The Art of Self-Fashioning, or Foucault on the Alcibiades

Caring for the Self and Others

Socrates: I’m sure you’ve noticed that when a man looks into an eye his face appears in it, like in a mirror. We call this the ‘pupil,’ for it’s a sort of miniature of the man who’s looking.

Alcibiades: You’re right.

Socrates: Then an eye will see itself if it observes an eye and looks at the best part of it, the part with which it can see.

Alcibiades: So it seems.

Socrates: But it won’t see itself if it looks at anything else in a man, or anything else at all, unless it’s similar to the eye.

Alcibiades: You’re right.

Socrates: So if an eye is to see itself, it must look at an eye, and at that region of it in which the good activity of an eye actually occurs, and this, I presume, is seeing.

Alcibiades: That’s right.

Socrates: Thus, if the soul, Alcibiades, is to know itself, it must look at a soul, and especially at that region in which what makes a soul good, wisdom, occurs, and at anything else similar to it. (Alcibiades 133a–b; Hutchinson 1997: 592)

Michel Foucault began his 1982 course at the Collège de France, L’herméneutique du sujet, with a meticulous reading of the Alcibiades (2001).¹ This dialogue, which is considered by some today to be pseudo-Platonic,² was widely appreciated in antiquity and universally accepted as genuine. One reason for its wide popularity was its theme: the necessity of caring for the self (epimeleisthai heautou),

¹. See also his résumé of the dialogue in his unpublished lecture of February 16, 1983, in the course “Le gouvernement de soi et des autres” (1983a), tapes of which are available at the Institut Mémoires de l’Édition Contemporaine.

². For a survey of the problem and a persuasive argument for the dialogue’s authenticity, see Denyer (2001: 14–26). For a brief survey of the latest stylometric research, see Brandwood (1992: 112). And for Foucault’s position and an updated bibliography on the status of the controversy in France, see Foucault (2001: 71, and Gros’s accompanying note). Croiset’s Budé edition (1960: 49–53), which would have been Foucault’s reference volume, emphatically rejects all questions concerning the dialogue’s authenticity.
defined as caring for the soul, as a propaideutic to entering into the affairs of state. For this reason, in late antiquity when the study of philosophy had predominantly become an exercise in textual commentary, and when the reading of the Platonic corpus proceeded through a structured curriculum, the Alcibiades was generally the first text read just as the Philebus was often the last (see chapter 5). The Alcibiades, in particular, was thought to provide both a protreptic admonition to turn to philosophy, as a means of caring for the self, and a general overview of Platonic philosophy (Foucault 2001: 164; Denyer 2001: 14; Hadot 1995b: 238–40).

In the dialogue, Socrates encounters Alcibiades on the cusp of maturity and declares his love for him. He recognizes that Alcibiades has had and shunned many suitors in the past, believing that his good looks, fortune, and social station permitted him to turn up his nose at such plebeian blandishments. Now, however, those suitors have deserted him and he has reached an age when boys were no longer considered attractive. Unlike others, Socrates had been silent about his love until now, at the behest of his famous daimôn. But Alcibiades is about to address the Athenian assembly for the first time a few days hence, and Socrates approaches him with the proposition that he can now be of more service to Alcibiades than all his previous lovers, and more than even his famous guardian, Pericles himself. Alcibiades is charmed by the declaration of Socrates’ affection and intrigued by his offer. He agrees to enter into a series of questions and answers with Socrates so that the latter can make clear to him the nature of his services. In the course of the ensuing dialogue, Socrates is able to demonstrate that Alcibiades has neither expert knowledge on the matters of state that he presumes to advise the Athenian people on, nor a fundamental knowledge of the good and the just. It is precisely the revelation of this aporia at the heart of Alcibiades’ self-understanding that is the service Socrates presumes to offer. The result of this initial dialectical interchange is an agreement between Socrates and Alcibiades on the necessity to care for themselves before they presume to offer their services to the city. A man who does not know that which is best in himself cannot know how to make his fellow citizens better.

This recognition leads to a final series of questions and answers concerning the nature of the self and how it is to be cared for. The self as seen in the passage cited at the beginning of this chapter is identified with the soul, and the soul, we learn, is only made visible in the soul of one’s interlocutor, i.e., through the practice of the dialectic. The dialogue concludes with Alcibiades agreeing to pursue this form of caring
for himself. Therefore, we can picture the prospect of many future such dialogues as the young man sees his soul reflected in his lover’s and as the truth is pursued through the practice of Socratic intercourse.\(^3\) In the final lines of the dialogue, however, Socrates voices his concern that Alcibiades’ conversion may only be temporary and that he may once more be seduced away from him and philosophy by the allure of the polis. We conclude, therefore, by looking forward to the end of the Symposium, where an older but not wiser Alcibiades is shown precisely to have succumbed to the seductions of the unreflective life while nonetheless continuing to be smitten by Socrates’ unfathomable charms.\(^4\)

For Foucault, as for late antique philosophy, the Alcibiades constituted, to paraphrase Olympiodorus, “the gateway of the temple.” Foucault saw in it the first and fullest theorization of an ethic of self-relation that was to constitute his primary object of interest in the last years of his life (2001: 46; 1994c: 615). For him, the Alcibiades provided not only an explicit theorization of one of the guiding threads of the Platonic corpus, it also represented a model of self-relation that made possible the Stoic ethic of the care of the self in the first two centuries of the Roman imperial period (2001: 65).\(^5\) It was this latter form of self-constitution and cultivation that Foucault would directly contrast with the Christian model of confession and self-renunciation that he saw at the heart of modern technologies of disciplining and normalizing the self (2001: 242, 247; Gros 2001: 490–93, 507; Sennellart 2003: 157). The Stoics, starting from Plato’s initial model, offered an alternative form of self-relation both to the Christian archetype and to that described later and implicitly denounced in Foucault’s middle works such as Surveiller et punir and La volonté de savoir. It was this alternative model on which Foucault concentrated during the final years of his life (Foucault 1994f: 364; J. Miller 1993: 322, 340).

In this chapter, we shall examine Foucault’s reading of the Alcibiades as part of his wider understanding of Plato and ancient philosophy.

---

3. Foucault notes that the conversion preparatory to the pursuit of self-knowledge is the province of what he terms, following Pierre Hadot, “spirituality.” Spirituality has two main forms in the west, erōs and askesis (2001: 17). The Alcibiades combines these two forms.


as a whole. We shall do so first as part of his continuing dialogue with Deleuze, Derrida, and Lacan on the importance and interpretation of Plato in contemporary philosophy. We shall then look in more detail at the relation between his reading of the Alcibiades and his overall political and ethical project, before examining a number of passages from the dialogue itself.

1. Genealogy of the Ethical Turn: Foucault’s Platonic Dialogues

a. Deleuzean Dialogues

You aren’t unpracticed in detecting crooked conduct,
What the wise Portico, bedaubed with trousered Medes,
Teaches, the things the sleepless and close-shaven youth
Stays up to study, fed on pods and proud polenta.
(Persius 3.52–55; Lee and Barr 1987: 29)

Among the postmodern authors we have been examining, it is Foucault’s turn to antiquity that has received the most notice among theorists and professional classicists. His work in many ways represents the telos of the trajectory we have been tracing throughout this book. The final Foucault not only addresses the relation of ancient philosophy in general, and Platonism in particular, to the philosophical understanding of the subject in postmodern France, it also constitutes a deliberate and measured response to the problematics outlined by Lacan and Derrida in their respective readings of Plato.

We can provisionally date the origins of Foucault’s ethical turn to 1970 and his praise of Deleuze’s 1969 Logique du sens.7 Deleuze in this idiosyncratic work launches an attack on the insidious Platonism that he sees infecting western thought. Using Stoic logic’s distinction between bodies and events, as well as Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, he sets out to undermine Platonism’s doctrines of the representation, recollection, and imitation of an ideal

6. Zeno, the founder of Stoicism taught at the Stoa Poikile (“Painted Portico”) in Athens. It was adorned with a fresco depicting the defeat of the “trousered Medes” at the battle of Marathon.
7. See also Miriam Leonard’s important reading of a series of lectures Foucault gave in Brazil in 1973, “La vérité et les formes juridiques,” on the Oedipus Tyrannos (Leonard 2005: 68–95). The lectures were translated and published in Portuguese in 1974, but were never published by Foucault himself in French (Foucault 1994dd).
original, in the hopes of uncovering an alternative philosophical tradition that privileges surface over depth and event over essence (Benatouil 2003: 20). For Deleuze, Stoic doctrine represents the logical inverse of Platonic metaphysics. In Stoic logic, the ideal, precisely because it is an “incorporeal,” is always only an effect of a body’s surface rather than the ultimate guarantor of its essential identity. No longer representing the realm of strict determination, as we saw in Derrida’s reading of the *Philebus*, the ideal is now associated with the world of becoming and the unlimited, “The realm of becoming and the unlimited becomes the event itself, ideal, incorporeal, with all the reversals that are proper to it” (Deleuze 1969: 17). For Deleuze, Stoic logic is an open system of expanding and multiplanar surfaces, as opposed to the closed system of Platonic metaphysics. It represents the possibility of new lines of flight, rather than the consolidation of an ideal identity that is thought to subtend and determine the world of becoming (Aliez 1992: 221).

Foucault in his laudatory review argues that Deleuze’s method of reconstructing this system is “rigorously Freudian.” It is based on a careful symptomatic reading of the omissions, displacements, and repressions that constitute the history of western philosophy, offering a restoration not of a lost depth, but of a lost surface. The upshot of the review is a call not only for a return to ancient philosophy, but to precisely those texts and events from antiquity that are the least read and most frequently neglected:

We should not scorn Hellenistic confusion or Roman platitudes, but listen to those things said on the great surface of the empire; we should be attentive to those things that happened in a thousand instances, dispersed on every side: fulgurating battles, assassinated generals, burning triremes, queens poisoning themselves, victories that invariably led to further upheavals, the endlessly exemplary Actium, the eternal event. (Foucault 1977a: 172)

Although Foucault's eventual reading of the Stoics would be very different from Deleuze’s—focusing on the elaboration of an art of existence rather than a counter-Platonic logic—and although Foucault and Deleuze would later take their distances from one another philosophically and politically, nonetheless, even at this early date we can see Foucault's interest in the Stoics, as well as the Cynics, and such ostensibly marginal figures as Diogenes Laertius.

More importantly, we can also see in this same review his emerging conviction that the opposition to the classic metaphysics of “Platonism,”
which he, Derrida, Deleuze, and Irigaray all saw as subtending western thought, can be found in Plato himself: for he contends that a counterdiscourse to metaphysical Platonism can be found not only in the later Stoics, but also in the pre-Socratics, the figure of Socrates himself, and in Plato’s *Sophist* (Foucault 1977a: 166–69; Flynn 1991: 112; Wolff 1992: 241–42; Benatouil 2003: 24, 30–31, 36). In Foucault’s later work, this perception of the inherent heterogeneity of the Platonic oeuvre will lead to his reading the dialogues as an interconnected web of individual texts rather than attempting to subordinate them to a single overarching vision (Castel-Bouchouchi 2003: 176, 186–87). In the manner of Pierre Hadot—one of the main intellectual influences on the late Foucault (Davidson 1997)—he reads Plato less as an abstract theorist than as an advocate for a specific mode of reflective life (Hadot 1997: 211–12; 1995b: 102–3).

*b. Derridean Dialogues*

This sort of madness is given us by the gods to ensure our greatest good fortune. (*Phaedrus* 245b; Nehamas and Woodruff 1995: 29)

This pragmatic reading is in many ways separate from the mainstream of philosophical Platonism in early twentieth-century France, as represented by the works of people like Festugière (1950), Robin (1929, 1985), Diès (1941), and Boussoulas (1952). This latter tradition was that to which Derrida’s reading of the *Phaedrus* and *Philebus* in chapter 5 was both an heir and a response. This observation is important because Foucault, in his return to Plato at the end of his life, is not simply carrying forward his ongoing dialogue and later debate with Deleuze, nor is he merely grafting a reading of Hadot onto his own concerns with the body and sexuality; he is also continuing a polemic with Derrida that has its origins in the latter’s 1963 lecture on his *Histoire de la folie*. Indeed, the Platonic subtext remains one of the most lasting

8. For a defense of this approach to the dialogues, see Kenney (2003: 8–27).


10. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to underestimate the influence of these earlier more traditional French Platonists on the later postmodernists’ thought. Thus Festugière defines philosophie as “le soin de l’âme” (“care of the soul”) and opens his chapter on “La vie intérieure” with a citation from the *Alcibiades*, τί ἐστὶν τὸ ἐσωτερικὸν ἐπιμελέσθαι; (“what is the care of the self?”) (1950: 61, 130).
threads in the set of discussions, debates, and dialogues that constitute French poststructuralist thought.

That Derrida’s criticism of Foucault had struck a nerve can be seen in the fact that he waited over nine years to respond and that, when he did, he ignored those parts of Derrida’s argument that dealt directly with the constitution of western reason through the Socratic dialectic.\(^\text{11}\) Instead, he silently dropped from the 1972 edition of the book the original preface in which he had made the claim that the Greek *logos* knew no opposite (Boyne 1990: 74–76, 118). There was no longer a place for such sweeping generalities about ancient philosophy. As Foucault admitted at the beginning of volume 2 of the *History of Sexuality*, it had become clear to him that his genealogies of modernity could only be valid if their difference from and grounding in antiquity were solidly established (1984a: 11–14).

Nonetheless, neither the *History of Sexuality* nor Foucault’s courses at the Collège de France during the eighties should be seen as a concession to Derrida; rather they constitute a continuing rejoinder to his criticisms.\(^\text{12}\) In his initial response to Derrida’s essay, Foucault had argued that Derrida’s perspective was too exclusively philosophical, that it sought to reduce history to a system enclosed within the Socratic *logos*, and that it treated socially and historically embedded discursive practices as mere textual traces (1972: 584, 602). Twelve years later when volumes 2 and 3 of the *History of Sexuality* were published, the more strictly philosophical discourses of Plato, Aristotle, and Seneca were consistently read in the light of ancient medicine, manuals of domestic conduct such as Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos*, and the correspondence of the younger Pliny. Thus while Foucault granted Derrida’s contention that it was impossible to do a genealogy of western reason without a thorough consideration of its earliest exemplars, he refused to grant philosophical texts any special status. They were always examined as part of a larger ensemble of related discursive practices as opposed to the disembodied texts of traditional philosophy, of which he saw Derrida as the latest and “most decisive representative” (1972: 602).\(^\text{13}\)

In fact, Foucault’s later readings of Plato remain deeply implicated in his polemic with Derrida on the origins and constitution of western reason. The range of his response is multileveled and often quite subtle. But the significance of this ongoing debate is not to be underestimated

\(^{\text{11}}\) See chapter 5.

\(^{\text{12}}\) By all evidence, the debate continued to fascinate Derrida as well. See his analysis of the ambivalent place of Freud in *Histoire de la folie* and Foucault’s later work (1997).

\(^{\text{13}}\) See Kremer-Marietti (1985: 131) and Boyne (1990: 75).
if we are not to miss both the philosophical stakes of Foucault’s evolving understanding of the Socratic *logos* and the centrality of Plato to the debates that shaped the French intellectual scene in the last half of the twentieth century. Thus, at the start of his 1982 course on *L’herméneutique du sujet*, before his actual reading of the *Alcibiades*, Foucault sketches the historical importance of the concept of the “care of the self”—in both its Socratic and its later Hellenistic and imperial versions. The practice of the care of the self is contextualized in the history of western philosophy in relation to that of “knowing the self.” In the ancient world, he argues that self-knowledge was predicated on a preliminary “spiritual” transformation, which he defines as “the research, the practice, the experience through which the subject effects upon itself the necessary transformation to have access to the truth” (2001: 16). These practices range from physical and dietary regimens to the repeated engagement of Socratic dialectic or, in the later Stoic tradition, the keeping of notebooks and journals for recording both one’s own spiritual progress and the discourse of others. By contrast, Foucault argues, in the modern world the act of knowing oneself is predicated solely on the pursuit of the proper intellectual method, and the attainment of certain necessary conditions. Here, he pointedly refers to Descartes’s exclusion of madness from his first meditation as an example of the way in which the conditions for the subject’s access to truth come to be increasingly defined from within the domain of knowledge in the modern period, as opposed to knowledge being predicated on the subject’s having already gained access to truth through his or her own spiritual transformation, in those periods when the ethic of the care of the self is predominant. Philosophy, like poetry, may be a form of divine madness in the *Phaedrus* but not in Descartes. In this allusion to Descartes’s first *Meditation*, the editor of *L’herméneutique du sujet* immediately picks up on a reference to the earlier polemic with Derrida in an accompanying note (Foucault 2001: 19).

The topic is returned to later in the course. There it is a question of whether Descartes’s *Meditations* constituted actual spiritual exercises, in the antique mode, or purely textual investigations. Again the reference escaped neither the editor nor, one imagines, Foucault’s auditors (Foucault 2001: 340–41). The understanding of Descartes’s practice as an actual meditation was crucial to Foucault’s response to Derrida (1972: 591), since one who dreams can still think and hence meditate, but one who is *demens* cannot engage in this methodical practice of thought. For Foucault, then, the practice of being a subject can never be disarticulated from its relation to specific conceptions and practices.
of knowledge and truth, even though the relative priority or secondariness of those technologies of self-constitution in relation to the domain of knowledge may be radically historically variable.

The stakes, then, of Foucault’s reading of Plato could not be higher. The reasons are three. First, for Foucault, the “care of the self” is a crucial feature in determining the history of the subject’s relation to truth in western philosophy: he demands that we ask the question, is philosophy, both for us and for Plato, an abstract set of propositions, a theoretical structure, or something we do, an activity whereby we come to form and re-form ourselves. Clearly, these are not mutually exclusive propositions, but it makes a great deal of difference on which formulation we place the accent, on whether we pursue the study of ancient philosophy primarily in the manner of analytic ancient philosophers such as Terrence Irwin14 and Gail Fine or that of more practice-oriented and hermeneutic philosophers, such as Pierre Hadot and Alexander Nehamas.15 Second, this concept of the subject’s practice of the self is integral to Foucault’s personal polemic with Derrida, arguably the other, single most influential French philosopher of the postmodern period.16 Third, this polemic and its corollary issues are central to understanding Foucault’s conception of reason as defined by the foundational texts of western philosophy.

Indeed, evidence of a subtle retort to Derrida’s reading of Plato’s Phaedrus and the latter’s suspicion of writing can be seen in Foucault’s privileging of the Stoics throughout his later work.17 Foucault

15. In this particular division of the philosophical field, as Foucault understands it, Derrida winds up more as the uncomfortable bedfellow of his analytic confrères Irwin and Fine than of Foucault and Hadot.
16. Carlos Lévy (2003) thus has argued that Foucault’s exclusion of ancient Skepticism, as embodied in the work of both Pyrrho and later Sextus Empiricus, from his genealogy can best be understood in light of his polemic with Derrida on Descartes and the nature of radical doubt. Lévy argues that Foucault inadvertently repeats the totalizing gesture that Derrida had earlier seen (wrongly in Lévy’s view) to characterize his reading of Descartes. See also Gros (2001: 502 n.21).
17. Evidence of Foucault’s counterdiscourse to Derrida can be seen already in Les mots et les choses. Where Derrida had argued in his early work De la grammaïologie (1967b), L’écriture et la différence (1967a), and La voix et la phénomène (1967c) that western metaphysics was constituted by the systematic exclusion of writing in favor of the voice and consciousness’s immediate self-presence to itself, Foucault in Les mots et les choses argued for an alternative tradition of Renaissance philosophy that privileges writing (1966: 53). This theme would be picked up in the 1982 course at the Collège de France where Montaigne is specifically seen as the heir to the late antique tradition of the care of the self (2001: 240; 1994c: 410), a theme that is later repeated by Hadot (1995b: 395, 413) and Nehamas (1998). Foucault’s Les mots et les choses was published the year before Derrida published his three books, but the latter’s ideas had been in circulation for some time in the
observes that in the Stoics, and indeed all the philosophers of the imperial period, the exclusion of writing is completely discarded (Foucault 1994f: 361). Philosophical pedagogy had changed, he notes, following Hadot (1995b: 271–72). “The Platonic culture of the dialogue cede[d] its place to a culture of silence” predicated on the written word, and an “art of listening” (Foucault 1994g: 796). In making this case, Foucault implicitly argues that there is an alternative philosophical tradition to the (neo-)Platonic one from which Derrida derives, a tradition whose primary focus is ultimately on practice rather than the logos, and whose chief concern is the ethics of self-fashioning rather than the metaphysics of meaning as the presence of consciousness to itself (Spivak 1976: xvi–xl; Zuckert 1996: 213–14).

Indeed, while Derrida is never mentioned, the careful reader of Foucault’s *Dits et écrits* can discover a careful rebuttal of all the major points made in “La pharmacie de Platon,” beginning with the *pharmakon* itself.18 The *pharmakon*, it will be recalled, symbolizes writing’s suspect status as something outside, yet also integral to, the *logos* itself. Thus Plato in the *Phaedrus* has Ammon argue that writing is a *pharmakon* that allows people to appear to know more than they do by repeating the discourses of others, as Phaedrus does in the case of Lysias, rather than coming to real knowledge through an active engagement in dialectic. In contrast, Foucault points out, even a Platonist such as Plutarch recommends learning the discourses of others as a *pharmakon*, or drug, that guards the soul against illness (Foucault 1994f: 360; 2001: 310). *Aretê* on this model comes from study and prescribed spiritual exercises. Socratic *epimelia* *heatou* (“care of the self”) as outlined in the *Alcibiades* has, in imperial philosophy, become indissociable from the practice of writing (Vernant 1965: 1.112).

Thus what Plato on Derrida’s reading sees as harmful, imperial philosophy according to Foucault views as beneficial. Where Plato rejects writing,19 according to Derrida, as mere *hupomnēsis* instead of *mnêmē*, the philosophers of the empire, Foucault observes, directly advocated the keeping of *hupomnēmata*,20 or notebooks, not as a substitute for form of lectures and conference papers.

18. In at least one case, Foucault’s interviewers clearly invite him to situate his work relative to the problematic investigated by Derrida in “La Pharmacie.” Foucault’s response is to switch immediately to a discussion of the history and technical status of *hupomnēmata*, a move that appears to refuse the engagement with Derrida while simultaneously accepting it on his own terms (Foucault 1994c: 624–25).

19. For a discussion of the bibliography surrounding the issue of writing, orality and Plato, see note 33.

20. The importance of the *hupomnēmata* as a genre of philosophic writing that was
memory—conceived of by Plato as vital and interior to the soul—but as a form of practice, a technology of the self (Foucault 1994d: 417–19; 1994f: 361–61; 2001: 343). Writing, rather than undermining the presence of the *logos* to itself or representing a form of discourse whose author is never present to defend the integrity of his intentions, actually renders the absent party present, according to Seneca (Foucault 1994d: 425). The grapheme is not the foreign element that threatens the interiority of the soul, but rather the technology that makes interiority possible. Foucault states:

> The *hupomnêmata* ought to be resituated in the context of a very palpable tension during this period: inside this culture that was so affected by tradition, by the recognized value of the quotation, by the recurrence of discourse, by the practice of “citation” under the seal of age and authority, an ethics was in the process of developing that was very openly oriented by the care of the self toward some very precise objects: the retreat into oneself; the interior life; independence; the taste for oneself. Such is the objective of the *hupomnêmata*: to make the memory of a fragmentary *logos* transmitted by teaching, listening or reading, a means of establishing a relation with oneself as adequate and as perfect as possible. (1994c: 625–26)

Thus Foucault carefully and unobtrusively takes up each of Derrida’s major themes with regard to the role of writing in the constitution of western philosophical reason—the *pharmakon*, *mnêmê* versus *hupomnêsis*, presence versus absence, interiority versus exteriority—and demonstrates the existence of a countertradition that Derrida ignores. That countertradition, like Foucault himself in his response to Derrida’s attack on *Histoire de la folie*, privileges practice over the abstractions of pure reason, and self-fashioning over textuality in a vacuum. Thus it is no surprise that immediately following his discussion of Descartes in *L’herméneutique du sujet*, Foucault returns to a discussion of the practice of philosophy in the first and second centuries CE, where he demonstrates that reading, through the practice of meditation, is directly linked in Stoic practice to writing, and thus that writing was central to the care of the self (2001: 341).

The final and most explicit proof of the validity of this reading of designed to serve as a spiritual exercise, and hence a technology of the self, was first discussed by Pierre Hadot in reference to Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* (1992: 40–49; Davidson 1995: 10–11).
Foucault's interpretation of Plato in light of his continuing engagement with Derrida can be heard in the recordings of his 1983 course on Le gouvernement de soi et des autres. This course is devoted to an in-depth examination of *parrhêsia*, the Greek term for truth-telling or frank speech.\(^{21}\) It chronicles the changing sense of the word as it evolves from a primarily political term in fifth-century BCE Athenian politics and culture to one that refers to the courage of the philosopher to tell the truth, in the first instance to his prince, and ultimately to his disciple who, in the very different world of first- and second-century CE imperial Rome, would often be his social superior and patron.\(^{22}\) In the latter instance, it was a tool of the philosophical director of conscience to produce a self-relation of ideal transparency in the consciousness of his charge.\(^{23}\) In line with this investigation, the course features an

\(^{21}\) For a discussion of the concept, see Flynn (1991). For Foucault's knowledge of Philodemus' surviving treatise *Peri Parrhêsias* at a time when it had yet to be translated into any modern language, see Foucault (2001: 372) and Konstan (2004: 27). Philodemus' text is now available in English (Konstan et al.: 1998). For the changing meanings of *parrhêsia* from classical Athens to the Hellenistic period, see Konstan (1996).

\(^{22}\) For a full review of *parrhêsia* in its political and philosophic contexts as well as Foucault’s 1982–83 lectures on it at the Collège de France, see Monoson (2000: 51–63, 154–80) and P. A. Miller (2006).

\(^{23}\) See *L’herméneutique du sujet* as well (2001: 232, 357–63, and 382–89). There are places in these discussions where Foucault’s historical and philological expertise lets him down. On page 363 in a discussion of Plato’s critique of flattery (the opposite of *parrhêsia*), the *locus classicus* of which, as noted by the editor is *Gorgias* 463a, Foucault claims that “la flatterie dont parle Platon, et à laquelle il oppose le véritable rapport du philosophe au disciple, est une flatterie qui est essentiellement celle de l’amoureux à l’égard du garçon” (“the flattery about which Plato is speaking, and to which he opposes the true relationship of the philosopher to the disciple, is a flattery that is essentially that of the lover in regard to the boy”). The context, here, however is not erotic, but a description of rhetoric as a form of flattery addressed to the Athenian people in the assembly (463d2; see Dodds 1959: 224–25). Gros in his accompanying note also briefly mentions *Phaedrus* 240B, which is in an amorous context. But far from opposing *kolakeia* to philosophical *parrhêsia*, this passage occurs in Lysias’ speech, an example of the very kind of rhetoric Socrates exposes to critical examination in the *Gorgias*. Moreover, as noted by the editors of the Budé text, which both Gros and Foucault use as their primary reference, the flatterer and the courtesan, who is the next figure evoked in the speech, are traditional comic types (Moreschini and Vicaire 1985: ad loc). It is precisely at the conjunction of the erotic and the political that, as Foucault recognizes, the *Alcibiades* is set (1994g: 790).

On pages 382–83, Foucault equates *parrhêsia* with the Roman concept of *libertas*, which is often translated “freedom of speech.” He cites Seneca’s letters 29, 38, 40, and 75. Foucault argues that Seneca opposes philosophical *libertas* to popular *oratio* or diatribe as practiced by itinerant cynic preachers (40.3). This is an oversimplification. *Libertas* is a value term that traditionally refers to aristocratic freedom of speech. The image of the Roman orator addressing the *populus Romanus* in *contio* or the popular assembly was precisely the ideal image of *libertas* promoted by writers such as Cicero. Seneca, in fact, both cites the example of the *contio* (38.1) and Cicero’s authority in these letters and contrasts the measured nature of Roman oratory with Greek excess (40.11). Thus rather than a
extensive, detailed, and at times brilliant reading of Euripides’ *Ion* (January 12, 19, 26, and February 2) as well as shorter interpretations of the *Phoenician Women*, The *Bacchae*, and the *Orestes* (February 2). There are, in addition, examinations of specific passages from Polybius (January 12), Thucydides (February 2), and Isocrates (February 2). The rest of the course is focused on Plato and features explications of passages from the *Republic* (February 9), the *Laws* (February 9), and the letters (February 9).

The key discussion for our purposes comes in the course of a lengthy reading of Plato’s seventh letter on February 16, 1983. After an examination of the authenticity of the letters in the preceding meeting, a question that, as we have seen, Derrida addresses in his own manner in *La carte postale* (chapter 5), and which has been a matter of intense philosophical dispute since the early nineteenth century, Foucault turns his
attention to the twin problems of the nature of philosophical knowledge and the refusal of writing, as those problems are formulated in the seventh letter. The letter itself is addressed to the followers of Dion of Syracuse after the latter’s death. They are seeking advice on how to prosecute their continuing opposition to the tyranny of Dionysius II. In the course of his response, Plato outlines the circumstance under which he undertook his second visit to Dionysius II at the urging of Dion and his friends in an attempt to convert the young tyrant to philosophy and convince him to rescind Dion’s banishment. Plato had tried to instruct Dionysius once before and had met with little success. Nonetheless, Dionysius had claimed a continuing interest in philosophy during Plato’s absence and held dialogues with the members of his court. Plato thus decided to test him on his return. He discussed with him a number of issues that were apparently at a great level of abstraction and probably included such difficult notions as the forms of justice and the good as first principles of nature (344d). The goal was to expose to Dionysius the difficulty of the philosophical pursuit and to see if he would be inspired to undertake the strenuous labor necessary to live the life of a philosopher. “Those who are really not philosophers but have only a coating of opinions, like men whose bodies are tanned by the sun, when they see how much learning is required, and how great the labor, and how orderly their lives must be to suit the subject they are pursuing, conclude that the task is too difficult for their powers” (340d; Morrow 1997: 1658). Unsurprisingly, the young tyrant failed the test (345a). But Dionysius, Plato notes, was rumored to have later written a book based on their discussions. It is in this context that Plato launches into a brief digression on the nature of philosophical knowledge and its relation to writing.

Dionysius or any other writer, he argues, could not have been serious if he attempted to set down Plato’s essential doctrine, or that of any other philosopher, in writing. Such an exclusion of writing, of course, would seem to provide direct evidence for the Derridean thesis of the phonocentric nature of the logos at the dawn of occidental philosophy. The seeming contradiction, moreover, of Plato’s contention with the manifest fact that he himself did write would appear to be an example of precisely the kind of aporia and undecideability that Derrida

with those found in the late and middle dialogues (1988). For a position that in its essence is congruent with Foucault’s both on the seventh letter and what it reveals about the roles of writing and sunousia in the practice of philosophy, see Sayre (1988).

25. Plato only once tried to lecture on the Good. Aristotle tells us it was completely incomprehensible (Metaphysics A.6).
traces in his examination of the term *pharmakon* and its peregrinations throughout the Platonic corpus.

Foucault, however, constructs a different reading of the letter. He notes that Plato argues there are five aspects to the knowledge of any real object: name, definition, image, the acquaintance our minds have with the object (scientific knowledge, reasoning, and right opinion), and the object itself in its abstract ideality (342). Inasmuch as the first two elements are language-dependent and hence mutable, and inasmuch as the third is dependent upon individual material instantiations, which is made clear in Plato’s discussion of the example of a circle, while these three elements are necessary to the formation of the fourth element, they can never be adequate to a true *epistêmê* of the object in itself. Hence, “no sensible man will venture to express his deepest thoughts in words, especially in a form which is unchangeable, as is true of written outlines” (343a; Morrow 1997: 1660).

The problem is not, according to Foucault, one of writing per se, but of philosophy as a practice rather than as a set of “formulas” (see also Hadot 1995: 106). According to the seventh letter, we arrive at the knowledge of “real” objects not through direct sense perception, nor through the memorization of discrete formulas, but through the process of approximation, refutation, and reformulation that characterizes what has become known as the Socratic-Platonic *elenchus* (Irwin 1992: 65–66, 68–69; Penner 1992: 139–47; Fine 1992: 203–11; Nehamas 1998: 82–87). The dialectic of Socratic conversation, moreover, is pursued in the intense erotic relationship between master and disciple evoked by Socrates at the beginning of the *Alcibiades* (Souilhé 1960: liv–lv; Kenney 2003: 28–90) when he confesses his love for the young

26. Foucault seems to be paraphrasing Souilhé (1961: 1), but see also Festugière (1950: 191).

27. Foucault makes this clear at the conclusion of the course on April 9, 1983 in a discussion of the *elenchus* and the *Gorgias*. On problems with abstracting the concept of *elenchus* from the larger context of Socratic conversation or dialectic, Charles Platter comments (*per litteras*), “I have to admit I grit my teeth every time I see the word *elenchus* used as a synonym for Socratic conversation. It’s an organic process, not a formula. Nor do I see what is gained even heuristically by using it. So I view it as a kind of anachronistic terminology that doesn’t pay its way. For me it represents another way that professional philosophers get away from the dialogues and begin creating their own formulaic para-text where the complex issues brought into play by the dialogue form can be discarded.”

28. Foucault notes that the term for this relationship is *sunousia* (“being with”), which often has an erotic sense; he then asserts that it has does not have that sense in the context of the seventh letter while admonishing us not to “overinterpret.” It is difficult to know how seriously to take this admonition. On the one hand, it could be a deliberate attempt to innoculate his audience against a premature or facile psychoanalytic reading (on Foucault’s complex relationship with psychoanalysis, see below). On the other, Foucault is well aware...
man, and described by Lacan in his reading of the *Symposium*.\(^{29}\) The seventh letter is clear.

There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words [*rhêton*] like other sciences; but after long continued intercourse [*sunousias*] between teacher and pupil in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly [*exaihnês*],\(^{30}\) like the light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself. (341c–d; Morrow 1997: 1659)

Lest Foucault’s audience miss the larger importance of his highlighting this passage to his understanding of the role of writing and speech at the origins of western formal reason (and consequently of his entire rereading of Plato in terms of the practice of the care of the self), Foucault pauses to invoke directly Derrida’s reading of this same problematic as a foil to his own. To paraphrase, Foucault says, “You see the Platonic exclusion of writing, therefore, has nothing to do with the birth of logocentrism in western philosophy.” “Logocentrism” is of course Derrida’s term for the constitution of western reason under the sign of the self-presence of the transcendental signified to itself, which in turn is manifest in a phonocentrism that privileges speech over writing as the immediate transparence of meaning to consciousness itself (see chapter 5 and Derrida 1967b: part 1).

Foucault continues by noting that Plato does not in fact contrast writing with the *logos* in 342 but rather asserts the inadequacy of the *logos* to the thing itself in its abstract ideality (compare Sayre 1988: 95–97). The problem of writing, then, is not one of its difference from or deferral of full meaning, but of its rigidity, its removal from the question and answer of the dialectical process that leads to the flash

---

\(^{29}\) See *Symposium* 211 a–b. For a comparison of this passage with the seventh letter, see Robin (1929: xci).

\(^{30}\) On the centrality of this concept in Platonic metaphysics, see Boussoulas (1952: 77–82).
of insight in the intense relation between master and student. He concludes by summarizing 344b, a passage that I quote here in full:

For it is necessary to learn these things together, the true and the false of all being, with work and much time, as I said at the beginning. With each of these things worked hard against the others—names, accounts, observations, perceptions—being tested in well-intentioned disputations and using without envy questions and answers, wisdom and intelligence shine out concerning each thing, extending to the limits of human power.

From his reading of this passage, Foucault concludes that, “The refusal of writing is not made in the name of the logos, but of something positive. It is made in the name of tribê, exercise, work, and a laborious relation of the self to itself. It is the western subject itself that is engaged in this simultaneous rejection of writing and the logos.” Just as in 1972 when Foucault published his response to Derrida’s 1963 lecture, in 1983 he continues to see the latter as the “decisive” representative of a certain tradition of teaching philosophy in France, a tradition that emphasizes systems, categories and metaphysics as opposed to the relations, technologies, and practices that were Foucault’s central focus (Gros 2001: 506; Flynn 1994: 29).

There are, of course, a number of potential weaknesses in Foucault’s response to “La Pharmacie de Platon,” some more apparent than real. The first is the seeming contradiction between Plato’s rejection of writing in favor of the direct, interpersonal practice of dialectic and the fact that Plato nonetheless not only wrote, but wrote voluminously and with great care. For Derrida, as noted above, this contradiction

31. As Dodds notes in his commentary on Gorgias 463b4, on rhetoric as empeiria kai tribê, tribê can refer to an unscientific bricolage, an “empirical knack,” as opposed to methodical scientific inquiry (1959: ad loc). That seems to be the opposite of the meaning here, which refers to the acquisition of philosophic knowledge through the hard labor of the dialectic, through wearing words and perceptions out by rubbing them against one another (Places 1964: 509). But the emphasis in each case is on cumulative effect of the labor.
32. Of course, even then, he wrote dialogues.
is embodied in the ambivalence of the word *pharmakon* and of writing itself both in the *Phaedrus* and throughout the Platonic corpus. Foucault’s response to this problem, while not logically mutually exclusive with Derrida’s, is convincing and shifts the ground firmly back from theory to practice. He begins by drawing our attention to passage 344c in the seventh letter, “What I have said comes, in short, to this, whenever we see a book, whether the laws of a legislator (*nomothetes*) or a composition on any other subject, we can be sure that if the author is really *serious*, this book does not contain his best thoughts; they are stored away with the fairest of his possessions” (Morrow 1997: 1661; italics mine). Foucault is quick to note the seeming contradiction with *The Laws* and *The Republic*, in which Plato appears to play precisely the role of the *nomothetes* or lawgiver. He then notes that Plato also invents and relates a variety of myths, such as Aristophanes’ tale of the androgyne in the *Symposium*, the chariot procession in heaven of Socrates’ great speech in the *Phaedrus*, or the story of Er that concludes the *Republic*. These myths, he argues, are also not “serious” in the sense that they are not to be taken literally. Rather they are a provocation to thought and thus to a reexamination of our relation to ourselves, and hence of our capacity to govern both ourselves and others. Foucault then asks if this is not the real philosophical work of the *Laws* and the *Republic* as well: not to provide prefabricated recipes and formulas for the perfect state, but to prompt readers to question the nature of how they govern themselves and others and to seek what may be the best laws for each.33 In this regard, he cites the admittedly fictive fifth letter, which he believes nonetheless reflects Platonic if not Plato’s thought (see Souilhé 1960: lxxxix–xcii). It contends that the philosopher’s job as counselor to the state is not to impose a constitution, but to listen to each particular constitution’s voice, and to help it come to speak “its own language to gods and men” (321d–e; Morrow 1997: 1645). If we accept this, as well as the seventh letter’s judgment that philosophy cannot be reduced to “formulas” and that what we must seek instead is a system where men can live under freedom and the best laws, then the notion that the *Republic* and the *Laws* constitute actual blueprints for a real state becomes absurd. Thus, Foucault concludes that these dialogues are not to be taken “seriously,” but are to be read in a fashion analogous to the myths themselves.34

The *Republic* in fact explicitly supports this claim when Socrates

33. Compare Gadamer (1991: 44–45), who sees the shared pursuit of collective understanding as the animating spirit of the Platonic dialectic from the aporetic dialogues through the *Philebus*, *The Laws*, and the seventh letter.
34. See Asmis (1992: 338).
states that he wishes not to discuss the possibility of putting his plan in practice but rather to indulge his “fancy like an idle daydreamer out for a solitary walk” (458a–b; Lee 1987: 178–79). Later, when he and Glaucon are discussing whether the ideal philosopher would actually take part in politics, we find the following exchange:

Glaucon: You mean that he will do so in the society which we have been describing and which we have theoretically founded; but I doubt if it will ever exist on earth.

Socrates: Perhaps . . . it is laid up as a pattern in heaven, where he who wishes can see it and found it in his own heart. But it does not matter whether it exists or will ever exist. . . . (592a–b: Lee 1987: 358).35

The philosopher is to be the new artist who faithfully reproduces (mimeisthai) the harmonic forms of beauty and justice in themselves (500c–501b), rather than copies of copies like the mimetic artists who are expelled in Book 10. His is a fiction that points beyond the limits of the means of representation and actualization as in the myth of Er. As the Athenian says in the Laws, responding to an imaginary petition on behalf of tragedians, “Our entire state has been constructed to be a ‘representation’ of the finest and noblest life. . . . So we are poets like yourselves” (817a–b; Saunders 1997: 1483–84; see also Asmis 1992: 338; Nightingale 1995: 88).

A more weighty objection to Foucault’s critique of Derrida is to be found in his focus on the seventh letter: for, while it is possible to argue that the letter’s text does not discount writing in favor of the logos as the transcendental guarantor of meaning, but rather focuses on philosophy as an interpersonal practice of subject formation, one cannot say the same of the Phaedrus, which is the primary focus of Derrida’s exposition. The myth of Theuth makes clear that writing itself is seen as opposed to epistêmê and mnêmê, for Ammon does not condemn writing as part of a broader denunciation of the reduction of philosophy to verbal formulas as Plato does in the seventh letter, but he condemns the invention of writing per se as leading to a neglect of memory (mnêmês ameleôtesi).36 Mnêmê and epistêmê, as in the Meno (Hamilton 1973: 55n.2), are equated with one another in the myth

35. On the translation, see the note in Lee and Adam’s (1963) important discussion ad loc.

36. Ameletêsia is an alpha-privative form of the word meletaô (“to care for”), which gives us the epimelia of Foucault’s epimêla heautou or “care of the self.”
recounted in Socrates’ great speech. The forms, as is made clear there, provide the transcendental guarantee of meaning, and it is our immediate recollection of the forms that constitutes real knowledge and sparks our love of wisdom (philosophia):

For the soul that has never seen the truth will not assume human form. For it is necessary that a person understand what is spoken (legomenon) according to the form (eidos), a language which goes from the multitude of sense impressions to bringing them together by reasoning (logismoi) into a unity (hen). (249b–c)\(^{37}\)

Writing here, therefore, suffers from the same degree of ontological inferiority that poetry does in book 10 of the Republic and that the lover who physically consummates his desire for the beautiful boy in Socrates’ great speech does, and each must be expelled from the realm of pure presence constituted by the forms, if only to return in the guise of Eros as mediator in the Symposium, the writing on the soul of the Phaedrus, or the myth of Er at the end of the Republic.

Of course, Foucault, after such a provocative gesture as singling out Derrida for criticism, does not dare to neglect the Phaedrus. He turns to it two weeks later on March 2 as part of a larger discussion of the relation between philosophy and rhetoric. This lecture contains no direct acknowledgment of Derrida. Foucault’s first two texts for this lesson are taken from the Apology. In one, he says that Socrates announces that he will not use a speech produced by a logographos, but will address the court in his usual manner (17–18a). Foucault contends that Socrates contrasts his etumos logos\(^ {38} \) (“true, genuine speech”) with the false or fictive rhetorical speech that the jurors have just heard.

---

37. The translation is my own. The passage is much controverted. For three very different translations see Moreschini and Vicaire (1985: ad loc); Nehemas and Woodruff (1995: ad loc); and Hamilton (1973: ad loc). Nehemas and Woodruff adopt Badham’s emendation of iont’ for ion, which changes the subject of the last clause. This is in line with their overall interpretation of the dialogue as moving from the transcendental vision of the forms found in the Republic to a more immanent, almost Aristotelian vision, found in the Philebus (1995: xlii–xliii).

38. In point of fact, the adjective etumos appears nowhere in the Apology, although the phrases ton t’aléthê legonta (“speaking the truth”) (17b4–5), pasan tén alētheian (“the whole truth”) (17b8), and t’aléthê legein (“to speak the truth”) (18a6) do. The phrase etumos logos does, however, occur in the Phaedrus, where it is attributed to Stesichorus and serves to introduce Socrates’ great speech (243a9). It is impossible to tell whether the conflation is deliberate and Foucault is anticipating his argument on the Phaedrus or a simple slip, given that we are dealing with oral teaching and do not yet have access to an official transcript.
(17a1–4) and which, he implies, is the kind usually heard in the courts (17c7–d3). In the second passage, Socrates explains why, if he claims to speak the truth, he nonetheless does not speak in the assembly (31c–32). His answer is that he would not be heeded and would have certainly been put to death before now. In both passages, as Foucault reads them, the emphasis is on Socrates as parrhesiast and on philosophy as truth-telling. Foucault then turns his attention to Socrates’ great speech in the *Phaedrus* as another example of an *etumos logos*. His argument is that in the *Phaedrus* Socrates’ true speech is directly contrasted with Lysias’ attempt at a rhetorical *tour de force* in the speech *Phaedrus* reads. Lysias is later in the dialogue explicitly referred to as a *logographos* and *Phaedrus*, now converted to what he thinks to be Socrates’ point of view condemns him for that reason. Nonetheless, as Foucault notes, Socrates reproves *Phaedrus* on this point and indicates that the question is less if one’s *logos* is *graphos* (“written”) than if it is *aischros* (“shameful”) (258d). Lest we miss the Derridean resonances to these passages, Foucault underlines the fact that *logos* is used by Plato for both written and oral speech.

Socrates concludes, then, by arguing that *Phaedrus* says that for a speech to be good, the person who delivers it must be someone who knows the truth. But Socrates is not satisfied with this. Rhetoric on this model is conceived of as an add-on and ornament, a mere externality. Knowledge of the truth, however, is not given in advance, but is a function of discourse as it is practiced through the *elenchus* as discussed in the seventh letter. From here he concludes that the true art of rhetoric is nothing other than *psychagogia*, that is, the ability to “lead souls.” Dialectic, not rhetorical set speeches in the manner of Lysias, is the true example of this art. The tricks of rhetoric found in the manuals are only valuable to the extent that they are subordinated to the dialectic (and its *etumos logos*). Dialectic, in fact, makes a double demand, the knowledge of being and *psychagogia*. These are two faces of the same coin. It is by the movement of the soul that one comes to know being, and it is through knowing the nature of being that one knows the nature of the soul. Thus, according to Foucault, Socrates’ great speech has only the function of giving an example of the *etumos logos*, that is, of anticipating the discussion of rhetoric in the dialogue’s final part and hence of showing the link that exists between access to the truth and the soul.

39. This is a reasonable deduction, but Foucault does not cite a specific passage and I know of nowhere in the *Phaedrus* where Socrates actually says this.
Foucault’s reading is a tour de force. It offers an interpretation of the dialogue that at once unifies the two sections and recasts the Phaedrus not as meditation on writing’s relation to the logos, and hence to the soul, but as rhetoric’s relation to philosophy’s vocation to speak the truth and to lead others to the truth. Nonetheless, while valid in its own terms and offering important insights into how the Phaedrus can be read in terms of philosophy—viewed as a set of practices that are aimed in the first place at the relation of self to self and then of self to truth—it is not clear that Foucault’s performance invalidates the reading of Derrida. First, Foucault never offers a counterreading of the myth of Theuth, which is Derrida’s strongest piece of evidence. Second, he never addresses the way in which the vocabulary of writing as a pharmakon relates to the myth of Pharmakeia that opens the dialogue or to the nature of Eros as depicted in the competing speeches, nor, in spite of Foucault’s assertions to the contrary, can the discourse on love be reduced to a mere illustration of the problem of true speech as opposed to rhetoric (see Ferrari 1992). Third, Foucault oversimplifies what Derrida means by writing. As Derrida’s critique of Husserl in La voix et le phénomène makes clear, there can be no meaning without some form of inscription (1967c). All language represents a materialization of thought, an encoding of the conceptual in the signifier whether its medium be that of vibrations in the air, synaptic firings in the brain, or paper and ink. But thought has no reality outside that materialization; thus, as Derrida famously claims in De la grammatologie, writing always precedes speech (1967b). Linguistic formalization is not merely the medium of thought, but that which makes thought possible. Writing in Derrida stands for that formalization, which is at once inescapable and yet always alienates thought as pure meaning from itself (Stoekl 1992: 201; Zuckert 1996: 201–16). This is why Theuth’s invention must be banished because it threatens to make manifest the fact that the logos is always internally divided, always carrying its own other within itself. The attempt to expel writing from western metaphysics is the attempt to recover a lost origin, a realm of pure meaning, that like the forms is always posited, but never present. Thus Foucault’s observation that Plato uses logos of both speech and writing in a sense falls wide of the mark. It represents an overliteralization of Derrida, a reduction of writing to the practice of the letter, and hence a rereading of Derrida’s text not from the standpoint of the history of metaphysics, but precisely from that of the genealogy of philosophy as a practice.

40. Which is not to say that it does not also serve as such an illustration.
In the end, in spite of Foucault’s polemical jibes, and the strong evidence that it was at least in part the challenge of Derrida that led Foucault to return to Plato, it is not clear that the two levels of analysis are mutually exclusive. While Foucault is undoubtedly right to refocus us on the problematic of the care of the self in ancient philosophy and the relation of the subject to truth as a set of practices, nonetheless we cannot neglect the fact that it is with Plato’s dialogues that the very possibility of formulating in a rigorous manner questions about the nature of the good, the just, and the relative merits of pleasure and knowledge comes into formal existence in occidental thought (Grant 1866: 45). Plato is the founder of western metaphysics, and the conceptual and epistemological foundation of this ontology was from the beginning, as any reader of the *Ion* must know, linked to a break with the predominantly oral and poetic structures of thought that dominated Greek education and culture until at least the middle of the fifth century BCE.

Plato’s relationship with writing is problematic and the fact that this problematization is linked to a conception of philosophy as a spiritual practice pursued through the Socratic dialectic does not exclude it from also being a theoretical conundrum. Writing’s relationship to thought and the fundamental realities that make rigorous conceptual investigation possible is fraught with ambivalence and contradiction. The problem of externality and inscription, whether in the case of poetry, as in the *Republic*’s doctrine of mimesis; of sexual attraction, as formulated in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*; or of writing’s relation to thought and the real, as defined in the *Phaedrus* and the seventh letter, is central to Plato’s concerns. The doctrines of recollection and spiritual purification that Plato describes in the great middle dialogues and integrates

41. For a discussion of recent readings of the *Ion* in relation to the *Republic*’s “banishment” of the poets and the elaboration of Plato’s mature metaphysical theories, see Ledbetter (2003: 78–99), who accepts a rigorous distinction between the early Socratic dialogues and the later Platonic dialogues.


directly into his general theory of knowledge certainly have their roots, as Vernant (1965: 1.92–117; 2001: 24–25) and Morgan (1992) have shown, in traditional Greek religious and Pythagorean practices. But spiritual practice is ultimately inseparable from its theoretical values, however informal, unconscious, or provisional.

c. Psychoanalytic Dialogues: Foucault, Lacan, and Alcibiades on the Couch

It is less a matter of calling into question the apparent knowledge one thinks one possesses than of calling into question oneself and the values that direct our own lives. For in the final analysis, after having been in dialogue with Socrates, his interlocutor no longer knows why he does what he does. He becomes conscious of the contradictions of his discourse and of his own internal contradictions. He doubts himself. He, like Socrates, comes to know that he knows nothing. But in so doing, he takes a certain distance from himself, he doubles himself, with part of him identifying henceforth with Socrates in the mutual accord that Socrates demands of his interlocutor at each step of the discussion. A certain self-consciousness arises in him; he puts himself into question. (Hadot 1995b: 55)

The philosophical practice of dialectic is an interpersonal essay inscribed within an overdetermined complex of individual, technological, and cultural factors. As an ongoing exercise, it is dependent upon self-examination, the probing of the incoherence of one’s own beliefs and of one’s own self-relation in an intense prolonged dialogue with a master or director of conscience who is bound to one by the deep affective and erotic ties that Socrates cites at the beginning of the Alcibiades: “I was the first man to fall in love with you, son of Clinias, and now that others have stopped pursuing you I suppose you’re wondering why I’m the only one who hasn’t given up” (103a; Hutchinson 1997: 558; Halperin 1990a: 270). These encounters, which, as Plato describes in the seventh letter, lead over time to the spark of enlightenment, ideally produce both cognitive aporia and a resulting desire to pursue wisdom as modeled in the person of Socrates or his heirs (Hadot 1995b: 105). Eros thus leads both to the love of wisdom, philo-sophia (Symposium 204b; Kenney 2005), and a desire to know oneself as reflected in the soul of the interlocutor (Alcibiades 133a–b; Zuckert 1990: 148).

Such will be the definition of the philosopher, of the man who desires wisdom, in Plato’s Symposium. And this sentiment comes from the
The fact that one has encountered a personality, Socrates, who by his very presence obliges whoever approaches to put themselves into question. This is what Alcibiades lets us understand at the end of the *Symposium.* (Hadot 1995b: 56–57)

Yet while the *Alcibiades* in antiquity was considered “the gateway to the temple,” it also reminds us of how uncertain the journey could be. Alcibiades, the person and the literary character, may have shown great promise as a student of Socrates, but in the end, as the *Symposium* and his own checkered history show, he was seduced by the lure of the dēmos: by its promises of glory, power, and adulation (Kenney 2003: 28–44; J. Allen 2005; Wohl 2002).

The desire for wisdom is alluring, but of uncertain consequence. Diotima in her great speech in the *Symposium* says the true philosopher seeks to beget intellectual offspring in beauty (206b–207a, 208e6–209e5). Yet, as the *Theatetus* reminds us, such intellectual labors often miscarry. Moreover, the philosopher as midwife, who tries to bring the fertile young mind to issue, must test the result to see if the offspring is viable or abortive.

Socrates: So the work of midwives is a highly important one, but it is not so important as my own performance. And for this reason, that there is not in midwifery the further complication, that the patients are sometimes delivered of phantoms and sometimes of realities, and that the two are hard to distinguish [. . .]. the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is an error, or a fertile truth. (*Theaetetus* 150a–c; Levett 1997: 167)

This testing is the role of the *elenchus* as described in the seventh letter, the free and open process of question, answer, and refutation. Yet, as the case of Alcibiades demonstrates, the results were not always happy. Those who seem most fertile will not always stay until the testing program is complete: sometimes they depart in mid-travail:

But it is I, with God’s help, who deliver them of this offspring. And a proof of this may be seen in the many cases where people who did not realize this fact took all credit to themselves and thought that I was no good. They have then proceeded to leave me sooner than they should, either of their own accord or through the influence of
others. And after they have gone away from me they have resorted to harmful company, with the result that what remained within them has miscarried; while they have neglected the children I helped them to bring forth, and lost them, because they set more value upon lies and phantoms than upon the truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools, both by themselves and by everybody else. [. . . ] Sometimes they have come back, wanting my company again, and ready to move heaven and earth to get it. (*Theaetetus* 150d–151a; Levett 1997: 167–68)

The reminiscences of Alcibiades’ speech at the end of the *Symposium*, in the figure of those who have left Socrates’ company and seek to regain it, are too obvious to need to be belabored. This passage clearly aims in part to answer the question, why did Socrates’ favorite pupil come to such a bad end: treason, sacrilege, murder. Yet, what remains crucial in the *Alcibiades*, for the later ancient tradition and for Foucault, is not philosophy’s ultimate failure to convert the brilliant ward of Pericles, but the model the dialogue establishes of the intense emotional relationship between lover and beloved, teacher and student, master and disciple that is at the heart of the Socratic dialectic as exemplified in the dialogue, but also in such other texts as the *Phaedrus*, the seventh letter, and the *Theaetetus*. There are never, however, as the Socratic midwife is at pains to explain, any guarantees. *Philo-sophia* is an activity of the soul, not a formula capable of producing invariable, predictable results. It is not a commodity that can be bought, sold or exchanged, but an interpersonal essay.

The Socratic care of the self is not a solitary project. It requires reflection through the figure of the *philosophos*, who in his care for his charges makes possible a doubling, a reflexivity, and hence an externalization of the self, which is the image of his “disinterested” love for them (Foucault 2001: 58).43 That reflection, however, cannot be a simple sublimation of the self into the other or the concept. There is a

43. “Le maître, c’est celui qui se soucie du souci que le sujet a de lui-même, et qui trouve, dans l’amour qu’il a pour son disciple, la possibilité de se soucier du souci que le disciple a de lui-même. En aimant de façon désintéressée le garçon, il est donc le principe et le modèle du souci que le garçon doit avoir de lui-même en tant que sujet.” (“The master is he who cares for himself with the care that subject has for himself, and who finds, in the love that he has for his disciple, the possibility that the disciple has of caring for himself. In loving the boy in a disinterested fashion, he is thus the principle and the model for the care the boy ought to have for himself insofar as he is a subject.”) This formulation parallels closely Robin’s paraphrase of Phaedrus’ speech in the *Symposium* (1929: xxxix), a source Foucault was no doubt familiar with.
necessary opacity and remainder. The discourse and person of the Socratic philosopher must always in the end escape finality and full comprehension if it is to serve as the surface upon which the self catches sight of itself and thus comes to know and care for itself (Hadot 1995b: 57, 110; Nehamas 1998: 87). As Alcibiades says of Socrates, he never quite says what he means. “He has deceived us all: he presents himself as your lover, and before you know it, you’re in love with him yourself” (Symposium 222b; Nehamas and Woodruff 1997: 503). Socratic irony, as Alcibiades learns when he arises from Socrates’ couch the next morning as pure as the night before, is in fact not a riddle to be solved, a Silenus box to be opened and its contents immediately possessed (222b). Rather it is the ground for the establishment of a complex reflective relationship whereby the subject comes to understand and possess the truth of its desire as reflected by the other who eludes full comprehension (Nehamas 1998: 61).

This interpersonal relationship is of course precisely what Lacan speaks of in his reading of the Symposium in the Seminar on Transferance (chapter 4). Such a responsion between Foucauldian and Lacanian interpretations of the erotic ties that bind Socrates and Alcibiades should not surprise us. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine how Foucault’s History of Sexuality and his lectures at the Collège de France could not take place in the shadow of Lacan’s work on ethics in his commentaries on the Antigone and the Symposium (Davidson 1994: 117–18).

In fact, Foucault’s engagement with psychoanalysis in general and Lacan in particular was substantial and ongoing. Nor, despite assertions to the contrary, was the relationship simply a negative one (Halperin 1995: 121; Dean 2003: 238–52). Foucault not only underwent analysis himself in the late forties, but he attended Lacan’s seminars in the 1950s and later read the Ecrits (Lane 2000: 312–13, 324; Eribon 1994: 251). Moreover, he explicitly cites Lacan along with Lévi-Strauss and Dumézil in interviews throughout the sixties and as late as 1978 as among his major influences in combating what he saw as the oppressive and ahistorical reign of Sartrean phenomenology in postwar France (Eribon 1994: 234–49). Far from seeing Lacanian analysis as a normalizing human science,44 in Les mots et les choses he specifically

44. See Eagleton (1996: 141), “Equally serious is the complaint that psychoanalysis as a medical practice is a form of oppressive social control, labeling individuals and forcing them to conform to arbitrary definitions of ‘normality.’ This charge is in fact more usually aimed against psychiatric medicine as a whole: as far as Freud’s own views on ‘normality’ are concerned, the accusation is largely misdirected. Freud’s work showed, scandalously,
exempts Freud from this charge, as well as those like Lacan who, rather than seeking to install the normalized ego of psychology and/or American psychoanalysis, search “for something that exists with the mute solidity of a thing,” a clear echo of Lacan’s emphasis on das Ding in the seminar on the Antigone (Foucault 1966: 372, 385–86; Lane 2000: 344; Dean 2003: 238, 244).

Indeed, the task Foucault set for himself in Les mots et les choses was in many ways quite Lacanian. It was nothing less than to uncover the “positive unconscious of knowledge” (Foucault 1970: xi; Bannet: 1989: 157; Lane 2000: 316; Shepherdson 2003: 150 n.13). By the same token, in L’archéologie du savoir, Foucault explicitly compared his project to similar modes of inquiry in contemporary psychoanalysis. Its role was not to “dissipate oblivion,” nor to reconstruct the primal scene of history, but “to make differences,” to open a space for new “countermemories” and new practices (Foucault 1969: 268–70). Thus, Charles Shepherdson summarizes the relationship between the two thinkers in his aptly titled “History and the Real: Foucault with Lacan” as follows:

In short, unlike the “new historicism” with which Foucault is so often confused, genealogy is not an elaboration of knowledge that admits to having a perspective, in the sense that it may one day prove to be inadequate, or to be only one point of view, but rather an act that bears on the present, on what Lacan calls the position of enunciation. The same holds for psychoanalysis: its aim is not to uncover the truth about the past, contrary to many commentators; it does not seek to discover “what really happened,” as if a realist view of the past could address the questions proper to psychoanalysis. On the contrary, it is directed at what Lacan calls imaginary and symbolic elements, at the narrative which, however
real or fabricated, has brought the client into analysis. (1995: ¶ 51; emphasis in original)

Far, then, from being fundamentally opposed, Foucault and Lacan, by Foucault’s own explicit admissions, are in many ways involved in what can be conceived of as complementary, or at least certainly not mutually exclusive, projects.

Foucault’s opinion of Lacan did not change radically over time. In an interview given on the occasion of Lacan’s death in 1981, he declared that the latter “searched in psychoanalysis not for a procedure to normalize behaviors, but for a theory of the subject” (1994e: 204). More importantly, for our purposes, in the middle of his 1982 course at the Collège de France, after his extensive reading of the *Alcibiades*, one of the auditors posed the question of whether in fact the logical operators in Foucault’s discourse were not essentially Lacanian. Foucault responded by noting that whether the categories of his discourse were in essence Lacanian was more for the audience than for him to judge, but nonetheless he would say this much, that there were only two thinkers in the twentieth century who had posed the question that ultimately interested him in his reading of Plato and the Stoics—i.e., what is the relationship of the subject to truth? And what is the cost and nature of that relationship? They were “Heidegger and Lacan.” Thus, any reader of Foucault’s late ethics who does not see this work as in important ways a response to Lacan’s own efforts in this same field, is not only misjudging the nature of Foucault’s relation with Lacan throughout his career, but also ignoring the former’s direct acknowledgment of a profound affiliation (Foucault 2001: 180–82; Castel-Bouchouchi 2003: 188–89).

The relationship was mutual. Lacan himself recognized the importance of Stoic ethics and saw them as anticipating those he sought to outline for psychoanalysis (1973: 283). He also repaid Foucault’s interest in his teaching with a lively admiration for the latter’s work (Lacan 1966e; Julien 1990: 13n.3; Eribon 1994: 251–54). He was particularly appreciative of the importance Foucault had accorded his “return to Freud” in the philosopher’s 1969 lecture, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur,” and he evoked Foucault several times in his seminar of that same year. Often these evocations came in the context of recalling his seminar a decade earlier on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, which not only included his

---

reading of the *Antigone*, but also laid the intellectual groundwork for the following year’s interpretation of the *Symposium* (Rabaté 2003a: 7–8; Foucault 1994m).

Nonetheless, as should hardly be surprising in the case of two such original thinkers, there were substantial differences between them, and their mutual regard did not entail a homogeneity of views. Indeed, one common reading of the *History of Sexuality* is as a critical genealogy of psychoanalysis. The three volumes together and the accompanying lectures at the Collège de France pose in part the following question: what are the structures of discourse, of subjectivity, and of the self’s relation to truth that make the talking cure possible (Eribon 1994: 255; Dean 2003: 241–42). Foucault saw in the Christian practice of confession—in its positing of the subject’s identity as a hidden truth that must be ferreted out from within, and exposed by and to the confessor—a set of structures and assumptions that laid the foundation for the psychoanalytic clinic.⁴⁷ To establish the historically variable, and hence contingent, nature of these structures, in turn, required an investigation of the alternative modes of self-relation found in the Stoic and Platonic philosophy that had preceded Christianity (Foucault 2001: 170–71, 208; 1994f: 364; Benatoui 2003: 29; Gros 2003: 12; Sennellart 2003: 157). Such a reading of psychoanalysis as a historically contingent structure also required Foucault to elaborate a way of thinking about the history of sexuality that did not rely, at least implicitly, on a Freudian model (Foucault 1994c: 610; 1994i: 215; Butler 1990: 72–73; Jameson 1991: 12; Black 1998).

If we examine the *History of Sexuality*, there are numerous echoes between Foucault’s and Lacan’s texts. Two brief examples will illustrate the phenomenon. First, in the opening pages of the seminar on the *Antigone*, Lacan anticipates Foucault’s arguments in volume 1 of the *History of Sexuality* when he contends that “genitality” is an ideological construction, not a biological reality, and that psychoanalysis, in striving to produce a *scientia sexualis*, has neglected the establishment of an *ars erotica* (Lacan 1986: 17–19, 182; see also 1973: 213; Foucault 1976: 71–98, 204–5). Second, in the seminar on the *Symposium*, we find a discussion of how the ethics of pederasty differed from one community to the next in ancient Greece, immediately followed by a comparison of the *erômenos* to the beloved in the medieval courtly

⁴⁷ For the controversy on the extent to which Foucault saw psychoanalysis as an instrument of disciplinary power, and on the degree to which he overestimates the kinship between the confessional and the analytic couch, see Leonard (2005: 88) and Armstrong (2005: 130–31, 184).
Both ideas are closely paralleled by a series of passages in Foucault's *L'usage des plaisirs* (Lacan 1991: 42; Foucault 1984a: 211–12, 216–17, 235–36). In fact, a number of the concepts that Foucault would later develop in more detail and from the standpoint of a different philosophical agenda can already be found in embryonic form in the seminars of Lacan. Thus Foucault’s assertion of the relative insignificance of the gender of one’s sexual object choice in ancient concepts of eros is anticipated by Lacan’s comment that the ancients concentrated on the drive itself (Eros, Amor) rather than the traits of the object (Lacan 1986: 117).

Most important from our perspective, however, is that Foucault chooses to close volume 2 of the *History* with his own extended reading of the *Symposium*. Where Lacan focuses on transference, the problematics of desire, and the nature of erotic substitution, Foucault argues that the Platonic text represents a historical mutation in the development of Greek pederastic discourse, wherein the seeker of truth is described as the *erastês* and the role of the *erômenos* disappears (Foucault 1984a: 266; Carnes 1998: 110; Nicholson 1998: 26–28). In its place, a regime of erotic symmetry is instituted based on a new discourse concerning the ontology of love, as opposed to the more traditional debates on the proprieties of the pederastic relationship that focused on questions such as to whom, how often, and under what circumstances a boy should grant his favors to a suitor (Foucault 1984a: 259–64). What Socrates introduces is not the figure of the desire of the analyst but that of the master of truth who reduces others to amorous slavery in their pursuit of wisdom and who wins this position through the power that he exercises over himself as demonstrated in his relation to Alcibiades (Foucault 1984a: 265). Foucault’s reading of the *Symposion* thus differs from Lacan’s in two crucial fashions. First, Foucault historicizes Lacan’s reading by recontextualizing the *Symposium* within the larger discourse of pederasty in classical Greece. Second, the gesture of historicization renders impossible any easy identification with the figure of Socrates. Hence, while for Lacan Socrates serves as a precursor for the psychoanalyst, Foucault himself explicitly rejects both the role of *maître de la vérité* and the very notion that the fundamental structures of the subject’s relation to desire can be translated directly from antiquity to the present (Stoekl 1992: 197; Poster 1989: 34–52; Macey 1993: 458, 468).

The Lacanian response as given by Žižek is telling on both counts.

48. Both seem to derive from a passage in Robin (1929: xlv).
Žižek argues that Lacan’s and Foucault’s visions of the subject are not as mutually exclusive as they appear. Each of them sees subjectivity as a construction undertaken outside the guarantees offered by a universal reason, that is, in the realm of history and practice. Yet there remains a central difference. The late Foucault wants to reserve the possibility that, through a contemporary reconstitution of a culture of the self, there could be a successful subjectivation, i.e., “the formation of the self qua esthetic whole.” It is this theoretical possibility of absolute self-coincidence or self-harmony that constitutes for Foucault the utopian ideal of ancient parrhēsia or truth telling as a philosophical practice governing the relations between master and disciple.

I speak the truth, I speak the truth to you. And that which authenticates the fact that I speak the truth to you is that effectively I am, as subject of my conduct, absolutely, integrally, and totally identical with the subject of the enunciation that I am when I say to you that which I say to you. (Foucault 2001: 389, see also 132 and 305)

For Lacan, however, the project of constituting a self-consistent, coherent subject is an impossible dream (Žižek 1992: 183–84).

The necessary failure of such a project, from the Lacanian perspective, is predicated precisely upon a differing view of the relation between sex and sexuality, as they are historically constituted, from that found in Foucault. For as Foucault famously argues at the end of volume 1 of the History of Sexuality, sex itself is a discursive construction that groups together a disparate group of practices, sensations, and organs. Its origins can be traced in the scientific and medical literature to the end of the seventeenth century. Sexuality in turn is a secondary formation that seeks to found an individual identity (normal, perverse, heterosexual, homosexual, transvestite, pedophile, fetishist, etc.) on this initial factitious heterogeneity (Foucault 1976: 204–8). For Lacan, however, sex never was a unity or the ground of an identity, but precisely the point at which all such constructions failed. It named not a neutral positivity, nor a contingent construction, but the historically variable, yet never escapable limit of identity constructions, the traumatic cut or core from which, as Aristophanes in the Symposium saw, desire emerges (Žižek 1992: 123–24; Rabinovich 2003: 208).49

49. Moreover, as Laurent Jaffro argues, it is precisely in an effort to construct a theory of self-formation, i.e., an ethics, that is not in the last instance founded on the self’s necessary alienation or division from itself, that Foucault downplays the role of rhetorical manipulation in ancient Stoicism, as opposed to the frankness of parrhēsia. His emphasis
The ultimate difference between Foucault and Lacan, then, is not, as often charged, that psychoanalysis accepts the repressive hypothesis, and Foucault rejects it. For Lacan never posits the unconscious as an inner realm of instinct that needs to find expression, nor does he accept the possibility of liberation from oppression through the production of a “more open and honest discourse about sexuality” (Lacan 1973; 142, 167; Žižek in Hanlon 2001: 5). When Foucault sets his sights on the repressive hypothesis, it is the ideology of Marcuse, Reich, sixties free love, and Dr. Ruth that he has in mind (Foucault 1976: 25–67; Lane 2000: 320–21; Butler 1990: 72; Eribon 1994: 256–57; Nehamas 1998: 174; Armstrong 2005: 269). For Foucault and Lacan both, law and desire are not opposed to, but consubstantial with, one another (Foucault 1976: 108). There is no desire per se before the institutions that seek to regulate and limit it, and yet bid us to speak, confess, and shape it (Dean 2003: 241). Nor is the ultimate difference, as is sometimes alleged, that Lacan and psychoanalysis are homophobic, while Foucault’s call for an emphasis on “bodies and pleasures” is the basis for modern queer theory (Foucault 1976: 211; Dean 2003: 241; Feher-Gurewich 2003: 203–4). Lacan rejected all attempts to “normalize” or “cure” homosexuals in his clinical practice and had strong words for those who brought homosexuals to psychoanalysts “for their own good” (Lacan 1991: 75; Roudinesco 1997: 224; Liu 2000: 128). As early as 1938, he had rejected any notion of a “natural family” (Luepnitiz 2003: 223), and his later dictum that “there is no sexual relation” explicitly rejects the notion of heteronormative complementarity (Dean 2003: 243–44). Finally, as Roudinesco notes, Lacan’s use on the absolute self-transparency of the discourse of parhêsia, as opposed to the opacity of rhetorical trickery, allows him to diminish the degree to which Stoic conversion involves a necessary rupture of, or violence to, the self, in order to then (re)form the self so as to maintain a new harmonious relation to the truth (2003: 64–68). Even here, one must beware of overstatement and a lack of nuance. Foucault elsewhere readily admits that there are fundamental ambiguities within Hellenistic and Roman thought concerning the self, including whether the self is a plenitude that is recovered through systematic practice, or an object that is laboriously constructed and thus never given wholly in advance, and consequently never completely coincident with its own history (2001: 205). Nonetheless, Laurand has observed that Foucault seems deliberately to avoid any discussion of pothos or “desire” in the Stoic Musonius Rufus’ writings on marriage (2003: 97–99).

of the Socratic model of transference as presented in his reading of the *Symposium* was a direct challenge to the psychoanalytic establishment, which by and large in the late fifties and early sixties continued to reject homosexual candidates who wanted to become training analysts (1997: 254).\(^{51}\)

The true difference between Lacan and Foucault concerns the way in which they view the relationship of power to the law. Foucault charges that Lacanian psychoanalysis still sees power as essentially negative and limiting—that is to say, as a kind of legal stricture—whereas he is elaborating a model of power that sees it as essentially positive and productive (Foucault 1976: 109–14; Dean 2003: 242; Eribon 1994: 258; Butler 1990: 72–73). I have written extensively elsewhere about Foucault’s exclusion of the negative, his attempt to elaborate a purely positive model of history, and the difficulties this implies for any concept of historical change, and the contrast between it and a Lacanian historicism of the Real. Thus there is no need to recapitulate those arguments in detail here (P. A. Miller 1998; 2004: chap. 1).\(^{52}\) What we do need to realize, however, is that positivity and negativity are themselves relative terms that ultimately cannot avoid implying a dialectical relation. A positive production is always also a determination and hence a negation. A given regime of power relations necessarily produces A rather than B. Thus the distinction Foucault draws between positive productive power and the negative law is one that is hard to maintain with absolute logical rigor (Žižek 1993: 22–24, 98, 109, 122–24, 263; Derrida 1967a 380; Stoekl 1992: 180–82; Copjec 2002: 94–96).

Nonetheless, as we argued in chapter 1, while Lacan’s concept of the Real, in its function as the negation of the Symbolic, makes historical explanation possible, he himself often fails to deal fully with the

\(^{51}\) It is true that at one point Lacan calls the *Symposium* a reunion of old “fags” and “queens,” but he is there speaking explicitly from the perspective of a Greek peasant (1991: 54). This is not to say there is nothing to object to in Lacan’s treatment of same-sex attraction, but these are by and large not objections Foucault would have made. There is, for one thing, no explicit theorization of homoeroticism per se in Lacan (Restuccia 2000: 359). The centrality of the phallus to Lacanian thought also makes the articulation of a truly female homosexuality difficult (Blévis 2000; Pommier 2000: 83). Lastly, many practicing Lacanian analysts are a good deal less open to the radical implications of Lacan than was the master himself (Feher-Gurewich 2000: 376). As Leonard notes, Lacan’s treatment of ancient pederasty still seems to take place within what are predominantly heterosexist categories (Leonard 2005: 173–76). Yet in late fifties France, it would be hard to find any major intellectual figure of Lacan’s generation who did not assume, at least implicitly, a heterosexist norm, even if they were not personally and politically actively homophobic. This certainly would include Lacan’s contemporary, Sartre.

\(^{52}\) See also our discussion of History, historicism, and the Real in chapter 1 of the present volume.
concrete historicity of the texts he examines (Butler 1990: 29, 55, 76; Irigaray 1977b: 97). Thus, even though he makes it clear that the Symbolic and the subject’s insertion into it are open to historical modification, he does not speak in requisite detail of how that modification happens and the nature of its consequences. One result of this failure is that Lacan’s description of the Symbolic, particularly in relation to gender, can appear to be a prescription (Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 277). This is the gist of Luce Irigaray’s feminist critique of her former teacher: not that his description of Woman’s exclusion from the Symbolic, as constituted by patriarchal reason, is inaccurate, but rather that his failure to posit an alternative to this situation implies that it is unalterable and perhaps even desirable (Irigaray 1977b: 92, 99; 1977c: 205; Weed 1994: 87, 99, 100–102). Lacan, then, may make historicization possible, as Jameson recognized, but he does not himself fully historicize. Foucault, on the other hand, does historicize, but his refusal of any explicit conception of historical negation in favor of a purely positive analytics of power is not only impossible to maintain strictly, but, were it possible, would render the historical succession of different Symbolic regimes or “dipositifs” logically inexplicable. But this, as just noted, is ground we have already covered.

What is more important for the present inquiry is to recognize the urgency Foucault felt to elaborate a theory of power that could be conceived as a positivity and hence would imply the necessity of resistance in its very foundation (Foucault 1976: 121–35; Halperin 1995: 59–60; Rouse 1994: 108–9). The conception of power as a series of differentials in positive force always demands that the resistance to power be conceived as immanent to the very nature of the differential that articulates it. Negation, however, at least from the point of view of practice, does not require us to imagine power as this ever shifting field of countervailing forces that constantly contains the potential of its own tactical rearticulation as an ontological given (Bannet 1989: 94). Negation figures itself as a pure gap (not A).

Foucault, in fact, recognized only too well the omnipresence of the law. In the 1960s he argued that the law is the outside or limit that envelops all behaviors and empties them of interior determination. At that time, he saw literature as a way to make the law visible and thus as a means of being able to posit an outside or dehors to its reign (Foucault 1986: 33–34; Lane 2000: 334). By the eighties, he had come to

see the law as only one mode of power in a vast productive system, which creates the fabric of its resistance in the very moment that a given regime of power relations comes into being (2001: 109). The outside, to the extent that it still existed, became visible precisely in the genealogical analysis of the difference between various systems of power, and the forms of self-relation and subjectivation they made possible (1994h: 721; 2001: 303). Lacan’s fault ultimately, from a Foucauldian point of view, was to fail to account precisely for these changing positive regimes of self-relation and power, and by focusing on the negative, to assume an identity of structure, if not content, from one regime to the next.54 It is in this context that Foucault’s reading of the Alcibiades looms large.

2. Ethics, Politics, and the Care of the Self

“You handle the people’s business?” Picture the bearded master, whom a grim dose of hemlock carried off, saying these things. “With what qualification? Speak up then, ward of great Pericles.”55

(Persius 4.1–3)

In the last two volumes of the History of Sexuality and in his lectures at the Collège de France from the same period, Foucault sought to elaborate an ethics founded not on the juridical, authoritarian, or disciplinary structures of modernity but on what he refers to as an “art” or “stylization” of existence (J. Miller 1993: 322–23, 340, 346–47; Larmour et al. 1998b: 22–33; Vizier 1998: 67–68, 71).56 In particular, Foucault saw in the work of such philosophers as Seneca, Epictetus, and Plutarch a turn to the self that, through various practices of examination and study, sought to fashion a beautiful existence in which the subject attained perfect mastery over itself (Foucault 1994f: 356):57

54. Thus Lacan in his reading of pederasty in the Symposium asserts that the only thing that separates its ancient from its modern practice is that modern boys have bad skin and lack culture. “C’est toute la différence. Mais la structure, elle, n’est en rien à distinguer” (1991: 43). No one who has read the History of Sexuality could accept the truth of this statement. For Foucault’s attempt to historicize the death drive, see Dean (2003: 250–51).

55. The bearded master (magister) is Socrates, and the ward of Pericles is Alcibiades.

56. On the relation between Foucault’s late ethical thought and Anglo-American “virtue ethics, see Levy (2004), who fails to emphasize sufficiently the importance of aesthetics in the final Foucault, but nonetheless notes some important points of meeting between these two bodies of thought.

57. On the convergence of the various philosophical schools of the imperial period in their focus on philosophy as an askesis, or technology of the self, see Davidson (1995:
In the philosophical tradition inaugurated by Stoicism, *askesis*, far from denoting self-abnegation, implies the progressive consideration of the self, the mastery of the self—a mastery one attains not by renouncing reality, but by acquiring and assimilating the truth. The ultimate goal of the *askesis* is not to prepare the individual for another reality, but to permit him to accede to the reality of this world. In Greek, the word that describes this attitude is *paraskewazô* (“to prepare oneself”). The *askesis* is a set of practices by means of which the individual is able to acquire, to assimilate the truth, and to transform it into a permanent principle of action. *Alētheia* becomes *ēthos*. It is a process of intensifying subjectivity. (Foucault 1994g: 800)

Stoic *askesis*—as opposed to later Christian practice, which borrows many of the same techniques of self-surveillance—is not designed to root out hidden desires, nor to decipher the reality of who we are beneath appearances, but as a device to mold behavior. This self-surveillance is less disciplinary, in the sense of being designed to make the individual conform to a single pre-established end, than shaping. It is a technology of the self that seeks to allow the subject to attain mastery over its thoughts, feelings and reactions to external events (Foucault 1994c: 610, 615, 626–27; 1994f: 359, 364–65; P. A. Miller 1998: 184–88). Stoic *askesis*, as such, conforms to Foucault’s definition of ethics as the “mindful practice of freedom” (1994h: 711–12). It is less a purely cognitive activity than a practice, or in the words of Pierre Hadot, a “spiritual exercise” (1987: 15–16; 1995: 82–83).\(^{58}\)

The course Foucault offered in 1982 on the *Alcibiades* and the care of the self in many ways takes up where the *History of Sexuality* leaves off. It was originally conceived of as the draft of a book that was projected to accompany the final three volumes of the *History* (Gros 2001: 30–31) and Hadot (1987: 206; 1995a: 59). Hadot 1995a is a revised English translation of Hadot 1987. The revisions, however, are in some cases quite extensive and the reader is advised to consult both texts.

little actual sex in them\(^59\) (Macey 1993: 358; Edwards 1993: 75). It was not Foucault’s intention “to reconstitute the history of sexual comportments” (Foucault 1994b: 578). By the time these volumes were published, his concerns had shifted from the thesis announced in volume 1, that sexuality was the product of a certain practico-discursive \textit{dispositif}\(^60\) established at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century, to how the subject constitutes itself in relation to itself, i.e., as an ethical subject (Davidson 1994: 117–18; Elden 2005). Sexual practices and desire would be central to any such account, but only insofar as they contributed to the larger project. As Foucault himself observed, his goal was to “study the game of truth implicated in the relation of the self to the self and in the constitution of itself as subject, in taking as [his] domain of reference and field of investigation what we might call the ‘history of the desiring man’” (1984a: 12). The revised \textit{History of Sexuality} was to be a “history of self-reflection, -knowledge, -examination, and -interpretation” conceived as the means or the technologies for constituting the self as the subject of its own formation (1984a: 35–36). Volumes 2 and 3 of the \textit{History of Sexuality} were, in fact, far more the first installments in a new history of the subject, than they were a mere modification of the program announced in \textit{La volonté de savoir} (Kremer-Marietti 1985: 251–52).

It was this study of different forms of the subject’s relation to itself that led Foucault to his final turn to the ancient world far more than an interest in pederasty or other sexual practices per se (Jaffro 2003: 78; Gros 2001: 511). Antiquity served as the ground for a fundamentally new conception of the self as the subject of ethical action (Foucault 1994h: 711–12). It was through the historicization of the subject, not simply as the object of knowledge in the mode of the human sciences or as a responsible agent in the Sartrean mode, but as a historically specific form of self-relation that Foucault came to be able to “think differently” about the subject and the possibility of effective ethical action

\(^59\) And what there is is mostly male. The Greek texts themselves say relatively little about women and Foucault readily acknowledges their oppression (1994c: 612).

\(^60\) “The actual term dispositif [ . . . ] is borrowed from Gaston Bachelard, who employed it to counter the reigning philosophy of phenomenology. Bachelard proposed instead the study of ‘phenmeno-technology,’ believing that phenomena are not given to us directly by an independent reality but are rather constructed (cf. Greek \textit{technê}, ‘produced by a regular method of making rather than found in nature’) by a range of practices and techniques that define historical truth” (Copjec 1994: 20). On the specifics of Foucault’s use of the term see Macey (1993: 355); Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 121); and Elden forthcoming.
(Foucault 1984a: 14; 1994c: 617; Kremer-Marietti 1985: 277–78). On the philosophical, moral, and political levels, the encounter with antiquity in general, and the concept of the self’s relation to itself as defined in the *Alcibiades* in particular, offered the possibility of what only literature had promised in the 1960s, “une pensée du dehors”:\(^{61}\):

So long as Foucault confined himself to the study of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the subject, as if by a natural path, found itself reflected as the objective product of systems of knowledge and power, the alienated corollary of these *dispositifs* of power/knowledge in which the individual sought and exhausted an imposed exterior identity, outside of which there was no salvation save madness, crime or literature. Beginning in the eighties, while studying the techniques of existence promoted in Greco-Roman antiquity, Foucault allows us to see another image of the subject, which is no longer constituted but self-constituting through regulated practices. The study of the modern west had hidden from him for a long time the existence of these techniques, hidden as they were in the archive by systems of knowledge and *dispositifs* of power. (Gros 2001: 494–95)

Foucault thus came to see his work in the eighties as a series of studies on the “arts of the self,” that is to say, on both “the aesthetics of existence and the government of the self and others” (1994d: 415). In doing so he returned to the Nietzschean roots of his philosophy and ultimately to Nietzsche’s roots in ancient philology (Nehamas 1998: 142; Foucault 1994j: 703–4; Benatouil 2003: 32–33). Life itself could become an aesthetic object, and ethics the means and name of this project (1994c: 617).

The purpose of this stylization of existence was not self-absorption, but to offer new means of resistance to the normalizing structures of the market, scientific and social institutions, and the state (Žižek 1992: 180–81; Gros 2001: 524–25). To know oneself, the injunction of the Delphic oracle, had, under the conditions of modern society, become a means of discipline, adaptation, and control rather than freedom. Self-knowledge had become the internalization of the modern means of observation and control, which Foucault had evoked emblematically in the image of Bentham’s Panopticon in *Surveiller et punir* (1975: 228–64):

---

61. See chapter 1.
Subjects don’t consume enough anymore: they’re depressed. Subjects don’t vote anymore: they lack confidence. Subjects destroy property and steal: they lack a strong paternal role model. Every social problem today is cast in terms of the psychology of the subject. Every problem, no matter how small, ought still to find its resolution in a knowledge of this same psychological subject. Every good psychology is in addition without qualification a psychology of the good consumer, the good worker and the good citizen. . . . The specialists of self-knowledge teach us once more how to work, to buy, and to vote. (Gros 2003: 12; compare Shepherdson 1995: ¶ 29)

Foucault, as we have seen, thus rejoins Lacan, who in his own version of ethics as aesthetics also explicitly used the turn to antiquity to construct a model of resistance to the normalizing and adaptive structures of modern ego/industrial psychology, whose motto he sums up in the phrase, “Continuons à travailler, et pour le désir, vous repasserez” (“Back to work, and as for desire, better luck next time!”) (1986: 367). It is small wonder that Foucault mentions Lacan approvingly at the beginning of his reading of the Alcibiades as the first since Freud to have sought to “recenter” psychoanalysis on the relation between the subject and truth (2001: 31–32). An ethics and aesthetics of existence, founded on the history of subjectivation, thus becomes a means of resistance to the commodified and normalized subject of capitalist modernity, une pensée du dehors (Davila 2003: 207).

We see, then, that Foucault’s turn to the self is hardly a matter of narcissism, but just the opposite. It is the recognition that all forms of governmentality—i.e., the reversible field of power relations that grounds both the state and the subject—must pass through a defined form of self-relation:

If we take the question of power, of political power, and place it under the larger question of governmentality—governmentality understood as a strategic field of relations of power, in the largest sense of the term and not simply political power—then, if we understand by governmentality a strategic field of relations of power, insofar as they are mobile, transformable, reversible, I believe that reflection on this notion of governmentality cannot not

62. I owe this translation to Pierre Zoberman. See also Žižek (1989: 117).
63. On the relation between disciplinary practices and capital, see Foucault (1994g: 785; 1994k: 466–70); Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 135); and Sakolsky (1992).
pass through, both theoretically and practically, the element of a subject that would be defined by its self-relation. While political theory as an institution ordinarily is based on a juridical concept of the legal subject, it seems to me that the analysis of governmentality ought to be based on an ethic of the subject defined by the relation of the self to the self. This means that [. . .] relations of power—governmentality—government of self and others—self-relation, all this constitutes a chain, a network, and it is there, around these notions, that we ought to be able, I think, to articulate the question of politics and the question of ethics. (Foucault 2001: 241–42)

The study of ethics and the history of the self’s self-relation is an “urgent task” that is “fundamental” and “politically indispensable,” therefore, inasmuch as the self’s relation to itself is “the first and last” point “of the resistance to political power” (Foucault 2001: 241). In this way, through a critical genealogy of the self, new forms of self-relation may be created, new relations of power, and new possibilities of resistance (Foucault 1994c: 612; 1994h: 711; Sawicki 1994: 294). Consequently, Foucault’s reading of the Alcibiades and its relation to later Greco-Roman philosophy was not only part of his continuing dialogue with the most important thinkers of his day (Deleuze, Lacan, and Derrida), but was also a matter of immediate political and cultural actuality, as testified to by the hundreds of auditors who crowded into the halls of the Collège de France to hear him lecture on Plato, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius (Gros 2001: 502–3).

What Foucault offered them was not a history of ideas or philosophy, but a critical genealogy of the subject. For his argument is that conventional intellectual histories fail to recognize that the ancient axes of self-knowledge and self-constitution differ fundamentally from those found in the modern world. For where modern philosophy and the human sciences have fixated on the Delphic oracle’s injunction “to know thyself” and have seen the care of the self as a secondary matter of disciplining the self in accord with that knowledge and the law—the self being taken as an object of positive knowledge—in ancient philosophy this order was precisely reversed (2001: 442–43). The care of the self was the practice necessary for knowledge of the self to be produced; it was the means of the subject’s access to a truth inseparable from the ethical work necessary for its production. Thus in the Alcibiades, once Socrates, through the practice of the elenchus, has elicited the admission from Alcibiades that he neither knows that
on which he presumes to advise the Athenian assembly, nor in the final analysis what he himself is saying, the conversation then turns not to what a positive knowledge of either one of these phenomena might be, but to what it might mean to care for oneself and what is the nature of the self (127d6–128a3).

Schematically, let us say the following: where we moderns understand the question [of self-knowledge as] “the possible or impossible objectification of the subject in a field of empirical knowledge,” the Ancients of the Greek, Hellenistic and Roman period understood: “the constitution of a knowledge about the world as the spiritual experience of the subject.” And where we moderns understand “the subjection of the subject to the order of the law,” the Greeks and the Romans understood “the constitution of the subject as an end for himself, through and by the exercise of truth.” There is here a fundamental heterogeneity that ought to warn against all retrospective projection. (Foucault 2001: 304–5)

It is precisely this spiritual dimension—defined as the practico-discursive regime of self-transformation that makes possible access to the truth—that is, according to Foucault, neglected in most modern treatments of ancient philosophy. That neglect, in turn, creates distortions as concepts are abstracted from the practical contexts in which they were deployed (Foucault 2001: 16–17; Hadot 1995b: 21–22, 412). In the process, those same concepts are robbed of their ability to posit an outside to modern regimes of power and subjectivation, to “make differences.”

A critical history of thought, in contrast, implies an analysis of the historical conditions according to which discrete “relations to truth, to rule and to self were constituted” as “singularities” transformable though the “work of thought on itself” (1994b: 580). By examining the knowledge of the self within different regimes of caring for the self, Foucault claims that one comes to see that self-knowledge has meant different things under different regimes of self-formation. In fact, one must address the different forms of caring for the self to understand the different forms of self-constitution that are to be known (Foucault 2001: 443–44). Foucault’s critical genealogy of the subject aims at nothing less than the reconstitution of a lost body of knowledge that had been obscured by the triumph of the punctual subject of post-Cartesian thought: the normative subject of classical economics, game theory, and the social sciences (Foucault 2001: 13–15).
3. Reading the *Alcibiades*

Socrates: Was the person who put up the injunction on the temple at Delphi a fool, and knowing oneself is an easy thing, or is it difficult and not for everyone?

Alcibiades: Often it has seemed to me to be for everyone, and often very difficult.

Socrates: But, Alcibiades, whether it is easy or not, all the same, the situation for us is as follows: when we know what that thing is, then we should know how to care for ourselves, but not knowing it, we should never know how. (*Alcibiades* 129a2–9)

The passage just cited poses the question of the relation of the care of the self to self-knowledge with particular acuity. On the one hand, it seems to contradict Foucault. It claims that the condition of possibility for the self to care for itself is knowing the self. On the other, it makes it quite clear that the self as conceived here is not the pure consciousness, the punctual self of Cartesian and post-Cartesian thought. It is a self the knowledge of which is not available to all and is difficult to attain.64 That knowledge, as the remainder of the dialogue makes clear, can only be attained through a deliberate effort of reflection, of self-examination, and of labor by and on the self undertaken with an interlocutor, a master, and/or lover in dialogue with whom one's soul becomes visible to oneself. The knowledge of oneself that permits one properly to care for oneself is therefore dependent upon a kind of spiritual practice or care that makes that knowledge possible. This knowledge and care, in turn, as the frame of the *Alcibiades* makes clear, is the predicate for any reasoned and constructive engagement with the political institutions of the democratic *polis*, to the extent that such an engagement is achievable at all. The seduction of the unreflective exercise of power over oneself and others, however, as both the conclusion of this dialogue and of the *Symposium* makes clear, remains ever alluring. The unrefracted love of the approbation of the *polis* leads one to become a slave to its changing whims, a flatterer to its vanities, and a traitor to oneself (Foucault 1994h: 712–16; *Gorgias* 500e–501c, 502d–503b, 521a–522a; *Theaetetus* 175e).

64. As Charles Platter points out to me (*per litteras*), the attribution of self-knowledge to the Delphic oracle is made doubly problematic by *Phaedrus* 244a9–b6, where Socrates notes that it is only reliable when the priestess is mad (*maineisai*). Of course, love and poetry are themselves later termed forms of madness in this same dialogue, and philosophy too, since it is the highest form of love (245a, 246e6, 249d4–e4, 250b7, 252e). This obviously renders problematic any notion of philosophy as the triumph of a disembodied reason.
The *Alcibiades* for Foucault provides the first and most comprehensive account of this complex relationship between the knowledge and the care of the self, a relationship that is less a vicious circle than a mutually enriching and co-constituting dialectic in both the Platonic and the Hegelian senses of that term (Foucault 2001: 46). The dialogue is the starting point for his history of the “care of the self” as a self-conscious practice. That practice in turn is understood to constitute a crucial nexus for both “a history of subjectivity and an analysis of the forms of governmentality” (1994i: 213–14). Consequently, this dialogue, regardless of its actual provenance, represents the emergence of an “event” in thought. It represents the theorization of a form of self-relation that for the first time explicitly problematizes the nature of the subject (Foucault 2001: 11, 242, 247). The soul or psyche was no longer a shadowy substance that was evacuated from the body at death, as it was in archaic poetry, but had now become a self-consciously theorized vehicle for, and a repository of, truth (Davidson 1994: 126; Havelock 1963: 198–200; Snell 1953: ix, 5–20).

As the *Alcibiades* makes clear, the care of the self requires a conversion of one’s gaze from the world of externals to the self and a meditation on its nature. In fact, it requires nothing less than the constitution of subjective interiority as a form of practice (Foucault 2001: 12). This practice, in turn, requires the isolation of what constitutes the self in itself. Thus, in the passage immediately following the one cited at the beginning of this section, Socrates continues:

> Socrates: Come then, in what manner would this very thing itself [*auto to auto*] be found? For in this manner we would quickly find what we ourselves [*autoi*] are, but if we remain in ignorance, then we would be unable [to discover this]. (129b1–3)

As Foucault notes, on one level, Socrates’ question is purely methodological and formal, but on another it is the telos toward which the whole dialogue has been moving and explains why the *Alcibiades* occupies the crucial place Foucault assigns it in his genealogy of the modern subject. Socrates does not ask Alcibiades, “what sort of animal are you, what is your nature, how are you composed,” but “what is this relationship that is designated by the reflexive pronoun *heauton*, what is this element which is the same on the side both of the subject and the object” (Foucault 2001: 52).

The answer to Socrates’ question, while definitively offered only after another considerable passage of dialectical exchange, is implicit in what immediately follows:
Socrates: With what are you now in conversation (dialegêi)? Is it anything other than me?
   Alcibiades: You’re right.
   Socrates: And I with you?
   Alcibiades: Right.
   Socrates: Is Socrates in conversation?
   Alcibiades: Absolutely.
   Socrates: And Alcibiades listening?
   Alcibiades: Yes.
   Socrates: And so does Socrates engage in conversation by means of speech [logôi]?
   Alcibiades: What else?
   Socrates: Do you call conversation [dialegethai] and the use of speech the same thing [t’auto]?  
   Alcibiades: Yes.
   Socrates: But the one using and what he uses is there not any difference between them?
   Alcibiades: How do you mean?
   Socrates: Just as the leather cutter cuts with a cutter and knife and other tools.
   Alcibiades: Yes.
   Socrates: And so the one cutting and using is one thing, and the things the one cutting uses are another.
   Alcibiades: Could it be otherwise? (129b5–c12)

This is a passage of great subtlety. On the one hand, it prepares a logical distinction between the agent of an action and the means by which that action is accomplished. This will be the basis for Socrates’ later definition of the self as equated with the soul. It is, as Foucault notes, a definition of the subject as that toward which the activity of reflection, of the return toward the self, ought to be oriented, not of the soul as a prescriptive nature that in itself dictates the law of our behavior (Foucault 2001). On the other, it establishes on the connotative level the means by which that reflective activity is be pursued: in a dialogue (dialegesthai) between Alcibiades (the student, disciple, beloved) and Socrates (the teacher, master, lover), using reason/speech (logos) to reveal the nature of the thing itself (auto to auto) that makes use of, and is only made manifest by, these means. What we see, then, is nothing less than, in capsule form, the ideal cognitive and affective working of the dialectic as described in the seventh letter and elaborated in the Symposium.
The next step in the argument is to acknowledge that if the cobbler or leather cutter (skutotomos) uses tools, he also uses his hands and eyes, and since these body parts have the same relation of instrumentality to the cobbler as does his knife, then, insofar as the agent of an action and the means by which the action is accomplished are distinguished, the self of the cobbler cannot be identified with his body. The self of the cobbler, then, and of any other human being would not be that which is used but that which uses, and this is what we call the soul.

Socrates: What then is a human being (anthrôpos)?
Alcibiades: I am not able to say.
Socrates: You are able to say that it is what uses the body.
Alcibiades: Right.
Socrates: Does anything else use this than the soul?
Alcibiades: Nothing else.
Socrates: And so it is in the position of command?
Alcibiades: Yes. (129e10–130a4)

The soul, as defined in this dialogue, as opposed to its tripartite conception found in the Republic and the Phaedrus, is less a substance than a relationship. The self that we must care for is the soul as self-constituting subject, as that which acts through and upon itself, more than a discrete entity among others with definable positive qualities (Foucault 2001: 56). And it is precisely insofar as we possess the capacity to know and act upon ourselves, as revealed through our interactions with others, that the care of the self becomes both a necessary quality in defining ourselves as human (anthrôpos) and a prerequisite to any meaningful exercise of power over oneself (i.e., ethical power) and over others (i.e., political power). Care, then, becomes the ground of all authentic interaction with both ourselves and others (Silverman 2000: 32–33).

Thus, when Alcibiades’ other suitors claimed to love him, it was not him they loved, but his accidental attributes: his looks, his fortune, and his political connections. Socrates, however, loves him and manifests this love, first, through revealing Alcibiades’ lack of self-

65. The theorizations of the soul found in Plato represent less a consistent doctrine than a series of fertile metaphors. See, for example, the passage in Symposium where Diotima seems to indicate that the soul’s make-up is in constant flux, just like the body itself (207e2–208a7).

knowledge, and then through reflecting the true nature of the self to
him, by means of their dialectical intercourse, so that Alcibiades may
care for it and become as beautiful as possible, in the only sense that
belongs inherently to Alcibiades:

Socrates: This is then the cause: I was your only lover; the oth-
ers loved your possessions. Your possessions are now passing out
of season, but you are just beginning to bloom. And I will not
leave you lest the people of Athens corrupt you and you become
ugly. For this I truly fear, that you should become a lover of our
people \[dēmerastês\] and so be corrupted. For many good men have
already suffered this at the hands of the Athenians. For the people
of greathearted Erechtheus are good looking, but it’s necessary to
see them naked. Keep well what I am saying to you.

Alcibiades: What do you mean?

Socrates: First of all strip down and train hard \[gumnasai\],
blessed man, and learn what is needed to attend to the affairs of the
city, so that you go in already having an antidote and will therefore
suffer no harm.

Alcibiades: You seem to me to speak well, Socrates, but try to
explain how we should take care of ourselves.

Socrates: We explained this before—for what we are was agreed
upon—but I feared lest weakening we should forget this and care
for something other than ourselves.

Alcibiades: That’s it.

Socrates: And then we agreed that it was necessary to care for
the soul and that we must look to this. (131e10–132c2)

In this passage, the language of love, pederastic desire, political power,
self-mastery, and self-fashioning all become inextricably intertwined
not be seduced into becoming a lover of the city \(dēmerastês\), as his
guardian Pericles had recommended in his famed funeral oration
(Thucydides 2.43; Wohl 2002).\(^{67}\) Such a seduction, Plato insinuates,
implies a reversal of normal subject/object relations since the \(erastês\)
is normally the pursuer and not the pursued, and thus in the active
position, but the lover of the city is seduced by the love of unreflected
power and the need for the city’s approbation and so becomes passive

\(^{67}\) Of course, these may not represent Pericles’ exact words, but a discourse typical of
the period.
in regard to its wishes. To disabuse himself of its seductive powers, Alcibiades must see the city as it is, naked (gumnos), and stripped of all pretensions. He will achieve this by himself stripping down (being naked to himself) through training hard and caring for his soul, a practice which will ultimately culminate in an insight into the nature of the good and the just, as described in the seventh letter. The place where hard training is done in the classical polis is the gymnasia, which is where one sees, and is seen by, others naked. It is also the primary place for pederastic encounters both philosophical and otherwise (see the Lysis). There, through the practice of Socratic intercourse one comes to see oneself unadorned and is thus prepared to protect oneself from the blandishments of the people or dêmos and in turn to offer it what is needed. The real question, as Socrates intimates at the dialogue’s end, is whether Alcibiades is prepared to undergo the hard training necessary to see himself naked in the eyes of his philosophic lover.

4. Conclusion

The phrase, “return to,” designates a movement with its proper specificity, which characterizes the initiation of discursive practices. If we return, it is because of a basic and constructive omission, an omission that is not the result of accident or incomprehension. It follows naturally that this return, which is part of the discursive mechanism, constantly introduces modifications and that the return to a text is not a historical supplement that would come to fix itself upon the primary discursivity and redouble it in the form of an ornament which after all, is not essential. Rather, it is an effective and necessary means of transforming discursive practice. A study of Galileo’s work could alter our knowledge of the history, but not the science of mechanics; whereas, a reexamination of the books of Freud or Marx can transform our understanding of psychoanalysis or Marxism. (Foucault 1977b: 134–36)

Thirteen years after Foucault pronounced these words in 1969, he would add Plato’s name to that of Marx and Freud. His return to Plato, like Lacan’s to Freud and Althusser’s to Marx, was not designed simply to reproduce what was already there, but to probe the silences and gaps in Plato. It sought, as all authentic returns must, to transform our understanding not only of Plato, but also of ourselves. The method

68. Compare Theaetetus 162b.
of that transformation was not merely to appropriate a set of models and impose an ill-fitting classicism on a very different age, but to historicize both our contemporary understanding of what it means to be a subject and our readings of the foundational texts upon which that understanding inescapably rests.

The return to Plato is not a conservative move, but one of surpassing radicality. It seeks not a return to the past, nor an allegorization of the present, but a true thought from the outside, *une pensée du dehors*. It seeks the moment when the now naked Alcibiades comes to recognize the nature of his own grimace as reflected in his lover’s eyes and the movement of the soul that lies behind it. It seeks to achieve self-knowledge in a Platonic epistle sent to us from antiquity, a letter that never quite reaches us, and yet that in its very failure always arrives at its destination. It seeks a return to the cave with a vision of the outside that will cause us and others to see anew, and hence to create an authentic self that does not cede on its desire, a desire which, in the end, can be realized only in the eyes of the other.