension which the *tribē* seeks to create in the “rubbing together” is the co-opting of an already present tension that exists naturally: the tension between being and becoming. It isn’t necessary to indulge in too much metaphysical speculation to suggest that the benefit of reading Foucault’s Plato with Gadamer is that we may conclude that the *Seventh Letter*’s theory of knowledge, which unabashedly identifies “being” rather than “quality” as the highest object of knowledge, actually facilitates rather than detracts from the conception of philosophy as an activity, as a practice of self, and as a way of life. Whatever this “knowledge” is that Plato prizes, the difficulty in attaining it, the level of the effort required, and the lack of any direct access to it, i.e., mystical or revelatory, means not only that few will acquire it, but that those who do are not able to transmit that knowledge in a book or a lecture. The “metaphysical portrait” of the world to which the philosopher may attain cannot become a collective object of idolatry because it cannot be communicated as *dogmata*: it belongs to that level of knowledge whose problematic accessibility through the doorways of words, image, concept and, as Gadamer adds, the intellect in the soul, has made all language– whether written or oral– deficient. I will consider the question of dogma or “doctrine” more extensively below.

First I would like to inquire in what specific sense Plato’s theory of knowledge as “effort and work” might bear on a “practice of self” or one’s “mode of being” beyond an *askēsis* of cognition. If we consider it true that we act based on what we think we know, then whenever we suspend confidence in the knowledge we think we have, action based on that knowledge is impeded in theory if not in fact. To the extent that the practice of critical thinking, of the sort Plato prizes in the *Seventh Letter*, destabilizes the epistemic co-ordinates on which the subject’s world rests, and through which his own self and others are evaluated/ valued, the practice of critical thought must be destabilizing for the subject, as I already noted above; an instability that can only be resolved when that “self-nourishing flame” of knowledge is finally lit. One who thinks he does not know will eventually begin to live as though he did not know. We have to recall that Plato has just defined knowledge of the essential “being” of a thing as neither a given *nor a give-able*;*[[47]](#footnote-47)* it can be communicated neither in written nor oral formulations, but only acquired through the arduous process he details. We should not miss the critique of any convention-based order this necessarily, if inadvertently, entails: accepting this theory of knowledge could possibly render one’s entire education thus far inadequate and would force one to consider whether one had in fact yet attained true knowledge of anything at all. All inherited insights into social and political life, however seemingly true and precise, would have to be put to the test and, even where found sufficiently precise, would still be submitted to this practice of “rubbing” the names, images and definitions together. The epistemic co-ordinates that condition the subject’s experience of itself and its society would be shaken.

The question raised by this consideration is: what is the way of life that is suitably characterized by a thirst for knowledge that combines an awareness of the difficulty of obtaining knowledge, of one’s own deficient condition as a medium of knowledge, and one’s own present ignorance, while simultaneously allowing one to “test” everything in a constant manner without abandoning the fundamental signposts of the truly “fair, just, and good:” those “things” which were inherited as conventional formulations but are nonetheless necessary to preserve one’s goodness, even if one does not “know” them?[[48]](#footnote-48) Such a way of life would have to be an art of life, a *technē tou biou*. That the practices of knowledge must become some sort of “art of life” becomes evident where Plato writes that knowledge of something “naturally good” is very difficult to attain to even for a “naturally good” person (343e). The situation is more difficult for the person whose nature is “defective,” as is, Plato writes, “that of most men.” People with a deficient nature with respect to “the acquisition of knowledge and the so called virtues,” and whose “qualities have been corrupted,” could not even be made to see “by Lycenus” himself (343e).[[49]](#footnote-49)

There is much to consider in these brief remarks: Plato is claiming that most people do not have the natural skills to acquire knowledge of the virtues, which emerge in this portion of the letter as really the fundamental things worth knowing. Presumably, he means they lack the intellectual capacity to grasp them in their “being” and not the inability to practice them in some sense. This raises questions about the Socratic equivocation of virtue and knowledge that I cannot pursue here. However, it seems sufficiently clear that there might be some hope for those whose nature in this respect has to be developed or honed a little, though they are at a disadvantage to those who have such skills naturally. It is the third category, those “whose qualities have been corrupted,” for whom there does not even exist a semblance of a hope, whether or not they have the strength of intellect. Plato writes,

Neither quickness of learning, nor a good memory can make a man see when his nature is not akin to the object, for this knowledge never takes root in an alien nature; so that no man who is not naturally inclined and akin to justice and all other forms of excellence… will ever attain the truth that is attainable about virtue (344a).

I recall that both “quickness of learning” and “a good memory” belong to the abilities whose honing was part of the purpose in undertaking the *pragmata* of philosophy to which Foucault gave attention and which were mentioned in an earlier portion of the letter. Here Plato declares that these abilities are not actually what allow one to acquire knowledge of a thing, and we are quite clearly no longer talking about a circle; rather, knowledge of the fundamental things of the sort needed for knowing “what sort of [person] one should be and what way one must follow to go through life best.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Evidently, if one wants knowledge of a virtue one must already have a nature akin to that virtue. Of course, one possible reading of this portion of the letter is that Plato is separating the sheep from the goats, so to speak. We, who are already akin to the just and the good, have some hope of truly knowing it; those other vice ridden people, however, do not. In my opinion, we should not be fooled into thinking that we ourselves suffer no “corruption” or are free from the danger of it. I think Plato is relying on the fact that most people take the default position with respect to their own virtue: they assume they have it. However, by pointing out those “other” people who are hopelessly ridden with vice, and so incapable of knowledge, Plato will make the sensitive reader worried about where he stands. He will feel the urgency of either needing to further develop or to preserve his own virtuous state. In this way, Plato’s remarks call attention to the self as the material of a “work” since if one would like to know a “good object” one must somehow become good.

There is an ambiguity here about the meaning of “nature” and “naturally inclined.” If one is not inclined by nature to justice, can one remold that nature and develop new and better “inclinations”? There is much to suggest that this is so and that this is the precise point at which the “practices of the self” that Foucault finds to be implicit and the “practices of knowledge” that Plato makes explicit converge: if a person has a certain freedom in developing what they are inclined to or akin to by nature, since nature has a degree of malleability,[[51]](#footnote-51) then he or she must work on himself or herself to become more just for the very purpose of acquiring a clearer knowledge of what the just is. Conversely, the opposite may also be the case: one may neglect the development of one’s “inclinations,” become less and less just and so muddy more and more the waters of knowledge: one loses access to the truth when one fails to engage in practices of self-transformation. A reader sensitive to Foucault’s critique of the universal aspirations of moral codes might object, sensing an attempt to position a Platonic moralism in place to absorb the Foucauldian emphasis on *askēsis*. I only ask that the reader suspend presumptions about the universalism of Platonic ethics and therefore what likely has to be imported under the labels “good,” “just,” or “virtuous.”[[52]](#footnote-52) It may be, for example, that Alexander Nehemas is correct when he writes that Plato the universalist appropriates the more “individualist” Socrates in his attempt to “articulate a single mode of life that is best for everyone” (Nehamas, 184), or that Nietzsche is correct when he says much the same.[[53]](#footnote-53) Eric Voegelin, however, writing of the *Republic*,claims that “Plato does not offer recipes for moral conduct” (Voegelin, 57).[[54]](#footnote-54) What is at stake is not what Plato himself thought the life best lived invariably consisted of, but the role of “recipes” or prescriptive formulations for conduct– what Foucault calls *mathēmata*–in stimulating his readers to reflect on the ethical form of their lives. Foucault himself rests part of his interpretation of Platonic *ergon* on the *Fifth Letter*, where Plato appears to understand the role of philosophy as guiding a government’s actual lived regime into harmony with its “own voice,” in accordance with its own constitution as though it were a “living being” (211).[[55]](#footnote-55) This would be no less true of guiding the individual. Such claims should trouble the opinion that Plato prefigured a universalizing and univocal moral code or that he sought to lay one down himself.

If one wants knowledge of the good one must already in some sense be good or *become* good, Plato writes– whatever that means. If we consider my conclusion above, that the practice of *tribē*, of ascent and descent, is necessarily also an attempt at overcoming the deficiency of the *media* we can see here that, in Plato’s view, it is an overcoming that necessarily has a certain ethical form. Just as it is possible to use words in a way that is characterized by the speaker’s awareness of words’ deficiency, yet in a way that does not help the listener approach true knowledge,[[56]](#footnote-56)so might we wonder if there is manner of trying to overcome the limitations placed on human knowing by the fact of the “coming into being” and “passing away” of things that fails to lead to true knowledge. In other words, recognizing the weakness of language and the other *media* of knowledgeis insufficient for the acquisition of knowledge in the philosophical sense unless one also, in practice, recognizes the weakness of self as a natural barrier to the acquisition of knowledge. One must, at the same time, avoid self-assertion while “working on the self” for the purpose of becoming akin to the thing that one would know: one has to become virtuous or “excellent.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Why must one be akin to the thing one would like to know, at least as it pertains to the virtues?

Plato, in the *Seventh Letter*, has portrayed the sophists as those who also undergo something like the *tribē*, the work of ascent and descent between the four *media* (343d), yet never attain knowledge in the fifth sense. Why? We have to conclude, based on what Plato says, that they are somehow “rubbing the sticks” together improperly, with the wrong intention, the wrong disposition– the wrong ethical form. The virtues, whatever they are, do not guide them in their intellectual pursuits.[[58]](#footnote-58) My point is that “ascending and descending” between the *media* cannot merely remain a cognitive exercise, a game of rubbing words, images and conceptual formulations together since the medium in which all such things comes together is the self as soul. Gadamer identifies the fact of mediation– that we only know one thing by means of another thing that is other than it– as what stands behind the weakness of knowledge in general.

The acquisition of true philosophical knowledge, then, must indeed be a practice and work of the self because, given that we do not know what the virtues are in their being, they nonetheless have to guide us in our quest for understanding them if being akin to them is a prerequisite for knowledge of them. This means we are in the pursuit of something we are constantly making mistakes about, and so suggests a work of constant revision in word as well as deed. Moreover, we may go to those who claim to “know” what they are, but if they really know what they are, they cannot tell us what they are directly and so should not claim to teach them. This does not mean such persons cannot assist us with “true” discourses that will help produce illumination given that we do the necessary work “of ourselves” ourselves. If knowledge of virtue cannot be taught, yet one must remain guided by and akin to it, it is necessary to speak about it: how one goes about talking about it without claiming to teach it will have to register both this necessity and this limitation (as the dialogues register dramatically).

To venture a suggestion, then, regarding what about the sophistic form of life renders it incapable of attainting to knowledge even if it also moves repetitiously–albeit, manipulatively (343d)– through the four *media*, I will take the suggestion of Gadamer about obstinacy (*Rechthaberei*), which he identifies as the prime example of how a medium can “push itself to the fore” (Gadamer, 112) and so assert itself over and against the being of the thing that we are trying to grasp through it. It is worth quoting at length:

In knowledge and insight there is distortion too. In an argumentative discussion *the distortion,* *which any knowing implies* and which it can push to the fore, is the obstinacy which makes us refuse to acknowledge that someone else might be right. For what is that obstinacy other than the opinion which I advocate, or have advocated, asserting itself as *my own* position to such an extent that I am no longer able to follow the objective counterargument of the other person? What tend to block the path to objective truth are, in the first place, the fact that an opinion or insight is always my opinion or insight and always has such and such a particular character and, in the second place, the fact that I, since I am so taken with myself, am prejudiced generally against the opinion of others (Gadamer, 112 [italics added]).

Just as the circle is composed of tiny straight lines, so is objective knowledge composed of subjective perspectives; as one is contrary to the nature of the object of knowledge, so the other. So enamored are we of ourselves, that the medium in which understanding occurs– the self–is often prized at the expense of the objectivity of discourse and knowledge.[[59]](#footnote-59) This might mark the difference between eristic and dialectic: the latter is a real quest for knowledge; the former is a contest for glory and an attempt at domination. The suggestion is that the sophistic way of life is overly determined by conquest and self-love and that this might be the root of the “corruption of qualities” that deprives people of real knowledge.

Gamader considers the section discussing virtue, and to which I drew attention to above, as the portion of the text that treats “in sufficient detail” “how the soul must be disposed in order to avoid this self assertion” (Gadamer, 112). That disposition, we must reason, is one in which the self is already, or learns how to get, “over” itself. Surely the development and/or preservation of such a disposition is a “work of the self” and an *askēsis*. If the self, as the medium of knowledge, has to learn how to get out of its own way in its attempt to understand, and if it is true that in order to understand it must be must be or become like something other than what it is (i.e., be like the object of its knowledge), we can see how the *Seventh Letter* links the acquisition of knowledge to practices that aim to both “escape” the self as well as positively transform it.

What Jürgen Mittelstrass calls “the Socratic form of the dialectical intention” can be linked to the need for the practices above. For Mittelstrass, the philosophical orientation is “already reached in the approach itself” (Mittelstrass, 131); that is to say, the modality by which one attempts to acquire knowledge is inseparable from knowledge’s acquisition. This is precisely what sophistry does not register, but the Socratic conversation, whose form is the paradigm of the written dialogue, does. “*Doing* something better,” Mittelstrass writes, “and not *knowing* something better is what overcomes the sophistic intention” (Mittelstrass, 131[italics added]). The addition of *praxis* and *ergon,* and not an increase in *epistēme* and *logos*,is what differentiates the Socratic conception of philosophy from the Sophistic pursuit of knowledge. The self must be made transparent even as its “nature” is transformed to become akin to what it seeks. In this respect, it is like the basic outline of self-care that McGushin articulates as Foucault’s, writing that care of the self “is not a turn inward but rather toward the world as that evolving web of relations, practices, and knowledges through which the self manifests. It is also a turn toward the self as a material to be shaped and transformed, as a goal to be achieved, and as a practice articulated”(McGushin, xxi). For Foucault, the imperative to know the self overtook the need to take care of the self, and this contributed to the eventual dominance of an epistemic paradigm that excluded the need for *askēsis* altogether. Foucault’s “new” conception of philosophy is one that would restore the care of the self to an appropriate place. As we can see, Gadamer’s stress on the deficiency of the *media* means that the self has to be aware of its own deficiency when approaching knowledge. However, the focus on mediation means that the resultant dilemma is not solved by something like a theoretical elaboration of the conditions of possible knowledge so that the subject can henceforth proceed to know only within its prescribed limits. Since all of the *media*, including the self, risk asserting themselves at the expense of the object of knowledge the solution can only be the “constant rubbing” or the *tribē* that Plato and Foucault describe.

I think it was useful and necessary to show how Foucault’s analysis of the importance of “practices” in the *Seventh Letter* may lead to a certain type of ethical reflection that plays out over and again in the drama of the dialogues while also being consonant with the claim that philosophy’s reality is “a work of self.” We have found that the weakness of language is tied to the fluidity of the soul as the medium of knowledge. There are a number of implications for this: it means language, as it pertains to the acquisition of knowledge in the (fifth) philosophical sense, cannot be “improved” merely by making it more and more precise, since its “deficiency” does not lie in itself alone. One cannot try to rectify what is “deficient” in language without also addressing what is “deficient” in the soul (and all the *media*), and so the practice of a discourse that would mind “the weakness of *logos*” and a work of the self that would tend to “the weakness” of *psychē* are interwoven, and perhaps each requires the other. Both, if it is meaningful to separate them, require the renunciation of the illusion of their own constancy or stability (obstinacy) in favor of the permanency of self-disruptive practices that make use of both speech and deed in aiming at what does not pass away.

But conclusions we may draw from Gadamer are not Foucault’s; they can only help us position Foucault with respect to a common pulse that he and others have put their finger on in Plato’s works. The next section will look more closely at how Foucault interprets the relevance of the fact of the “weakness of language” for the image of the philosopher as a lawgiver and a teacher of doctrines. By showing that, for Foucault’s Plato, the philosopher can be neither a giver of law nor a giver of doctrines, we will at last be sufficiently set up to consider what or how the dialogues teach.

Chapter 3: Ambiguity, *Mathēmata, Dogmata*

The number of barriers in Plato’s works faced by those who try to show his dialogues intend to impart a unified theoretical system of thought are numerous enough to have made plausible, for a time, the assertion that Plato himself must have kept the interpretive key hidden from the general public, only to be imparted orally to the few. This is a vulgar description of the position taken by the esoteric school, which was mentioned above. It continues to be relevant to the extent that it signifies the possible overwhelming complexity of Plato’s thought: we cannot find his system because he must have hidden it from us. Of course, there are scholars who continue to assert Plato taught a system or a “nexus of ideas” today, and offer reasons other than those of the esoteric school, yet the controversies over what Plato means have not abated. According to E. N. Tigerstedt “the controversies about Plato are far more radical and fundamental” (Tigerstedt, 13) than controversies over what many if not all other great thinkers of the Western tradition intended to communicate in their writings. Tigerstedt’s study *Interpreting Plato* (1977) documents the wide range of conflicting interpretations of Plato’s thought that the unsystematic and ostensibly obscure presentation of his thinking generated. As I stated above, I do not speak definitively against the claim that Plato is a Platonist in some sense. I only cite evidence of the notorious difficulty in attempting to interpret Plato systematically because the following section argues that the ambiguity surrounding Plato’s intentions is a deliberate feature of the dialogue form equipped with a philosophical justification we began to explore above. That it is difficult to give a consistent picture of Platonic doctrines will be linked to the fact that the transmission of teachings is not the dialogue’s primary objective.

More specifically, I will examine how the “weakness of language” renders the “formulations” of philosophy defective and that this fact undermines the discursive, and therefore the dogmatic, transmissions of Plato’s philosophical knowledge, as Foucault has come to understand it. This is what is under investigation in this section. The aim is to show how Foucault’s identification of a problematization of *mathēmata* (formulae) in the *Seventh Letter* can be linked to specific insights about how Plato destabilizes the formulations of theoretical knowledge, both his own and those of others, that he did commit to writing (and presumably to speech). If Foucault’s lectures show us that Plato was playing a “game” with his writings, I will rely particularly on an essay by Rosemary Desjardins to draw some conclusions about what that “game” was and why we might be able to identify this “game” of *logos* as being also *ergon* in the philosophical sense Foucault had first defined.

Foucault largely sidesteps the question of what Plato’s doctrines were, and even whether Plato seriously taught them at all. He appears to suspend these questions and in doing so, in my view, gains access to perspectives on Plato’s thought that are less easily discernible if one is reading him through the inherited discourse that is preoccupied with a history of metaphysical claims.[[60]](#footnote-60) No doubt this is part of why his reading may be called “unconventional.” McGushin’s book notes the absence of discussion of the forms in his introduction and seems to suggest this might be a weakness of the work.[[61]](#footnote-61) Even so, this does not mean that Foucault’s analysis does not “map” the question of Platonic doctrine in the course of his attention to other concerns. Indeed, I claim he rather clearly does in his deduction from the theory of knowledge in the *Seventh Letter* that the philosopher is not to be a lawgiver or any type of prescriber of specific political action. That, in Foucault’s reading, philosophy is not to assert itself as a concrete program of political action was discussed above. However, now we are equipped to see how Foucault understands this as a consequence of the “weakness of *logos*” and, as Gadamer helped us see, the very weakness of the self as the medium of knowledge.

For Foucault, the fact that Dionysius’s commitment of Platonic teaching to writing amounted to such a revealing error points to an entirely different conception of philosophy’s reality than many of us have become accustomed to: philosophy as a way of life. Yet we must ask, why should writing and philosophy as a way of life conflict? The prohibition of writing “serious” matters means that what is essential in philosophy cannot be transmitted orally or in writing since the constitutive element of philosophical knowledge lies with practices of the self. Plato’s theory of knowledge complicates any simple or direct transmission of that knowledge from teacher to student. Indeed, it seems reasonable to say that the teacher begins to look like a sort of “midwife.” The fact that philosophy’s reality is taken up, as a consequence of its necessarily “silent” substance, at the site of the self’s relationship to itself (242) is a logical outcome of the teaching that knowledge in the highest sense cannot be formulated into words once we understand that the self also belongs to the deficient *media*.

The likelihood of the student receiving what the teacher would like to communicate hinges on many elements apart from what the teacher himself says or writes: the likeness of the student’s soul to the object of knowledge being pursued, whatever disciplines ensure that this likeness is achieved or retained, his willingness to practice the *pragmata* of philosophy which hone the skills of memory, quickness in learning, and adeptness in the use of reason (240), and his willingness to constantly test and challenge the soundness of the communicable (lesser, fourth degree) knowledge, to cite the elements Plato has discussed so far. All of these place a substantial portion of the burden of the communication of philosophical knowledge on the person who would receive it. Indeed, given the definition of philosophical knowledge as the result of constant effort made by a subject between all the modes of knowledge, the language of “transmission” and “reception” begins to look dubious altogether.

How, then, can philosophy be taught, if at all? In Foucault’s answer: certainly not by the delivery of this knowledge in the form of *mathēmata* (formulae)*,* which, as Foucault understands it, is “the instrument by which *ready made* knowledge is conveyed to someone who has to know it” (252 [italic added]). Writing, Foucault claims, “is bound up with the form of *mathēmata*” (252). Why this is necessarily so, he does not make clear, but it seems evident that it would be so on account of the fact that writing alone cannot actually accomplish “the constant friction between the different modes of knowledge” (252) that becomes philosophical knowledge in the highest sense. *Mathēmata* is “ready made,” in Foucault’s words, and so we must reason it contradicts the nature of philosophical knowledge as something to-be-made, as the consequence and even the product of “practices” that inform a “mode of being.” People who take “ready made” knowledge to be the highest sort will, consequently, fail to engage in the practices by which knowledge, perhaps including knowledge of self, is made. They might begin, for example, to think they know what a virtue is without seeing the corresponding need to make their nature akin to it.

Dionysius, who showed little willingness to undergo the *pragmata*, who in all likelihood had little similarity between his nature and the virtues, and who demonstrated time and time again “obstinacy” in thinking he “already knew the most important matters,” nevertheless tried to communicate in “formulae,” knowledge that we may infer he did not have in the highest sense. Plato had remarked how Dionysius appeared to be knowledgeable in philosophy to those whose heads “were full of half-understood doctrines” **(**338d**)**. The evident danger in trying to commit the most serious things to writing, when in fact they cannot be, is that they will give people a false sense of knowledge. In coming to think they truly know what they do not, such writing is liable to make them ignorant of their ignorance. Such an outcome is the very opposite of philosophy in its Socratic meaning and probably any other.

As I mentioned above, I claim that the impossibility of formulating philosophical knowledge into *mathēmata* has implications for how we ought to understand Plato as a teacher of philosophical doctrines and, therefore, what the dialogues aim to do as expressions of Plato’s “teachings.” However, Foucault instead draws from this a conclusion about the philosopher as a giver of law. He writes:

If in actual fact philosophy cannot be practiced and learned in the form of *mathēmata*, then a philosopher’s role will never be that of a lawgiver, it will never be to present a system of laws to which citizens must submit for the city to be governed properly (252-53).

As was extensively discussed above, philosophy addresses the subject of political action; it stands in a necessary exteriority to the political field. Foucault now roots that characterization of the philosophical *ergon* in the nature of philosophical knowledge. Philosophy cannot say what is best for a person or a state in its specifics, not at any rate as a normative feature of its discourse. This means that philosophical activity does not supplant the political process, understood as the effort to determine what body of laws would best serve the society in which they are to be enacted. Neither, though, does this mean philosophy has no role in that determination; rather, it seeks to help those who legislate truly see, and so become guided by, the principles that make a political body healthy, even given certain natural varieties in constitution/ disposition that one would find among different peoples and their different political arrangements.[[62]](#footnote-62) The point is that a certain level of free determination in the application of the philosophical principles has to be left for those who legislate, since such people live with the weight and the immediacy of political demands that would inevitably distort any such principles from being successfully implemented in their abstracted purity. As Gadamer shows us above, in Plato’s view the object of philosophical knowledge never comes into being nor passes away; the subject of philosophical knowledge, however, is in a sense always coming into being and passing away. This means there can be no “stamping” of philosophical knowledge into the form of political life in, say, the form of a body of laws that refer their authority directly and unambiguously to the knowledge that produced them. The medium has to be respected in its integrity.[[63]](#footnote-63)

If, then, the philosopher *as philosopher* is not to be lawgiver, the intention of certain Platonic texts must evidently be recast. If a philosopher would not seriously behave as a lawgiver,[[64]](#footnote-64) what are we, Foucault asks, to make of texts like the *Republic* and the *Laws*? This, in fact, is where Foucault comes the closet to explicitly raising the question of the function of the form of Plato’s dialogues. He writes:

Is not the activity of lawgiver that Plato seems to be taking on in the *Laws* and the *Republic* a game? Is it not a game like a myth is a game, although obviously in a different way. So what philosophy has to say will certainly be said through this nomothetic game, as it is through the mythical game, but in order to say something else (253).

Foucault then wonders, with the obvious implication that we should answer in the affirmative, whether “the reality of philosophy” must not then be thought of as something “completely different from giving men laws and proposing the constraining form of the ideal city” (253).

McGushin’s book also notes the remarks of Foucault in question, for the insight into the “weakness of language” is what enables Foucault to root philosophically the claim that philosophy’s “reality” is “the work of the self.” The fact of the inadequacy of *mathēmata* is what ultimately refers the philosophical address to the subject in his “mode of being” and prescribes the practices of knowledge, since language is not fundamentally capable of delivering the knowledge in the highest sense. The self’s modality must take over for what language cannot do. McGushin writes:

Foucault takes this [the impossibility of writing] as a clue to the meaning of the dialogues. If they do not set out philosophical knowledge in the form of theoretical knowledge, or at least if this is not the fundamental and *serious* task of the dialogues, then it must be something else. Given this, it is more likely that the writings are meant not as a theory of philosophy setting out its doctrines so much as a confrontation of the reader with the activity of philosophy portrayed in the figure of the first philosophical *parrhēsiast* Socrates. Foucault will approach the works of Plato as portraits of who Socrates is dramatically (McGushin, 52).

A brief digression is necessary. I must note that McGushin is inferring the above from Foucault’s brief remarks. In the *Government of Self*, Foucault speaks only of the *Laws* and the *Republic* with respect to *nomoi* and the ideal city, where he asserts that the Popperian interpretation of them is surely wrong. While I think it is true in some sense that Foucault assesses Socrates “dramatically,” there is nowhere in the text that I am aware of where Foucault makes an explicit reference to the relevance of the dramatic form for his interpretations of Socrates. It is true that Foucault is analyzing what he calls “the dramatics of true discourse” (68)– though he cautions us he is “removing all pathos from [that] word” (68). The study of the “dramatics of true discourse” is *not* the methodological study of Plato’s writings as a unique type of literature. The “dramatics of true discourse” is a feature of Foucault’s study of “the ontologies of truth” (309). It examines all truth-telling acts as they play out in a “dramatic” scene with reference to the self-comportment of the speaker in the act of binding himself to his own speech and how this comportment affects the perception of the claim that his utterance is true. Foucault makes no distinction between the dialogues of Plato, the plays of Euripides and the histories of Plutarch and Thucydides. In previous lectures, the dialogues-as-data are mixed seamlessly with statements from philosophical treatises, letters and other forms of writing. In my opinion, Foucault’s interest in “the ontologies of truth” and the “dramatics of true discourse” *do* inadvertently cause him to encounter Socrates dramatically[[65]](#footnote-65)– but not with Plato *as the dramatist*. He does not assert the insight that Plato stands in a meta-philosophical position with relation to the philosophical positions put forward in his works, nor, for example, does he note that Plato never appears as a self-identified voice in his texts. Socrates’ conversations are, for Foucault, treated the same as historical records and so, I claim, not truly treated as dramas. There are *no* comments on the decision behind the dialogic form, and, for example, the *Alcibiades–* that forerunner of dogmatic Platonism–is treated as though it were a treatise in disguise. For this reason, Hyland’s critique of certain continental interpreters of Plato for their failure to factor in the dialogic form of Plato’s writings into their analysis could still be extended to Foucault. Nonetheless, McGushin’s assertion that the dialogues in general are meant as an encounter with philosophical activity coheres with the central claim of this study. It *is* the outcome of Foucault’s analysis, I claim, though not one he himself explicitly drew for us.

The theory of knowledge found in the *Seventh Letter* ultimately leads Foucault to question the alleged idealism of Plato’s most explicitly political works. Such works cannot be “serious” and in fact say one thing “in order to say something else.” What this “something else” is has been discussed in part all along: it concerns the “mode of being,” the “work of the self on self.” Of course, it is not necessary to say this *alone* is what is at stake in these “games.” What that “something else” might be could be a variety of things. Nonetheless, if we were to inquire how we should read the Platonic dialogue in light of Foucault’s late lectures, an answer would begin here: Plato’s writings play a “game” in which not everything said is “serious,” since what is most serious cannot even be said. These writings strive to say “what philosophy has to say,” but will not be found saying it directly where and when it is unwise to do so. Though Foucault focuses on the question of the philosopher as lawgiver, he is obviously aware that he is also raising that of the philosopher as a teacher of doctrines. The manuscript for the lecture on 16 February ends with a claim worth quoting in full:

We see then the double obligation: the person who wants to govern needs to philosophize; but the person who philosophizes has the task of confronting reality. This double bond formulated in this way is linked to a certain redefinition of philosophy as *pragmata*, that is to say, as a lengthy work comprising a certain relationship to a guide; a permanent practice of knowledge; a form and conduct of life, including every day life. And in this way two complementary figures are avoided: that of the philosopher who turns his gaze toward another reality and is detached from the world; that of the philosopher who arrives with the table of the law already written (255 [manuscript note]).

A philosopher, who has no table of laws to deliver nor is too absorbed by his Thalean wonder[[66]](#footnote-66) at “another reality” to live and deal appropriately with the matters of daily life, would appear to be the figure of the philosopher we can derive from the *Seventh Letter*.

If Foucault is right that the philosopher cannot deliver dependable formulae, and right in concluding the philosopher thereby cannot deliver *nomoi*, what is true for *mathēmata* must be equally true for *dogmata*. It remains that Plato does not specify that he means the exclusion of *nomoi* by his exclusion of *mathēmata*: rather, this is the conclusion that Foucault draws based on the character of the advice that Plato offers and how he appears to position himself as advisor in relation to political action. In fact, it is not clear to me that *nomoi* are specifically “formulae” if one is working with a positivistic conception of law that prescribes what will be rather than describes how things are. While not contesting Foucault’s conclusion that the law-giving portions of the *Republic*, and especially the *Laws*, must be a sort of “game,” I claim that the deficiency of *mathēmata* even more clearly excludes *dogmata* (of which *nomoi* might be a sub-class): written and spoken formulae intended to communicate the nature of things, including the nature of knowledge and the unalterable, cosmic laws that govern social and political life. If the “being” of a thing cannot be suitably conveyed in words, as the *Seventh Letter* asserts, one’s conception of philosophical teaching will have to be altered. Rather than just the *Republic* and the *Laws*, the entire corpus of Platonic writing will begin to look like a “game” to the extent that it might read as an attempt to impart certain doctrines to the reader. The reader of the *Seventh Letter*, for example,is left in the curious position of being told the “true doctrine [*logos alēthēs*]” (342a) of the nature of knowledge, a “doctrine” easily formulated into numbered bullet points, as Gadamer does for the reader’s sake in his essay considered above (Gadamer, 100). Yet this “doctrine” includes the assertion that true knowledge cannot be formulaic in expression, and so undercuts the dependability of the very manner in which Plato has taught it to us. We must conclude the image of the four *media*, described in their nature and their deficiency, and the subsequent “rubbing” together is also that: an image, and one that necessarily shares in the defects of the things whose defects it alleges.

If philosophical knowledge cannot be communicated in *mathēmata*, one might think that this means that formulations of philosophical knowledge should be avoided altogether. If we are to follow Foucault’s comments on the philosopher and *nomoi*, this would not be the case. The *Laws* prescribe laws; the *Republic* imagines the constraining form of a society, though neither activity is, in Foucault’s assessment, what genuine philosophical activity is. The *Seventh Letter* teaches a “true doctrine.” It looks as though philosophy speaks indirectly through the forbidden medium; that the philosopher will make use of *mathēmata* but *in such a way* as to respect the limitations of that medium. The dialogues are the choice form that Plato gives to his writing precisely so that the reader may register the ambiguity of language and understand that what is found in *mathēmata* is necessarily a deficient formulation of the philosophical knowledge it represents; at least this is the conclusion that some have drawn who have argued that greater attention to the dialogic form is absolutely necessary if Plato is to be understood.

Charles Griswold, for example, in his lengthy study of the *Phaedrus*– that other Platonic text that famously disavows the written (as well as, Griswold argues, the spoken) word–claims that the dialogic form serves this function. In Griswold’s study of the *Phaedrus* and the understanding of self-knowledge it employs, he identifies “the substitution of an opinion for knowledge” (Griswold 1986, 215) as one of the particular dangers that writing especially poses. Knowledge can only be gained through the *work* of philosophical activity, whereas opinion can be effectively transmitted in words. While written works, like words in general, might in fact *signify* the presence of knowledge, there is no guarantee that they will *communicate* it.[[67]](#footnote-67) In fact, the danger is that they will give the impression of communicating it when cannot have not. To quote at length, he writes:

The written word [for Socrates] can easily take on an authority, inviolability, and finality it does not possesses, and its weighty pronouncements a specious lucidity that seems to answer all questions. Socrates seems to fear the canonization of a *biblos*. That is, the written word lets us *persuade* ourselves too easily that we are in irrefutable possession of the truth, while in fact we are not. It facilitates our tendency to become dogmatists or zealots rather than philosophers (Griswold 1986, 207).

If this is Socrates’ famous criticism of writing in the *Phaedrus*, we cannot forget that Plato is the one writing it down. The fact that Plato wrote shows that he “must think that the criticisms of writing are answerable at least to some extent, that some benefit that Socrates did not acknowledge follows from the use of the written word” (Griswold 1986, 219). For Griswold, the dialogic form is Plato’s answer to Socrates’ critique of writing. Both in form and in content, it exhibits an awareness of the “weakness of words” discussed above. “By *writing*,” Grisworld writes, “Plato signals disagreement with Socrates’ criticisms, and by writing *dialogues*, he signals agreement with them” (Griswold 1986, 220). The particular advantage of the dialogue is that it vividly keeps the activity of philosophy alive for the reader, even as it must necessarily reify it in the act of binding it to the page. Griswold writes: “by questioning others and defending itself (as well as the reverse), the movement of thought does not settle artificially on a single system, concept, theory, method, proposition– on a single dogma, in short.” Dialogue with another person helps keep the movement of thought genuine as opposed to “artificial”. The written dialogue, for Griswold, preserves that “special form of discourse” that would “check this danger” in preserving the image of thought’s movement in its dialectical fluidity (Griswold 1986, 215)[[68]](#footnote-68). We can see that Griswold is among those who conclude that Plato is not a dogmatist who conceives of philosophical activity as the transmission of teachings about the nature of things or the “truth of truth,” but rather wishes above all else to impart what I call, with Jürgen Mittelstrass, “a philosophical orientation.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

One manner in which Plato introduces instability into the formulations of theoretical knowledge that his dialogues are rich in recording is the ubiquity of irony. According to E.N. Tigerstedt, Platonic irony serves at least two functions. The first is to “still more weaken the contact between the readers and Plato, who seems to keep smiling at us from a distance,” and the other is to “trouble and upset us, by making us uncertain of the author’s intentions” (Tigerstedt, 95). The temptation to rely dogmatically on Plato’s words is undercut by the fact that “we can seldom be absolutely sure that Plato is not speaking ironically” (Tigerstedt, 95). For Tigerstedt, the principal result of the dialogic form (along with the features by which Plato inflects it) has the effect of constantly keeping us “on our guard” (Tigerstedt, 99), since Plato has engineered it in such a way that “everything can be called into question” (Tigerstedt, 99). If everything may be called into question, it falls to the reader to determine those things that Plato is really “serious” about, since he does not himself clearly mark where his seriousness begins and his “game” ends.

Mittelstrass also opposes the dialogic form to the dogmatic tendency, writing that the dialogue “copes effectively with the dogmatic tendencies that are part of [the] systematic constraints” a treatise form implies (Mittelstrass, 140). The claim is not that a treatise is, by definition, dogmatic; only that the requirement for systematization involves a “dogmatic tendency.” With the dialogue, he writes, “theoretical (dogmatic) comprehensiveness is…replaced by exemplary presentation as an essential aspect of the philosophical acquisition of knowledge and its literary transmission” (Mittelstrass, 140). For this reason, “the dialogue transmits less theoretical than *exemplary* knowledge” (Mittelstrass, 140); that is, models of knowledge’s acquisition.

To deepen the conversation about the relation between *mathēmata* and *dogmata*, and what this means for *Plato’s own dogmata*,I would like to consider Plato’s assertion that language suffers a “weakness” in conjunction with some observations and claims made by Rosemary Desjardins in her essay “Why Dialogues? Plato’s Serious Play”(1988). Besides reflecting on how the “weakness of language” impacts how Socrates interprets his tradition, Desjardins analyzes how Plato’s awareness, problematization, and pleasure in the fact of “the ambiguity in language” informs his reservations about the written word and his written interpretation of Socrates**.** Desjardins will help us see how the “problem of language” informs the composition of the dialogues and how the ambiguous “game” they play with formulations is compatible with Foucault’s claim that philosophy ultimately finds its reality in the “work of the self.”

Desjardins writes in consideration of the same passages in the *Seventh Letter* that Foucault and Gadamer discuss. It is Desjardins’ contention that “for Plato… there is for logoi seldom a simple true or false, but rather true or false always *under an interpretation*” (Desjardins, 112 [italics in original]). This is due, she writes quoting the *Seventh Letter*, to the fact that “logos, inasmuch as it is compounded of nouns and verbs, is in no case established with sufficient stability (343b4-6)” (Desjardins, 112). Desjardins’ essay proceeds to show how the problem of the interpretation of the traditional texts and formulations “inherited from the poets and philosophers…are, in a variety of contexts, shown to be susceptible of various interpretations” (Desjardins, 114) and how this fact is a fundamental concern that informs the drama of the dialogues. Formulations, for example, about justice or *sōphrosynē* are consistently asserted and disputed throughout the dialogues, with many dialogues never arriving at an acceptable definition. Evidently, it is very difficult to arrive at a definition of what even a singular virtue is that would satisfy Socrates’ demanding criteria– that is, when he chooses to be demanding.

There is no need to summarize again why Plato found all formulae to suffer “weakness.” Suffice to say, the claim that “there is for logoi… a true or false always *under and interpretation*” can cast further light on Foucault’s observation that philosophical knowledge can never be expressed in *mathēmata*. Desjardins’ paper adequately shows that, the deficiencies of formulae notwithstanding, Plato did not cast an extant tradition of formulae alleging insight into social and political life aside, but deliberately made use of them and, in doing so, also problematized them; he did this in such a way as would not only break unfounded confidence in their reliability but also, and perhaps especially, to draw attention to the importance of the subject who uses them and the one who receives them in determining the extent of their sufficiency for a given context.

She lists too many examples from the dialogues about disputes over definitions to cite them all. One example, taken from the *Euthyphro*, involves Socrates’ response to Euthyphro’s proposal “that piety is service or care of the gods”– no doubt a traditional answer right out of the catechism, so to speak. In response, Socrates “quite simply acknowledge[s],” “what you say seems fine, Euthyphro– except I don’t quite understand what you mean by ‘care’ (*Euth.* 12e5-13a2)” (Desjardins, 114). Desjardins’ argument is that Socrates does not really dispute that piety *could be* *truthfully* formulated as “care of the gods.” The problem is less with the formulation itself, than with what Euthyphro *himself* intends to communicate in choosing this formulation. We can imagine that, for some, such a formulation of piety is all that is necessary, if by it they understand something like the indivisibility of piety and the just life, as many pious but non-philosophical people continue to do today.

Desjardins offers stronger examples when she notes that Socrates does not reject Simonides’ definition of justice as “to render what is due,” but rather shifts the burden of the definition to what one means by “what is due (*Rep*. 332a)” (Desjardins, 114). Arguably, the understanding we glean from the *Republic* that justice is to “mind one’s own business” encapsulates or is encapsulated by the maxim “to render what is due” if either is understood in the appropriate way. The very fact that either definition could plausibly encapsulate the other reveals the “weakness” or pliability of them both. Indeed, it was not with little effort and preparation that the interlocutors of the *Republic* were able to understand justice as “minding one’s own business.” Surely, Socrates could have delivered this rather commonplace definition more conveniently at the start of the conversation; the same definition, Desjardins notes, that is given for *sōphrosynē* in the *Charmides* (162a-b)– and rejected there (Desjardins, 114). Instead, as is well known, the definition of justice is pursued in the process of the elaborate construction of an entire city in speech, as though what justice *means* could not be seen without a group simulation of our collective social activity that takes on greater and greater proportions and increasing complexity/ perplexity. In fact, when all is said and done, we have no guarantee that any character in the *Republic* really understood the definition of justice in the sense that Socrates wished to impart to it. How then can we, if the understanding to which the mind aspires evades the capacities of verbal expression?

The Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn gives a very apt rendering of the problem that Desjardins is exploring in his *Jerusalem* (1783). In that seminal text, one that defends the assertion that Judaism is not in essence dogmatic while–among other things–*problematizing language as a deficient system of signs*, Mendelssohn relates the attempts he and a friend made to secure verbal agreement about an issue. He writes:

It would sometimes emerge that we had each connected different ideas with the same words. Not infrequently we thought alike, yet expressed our ourselves differently; but just as often we thought ourselves in agreement when we were still very apart in our thoughts…our ideas had to rub against each other for a long time before they could be made to fit themselves to one another and before we could say with any assurance: Here we agree! (Mendelssohn, 67).

This is in effect the precise experience of language and communication that Desjardins is claiming to be so fundamental to Platonic thought, and the precise insight into the deficiency of *mathēmata* that she claims Plato seeks to address through his particular use of the dialogic form. It is true that Plato problematizes not only words but even the stability of ideas which are expressed in them. Nonetheless, “connecting different ideas with the same words” is an evident consequence of the ambiguity inherent to language since the “multiple valences of meaning” which may adhere in a single word or single formulation of a concept “separate from one another in speaking about things” (Gadamer, 111). Yet, without further effort, the concept or word remains singular, even while its possible meanings split up among the minds of a conversation’s participants, often giving either the illusion of agreement where it has not yet been achieved or the illusion of disagreement where it has not actually occurred. For Mendelssohn, this means that words and ideas have to “rub together” so that what the speaker intends to communicate by *and even despite* the words he uses become increasingly clear–a claim that could be easily related to the reservations about language expressed in Plato’s *Seventh Letter*. For Desjardins, Plato attempts to facilitate such a “rubbing together” of words in the mind of the individual by orchestrating a tension among words and concepts within the dialogues themselves.

Her essay discusses multiple ways in which Plato has Socrates or another character in the dialogue deliberately render a formulation ambiguous: either by turning it into a riddle, by shoring up its unreliability, or suggesting that a hidden meaning deep beneath the surface (Desjardins, 114). Time and time again, the meaning of a formulation is what comes to be at stake, suggesting a formula never unambiguously communicates its content. In trying to discover what each other *really* mean behind the ambiguity of speech, the participants of the dialogue are drawn into the activity of philosophy.

It is not only the poets’ definitions that suffer this treatment, but the famous formulations of Plato’s predecessors in the philosophical tradition and *even Plato’s doctrines themselves*. She writes:

The statements of the philosophers fare no better [than those of the poets]; they likewise lend themselves to widely differing interpretations– whether it be Anaxagoras’ assertion about nous, the Heracleitean doctrine of flux, Protogrean claims about man the measure, or Parmenides’ teaching about being and nonbeing. So pervasive is the problem of ambiguity, that not even the words of the god himself escape this kind of testing and analysis (Desjardins, 114-115).

With the last example, we recall that Socrates’ “divine mission” in Athens is the consequence of his need to test the truth of the god’s word regarding his wisdom. It would appear that the ambiguity of the meaning of words, doctrines and statements causes something like the instigating “stab” of philosophical activity. An ambiguity in the meaning of a (divine) formulation is allegedly the cause of the beginning of Western political philosophy. Gadamer writes, referring the weakness of *logos* in the *Seventh Letter* to comparable implications drawn from the *Parmenides* and the *Statesman*:

The multiple valences of meaning which separate from one another in speaking about things contain a *productive* ambiguity, one pursued, as we know, not only by the academy but also by Aristotle with all his analytic genius. The productivity of this dialectic is the positive side of the ineradicable weakness from which the procedure of conceptual determination suffers. That ever contemporary encounter with the logoi of which Plato speaks is found here [in the *Parmenides*] in its most extreme form. It is displayed here as the experience which we have when the conventional meaning of single words gets away from us. But Plato knows full well that this source of all aporia is also the source of the *euporia* which we achieve in discourse. He who does not want the one will have to do without the other (Gadamer, 111).

That “ineradicable weakness” that the “procedure of conceptual determination suffers” should, in Desjardins’ opinion, make us cautious about the dependability of Plato’s own “doctrines.” She writes:

Characteristic Platonic doctrines are themselves subjected to cross-examination and *under certain interpretations* suffer elenchus. Thus Meno’s understanding of the Platonic claim that virtue is knowledge is shown to be indefensible, Theatetus’ understanding of the Platonic doctrine that knowledge involves true opinion and logos is shown to be inadequate, and young Socrates’ understanding of the doctrine of forms is shown to be fragile under the cross-examination of Parmenides (Desjardins, 116 [italics in original]).

Consider how these inconsistencies within the Platonic corpus might facilitate something like the “rubbing together” that Plato says is necessary for gaining knowledge, that Gadamer links to overcoming self-infatuation, that we might say Mendelssohn links to authentic communication, and that Foucault links to the “work of the self.”

Someone who does not have that full acquaintance with the “many-sidedness” of the thing to which a Platonic formula is being applied might be all too ready to accept it as unequivocally true on account of a dogmatic disposition (another sort of *Rechthaberei*). For such a person, his confidence in that formula will be undermined if he encounters another place in the Platonic corpus where an attempt to defend that teaching results in *aporia* or even where it is blatantly or implicitly contradicted.[[70]](#footnote-70) Such a person, perturbed by Plato’s self-undermining authority and apparent uncertainty about the absolute dependability of his own views, might find his discourse somewhat wanting and seek out dogmatic authority elsewhere. Or– another possibility–since he had perceived that that formula was true in some respect, unsatisfied with either its purported proof or disproof, he may be unwilling to discard it wholesale and instead begin to imitate the struggle for an even more precise definition or a precise isolation of the sense in which he suspects it really captures an aspect of reality. In his mind or perhaps in conversation with others, he may eventually begin the rubbing together of the four *media* discussed above, taking the dialogues as objects of imitation in both their uncertainty and their confidence.

The fact that Plato might lead us into an *aporia* about even his own “doctrines” is, in both Gadamer’s view and Desjardins’, part of the very essence of philosophical activity. As Gadamer writes, the euphoria of philosophy is intrinsically bound up with the slipperiness of *logos*, which always moves toward convention, and the constancy of our need to pursue it, meaning we have to constantly pull it back. In Desjardins’ view, Plato foresaw the danger that his teachings could become mere *logos*: blunt objects of dogma or pretty ornaments that would no longer have applicability to the needs of the present. This was the fate that threatened to befall the traditional poetic and philosophical formulations so treasured in Socrates’ day, and Plato uses the dialogic form to attempt to counteract that possibility (Desjardins, 122-24).

We obviously have some major indications as to what might inform the dramatic action of the dialogues here. Desjardins is identifying a sense in which Plato deliberately undermines what are considered by many to be his philosophical teachings in the service of a greater, “meta-philosophical” one. If Desjardins is correct, it would not follow that there are no such thing as “Platonic doctrines” but it would suggest an inherent deficiency in the formulation of these doctrines that render the truthfulness (or falseness) of their formulation dependent in part on the participation of the reader. The dialogic form then is the means by which this participation is facilitated. Jürgen Mittelstrass claims that “the reader is drawn into the dialogue through identification and critical appraisal” (Mittelstrass, 139). As noted above for Mittelstrass, the purpose behind Plato’s choice of the dialogue form is indeed to transmit something– but not information. Rather, his essay claims that Plato seeks primarily to transmit “a philosophical orientation” (Mittelstrass, 139). Mittelstrass acknowledges that verbal formulations, or “textbook knowledge,” obstruct the acquisition of genuine philosophical knowledge to the extent that textbook knowledge is, in appearance, the same as philosophical insight,[[71]](#footnote-71) but different in its manner of acquisition– which makes all the difference. The dialogue form teaches the reader to attempt to acquire knowledge dialogically by offering a chance to imitate the experience of its acquisition. By maintaining the pragmatic context in which genuine philosophical knowledge is sought for and acquired, the dialogue is able to “partially suspend its own textual character” (Mittelstrass, 139) In doing, so Mittelstrass claims, “any possibility of confusion with textbook knowledge is excluded” (Mittelstrass, 139).

The importance of the reader’s participation in the “pursuit of [the] philosophical orientation” that would alone enable them to understand any knowledge or doctrine Plato would wish to impart would correspond with the implication earlier drawn from Foucault’s criteria for philosophical *ergon*: the formulations of Platonic teaching might be “only *logos*” and lose their “reality” for those who are not disposed to receive them, those who lack the proper willingness “to listen,” which here includes those who refuse to embrace the *aporia* found in ineradicable ambiguity as being also the source of the euphoria achieved in discourse. Those who do not treat the dialogues as an opportunity to develop a philosophical orientation are likely to find them either full of empty words, or a series of “teachings” that present themselves as unsure of their own veracity.

At the start of his study, E.N. Tigerstedt, contemplating the difficulty of determining the content of the Platonic “system,” asks: “are [Plato’s] thoughts to be found in his writings, open to every fair minded and careful reader, or are they hidden behind the written work, a secret doctrine, to be extracted painfully from hints in him and other authors?” (Tigerstedt, 13).

While today the esoteric position is perhaps formally defunct, its logic as an answer to the lack of evident systematization in Plato’s thought, combined with the claim in the *Seventh Letter* that nothing serious should be committed to writing, remains tempting. We might be tempted to think that Plato has a “serious” conception of philosophy that is far loftier and more profound than anything we can find on the surface of his text. After all, Dionysius’s authoring of a treatise was a clear sign he did not really understand philosophy. Dionysius tried to write something “serious” down. What serious matter was Dionysius trying to commit to paper? I think, on reflection, we can see that Plato *did write about serious things* and constantly so. How could justice or “the good” not be serious–perhaps the most serious–things? If, however, we follow the course that Desjardins, Griswold and others have shown us we can adopt a qualification of the prohibition of writing in the *Seventh Letter*: “serious” things cannot be written down in an unproblematic, i.e., “serious,” way; all attempts to express them directly are flawed by nature, and so any text about them ought to register the deficiency of that attempt if the medium is not to get in the way of its capacity to communicate something other than itself. Plato’s choice to write dialogues is his way of registering that fact. According to Desjardins, “it is awareness of [the] constant need for interpretation that drives Plato to adopt a special kind of vehicle for his philosophy–that of the dramatic *dialogue that will not be forced to rely exclusively on vulnerable discursive content*” (Desjardins, 121 [italics added]). In this reading, the problem with Dionysius is less that he wrote than the fact that he was not a suitably philosophical person to write; he may have written in too “serious” a way, which might have, paradoxically, demonstrated his lack of seriousness.

The conclusion to which Gadamer, Desjardins, Griswold, Hyland and others lead us is that Plato intends to communicate what is communicable in his writings; what is not communicable, he communicates only to the extent possible in a way that respects the limitations of the *media*– including, not least of all, the limitations of the soul. The *Seventh Letter*, in its objection to the writing down of “serious matters” offers us no convincing reason to suspect that Plato saved the “keys” to the confusion generated by the lack of clarity in his work for private lectures or somehow hid them in his writings. Rather, the “key,” is given plainly “to the fair-minded and careful reader”: not the loftiness of philosophy but rather the fact that the weakness of language renders philosophical knowledge supra-verbal may explain the unsystematic and contradictory character of his work. Drew Hyland claims in *Questioning Platonism* (2004):

By writing dialogues of the exceedingly complex sort that he did, dialogues where it is next to impossible to say with any confidence just what view the author wished to espouse, Plato, I want to suggest, *removed himself in advance* from the philosophical controversy over doctrines that became the history of philosophy (Hyland, 120-121).

This is probably an extreme statement, but it gets at the point I want to emphasize. If I dwell on the question of doctrines, it is because its seems to me to be the best way to verify my claim that Foucault’s analysis has set us up to see that Plato’s writings should be characterized as a type of the deed (*ergon*) that true philosophy’s criteria demands. To explicate from the language of Foucault, I think we can say: *mathēmata* are in tension with *ergon* to the extent that they are always in danger of being mere *logos*. This is because mere *logos* gives the appearance of transmitting knowledge, knowledge “ready made” and “won” without any corresponding need to engage in a “work of the self”; a knowledge that, not only making the subject ignorant while thinking he knows, also makes him forgetful of the necessity of practices of self care. By destabilizing his own *logos* Plato forces the reader to care for himself, i.e., engage in the practices of the self that are also practices of knowledge, some of which are directly facilitated by the text, if he would receive the knowledge the text would like to impart. How this facilitation is accomplished through the dramatic and dialogic form will be the subject of the next chapter. However, the first step involved in that facilitation was hopefully demonstrated above: if the reader cannot depend directly on the *logos* he will have to learn to depend on himself.

In other words, the dialogic form is the form of writing specifically tailored to accommodate Plato’s theoretically rooted Socratic refusal to separate the acquisition of knowledge from the care of the self. The historical contingency of such a separation is what Foucault was uncovering in his *Use of Pleasure* and especially *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Plato’s art of writing shows us that he was not unaware of the danger of such a separation. The first step to preventing the intrusion of *logos* into the task of *ergon* is to eliminate the appearance that the *logos* is capable of standing on its own; this, we have found, is what the dialogue allows Plato to do when he, for example, leads the reader into an *aporia* or allows his own doctrines to suffer elenchus. In this way, the dialogic form of Plato’s writings, to the extent they seek to undermine their content as transmittable formulations of theoretical knowledge, cohere with Foucault’s claim that “the living substance of philosophy” in times past was “an *askēsis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought” (UP, 9).

Desjardins writes, “as I understand him, Plato seems always to be aware of the burden of ambiguity that must threaten any mere statement of doctrine– *including his own*” (Desjardins, 115). Thus for Desjardins, to avoid the problem of being mere *logos*, or to help the reader see that *logos* might be absent of any true content, Plato inscribes his philosophical teachings into “concrete and dynamic” performances that “ensure that discursive content is always aligned with, always illumined and qualified by, and always interpreted with reference to the dramatic element provided by the dialogue” (Desjardins, 121). The possible effects of these performances will be the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Experiencing the Dialogues

One of the implications of the claim that Plato’s awareness of the weakness of language issues in a choice to write dialogues in order to subvert the dogmatic tendency to which *mathēmata* tends–a claim implied by Foucault and asserted by Desjardins, Hyland, Griswold, Sayre and others– is that the dramatic dimension of the dialogues thereby takes on more importance. The transmission of information in the form of *mathēmata* does not require the speaker or writer to come into view beyond the extent that his identity certifies him as an expert in the matter. The character, deeds, and general life situation of the teacher of *mathēmata* have no obvious bearing on how we ought to interpret the knowledge transmitted to us.[[72]](#footnote-72) Obviously, we are more inclined to take seriously the *mathēmata* coming from a scientist than from a layman, though the form of *mathēmata* also means the information can pass from one to the other and then to us while maintaining its evident veracity. Ultimately, its rational form means that in some contexts it can be disassociated from a speaker entirely because its form-as-formulation vouches for itself. This is less true for that level of language where meaning is inherently ambiguous. If a formulation appearing in a Platonic dialogue is not intended to be able to stand on its own as an unambiguous statement of the truth of a matter; if, as Desjardins writes, for Plato “to think we ever have– or ever could have–significant truth literally and unambiguously wrapped up in logos is to be ‘an utterly simply person’ (*Phr*. 275c7)” (Desjardins, 115), then what does Plato give us to help us manage that ambiguity? Does he simply leave us out to sea? The answer from much contemporary scholarship on that question is that such help is found in the words and deeds of the characters and the contexts that help determine them in their appearance in the text. That is to say, not just the words that obviously pertain to a specific “doctrine,” but the other words that surround them, the context that gives rise to the discussion, the sorts of people involved, how they behave through the course of the discussion and so on. As Desjardins writes “words do not unambiguously *mean*” (Desjardins, 116)[[73]](#footnote-73) and so part of their meaning has to be supplied by the people who are speaking *as specific persons* in a world that conditions them, their speech, and its reception.

For example, the relevance of the dramatic dimension to the dialogue’s interpretation was asserted by Strauss in his *City and Man* (1963), where he wrote: “…the Platonic dialogues are dramas, if dramas in prose. They must then be read like dramas. We cannot ascribe to Plato any utterance of any of his characters without having taken great precautions” (Strauss, 59). Strauss goes on to cite an example from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, where Macbeth famously claims that life is a “tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing” (V.v. 27). We cannot, Strauss cautions us, infer from this that Shakespeare is “teaching” us that life is nothing but fury and empty sound. In considering this utterance in light of the action of the play and the man who utters it, we “might find life is not senseless simply, but becomes senseless for him who violates the sacred law of life” (Strauss, 59). At the same time, we can reason that Shakespeare is taking Macbeth’s utterance *seriously* as an existential experience that is real and possible for us all. A dramatist like Shakespeare is interested in portraying a diversity of “true” experiences that lead to statements about life whose evident truth may depend on who one is or has become in the great drama. Strauss’s surmise, that life might *become* meaningless for a person who acts like Macbeth, means that unequivocal and impersonal assertions like “life is not meaningless” and “life is meaningless” are possibly claims without any serious meaning– mere *logos*. In the same vein, the dramatic dimension of the Platonic dialogue will mean that its diverse utterances are not all simply positioned as true or false based on which ones the reader thinks are most likely to express Plato’s actual opinion– even if it is true that some opinions expressed by certain characters are much closer to his own than others. If the point, however, were not to allow us to encounter opinions other than Plato’s seriously, it would imply that Plato had chosen “a dialogue form that was manifestly a concealed treatise” and “there would be warrant…for considering that he, too, was primarily interested in getting across a doctrine that he wanted people to accept” (Hyland, 120). According to Hyland, he emphatically “did not!” intend his dialogues to be capable of being translated into the treatise format.[[74]](#footnote-74) In fact, if that were possible, we would have to refute the fundamental conclusion drawn so far from Foucault and the interlocutors we brought to him: that the problematization of *mathēmata,* and therefore the exclusion of the doctrinal conception of philosophy, is necessary if we are to take Plato’s theory of knowledge in the *Seventh Letter* seriously. Just like the statement “life is a tale told by an idiot” needs to be read in the context of the character, other words and deeds of Macbeth, so the “formulations” of philosophical, poetic or political knowledge in Plato’s works rely in some measure on the character, other words and deeds of those who utter them– and suggest the reader’s own words ought to be supported by the same.

Consider what Desjardins points out about the *Charmides*. The dialogue is mostly dedicated to an inquiry about the definition of *sōphrosynē*. “Plato,” Desjardins writes, “brings together Charmides and Critias, both of whom at the time of the conversation represent claims to that virtue” (Desjardins, 120). Yet, as she points out, at the actual time of the writing of the dialogue it was well established that both men’s possession of *sōphrosynē* had been “only apparent, not real” (Desjardins, 120). This is on account of the nature of their political involvement in the regime of the Thirty. It is notable that the dialogue never comes to a satisfactory conclusion about the definition of *sōphrosynē.* The reader is left to wonder whether arriving at this *aporia* was, in fact, necessary or if the inability to discover what this virtue really is was a consequence of the fact that neither Charmides nor Critias really possessed it. At several key points in the dialogue it seems as though the nature of this virtue was accurately formulated– only to find the formulation refutable. Does Plato mean us to dispense with every “failed” formulation of *sōphrosynē* altogether or is he, in fact, leaving these “deficient” formulations for us to consider and perhaps discover in what particular sense they may be right when coupled with actual experiences of life? For Critias and Charmides, we may conclude their deeds disproved their knowledge, but is that the same thing as a refutation of their *logoi*?

For Desjardins, Plato might give the reader *logoi* that are neither unambiguously refuted nor unambiguously affirmed. The reader may be left to see “in what sense…specific interpretations [of *logoi*] are to be rejected, in what sense maintained” (Desjardins, 120). In this way, we can see how Plato continues to use the sort of *mathēmata* that Foucault problematized, yet, through the ergonic dimension of dramatic form, used in such a way to deprive it of a determinative meaning, and thereby preventing it from having any simplistic prescriptive sense.

If the fact that the exclusion of philosophy as doctrinal transmission in the *Seventh Letter* leads us to conclude that the dialogues, not concerned with transmitting doctrine, invest their dramatic dimension with an open-ended pedagogical function, it is not thereby shown that the dialogues are “works” in the sense that Foucault defines. However, a dramatic, as opposed to a doctrinal, encounter with “philosophy’s reality” does more closely approximate Foucault’s new-founded Platonic requirement that philosophy address the subject in his “mode of being” by helping him discover *for himself* the principles that would best guide his particular decisions, just as a good physician would, through agreeable interlocution with the patient, try to develop a daily regime that is consonant with patient’s constitution. Foucault’s requirement that philosophy be aimed at inducing practices of the self that transform the subject’s mode of being inherently qualifies what sort of *logos* it is permitted to make use of. Since remedying deficiencies in a mode of life is, in a certain sense, inherently idiosyncratic with respect to each individual, what one person stands in need of realizing about himself or herself is not identical with the next: a general form for addressing all subjects in their need for modifying their “mode of being” begins to look undesirable and even dangerous; philosophy as a “work of the self” and philosophy as a dogmatic transmission of insights into “the way things are” begins to look incompatible once more, or at least in deep tension with the reality of the individual. In fact, this incompatibility, which has its root in the ambiguity of language and all the *media* of knowledge, is precisely what we have found informing Plato’s attempts to destabilize the formulations of theoretical knowledge through such artifices as the dialogic form.

If it is the task of the philosophical *logos* to help the subject see what he needs to remedy in himself, that *logos* will have to be tailored specifically to the subject of its address to the extent possible. But how can the written word, which is necessarily static, accomplish such a thing? Moreover, Plato’s dialogues are public works. Even if Plato wrote them with specific people in mind, his public audience now and in times past could not possibly have been accommodated by the text.

However, it is claimed by some that the *logos* of the dialogue is crafted specifically to accomplish such an accommodation of the individual, within limits, and that this possibility is one of the specific advantages of the dramatic form. For Tigerstedt, the dialogue is a meeting of “two minds”: “in the first place, the minds of Socrates and his interlocutor; in the second place, the minds of Plato and his reader” (Tigerstedt, 98). Since Plato nowhere explicitly identifies any voice in the text as being identical with his own, the second “meeting” can obviously occur only in and through the first. This means that the “conversation” the reader will have with Plato the author will be conditioned by how he reads the conversation occurring between the characters of the dialogue. Plato’s address to the reader is never direct and will always be filtered in part through whomever in the dialogue the reader allows Plato’s address to be filtered through– be it Adeimantus, Polemarchus, Phaedrus or some other. There is no other point of access to what Plato wishes to say than through its dramatic presentation in the mouths of a multiplicity of characters, each of whom typically appears not only as a voice but often as a historical person with a known reputation. The speakers in a dialogue, Rowe’s observes, will “always be identified as particular individuals, usually with names and always with identifiable characteristics” (Rowe, 10). Plato takes care to depict philosophical activity between a variety of different types of people of different professions and of varying capacities. In Rowe’s opinion, Plato does not depict a conversation with Ion or Laches as an expression of his interest in the philosophical care of Ion or Laches: rather, he depicts it so for the reader’s sake. Plato chooses a variety of characters for the “types they represent” (Rowe, 11). He expects the reader to find his counterpart in a given dialogue, or otherwise read into one of the personalities one of the people the reader knows (Rowe, 11). In connection to this, the nature of the conversation itself, Rowe notes, begins not with Socrates’ presumptions or opinions, but those of some character, presumptions to which Socrates adapts himself only with the aim of turning it toward a consideration he thinks they ought entertain. According to Rowe, “we…are more like his audience than we are like Plato or his Socrates” (Rowe, 30); the reliance on characters is, in a manner, an attempt to meet us as readers where we ourselves begin. In the likelihood that we will share some of the presumptions of the characters as well as their attitudes and the characteristics of their personalities, Plato uses them in a drama that allows the articulation of his philosophy to begin somewhere that is familiar to our own thought-processes and worldview. If Socrates says different things to different people, the reader is given permission to hear things differently than other readers do, a fact that would buffer any prescriptive use of the Platonic *logos* in the sense of a lawgiver or catechist.

For Griswold also, Plato’s dialogues are deliberately crafted to meet such qualifications as those we find qualifying philosophical *ergon* for Foucault. Griswold claims that what he calls “the stratification of meaning” in Plato’s works, a stratification we have explored above with the help of Rosemary Desjardins, are deliberately designed to speak to different people in different ways, in part according to their philosophical abilities. In an important sense, Griswold claims, the singular and static *logos* of the dialogue is inwardly differentiated, multiple and fluid. The dialogues are “medicinal in that they vary the treatment with the patient” (Griswold 1986, 221) because “in a sense, they do know when to speak and when not” since “they announce their deeper message only to those readers able to find it” (Griswold 1986, 221).

In this, Griswold is similar to Strauss, who claims that the Platonic dialogue is “so contrived as to say different things to different people” (Strauss 1963, 53). The presence of such an intention behind the crafting of the dialogue is consonant with Foucault’s insight that the philosopher’s task is to listen to “voice” of the living being that it addresses in order to bring it into harmony with itself.

Just as Foucault concludes that the *Republic* and the *Laws* are not to be read, in all seriousness, as “proposing the constraining form of the ideal city” (253), so the dramatic form cannot seriously be read as delivering unalterable laws that would impose an already decided form on the subject’s life; the very fact that the reader is the listener of a conversation in which he is not directly involvedmeans that he stands at a distance from the discourse in not being directly addressed by the author of the work. Much like the chorus may have functioned in Greek tragedy, an “audience” to the action (discussion) is often inscribed into the work itself, allowing characters to perform the function of an audience to the action and allowing the reader to view it all from a “meta” perspective. The meta-situation of the reader of the drama allows a distance perhaps not as easily attained in any other format.[[75]](#footnote-75) While it is true that the reader is invited to identify with the character that may resemble who he is, would like to be, or is afraid of being, the dramatic form also allows the reader to see that the conversation is not occurring in his time, in his place, and under his own particular conditions. Whatever conclusions the participants in the dialogue happen to draw, the distance between the reader and the dramatic action gives him silent permission to modify them as they might apply to his life and in accordance to the extent that he finds the conclusions sound.[[76]](#footnote-76)We recall, for example, that not every dialogue even arrives at a clear conclusion or solution to the dilemma it initially raises.[[77]](#footnote-77) The reader, in such cases, is encouraged to continue the work of the dialogue himself or herself. In this way, McGushin’s emphasis on how, for Foucault, freedom particularly distinguishes philosophy from rhetoric seems apt:

Discourse attains the mode of being of philosophy on the condition that it brings the other face-to-face with her freedom. It does not attempt to insinuate itself between the other and the decision she makes or the opinion she holds, in the space where her freedom takes shape. Rather it provokes and incites the other to determine herself, to take up a deliberate relationship to herself. Philosophy does not try to think for the other or govern her (McGushin, 49).

The dialogic form is an appropriate form for a written philosophical discourse to take when it ought to be a discourse like the above. Unable to speak to its addressees like a physician to a free patient, to mutually discover through interlocution and a practice of trial and error which regime is suitable, the author instead ceases to speak directly so as to prevent his expertise from being simplistically misused. The reader is encouraged to begin his own practice of trail and error, and as he does so he may find the text begins to speak differently the more or less he comes nearer to different exemplary attitudes taken toward the philosophical questions at hand.

The dialogue does not try to “think for the other”; rather, it shows others in the process of thinking and speaking and not always doing so in full clarity and for reasons that are often less than objective; yet, with objectivity or truth as the constant aim of Socratic discourse, the reader is encouraged to rectify what he perceives to be wrong. As has been noted, even Socrates is sometimes found to rely on fallacies of which Plato was no doubt aware he, as author, was creating.[[78]](#footnote-78) The form of the dialogue at once creates distance by the very form of its address– the reader is exterior to its “closed” world, much like a stage drama or a film rarely “breaks the fourth wall”– yet also facilitates nearness to the text through *pathos* and its invitation to *mimesis*. Connected to this, the dialogue, particularly as drama, does not try to impart a system of thought to its reader: a system that could be taken away in the form of *mathēmata* and therefore render the dialogic experience secondary to its content. The dramatic element of the dialogue specifically counters this possibility, since it mimics the chaos of life. Griswold writes:

A Platonic dialogue does not present a clear and certain (permanent), or complete teaching. In general, Plato’s dialogues look like a buzzing confusion of ideas, arguments, images, myths, digressions, and interjections by characters meeting at a variety of places and times. To find a *system* of thought in the dialogues (if it exists at all) can only lie buried deep in the dialogues (hence the connection between the old view that Plato is an esotericist and the view that he has a system) (Griswold 1986, 220).

An excellent example, I think, of the relationship between deeds, character, the interpretation of *logos* and the extent to which Plato’s address respects the “freedom” of the reader is found near the start of the *Republic* in Adeimantus’s great complaint (362e-367e) about poetry and its effects on the soul of the young who are attempting to sort out what way of life is best. In the following, I want to illustrate an exegesis of a portion of a text in its dramatic relevance by incorporating Desjardins’ insight that the formulations of poetry, among others, are possessed of ambiguous surface meanings in an assessment of the way that the dramatic artifice of the dialogue can possibly affect our reception of its content. Adeimantus quotes the famous lines from Hesiod:

Vice in abundance is easy to choose,

The road is smooth and it lies very near,

While the gods have set sweat before virtue,

And it is a long road, rough and steep (*Republic,* 364d).

Does this formulation, which suggests insight into the nature of virtue and vice, encourage or discourage virtue? What does it mean? One might think of the time-honored saying that “nothing worthwhile is acquired without great effort.” If one were to accept that saying, virtue would appear to be something worthwhile; the fact that it requires “sweat” might be a sign that it is worthy of our pursuit. As a matter of fact, is not the claim that “sweat and long roads” mark admirable tasks clearly operative in our day-to-day value judgments? The earning of a master’s or bachelor’s degree, for example, could hardly be said to confer any honor– if indeed it does­­­– were it something easily obtained on a road short and level. The ambitious and prideful character of human beings often makes sayings such as Hesiod’s above into an enticing challenge when it pertains to subjects of commonly agreed worth. In other words, Hesiod may well have been telling us that virtue is an accomplishment that we ought to seek out and of which we should be proud, while a life of vice is equivalent to laziness and therefore something low and to be despised as base. The *Works and Days* contains a number of invectives against “idleness.” This is to have said nothing of the fact that it could be merely a warning: what one finds easy to choose is likely to be or become a vice, which everyone simply knows is shameful. Yet is this what Hesiod means to tell us? Moreover, even if this is what Hesiod means to communicate, ought we to derive the same meaning from the claim as he intended to give it? Adeimantus’ indictment of poetry suggests not. Let us consider some of the “polyvalent” meanings of this formulation that begin to separate as soon as it is uttered. The first was stated:

(1) Difficulty in attaining virtue marks it as worthy of human pursuit and denigrates vice as base. (2) That there is difficulty in attaining virtue is a neutral observation that confers no extra value on it. (3) Virtue is difficult to attain. All natures are not equal. The gods “set sweat” before many things that only the few are capable of attaining. Therefore, virtue is not for everyone, even if admirable and desirable. (4) We all fundamentally prefer what is close, near and easy. Often we have to work hard and sweat, but we do this in order to bring other things near to us and make our lives easy and comfortable in the long run. Therefore, vice is naturally preferable to virtue since virtue is only undertaken so that we can live our vices out comfortably. If a semblance of virtue can gain the same things that substantial virtue acquires, the semblance is preferable since virtue is not preferable in itself.

Adeimantus’s indictment asserts that, when we place Hesiod’s formulation of the nature of virtue and vice alongside other seemingly true insights into the nature of things, such as justice and its rewards, the content of the good life, the actions and priorities of the gods and the fate of the soul after death, we are actually taught the truth of the fourth possible meaning of his formulation irrespective of what Hesiod *may* have intended. What is important about Adeimantus’s complaint for the purposes of my argument is that he shows how the probable meaning of a formulation can shift when it is decontextualized and then re-contextualized alongside other discourses or within new situations and experiences of the world. What, in Hesiod’s day, might have been heard as an encouragement of virtue or simply a neutral description has become, in Adeimantus’s, a sly praise of vice. The point is that Hesiod’s words, which likely did not have the sense that Adeimantus concludes, were not stable enough to continuously communicate their original meaning because neither was the world around them. The social and political climate of Adeimantus’ Athens was much different than the context in which Hesiod wrote. Consequently, the real life situation and experience of Adeimantus, including the crisis of an evidently overburdened political and poetic tradition, was the new context that Adeimantus brought to bear on his own reading of Hesiod, with results that might be described as dangerous.

Plato, then, has an interest not only in drawing attention to the instability of words and definitions, as one can do and attempt to prove within a treatise, but also in *maintaining* that instability by retaining the fluid format of the live conversation that allows words to be spontaneous, positions ill-thought through and later recanted,[[79]](#footnote-79) and remarks and claims to stand as indications (or indictments) of their speaker’s character. By doing this, Plato maintains the context that gives words some particular senses as opposed to others and allows them to remain qualified, and in a way, contained, by the dramatic action at hand. In other words, Plato “prevents the logos from becoming completely autonomous,” in the words of Charles Griswold Jr. in his *Self Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus* (1986, 223). Griswold writes that “even the most abstract monologues… are bound to a dramatic, rhetorical, human and empirical context. In the Platonic dialogues, the soul’s pathe and erga are always before us” (Griswold 1986, 223).

That the soul’s *pathē* and *erga* are always before us is especially pertinent to the example I have used above. Adeimantus’s indictment of poetry for its latent praise of the unjust life is coupled with Glaucon’s own speech, including his tale of Gyges’ ring (*Republic*, 359-60). Together, their speeches amount to a “perfect” praise of the unjust life in the hope that Socrates will refute it for them. When they are finished speaking, Socrates is shocked– in wonder, even (*Republic*, 367d). He marvels at the thoroughness of their repudiation of the desirability of the just life and wonders how they might still think injustice terrible “when [they] are able to speak that way on its behalf” (*Republic*, 368b). The obvious suggestion is that their “praise of injustice” might not be entirely hypothetical. Perhaps they indeed really suspect that the whole notion of the intrinsic goodness of justice is a pious ruse? Socrates, however, infers from his knowledge of their character that they are not actually persuaded by their own argument for injustice (*Republic*, 368b).

To stay with the narrow example of the text of Hesiod, we can see how Plato is able to expose the reader to the fourth meaning of the claim that “virtue is difficult” while also distancing the reader from that meaning through the dramatic artifice. It is a delicate balancing act. The reader is aware that the meaning Adeimantus attributes to Hesiod is not the original sense of his words. In fact, the entire discussion of poetry in the *Republic* is full of poetic formulations whose alleged “meaning” in the sense of their implications for how life ought to be lived would likely not be recognized by their authors. Plato’s dramatic artifice allows him to give a clear demonstration of the warning he set out in the *Phaedrus*, where he wrote (275e) that written words “hobnob with completely inappropriate people” and are faced with “rudeness and unfair abuse…always need[ing] [their] father to come to [their] assistance…incapable of defending or helping [themselves].” Of course, be they dialogues or treatises, Plato’s writings also suffer this fate. It needs little reminding, however, that this is part of the reason the most serious matters ought not to be written down. It also signals that Plato is cautioning us from using his writings “seriously” in the same way he playfully abuses Homer’s or Hesiod’s works in all seeming seriousness.

Intended meaning or not, the *pathē* of Adeimantus in exclaiming how poetry teaches us to prefer vice certainly could lead us to infer his seriousness. If Socrates did not vouchsafe his character for us, we might suspect he is, deep down, really a student of Thrasymachus or Callicles. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that Adeimantus is not at least *partially* serious about the effects of poetry on the soul as he describes, despite what Socrates says about his character. If Adeimantus were not partially convinced by his own argument, his apparent need for Socrates to disprove it and hear justice successfully praised for “being fruitful by [its] own nature” (*Republic*, 367d) is curious. It is fair to conclude that his enthusiasm means that he is inwardly divided about the matter, as Strauss says of Glaucon (Strauss, 87). If Adeimantus is inwardly divided about the value of virtue, it is fair to imagine some readers of the *Republic* are as well, and might see themselves reflected in him.[[80]](#footnote-80) In seducing us with the *pathē* of Adeimantus and his personal uncertainty, Plato takes seriously the dark suspicions at which those who spend much time reflecting on the nature of moral and political life are liable to arrive. In exposing– with calculated distance– the reader to the fourth meaning of the claim that “virtue is difficult,” Plato also takes seriously the possibility of its truth without discarding the possibility that the other meanings we may derive from it are true as well. Several “truths” at once come into play with respect to the same thing. One might have long suspected that virtue or justice is a type of ruse or, at any rate, that the dependence on convention, and therefore shame, to transmit it as a value conceals facets of the question that have potentially dangerous implications, and which public discourse therefore does not explore out of a concern for the general interest. The advantage of being dramatically exposed, in serious consideration of its truth, to the claim that the difficulty of the virtuous life implies its intrinsic undesirability means that one encounters this “dark truth” only in a cloud of ambiguity: it is not being asserted by the author of the text (Plato), it is not being asserted in total seriousness by the character who speaks it (Adeimantus), and it is evidently an unsavory and even debased claim for the man who has evidently “spent [his] whole life considering nothing other than this” (*Republic,* 367e) (Socrates). Yet the man who first asserted this type of claim (Thrasymachus) was falsely charmed out of his opinion (*Republic*, 358b), showing that refutation of a person holding an opinion some people consider immoral is not the same as refuting the opinion itself. The ambiguity of language is met with the ambiguity of life, and in this case we can assert that the ambiguity protects as much as it obscures.[[81]](#footnote-81) The reader is thrown back in part on the character of the speakers, which shows forth in part in “deeds” (*erga*), to assist him in sorting through the lack of clarity, as Desjardins argues.[[82]](#footnote-82)

In allowing the reader to take Adeimantus’s “hypothetical” claim seriously– that the gainful semblance of virtue or justice is inherently preferable to its substantial possession–the reader is encouraged to reflect on his own actual, not seeming, attitude toward virtue or justice and just what might make him different from Socrates, or Thrasymachus, or Polemarchus, or Glaucon, or Adeimantus. Adeimantus’s claim that culture at large both fosters and sanctions this “dark” suspicion would be further cause to reflect on culture generally as a factor in moral formation and just what passive and active factors were involved in one’s– the reader’s– creation as an ethical subject. Socrates, of course, has been commissioned with persuading Adeimantus, Glaucon and the rest of the audience out from this “dark” conclusion, but the reader will not be treated to a sermon. Socrates expresses grave doubts that the one who expresses such an opinion can be convinced otherwise by an argument, and the reader is left to develop what criteria he personally would need to see met in order to be persuaded. In a way such as this, hopefully the reader can see how the dramatic form can facilitate the reader to bring himself to bear on the text– and the exercise of thought to bear on him.

The case could be made that all dramas, if inadvertently, probe our “way of life” since they make us witnesses to human action and its consequences and therefore cause the thoughtful person to reflect on the connections among deeds, knowledge, opinions and experiences. However, Plato’s dramas are not tragedies, and their dramatic action is not plot driven in any conventional sense. Rather, they are philosophical dramas that portray philosophical action. Having, I think, sufficiently shown that, for Foucault and others, the dialogues cannot be said to be primarily concerned with imparting teachings in the sense of formulaic/ theoretical knowledge, we turn to what they do intend to impart and the relevance of what the dialogues seek to do with respect to one’s “way of life” and the “self’s relation to self.”

As noted above, for Jürgen Mittelstrass, the Socratic dialogue aims to impart “a philosophical orientation.” In addition to this, he claims that the Socratic dialogue also aims at “the development of… an (autonomous) philosophical subject” (Mittelstrass, 126). In a claim that is remarkably consonant with Foucault’s conception of philosophy’s “reality” derived from the *Seventh Letter*, and McGushin’s assertion that Foucauldian philosophy is an *askēsis* aimed at the development of a new form of subjectivity, Mittelstrass writes that “*in philosophical dialogue it is the individuals and not their opinions that are at stake*” (Mittelstrass, 129 [original in italics]). For Mittelstrass, the agonistic character of the Socratic conversation, far from being eristic, derives from the fact that “not just some opinions or problems but the subjects themselves” are the ultimate object of concern (Mittelstrass, 129). Socrates is not concerned with the triumph of his opinion. Where Socrates appears to be so, we might reason he is attempting to dis-embed the subject from the false opinions that constrain him so that he might become free to acquire knowledge for himself. What is at stake is the subject’s freedom, for Mittelstrass as well as Foucault, so long as one conceives of freedom (autonomy) as linked to the capacity to acquire (philosophical) knowledge, which itself is an *achievement* of the self and not merely a given feature of the natural born rational subject.

In Mittelstrass’s understanding the “philosophical orientation,” whose achievement is the primary goal of the Socratic dialogue, is acquired through the modality of the movement toward knowledge, and not simply in knowledge’s reception (Mittelstrass, 130). This is why the dialogues depict the acquisition of exemplary knowledge, as opposed to attempting to impart theoretical knowledge. Exemplary knowledge teaches, not itself, but the modality by which (non-scientific) knowledge is acquired.[[83]](#footnote-83) It draws attention to the form of the pursuit. The dialogue, in taking the form of the pursuit, teaches at least as much in form as in content. One can only acquire philosophical knowledge when one has “knowledge” of what philosophical knowledge is; that is to say, the philosophical orientation is a mode of doing/ being that also becomes a “knowing” of the fundamental situation of the subject with respect to the accessibility of truth, to attach a Foucauldian term. For Mittelstrass, philosophical dialogue *simulates* a number of possible “situations” and problems whose exploration should lead to the development of a “true” understanding of “situations or oneself” (Mittelstrass, 128). Behind this, I infer the *fundamental* situation of the subject as the one that underpins all possible situations whose “true” understanding we seek, but may never find. By better understanding “who we are” not just as particular individuals, but as possible subjects of action in a world that conditions us, greater degrees of autonomy can be attained. To quote Mittelstrass at length:

In the Socratic dialogue the processes of knowledge acquisition are primarily conceived of as developmental processes, that is, as processes in which not only objectively valid knowledge but also subjective autonomy is produced. According to Socrates and Plato, knowledge cannot be divorced from the individual who knows something or acquires knowledge. This is true at least for philosophical knowledge. Behind this is the insight that that knowledge has something to do with the life of the individual, with his (subjective) autonomy (Mittelstrass, 134).

Subjective autonomy is *produced* alongside the development of a philosophical orientation.[[84]](#footnote-84) This is highly resonant with Foucault’s interest in the question of a relation between *askēsis* and the access to truth, which he himself also posed in relation to the question of freedom. The second lecture of the *Government of Self* shows him asking “not how far the truth limits or constrains the exercise of freedom[[85]](#footnote-85) but, in a way, the opposite to this…to what extent ‘binding oneself by the truth and by truth-telling’…is actually the exercise, the highest exercise of freedom?” (67). As the development of the lecture series shows, truth-telling as an exercise of freedom must become the question of how one knows what the truth is, and must also become the problem of the truth of the subject of truth.[[86]](#footnote-86) If telling and binding oneself to the truth is “the highest exercise of freedom,” acquiring that truth in the first place becomes the *process of freedom’s acquisition* and therefore a practice of the self. The most indispensible step toward acquiring truth is the development of a philosophical orientation, which, as far as I can tell, appears to be a condition of subjective autonomy. Read this way, Foucault’s (and McGushin’s) requirement that philosophy refrain from attempting to govern the other and “bring her face-to-face with her freedom” (McGushin, 49) appears to mean the necessity of refraining from undue interference in the developmental processes by which authentic subjective autonomy begins to be achieved. If the modality of acquiring knowledge is dialectical, and if that modality is adopted not only to “know” but also in order to develop a relationship with oneself that can be characterized as subjectively autonomous, we can see how Mittelstrass is equipped to claim that “dialectics in the Socratic-Platonic sense is not just a *form of argumentation* but also essentially a (philosophical) *form of life (Lebensform*)” (Mittelstrass, 131).

*Conclusion*

The philosophical address that is the *logos* of the Platonic dialogue typically depicts, with notable variations, the dialectical arguments in which Socrates engages with his fellow Athenians. As Mittelstrass claims, we do not witness only a form of argumentation when we read the dialogues, but we encounter a form of life: the Socratic form of life. This life is not explained to us abstractly; it is depicted dramatically with a varied cast of characters who may share in that form of life along a gradation of participation, where we, the readers, may find mirrors of ourselves and be moved to ask what the relevance of the Socratic model is for our own lives. Imitation of that model is not a demand since the reason it is to be imitated has a clear aim: whether one calls that aim subjective autonomy or living out “the best model of life,” such an aim means that its own veracity and adequacy in guiding us ultimately lies in the self’s experience of itself.

If, as Foucault shows, the nature of philosophical knowledge leads to the reality of philosophy as “a work of self on self” then it also must lead to something *like* the dialogic form when it is given expression in writing. This is because, as we have found, philosophy expressed as *mathēmata*, as the formulations of theoretical knowledge, not only cannot communicate philosophical knowledge in the highest sense, but the tendency toward dogmatism actually obstructs the pressing need for “practices of the self” because it gives the illusion that knowledge has been obtained without the requisite effort that Plato stresses is intrinsically tied to the virtuous life that is capable of knowledge, and which Foucault observes should challenge our uncritical experiences of ourselves. When Dionysius wrote a treatise putting forward Plato’s philosophy in his own name, he demonstrated the tension between *logos* and *ergon*: he was eager to accept the honor of appearing to be knowledgeable *en logōi* before he had become the person such writing connoted. If he knew himself, he would not have written or, we have qualified, he might have written differently. Instead, he allowed the *logos* to occupy the space that ought to have been occupied by self-care. This is what is ultimately at stake in the need for philosophy to become *ergon* and for the “disqualification” of *logos* that Foucault finds in the *Seventh Letter.* Had Dionysius remained silent, he perhaps would have realized he himself was the text that ought to have been painstakingly “written,” and “revised” himself again and again.

*Logos* and *mathēmata* stand in tension with *ergon* and *askēsis* when the former, as *media*, assert themselves instead of allowing what they would communicate to shine through. In order to avoid this assertion and this distorting tendency of the *media*, the words must be inflected and, if its can be said, humbled. The *askēsis* that the self must undergo, disciplining its malleable material in a continuous fashion to become transparent to the knowledge it would grasp, finds its corollary reality in an “*askēsis* of the words” that philosophical writing must undertake if it is not to obstruct the knowledge it would communicate. The self-disruption of the *logos* in the dialogues correspond to the disruption of the self that is accomplished in *askēsis* if it is true that the weakness of language is also the weakness of the soul. As we have seen, the *logos* of the dialogues questions itself, it refuses, in Griswold’s words, to “artificially settle” on a system, and instead maintains a continual openness to the horizon that closes perhaps only in death.

The form of Plato’s writings has been given attention for several decades now, but this does not mean its importance has been explored or appreciated from every angle. Foucault has drawn attention to the inadequacy of mere *logos* in connection to the practices of self-care and *ascēsis*. He identified, in the content of Plato’s written *logos*, a need for philosophy to be *ergon* and a conception of philosophy that would be more than just words about “the truth of truth”– not “just *mathēsis* but also *ascēsis.*” If the form that the philosophical self must take is an aporetic one of constant revision and new beginnings, then we can see why the form of philosophical *logos* would need to reflect that, if it remains true that the self is a text.

Foucault claims that, from the works of Plato, we can derive “three circles” of philosophy’s reality: philosophy as a mode of address that treats the “regime” or *politeia* of its “patient,” philosophy as practices, and philosophy as a supra or (non)-verbal acquisition of knowledge. Each dimension of philosophy’s reality flows into the other and appears inseparable from the other: the non-verbal dimension of what undergirds one’s mode of being, as well as all being, means that an attempt by the “philosopher-physician” to bring one’s mode of being into harmony with itself requires practices that are both discursive and non-discursive.

That Plato’s written dialogues are found to be radically conditioned by an awareness of the non-discursive nature of philosophical knowledge would probably be no surprise for Foucault, given that he derives such a definition of philosophy’s reality from Plato’s writings, principally the *Seventh Letter*. With the assistance of scholars such as Gadamer, Desjardins, Griswold, Mittelstrass, and others, we can see that claims for such an awareness on Plato’s part are not a unique consequence of Foucault’s reading. At least in this specific respect, Foucault’s reading of Platonic thought is not “idiosyncratic” as McGushin suggests (McGushin, xxvi).

Foucault recommends such a reading of the dialogues when he notes the implications of his conclusions for the reception of the *Laws* and the *Republic* as proto-totalitarian programs: such readings are seriously defective. Had Foucault not died prematurely, one wonders what his ongoing study of the Platonic corpus would have produced. By showing that, for Plato, philosophy must be *ergon* as well *logos*, Foucault sets up the reader of the dialogues to begin looking for all the ways that the *logos* of the dialogues may be *ergon* as well. Foucault claims that philosophy, for Plato, is a *work* of the self on self. It is with a view to developing, transforming, and ultimately caring for the self as a “mode of being” that *logos* is also e*rgon*. When *logos* reflects, accommodates, and challenges the self it tries to craft, then it is doing “its work.” By showing that the theory of knowledge in the *Seventh Letter* makes language ambiguous and the self “weak” as a mediumof knowledge, by showing that the ambiguity of language conditions the formulations of teachings in Plato’s works, implying the relative unimportance of the transmission of theoretical knowledge, and that altogether this leads to a dramatic depiction of philosophy’s reality as a “form of life” that may be called dialectical, it becomes possible to affirm that the Platonic dialogue is in fact “a work,” an *ergon* of the philosopher-physician trying to help those with an open philosophical will to become adequate rulers– if not of a city, then certainly of themselves.

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1. For Foucault’s remarks that “the problem of ethics as an aesthetics of existence” became “covered over by the [Christian] problem of purification,” see “On the Genealogy of Ethics” in *Michael Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 247-248. The portrait Foucault depicts of the fate of the “aesthetics of existence” vis–à–vis Platonism, Christianity, and modern power is exceedingly complex, piecemeal, and likely marked by unannounced modifications as a consequence of new insights that were not yet fully integrated into the emerging picture of his research. In short, Foucault finds no single cause behind the submergence of the aesthetics of existence into morality or the techniques of modern power. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the Introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*: *Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurely (Pantheon Books, New York; 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See particularly the Introduction to Edward McGushin’s *Foucault’s Askēsis* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007) for his claim that Foucault’s studies in this “last phase of his life” were not merely academic but also the work of “*himself* in the act of becoming a philosopher” (McGushin, xi); also that “Foucault’s philosophical practice…appears to be both a retrieval from a philosophical past and a problematization of our philosophical present” (McGushin, xiv). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See pg. 343 in *The Government of Self*, where Foucault asserts that, for ancient philosophy, “the philosophical life is a manifestation of the truth. It is a testimony;” also see Foucault’s 1984 lecture series *The Courage of Truth*, trans. Graham Burchell(New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) 220- 265, for Foucault’s description of the development from *alēthēs logos* (true speech)to *alēthēs bios* (true life). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The quotation from Griswold cited above cites, among other works, Strauss’s *City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963) 50-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rosen writes: “let me just say as a matter of form that I agree with those for whom the successful interpretation of a Platonic dialogue depends, among other things, upon careful attention to such topics as these: the dramatic setting, the character and intelligence of the main interlocutors, the difference between rhetoric and living conversation and scientific or analytic discourse, the use of irony or, as is especially appropriate in a political conversation, urbanity, and the appeal to myth or allegory in order to reunite elements of the whole that have been displaced or disenfranchised by the piecemeal inspection of individual ‘arguments’ (a word that has a dramatic as well as a logical meaning)” (Rosen, 2) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On the other hand, Christopher Rowe says otherwise in his *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (2007). While claiming that his interpretation of Platonic thought takes due account of the dialogic form, he writes that “by and large, Socrates is Plato’s *portavoce*, his mouthpiece” (Rowe, 15). However, this claim is qualified by his intent to pay greater attention to the fact of the multiple colorings of Socrates’ voice, something he claims other interpreters have generally neglected. By this he means that there are occasions where Socrates adopts “the colouring and premises of his interlocutors or opponents, as an argumentative strategy” (Rowe, 16), and in this way Rowe intends to account for the Plato “of many voices” without succumbing to the “present post-modernist (or post-post-modernist) literary” interpretations (Rowe, 15). Nonetheless, it remains that by nowhere explicitly identifying Socrates as his mouthpiece and by occasionally giving reasons to suspect a distance between author and the character of Socrates, Plato may have been deliberately trying to destabilize his own texts for a variety of reasons, some of which hopefully become clear below.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The recent work by Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), claims that Plato’s thought evinces adherence to an ordered system of philosophical positions that he calls “Ur-Platonism,” whose variations claim the adherence of other philosophers of antiquity such as Aristotle. He writes that his work “undoubtedly amounts to swimming against some of the currents of contemporary scholarship, though, probably not as much as it would have a generation ago” (Gerson, x). It would seem that the legitimacy conferred on the attention to the literary form of Plato’s works has not thereby solved the question of Plato’s “Platonism” once and for all. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bourgault, Sophie, “Putting Bullshit on Trial: The Closing Chapter of Michel Foucault's Voyage to Antiquity,” in *Theory & Event* 14.1 (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Foucault does not find this imperative for the philosopher to advise the politician informing the *Gorgias*, for example. Rather the *Gorgias*, he claims, shows us parrhesiastic philosophy “in its psychagogic activity” (353). Such an activity “is no longer addressed to the politician” (353). Foucault’s lectures constantly suggest a classification scheme according to which different Platonic dialogues could be classified according to different types of parrhesiastic relationships they envision/ enact. Whether these different types are compatible or not, whether they suggest a development in Plato’s thought or whether they are different facets of a singular, overarching conception of philosophical *parrēsia* for Plato is unclear. At times, I find Foucault’s characterizations, such as the one above that distinguishes between the *Gorgias* and the *Seventh Letter,* flawed. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Foucault’s 1982 lecture series published as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graham Burchell(New York: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2005) 14-19 for Foucault’s remarks on what he calls the “Cartesian moment” and the claim that “the modern age of the history of truth begins when knowledge itself and knowledge alone gives access to the truth” (HSJ, 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I owe this assessment to a combination of Foucault’s attention to the letter’s theme of *ergon* and James M. Rhodes attention to the letter’s literary form in “Mystic Philosophy in Plato’s *Seventh Letter*” (2001). Thinking of the letter as a literary text allows us to see its (serious) playfulness and, when so done, suggests to me that the word/ deed dichotomy is consciously used by Plato as part of the letter’s implicit message that its addressees do not have Plato’s full trust on account of the fact that the conditions under which he would participate in their plans remain to be obtained. See Rhodes, “Mystic Philosophy in Plato’s *Seventh Letter*” in *Politics, Philosophy, Writing: Plato’s Art of Caring for Souls*, ed. Zdravko Planinc (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Socrates, in an act of political and ethical resistance, invented a new mode of subjectivity by linking *parrhēsia*– until then a form of political truth–to care of the self” (McGushin, xxiii).For an excellent analysis of Foucault’s claim, in light of Foucault’s total political thought, that Plato and Socrates “initiate or at least indicate…developments in the history of subjectivity” (McGushin, 37) in their re-configuration of the relationship of truth-telling to the political arena, see McGushin, Introduction to Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Eric Voegelin writes in his study of the *Republic* “it is not too venturesome to suggest that in the persons of his two brothers [Glaucon and Adeimantus] Plato represented himself as the young man who found the much needed help of Socrates” (Voegelin, 73). I note that the “dizziness” produced in Plato by the instability of the political situation in Athens, and which leads him to conclude the true nature of justice could only be discerned from the heights of philosophy, reinforces the claim that Plato once found himself in need of a conversation that was something like that of the *Republic*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Interestingly, Stanley Rosen sees something like the necessity of a philosophical *ergon* in the form of intervention into political life, which is so definitive in Foucault’s interpretation of the *Seventh Letter*, in Plato’s *Republic*. He links the compulsion to intervene in politics with Plato’s dialogues when he asks about what compels the philosopher to intervene in political life. In connection to this he asks, “who compelled Plato to write the *Republic*?” (Rosen, 9). For Rosen, Plato’s authoring of the *Republic* was produced by the same necessity that had him counsel Dionysius. He also writes: “as I read it, the *Republic* forces us to reflect upon the necessity of a philosophical intervention into political life, not just for the sake of the city but *for the sake of philosophy* *itself*” (Rosen, 9). To me, this sounds like a different way of formulating Foucault’s assertion that philosophy finds its “test of reality,” at least in part, through its contact with the political field: it has to enter politics for its own sake. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Plato writes “…by good luck I came off safely; and next to God I thank Dionysius for it, because there were many who were determined to destroy me, but he prevented them and showed a certain respect for me and my position” (339e). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See the lectures of January 12 1983: First and Second Hour (39-73) for Foucault’s elaboration of the basic characteristics of parrhesiastic speech. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. According to Eric Voegelin, who claims that “power and spirit cannot be separated” (Voegelin, 225), Plato channeled his political urge into the Academy, which he conceived “as the instrument by which the spirit can wedge its way back into the political arena and influence the course of history” (Voegelin, 226). In other words, Plato carried on his political ambitions the only way he deemed possible: addressing the city through the souls of those who might enter into its formal political game. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Foucault echoes this understanding when he finds that the goal of Plato’s education of Dionysius was to make him harmonious with himself, after the manner of a confederation of cities (269). There, Foucault briefly explores the theme of unity in diversity with respect to both the soul and the political sphere. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. On page 234 Foucault says the philosopher must address “the political will” and then proceeds to talk about “the philosophical will” when we might expect more information about the “political will.” Is this a slip on Foucault’s part? Or is there, perhaps, an important sense in which the political will and the philosophical will are the same? i.e., are both the will to govern? I think Foucault intentionally transitions from the “political” to the “philosophical” will as part of his understanding of their relationship according to Plato’s thought in *Seventh Letter* and elsewhere. Cf. *Gorgias* 509-10: Socrates discusses the power or skill that we must acquire in order to avoid doing wrong in comparison to the power or skill of avoiding wrong being done to us. Socrates seems to suggest the former is sovereignty in one’s soul while the latter he calls friendship with the city’s elite or even holding office oneself. The political art of avoiding harm done by others corresponds to the art of avoiding doing harm to others (and presumably, doing harm to oneself). Might this latter art be justice? Socrates remarks that the will is not sufficient for acquiring this “power.” In any case, the will in question would be a will to power harnessed either by an art of power over others: the conventional understanding of the politics of the city; or an art of power over oneself: a politics of the soul. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This, I think, is quite evident in the *Gorgias*, for example. Pastries are pleasing to the taste, and therefore good in some sense. Yet none would disagree that the “art” of pastry baking is the same as the “art” that helps acquire sound health through the right selection and preparation of food. Rhetoric addresses the appetite for the class of “good” to which pastries belong, while philosophy addresses the desire for sound health. See *Gorgias* 464-466. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. My summary of rhetoric here combines Foucault’s depiction of rhetoric in Plato’s thought with *my understanding* of rhetoric in Plato’s thought: that is, with reference to “what is truly best.” This is not to suggest the two understandings are incongruent. My summary above bears close similarities to McGushin’s summary of the same subject (McGushin 48-49). McGushin’s summary, sensitive to Foucault’s hesitation to talk about “the good,” emphasizes over and again the criterion that philosophical discourse must respect the integrity of the other in his or her freedom to develop in an authentic self-relationship. Talk of philosophy as seeking out the other’s *true* good easily sounds patronizing and paternalistic, though in my opinion not necessarily so if we are cautious. McGushin writes “It [philosophy] does not attempt to insinuate itself between the other and the decision she makes or the opinion she holds, in the space where her freedom takes shape… Philosophy does not try to think for the other or govern her…Rather, it provokes the other to take care of and govern herself” (McGushin, 49). What I intend by “what is truly best for the self considered as a whole” is not fundamentally different from any meaningful understanding of what “care of the self” must entail.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. That philosophy and rhetoric are to be distinguished by the criterion of their effects on the soul’s harmony is, I think, made clear in the *Gorgias*– perhaps Plato’s most polemical work against the “arts” of rhetoric. Where rhetoric is understood as the art of persuading others for one’s own benefit and safety, Socrates asserts “I think it’s better to have… the vast majority of men disagree with me and contradict me, than to be out of harmony with myself” (482b-c). Understood in context, this means it is not worth persuading others (and therefore having the skill of rhetoric) even for the sake of one’s own survival if what is necessary to persuade them will interrupt the harmony of one’s own soul. Socrates subordinates the value of persuasiveness to the value of harmony. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The implication of Foucault’s analysis here is *not* that specific political actions cannot be undertaken by people who are also “doing philosophy.” Indeed, the aim is that the subject of philosophical activity and the subject of political action will be *the same subject*. However, this identity of subjects will be what Foucault calls a non-coincidental correlation (291). He writes “we cannot at all infer that his knowledge of philosophy will be the law of his action and political decisions…what is important for Plato… [is that] this practice of philosophy is a way for the individual to constitute himself as a subject on a certain mode of being” (294); that “mode of being” will be qualified by that which is required, in Plato’s thought, for a ruler (294). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. When Foucault speaks about philosophy’s need to address a “philosophical will” after the manner of a physician and the fact that it speaks with regard to the “whole *politeia*” he is, at this phase, still talking about philosophy’s address to “the city” rather than “the subject,” though the theoretical transition between them has already been made. I think it uncontroversial to elide the two, city and subject, into one when discussing what constitutes philosophy’s reality, since part of the essence of Foucault’s efforts is to show how deficiencies in the *politeia* of the city are addressed in trying to shape the “mode of being” of whomever it is that exercises power. The object of philosophy’s address is slippery in definition, since it must address the political field indirectly through the souls of those who participate in it. Foucault is clearly making Plato’s perception of a reciprocal relationship between the mode of being of the subject and the mode of being of the city central to what characterizes philosophy’s task. McGushin, for example, in writing about what philosophy is for Foucault, seamlessly weaves “the city” and “the subject” together in his summaries when there is no compelling reason to distinguish them. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For example, in the *Protagoras*, the question as to whether virtue can be taught is pursued in order to discover whether Hippocrates should become Protagoras’ student. Tied to this inquiry is the concern that Hippocrates might be on the path to becoming a sophist himself (*Protagoras,* 311d-312). In the *Meno* the question whether virtue can be taught results in the explicit and implicit criticism of a number of famous Athenians (*Meno,* 89e-95). At stake in the *Meno*, among other things, is whether the Athenian elite make good teachers of virtue.In another example, the *Alcibiades,* it is found that Alcibiades is “wedded to stupidity in the highest degree” (*Alcibiades,* 575b). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For other important lectures on the *Alcibiades*, see HSJ 13 January 1982: First Hour–20 January 1982: First Hour; also see CT 29 February 1984: First Hour. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Thomas Flynn in his essay “Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault” (1985) observes the role that a Platonic metaphysics plays in the modification and eventual eclipse of the practices of self entailed by an “aesthetics of existence.” Writing of the period of *UP*, Flynn observes: “the Platonic dimension of the aesthetics of existence…undermines this stylistic in favor of a more cognitive, universal morality” (Flynn, 536). He also observes how, by the time of *CT*, Plato was being characterized as standing “at a crossroads” between two ways of envisioning truth-telling and can be said to be partially responsible for both. One way became the familiar path of Western metaphysics that embedded the care of the self within the care of the soul, metaphysically conceived and typified in the *Alcibiades*. The other was a care of the self conceived as “an art of life” (Flynn, 237) evidenced in the *Laches*. The former gave rise to a morality, the latter to an ethics. Foucault is pursuing a “genealogy of ethics” rather than a “genealogy of morals,” claiming that the concept of the ethical became gradually covered over by the concept of the moral. See, for example, “On the Genealogy of Ethics” pg. 240.  [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Foucault says that the *Seventh Letter* gives us a conception of philosophy that avoids “two complementary figures.” The first is “the philosopher who turns his gaze toward another reality and is detached from this world” and the second is “that of the philosopher who arrives with the table of the law already written” (manuscript note: 255). I take it that they are complementary in the sense that the second of the two is the form that the first takes upon his “descent.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Editor Frédéric Gros locates the argumentin “La Pharmacie de Platon,” *La Dissémination* (London: Athlone, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Drew A. Hyland in *Questioning Platonism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004) critiques Derrida’s understanding of Platonic philosophy, including his thesis of logocentrism in “La Pharmacie de Platon” on the grounds that Derrida consistently fails to take into account the dialogic form of Plato’s writings (85-122). In fact, he argues that the dialogic form is specifically chosen, and the dialogues so constructed, so as to draw attention to “the centrality of the marginal” in a manner that could resonate with Derrida’s own deconstructive “methodology” (99-100): an insight, Hyland claims, Derrida’s inattention to the dialogic form has caused him to miss. This resonates with my own claim to the extent that Foucault’s conclusions, which contradict Derrida’s thesis of logocentrism, are consonant with the findings of scholars who argue that greater attention to the dialogic and dramatic form of Plato’s writings are necessary if he is to be properly interpreted. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Foucault, among others, fails to mention that Dionysius’ authoring of the treatise is hearsay, regarding the truth of which Plato is uncertain. Nonetheless, the possibility that Dionysius wrote such a treaty is the grounds for Plato’s reflection on the relationship between philosophical knowledge and language. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. I write “teachings” thus since, while the remark about “explaining everything” clearly connotes that Plato was communicating ideas verbally, our standard understanding of a “teaching” is that it is itself identical with the knowledge that it is intended to communicate and so can be recorded and transmitted from one person to another even absent of the teacher who delivered it. Dionysius seems to have operated according to this understanding of teaching, since he seems to have believed he understood whatever it was that he was capable of repeating; but that precisely was part of the problem. As we will see, Plato’s remarks that follow undermine any claim that he conceived of his teachings in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. This is an interesting point of contrast with how Plato handles other topics that “shouldn’t be written about,” such as the content of the poetry to be censored in the city-in-speech of the *Republic.* While obviously censored there for reasons different than Plato’s silence here, it nonetheless remains that Plato has Socrates directly quote the very words whose sharing he and his interlocutors have labeled dangerous (Book II, 379d to Book III, 393a). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For example, consider the claim Socrates makes in the *Phaedo* that “that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers”–wisdom– cannot possibly be attained on this side of death” (*Phaedo,* 66e); or the claim made in the *Symposium* that the lover necessarily lacks possession of what he loves, either in the present or its secure possession in the future (*Symposium*, 199c-201). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For attestation to this fact, Desjardins refers us to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Literary Composition*, ed. Rhys Roberts (London: Macmillan, 1910), pp. 264-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Bowen’s article is in part an appraisal of Tigerstedt’s *Interpreting Plato* (1976), which offers such an “ahistorical taxonomy” (Bowen, 50). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Consider what Mittelstrass says is a consequence of what he calls “the presumption of reason” (Mittelstrass, 127). Thought interrupts action. He writes, “whoever interrupts an action in order to think is no longer sure of his ground. Aims and results of actions no longer coincide. The unity of action, which is the unity of designated and realized aims, disintegrates. It is ‘placed in question’ and ‘becomes a problem’”(Mittelstrass, 128). McGushin also draws attention to “problematization” for Foucault as the result of critical thought. For McGushin, thought is that through which “the ordinary, familiar surrounding world, practices and relationships lose their familiarity” (McGushin, 16). For Mittelstrass and for McGushin’s interpretation of Foucault, however, the suspension of action in thought is done in order to prepare “the conditions for many possible solutions,” to open “up the dimension of the possible” (McGushin, 16), to use McGushin’s words. It is perhaps in connection to this “paralyzing” effect of critical thinking that Meno calls Socrates a “torpedo fish” (*Meno*, 80b) who causes those who touch him to become numb; that is to say, Socrates disrupts the familiar. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. If this is true, then the doctrines of Platonic philosophy might be said to fall into at least two categories: (1) discursive teachings whose actual content, being subordinate to the their strategic purpose, would be flexible and so may be expressed in different and contradictory ways without, in the deeper sense, being contradictions. (2) Whatever understanding Plato has of the cosmos and “the nature of things” that makes this theory of knowledge true. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The secondary sources I most depend on: Drew Hyland in *Question Platonism*, Rosemary Desjardins in “Plato’s Serious Play,” Kenneth M. Sayre in “Plato’s Dialogues in Light of the *Seventh Letter,”* Charles Griswold in *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s* Phaedrus, Hans-Georg Gadamer in *“*Dialectic and Sophism,” and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. This claim is found in Béatrice Han’s *Foucault’s Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, trans. Edward Pile (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). For Han, Foucault’s later projects sit in an unresolved tension with the conclusions of his previous work. She writes: “Although Foucault indicates the impossibility of understanding the constitution of the self independently of the modifications that the subject must perform on itself, his definition of the self overall remains quite intellectualizing, in that it implicitly focuses on a conception of the self as a free-determining will. His insistence on the importance of problematization and recognition as *voluntary and reflexive* activities leads him to envisage the relationship to the body in a purely unilateral manner, as an action of the self on self, where the body only appears as material for transformation while consciousness seems to be paradoxically reinstalled the sovereign position that [Foucault’s] genealogy had criticized”(Han, 165). See particularly Part III, pg. 149-187. Near the start of the *Government of Self*, where Foucault discusses methodology, he says his analysis will pass “from a theory of the subject” to an “analysis of the pragmatics of the subject”; that is, “to the analysis of the modalities and techniques of the relation to self” (42). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The reader is likely to reflect on the fact that he or she rarely has had any trouble with understanding circles on that account! It is not within my range to defend Plato’s theory of knowledge here, but only to present how Gadamer understands it and how Foucault makes use of it. The sections from Gadamer’s essay under discussion also go some way in trying to help the modern reader understand why the “deficient” nature of the four *media* present a genuine epistemic problem (pg. 106-108). The entirety of pages 100-123 are relevant to my paper; in them Gadamer also frames the problem with respect to elements of Plato’s thought taken as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. I understand here that I am equivocating “intellect” and “soul” and may not have grounds, from Gadamer, from Plato, or both, to do so. Plato writes that *epistēmē* resides in souls (*en psychais* [342c]). Foucault draws attention to this when he notes that *epistēmē* “resides only in the soul” and so is a form of knowledge “that does not reside in the outside world” (250). Yet Gadamer speaks above of “the intellect” in the realm of “becoming,” suggesting that everything that is coming into being is problematic (i.e., unstable) with respect to its capacity to mediate knowledge. How much does “the soul” share in the “weakness” of the intellect? Gadamer speaks of the weakness of “the state of the soul when it recognizes or knows” (Gadamer, 112), linking soul and intellect. Ultimately, Gadamer *treats* the soul as a “medium of knowledge” when he claims that, according to the letter, the soul must be disposed in a certain way in order to avoid the type “self assertion” that is an obstacle to knowledge (Gadamer, 112). Thus the soul, like the *media* of words and images, has the tendency to “assert itself” at the expense of the thing to be known. In this case, whether Gadamer has in mind any meaningful distinction between soul and self is unclear and my work does not attempt to distinguish between the two. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. It is not my intention to wade into a philosophical debate about the actual “existence” of such “being,” and what would enable us to grasp it in a process that has been characterized as “mystical illumination” (Kant). See James M. Rhodes “Mystic Philosophy in Plato’s *Seventh Letter*” *Politics, Philosophy and Writing: Plato’s Art of Caring for Souls*, ed. Zdravko Planinc (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001) 242-247, for a reflection on this question. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. It might be objected that I have unduly imported Gadamer’s interpretation of Plato into the discussion. Since Gadamer’s conceptual framework is in in debt, for example, to Heidegger and other philosophical traditions, it falls upon me to demonstrate that his remarks on “coming into being” and “passing away” are justified by the *Seventh Letter* itself and not merely resultant from Gadamer applying his own philosophical presumptions to the text. I think it is justified as Gadamer’s genuine insight into the letter when we consider how Plato presents the third element of knowledge: Plato takes care to note that the figure of the circle is “what we draw or rub out, what is in turn destroyed” (342c). This would be no less true of the “nouns and verbs” that make up the name and the definition (the first and second elements). The spoken word passes away even as it is spoken and the written also eventually vanishes. Yet “the circle itself”, Plato writes, “to which they [the three elements] refer remains unaffected, because it is different from them” (342c). i.e., the circle never passes away. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Admittedly, Foucault’s characterization of the relationship between metaphysical schemes and self-care is difficult to pin down. Just because knowledge is thought to be gained by way of witness to a divine/ otherworldly reality does not, in principle, mean that it does not direct one to engage in practices of care or the stylization of one’s life. In *CT* Foucault says, speaking of Christianity, that “a whole series of differences, of modulations in the stylistics of existence, or even different styles of existence have been possible simultaneously within what is, all in all, the same metaphysical framework” (CT, 164). Yet Thomas Flynn also found that, for Foucault, metaphysical schemes undermine the aesthetics of existence (Flynn, 536) by supplanting ethics with morality. Likewise, consider what Foucault claimed in *HSJ*: “Platonism was the constant climate in which a movement of knowledge (*connasissance*) developed, a movement of pure knowledge *without any condition of spirituality*, precisely because the distinctive feature of Platonism is to show how the work of the self on itself … consists in knowing oneself, that is to say, in knowing the truth. To that extent, knowledge of the self and knowledge of the truth (the activity of knowledge, the movement and method of knowledge in general *absorb as it were the requirement of spirituality*” (HSJ, 77 [italics added]).

    Considering the dichotomy that was raised between the *Alcibiades* and the *Seventh Letter* specifically as it pertains to otherworldliness, application and action, I think it is fair to emphasize that the *Seventh Letter* is no less metaphysical in its theory of knowledge than the *Alcibiades*, even though it appears to Foucault to have a much more pragmatic understanding of philosophy. I am not arguing that Foucault believed that, wherever Platonic metaphysics is present, care of the self could not be. Rather, I claim that for Foucault metaphysical discourse is that “constant climate” that threatens to absorb self-care into knowledge and supplant the ethical task of forging a relationship with the self by obedience to a moral code. My point with respect to Gadamer is that it *is* the search for an “eternal verity” that has produced this need for “silent” practices of self. It is a search that demands self-knowledge, but only to the extent needed in order to “get out one’s own way.” It is a search that does not translate to a moral code since it is not communicable in code form, as will be explored in the discussion of *mathēmata* below. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. At least, not in any straightforward sense; not, as Foucault notes, as *mathēmata* (252). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Obviously, this sounds like the Socratic way of life. Socrates does not know what virtue is, yet he is always in pursuit of it; the man who does “not know” what justice is, is also reputedly the “most just man” of his time (324e). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Glenn R. Murrow’s translation includes the footnote: “Lycenus, one of the Argonauts, was proverbial for his keenness of vision” (1661). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. This is the answer to the question that “the good-natured souls” who have the means to “fly to all the things that are said” are in search of, at least according to Adeimantus near the start of the *Republic* (365a-b).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. That “nature” in Plato’s thought, whatever it might mean most specifically, is malleable I take from the comments on Socrates regarding imitation in the *Republic*. He asks, “haven’t you observed that imitations, if they are practiced continually from youth onwards, become established as habits and nature, in body and sounds and thought?” (395c-d). Here, nature appears to be understood as neither the mere sum of freely formed habitual activity nor entirely unaffected by it. That nature is at least in some part habituation contrasts with the tendency to understand it today as an unalterable and even essential feature of one’s disposition and even identity.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. For example, for an argument against a “moral reading” of the Socratic language of virtue, see Rowe 66-79. Rowe claims that, for Socrates and Plato, “excellence [virtue] is wisdom or knowledge, i.e., knowledge about good things and bad things, and what makes other things good that, in its absence, are neither good nor bad” (Rowe, 70). Wisdom, for Rowe’s Plato/ Socrates is knowledge of how to achieve a kind of success–certainly, a highly unconventional notion of success that overlaps with moral concepts–but not one that can be merely equated with a pious conception of morality. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Nietzsche writes “Plato…convinced himself that the ‘good’ as *he* desired it was not the good of Plato but the ‘good in itself,’ the eternal treasure that some man, named Plato, had chanced to discover on his way!” *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kauffmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York; Random House Inc., 1967) Book IV: 972, pg. 510. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. “…and with regard to the right paradigm of life he does not go beyond a hint that in such matters the mean (*to meson*) is preferable (619a)” (Voegelin, 57). [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See also pg. 234- 235 and pg. 266- 271 to see how Foucault links respecting the “voice” of a constitution with the ethical form of a philosophically inflected political subject. For example, Foucault says: “Once again, the problem of good government is not that of changing a constitution into a supposedly better one in an authoritarian manner according to a formula given in advance. Good government involves understanding the nature of the *phōnē*, the voice of each *politeia*, and then governing in harmony with this *phōnē*…as the guarantor of this symphony of the different cities, the leader must also be *sumphōnos* with himself, that is to say in harmony with himself. And this harmony with himself” is “first of all to live each day in such a way as to become increasingly master of himself (*egkratēs autos hautou*)” (269). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. See 343d. The sophists, “manipulating and testing” the four *media*, do so in a manner that never amounts to production of knowledge in the fifth. This is what makes them so skilled at refutation. Based on this passage, we can conclude that the sophists are very well aware of the “weakness of language” and so run up and down the four *media* somewhat like the aspiring philosopher– but in order to exploit the weakness and gain the advantage from naïve persons who have not realized that language is less dependable than they think. We can also conclude that Plato would not be content with his dramatic dialogues if all they did was to show the weakness of language and concepts; they must, among other things, also be in the service of a specific ethical form if they are to actually help one in acquiring knowledge in the fifth sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. I want to avoid the assertion that I have a clear idea of what the virtues are in their content, though I think they clearly play a fundamental role in the philosophical quest. Socrates is often found interrogating the meaning of the virtues whose possession was understood to be constitutive of a gentleman in his time. As I noted above, I think Plato’s writings warn that to fail to be guided by the virtues *properly understood* exposes the intellect to corruption. It is just this “properly understood,” however, that complicates what might otherwise look like a mindless conservative reflex on Plato’s part. Socrates, consistently portrayed by Plato as a pious man, was accused of impiety by his peers. Likewise, “the most just man of his time” (*Seventh Letter*, 324e) was certainly not found by the judges that condemned him to have been “minding his own business.” If Aristophanes’ portrait of Socrates has any seriousness to it, Socrates was not a shining image of Athenian convention. The radical dimension of philosophy is not, I think, extinguished by Plato’s and Socrates’ reliance on the vocabulary of virtue. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. It might seem as though Plato has only “moralized” access to the knowledge of the virtues here, so that it might be easy to see how one cannot know the good unless one is, in some sense, good. Even if that remains to be proven, it has a certain intuitive logic. Yet what, we might ask, about objects of knowledge that are not clearly moral or ethical in their substance, for example knowledge of more ordinary, mundane things? I think Plato might begin to answer that question by referring us to the problem of right use. As Socrates argues that wealth is of no good (e.g., *Euthydemus 279-282***)** unless we possess that art which allows us to use it well, so it might be impossible to have an ethically neutral knowledge of anything in the fifth, philosophical sense of knowledge. It would seem possible for Plato to have someone argue that knowing something “in its being” also involves knowing how to use that thing rightly, and that rightly is perhaps “well” or “justly,” and that one cannot know the good or the just unless one’s life is ethically shaped by what the good and the just are. In this way, all philosophical knowledge could be said to become inseparable from ethics. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. McGushin claims that, for Foucault, philosophy is not only “a way becoming who one is” (xi) but also a way “to get free of oneself” (xii). We might interpret that latter aspect of philosophy with Gadamer here: we must escape ourselves if knowledge of the thing is to appear in the medium of the soul with clarity. What “escaping oneself” means would depend very much on the individual. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. In fact, I think this preoccupation is behind what I consider his misunderstanding of the *Alcibiades*, but it is not one he brings to bear equally on every Platonic text. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. But only in order to point out, and defend, Foucault’s unique conception of historical research (McGushin xxvi-xxvii). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Interestingly, Wallach arrives at a related conclusion about the *Seventh Letter* and its implications for the relationship between philosophy and political activity. He writes: “the *Letter…*establishes stringent conditions for political activism, associates those conditions with ethical and educational goals, and *disassociates those goals from prescriptive political programs*– other than devotion to philosophy and the constitutional (political rule) of law…these features of the *Seventh Letter* neither present a portrait of Plato as a conventionally partisan political activist nor suggest that Plato’s Academy was a site for the inculcation and proliferation of political expertise…to the contrary, they indicate a radical indeterminacy in any Platonic political program beyond its commitment to education in virtue and the constitutional rule of law” (Wallach, 32 [italics added]). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. I think this conclusion accurately draws out the implications of Foucault’s remarks. In making it, I owe the distinction between “an ideal” and a “*paradeigma*” (pattern) in the Platonic sense to observations made by Zdravko Planinc in his *Plato’s Political Philosophy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991) 20-21. Between an “ideal” and a “pattern” the latter is closer to what I mean by “principles” above. Planinc points out that Socrates distinguishes the city in speech from the *paradeigma* which may be said to pattern to it, so that it cannot be said that the city’s institutional arrangement is identical to what is “in heaven” (592a-b). This is easy to miss. Glaucon remarks that the city in speech can be found nowhere on earth and Socrates remarks “but in heaven…perhaps a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself” (592). Socrates, Planinc notes, does not tell Glaucon to model himself after the city in speech, but rather refers him to the pattern “in heaven.” This is the pattern that, Planinc claims, Socrates was trying to refer the city in speech to all along (Planinc, 21). With respect to Foucault, this means that a pattern imaged in a “game” of city-making like the *Republic* cannot be merely mapped onto real life. Making a “heavenly” pattern earthly requires the virtues of *sophia* and *phronesis* (prudence). This coheres with Foucault’s emphasis on the weakness of language. If language is, in fact, so weak then the “pattern” of the good cannot be accurately formulated into words, into “ideals,” into laws to be implemented.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Unless he had the requisite political skills and were legitimately given office. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. This is why I think Foucault’s unconventional method produces results that may be compared with those who have given such explicit attention to the dialogue form. Foucault’s problematization of “truth” leads him to consider truth as a performance, and therefore to begin to look at its discursive function from a “dramatic” perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Jürgen Mittelstrass writes: “Ever since Plato gave philosophical expression to the story about Thales, who fell into a well and was soundly ridiculed by a Thracian maidservant because his star-gazing prevented him from seeing what lay before his feet, the anecdote has become the symbol of the philosopher whom ‘the whole rabble will join the maidservants in laughing at’ and who ‘as from inexperience…walks blindly and stumbles into every pitfall’ (*Theae*. 173e)” (Mittelstrass, 136). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. A conclusion like this is what informs, I think, Mittelstrass’s claim that knowledge and opinion structurally differ “only pragmatically” but not semantically (Mittelstrass, 137). [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. E.N. Tigerstedt corroborates Griswold’s analysis when discussing the rationale behind the dialogic form in *Interpreting Plato* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1977). Tigerstedt claims: “the Dialogue is the only natural way of treating philosophic matters” for Plato. This would be because, for Plato, thought itself “is called ‘a silent inner conversation’ [*Sophist 263e*]. The written dialogue is therefore the externalization of this inner dialogue” (Tigerstedt 98). Rowe would caution us, however, to avoid inferring from remarks such as the one in the *Sophist* that the dialogues are intended to be externalizations of thought processes, least of all those of the author himself. Such an interpretation would risk “radically understat[ing] the extent to which the dialogues are *staged*” (Rowe, 34 [italics added]). However, Tigerstedt qualifies: “But it [the dialogue] is at the same time something more: the meeting of two minds” (Tigerstedt, 98), by which he means the minds of Socrates and his interlocutor and also of Plato and his reader. He therefore avoids the assertion that the dialogues are external records of Plato’s thought in process. The claim that the conversational nature of thought is part of the rationale behind the dialogue choice and that it, to an extent, externalizes thought, can be qualified in a way that does justice to the complexity of Plato’s staging. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. See Mittelstrass 134-140 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. For example, as the assertion in the *Seventh Letter* that one can acquire knowledge of a virtue only if one’s nature is *already* like that virtue would appear to contradict the Socratic doctrine that virtue is knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Mittelstrass writes: “The communicability of philosophical knowledge through writing is purchased, according to Plato, at the expense of the transformation of knowledge into opinion. Where the pragmatic context is missing, the philosophical dialogue loses its characteristic function– to turn opinions into habitual knowledge, that is, into parts of a philosophical orientation. Only pragmatically do opinions and knowledge have a different structure. Semantically, they have the same” (Mittelstrass, 137). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Interestingly, these remarks fit very well with the distinction that Foucault makes between *parrēsia* and the performative utterance at the beginning of the *Government of Self*. Performative speech is the type of speech that always works, always does “what it is supposed to do,” precisely because its (hollow) meaning does not actually strive to communicate the subject who employs it. Foucault’s first example of the performative utterance is the chairman who says “the meeting is open.” Such an assertion is neither true nor false, but effects what it states through the rules specific to its “game”(62). It is the institutional status, for example of the chairman, rather than any quality or action of the speaker that would vouch for his truthfulness that guarantees the validity of the utterance. The performative utterance is not susceptible to ambiguity because its clarity is secured by the objectivity of the institutional context. See the lecture 12 January 1983: Second Hour (61-71). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. The full quote is owed to the reader to avoid the accusation of the abuse of its sense: “Given the problem of ambiguity in language, and the need to move from surface to deep-level meaning, it is hardly surprising that the first step in a dialogue’s development usually requires that one be shaken from a commonplace satisfaction with the surface of language and forced to recognize that language does not transparently and unequivocally *mean* just like that” (Desjardins, 116). Desjardins is thus referring to the “surface meaning” of words, a meaning to which we are likely to fall prey if we are not shaken to the awareness of their multiple meanings and which one specifically is being pursued. The dialogue form helps us do this because it is characteristic of actual conversation to ask for clarification as well as offer it. We are often unaware that our words do not signify what we imagine they do until we encounter a misunderstanding with someone and are forced to begin clarifying and perhaps retracing our steps, going more deeply or revising. Expressions of misunderstanding are perhaps the most common way to realize that “words do not mean” like we naively imagine them to. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. The context in which Hyland uses these words I borrow makes them apt for my argument. He is claiming that Plato did not intend any specific character to serve as a mouthpiece for his own views. See Hyland, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Distance, but also closeness; see E. N. Tigerstedt whose claims are similar to my own above. He writes, “Plato’s own teaching is at once and the same time forbiddingly impersonal and compellingly personal. His dialogues are discussions which are not addressed to any reader or which the reader is incited to join but to which he is admitted as a silent listener” (Tigerstedt, 96). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Similarly, Tigerstedt claims, “What Socrates says, he says to a certain person in a certain situation, and we cannot simply apply it to ourselves. But–and this is the paradox of the Platonic Dialogue–neither can we refrain from doing so” (Tigerstedt, 98). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. The aporetic conclusion of an inquiry is a unique feature of many of Plato’s texts that the dramatic form is particularly apt to accommodate. Griswold writes, “a given text may turn out deeply aporetic in the sense that it defines a problem and shows that there are no available solutions to it. A Platonic dialogue may be designed to establish with great consistency that there is an irresolvable inconsistency in our accounts of how things are” (Griswold 1986, 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. For example, Richard McKim’s essay “Shame and Truth in Plato’s *Gorgias*” *Platonic Writings/ Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles Griswold Jr. (New York: Routledge, New York, 1988) depends in some measure on pointing out that Socrates’ argument in the *Gorgias* is not logically defensible; principally this is because McKim claims that Socrates is not concerned with a logical defense of the just life in the strict sense employed by analytical standards. McKim sets out an interpretive “rule of thumb,” whereby “if a fallacy seems obvious to us” we ought to reason “that is because the dramatist *made* it obvious for some dramatic purpose” (Mckim, 46). Whether or not “rules of thumb” like Mckim’s are tantamount to a “divinization” of the author are addressed by Griswold in the introduction to his *Self Knowledge* (Griswold 1986, 11-12). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Jürgen Mittelstrass points out similar advantages of the dialogue form, including the claim that it “allows the revision of positions taken within the course of the writing itself” (Mittelstrass, 139). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. According to Griswold, something like this would be Plato’s intention. He writes, “Plato’s dialogues seem designed to function as mirrors of a peculiar sort, for they allow the reader who is unsuited to philosophy to see himself in the text” (Griswold 1986, 222). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. To be clear, I am not asserting that, in offering Adeimantus’s praise of injustice or in opposing Thrasymachus or Callicles to Socrates, Plato himself had no opinion on the matter nor that we lack grounds to have a sense of what his might be. Strauss does not claim we can never attribute a character’s utterance to Plato, he only says we may not do so “without having taken great precaution” (Strauss 1963, 59). At least for Strauss, it would seem Plato’s opinions may be in the dialogues and are worth wondering about. It is rather evident that the dialogues consistently valorize the life of Socrates over and against those that may be represented by Callicles or Thrasymachus. However, in concealing his own opinion on the matter behind the masks of his characters, Plato allows us to take a variety of positions seriously, and simultaneously at that. Plato himself may not share the “dark” conclusion Adeimantus “pretends” to derive from the contradictory discourses made by the poetic representation of human life, but the fact that the view of the relationship between nature and convention that it indicates is not always unambiguously disproven by Socrates, and that Socrates is occasionally found to be relying on questionable techniques to dissuade those who espouse it, suggest that Plato is playing a complex “game” with regard to positions we customarily think of as completely antithetical to his “doctrines.” [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Like Griswold cited above, Desjardins also claims that the dialogues communicate “through words and deeds” and “through the interplay of these two aspects” (Desjardins, 117). See pg. 119- 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. I must note that Mittelstrass makes important remarks on what he sees as the relationship between scientific and philosophical knowledge for Plato. For Mittelstrass, Plato indeed differentiates between these two types of knowledge, but in such a way as not to imply “the current distinction between science and philosophy.” Scientific knowledge could become philosophical knowledge were it treated dialectically. See Mittelstrass, 137-138. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. This statement about exposure to the dialectical experience as part of the development of a “philosophical orientation” coheres with McGushin’s conclusion about the purpose of Socratic truth-telling for Foucault. He writes,“[the] practice of subjectivization through ethical *parrēsia* and care of the self *was a practice of freedom*. The form of philosophical life and language that Socrates and Plato invented served to ‘desubjectify’ the political, ethical subject. They strove to detach the subject from its experience of itself, to disconnect it from the forms of control it had incorporated through the work of the ‘general opinion’ and the discourse of rhetoric” (McGushin, 44 [italics added]). [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. This is a significant shift in Foucault’s analysis of the function of truth. In fact, it appears to be a complete reversal of his interest in truth as a means of control. It was his wish to articulate a political history that would show the story of how “truth is not by nature free” (*History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, trans., New York, Random House: 1976) 60, and to show that such an association of freedom and truth is a ruse of power. See, for example, the lecture on “Truth and Power” in *Power*: *Essential Works of Foucault* 1954-84 (ed. James D. Faubion, trans.Robert Hurley and others, The New Press, 2000) 111-133. Foucault’s analysis of *parrēsia* in *The Government of Self* appears to analyze truth-telling as a practice of freedom in a sense no longer characterized by his Nietzschean suspicions. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. In McGushin’s analysis, the speaker of the truth exposes or reveals his own self in his enunciation (McGushin, 7); likewise, his truth-telling reveals to the listener who he [the listener] is (McGushin, 10). The truth, as a double revelation of the speaker and listener, means that truth is bound up with who the subject is, not objectively speaking, but as concerns his “relationship with himself” (McGushin, 10).  [↑](#footnote-ref-86)