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The Courage of Thinking in Utopias: Gadamer’s “Political Plato”

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Introduction

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s engagement with Platonic philosophy started early in his life, at the beginning of his Marburg period, between 1919 and 1922, and took shape for the first time in his doctoral dissertation, *Das Wesen der Lust nach den platonischen Dialogen*, supervised by two renowned professors who were revising their own theoretical developments in light of phenomenology: Paul Natorp and Nicolai Hartmann. This decisive decade in Gadamer’s life and works brought his first original contributions: the essays *Der aristotelische Protreptikos und die entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung der aristotelischen Ethik* (1928), *Praktisches Wissen* (1930),¹ and his first book, *Platos dialektische Ethik: phänomenologische Interpretationen zum ‘Philebos’* (1931).² Thus, Gadamer started to build his own interpretation of Plato (and Aristotle) by means of a vivid confrontation not only with Marburg’s Neo-Kantianism but also with Scheler’s phenomenological reflections on anthropology and ethics, Heidegger’s *Dasein*-analytics, *Altertumswissenschaft*’s philology, Werner Jaeger’s Third Humanism, and finally the artistic and mystical Plato as interpreted by the *George-Kreis* circle.

¹ This essay remained unpublished until its further inclusion in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5: *Griechische Philosophie I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985). Henceforth cited as Gadamer, *GW* 5.

² A reworking of his 1928 *Habilitationsschrift*—jointly supervised by two of his most important mentors, Paul Friedländer and Martin Heidegger—entitled *Interpretation des Platonischen Philebos*.

The aim of this article is to explore Gadamer's early reflections on Plato's utopian thought and its potential topicality. In the following section, I will show how *areté*, understood as a hermeneutical and existential virtue, is dialectically related to ethics and politics in Gadamer's phenomenological reception of Plato's philosophy. I argue that, in Gadamer's eyes, Socratic-Platonic self-understanding enables human beings to be aware of their political responsibilities, to recognize how they are existentially and mutually related to the other, and to clarify dialectically their own existential possibilities in order to transcend their inherited world of values. In the third section, I aim to show how these are the grounds on which Gadamer's initial thoughts on the utopian dimension of Platonic political philosophy developed, mainly through his further critical account of the works on the German "political Plato" published in Germany between 1927 and 1933, i.e., Kurt Singer's *Platon, der Gründer* (1927), Julius Stenzel's *Platon. Der Erzieher* (1928), and Kurt von Hildendorff's *Platon, Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht* (1933). Then, in the fourth section, I will express my own views on the relevance of reconsidering how the notions of *areté*, *phrónesis*, and *andreía* are already related in Plato's dialogues, complementing the insights on Gadamer's interpretation of *areté* in section two. My purpose is to go beyond Gadamer's reading and provide us with a more solid ground to address his late reflections on political courage and its relations with his dialectical understanding of Platonic utopia as a myth. Therefore, I will explore the problem of civil disobedience, a topic that was actually not at the centre of Gadamer's concerns, as a genuine mode of utopian political action which can enact a true deviation from the sophistic *pólis* and its understanding of power. Finally, in the conclusion, I will characterize Gadamer's portrait of Platonic utopia as a dialectical myth which enables human beings to recognize when politics are being reduced to mere power abuse by the State and also suggest why Gadamer's approach to utopias is still relevant today.

Areté as Existential-hermeneutical Virtue

The first time Gadamer alluded the utopian character of *kallípolis* was in his *Platos dialektische Ethik*. The first pages of this book read: "Republic is not a program of constitutional reforms among others, aimed to having a direct political effect, but, instead, an educational State [*Staat der Erziehung*]."³ As it will be shown, this statement

³ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6. Translation is my own.

is not a brief aside but an important starting point in Gadamer's interpretative framework of Plato's political philosophy.

In his essay on the Aristotelian *Protrepticus* some previous ideas can be found that may illuminate Gadamer's insight on the relationship between education, politics, and philosophy. In this text, the figure of the statesman, i.e., the one who acts in view of an ethico-political science (*ethisch-politische Wissenschaft*), is compared with the *tékon* or constructor. This is not because Gadamer aimed to suggest that politics are as accurate as a *téchne* could be, but to underline a sharp contrast. The politician, unlike the constructor, has the urgent need to know on what grounds the social world is based. Hence, in Gadamer's view, the ultimate ethico-political intention of the *Protrepticus* would have been to clarify the relation between human beings and things themselves, and not to external imitations or comparisons: the politician, unlike the sophist, must look at the living and dynamic nature (of life), rather than blindly imitate existing laws, constitutions, and social conventions.⁴ Accordingly, when Gadamer states that "the intuition of *physis* is demanded by the authentic philosophical politics,"⁵ he is taking into account the fragment 55.3–6 of the *Protrepticus*, to which in fact he explicitly refers.

Gadamer's early image of the Socratic-Aristotelian statesman is critical for understanding his later essays on Plato's ethico-political ideas.⁶ Rather than being a philosopher, the statesman should act like one. He must not proceed and judge according to a philosophical school, nor he must develop a special kind of politics that may be considered as suitable to philosophy: it is his action that must be philosophical, i.e., directed on each different occasion to *physis*, to the concrete experience of the *pólis* (and the *psyche*), which (obviously) has no correspondence to any historical *pólis* in particular, nor to the knowledge regarding the variety of existing institutional arrangements. Actual reflexive political action is shown as the kind of experience in which both the factual existence and the task of achieving a just mixture between *phronesis* and *hedoné* take place in view of the good life.⁷

This praise of philosophy, this exhortation to "awaken," aims, precisely, to challenge the whole of the citizenry as a community. Consequently, its scope is to raise the status of the issues that mutually bind human beings by means of a general, direct,

⁴ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 174–75.

⁵ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 175.

⁶ Not only *Platos dialektische Ethik* (1931), but also *Die neue Platoforschung* (1933); *Plato und die Dichter* (1934); *Platos Staat der Erziehung* (1942); *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles* (1978); and *Platos Denken in Utopien* (1983).

⁷ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 176.

and popular invitation to think. However, it must be stated that this exhortation does not seek at any stage to impose a specific doctrine, but rather to affirm the not-always obvious—yet intimate—relationships between philosophy and politics⁸ and, therefore, between the figures of the philosopher and the citizen-statesman.

Bearing this in mind, the statement on the political status of the philosophers can be more easily understood as the other side of the possibility of action and reflection of any citizen. In *Platos dialektische Ethik*, Gadamer decides to start from the *Seventh Letter* to point out that the philosopher's existential ideal, that of leading a life devoted to pure theory, should be understood by no means as “extra-political” (*ausserstaatliches*). It does not imply any renunciation of *práxis*, understood (though not exclusively) as a concern for the whole of the things related to the *polis*.⁹ This clarification seems necessary since philosophy is a protreptic experience (unlike “monologic” sophistry) that has politico-educational effects on society, although it is not exercised in an obvious direct way—and this would especially be the case of *Republic* as a philosophical dialogue.

According to Gadamer, the tragical defection of Athens regarding Socrates would have reinforced Plato's view on philosophy as a *detour* or *Umweg* from the paths of the city. Nonetheless, this deviation did not entail a political withdrawal, but a change of direction that would have made the (most) “authentic political task” (*echten politischen Aufgabe*)¹⁰ possible, an educational task, that it is inseparable from ethics insofar as, for Gadamer, ethics constitutes a concrete public understanding of the existence where human action takes place.

The notion of *areté* is understood by Gadamer at the same time as “existential and specifically human potentiality and intelligibility.”¹¹ Gadamer's theoretical gesture, although implicitly, snatches *areté* from its traditional Latin appropriation as *virtus* and its subsequent Christian-scholastic and humanist determination. It arose from Gadamer's rupture with the Hartmannian reading of Aristotle (and Hartmann's phenomenology of values).¹² For Gadamer, Socratic-Platonic philosophy did not treat

⁸ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 170.

⁹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 5–6.

¹⁰ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6.

¹¹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6.

¹² This led Gadamer to a theoretical reworking that he summarized in his mature years as follows: “ethics is only the elaboration of a moral conscience, which as such is already normative. Aristotle does say this. . . : the *arché* is the *hóti*, that is, the beginning is the ‘that’ (*Das*), the *quod*. In ethics one does not begin with a deduction of a supreme ultimate foundation, but, conversely, with that which seems valid to everybody, with ‘the fact that. . .’ (*Das*). This *Das* or *quod* is not, of course, a mere fact, but a recognized normativity, the one that is possible to find in the *legomena*; the one on which a society already agrees. His ethics. . . elaborates the normative concepts on which the Greek citizens of his time agreed. . . .

human existence in its facticity, neither the concepts of *areté* and *agathón eo ipso* but, instead, these latter two notions were determined by and defined in relation to something else which is neither its opposite nor its mere absence:

Therefore, the Socratic question about what *areté* would be (or a specific *areté*) is guided by a preliminary concept of *areté*, shared both by the questioner and the respondent. Every *Dasein* lives constantly in an understanding of *areté*. What and how the good citizen should be is already expressed in an interpretation that rules the entire public understanding of existence. It is the so-called morality. Hence, the concept of *areté* is a “public” one. Human existence, through it, is understood as being with-others-in-a-community [*das Sein des Menschen als ein Mit-Anderen-in-einer-Gemeinschaft*] (the *pólis*).¹³

Consequently, in Gadamer’s account of Plato’s philosophy, *areté* is always present as a public and original mode of self-understanding and existence. In fact, for Gadamer’s Plato, there is no way of being human outside *areté*, neither freedom exists for those who do not consider themselves as citizens.¹⁴ That is what Gadamer meant when, the previous year, he had stated in his *Praktisches Wissen* that “[o]ne can choose its own profession. It is not possible, however, to choose to be a human, one must always be such. . . . One cannot withdraw from his existence as a human,” a statement with ethical consequences that is strongly present in his 1931 book.¹⁵ Thus, *areté* is not something someone can or cannot have in a possessive and individual sense. When Gadamer stated that “along with the claim of being a citizen there is necessarily given the even broader claim of possessing *areté*, which makes oneself a citizen, that is, a man,”¹⁶ he understood that the possibility of “appropriating” *areté* is not that of

This elaboration is a theoretical clarification, yet it is based on the validity of *ethos*. It is not, therefore, the foundation of an *ethos*, but only its clarification” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, “La ética es una aclaración teórica del ethos vigente. Una conversación de Ricardo Malandi y Hans-Georg Gadamer,” in *Valores blasfemos. Diálogos con Heidegger y Gadamer*, ed. Graciela Fernández and Ricardo Malandi [Buenos Aires: Las cuarenta, 2009], 82). Gadamer essentially moves away not only from theories of the value of values such as those of Lotze, but also from maintaining a strict (Aristotelian) separation between ethical and dianoetic virtues.

¹³ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 39, original emphasis.

¹⁴ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 39.

¹⁵ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 242. See also *GW* 5, 110. As Francisco J. González appropriately remarked, for Gadamer there is no actual alternative between the life of pure pleasure or pure *nous* and the life of the good since the former entails a life that refuses dialectic and dialogue while the latter embraces both of them and, as a consequence, presents itself as the only actual choice of a genuine life (“Plato’s Dialectical Ethics, or Taking Gadamer at His Word,” in *Hermeneutic Philosophy and Plato: Gadamer’s Response to the Philebus*, ed. Christopher Gill and François Renaud [Sankt Agustin: Academia Verlag, 2010], 182).

¹⁶ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 40.

directing or manipulating it but, rather, that of accessing it by means of *lógos*: the claim of owning *areté* refers unequivocally to this participation in a shared understanding and its ethico-political consequences.

It seems Gadamer bore in mind the famous Socratic *dictum*: “Virtue has no master; whether it is honoured or despised, each one will have a greater or lesser part of it. The responsibility belongs to him who chooses, god is not responsible” (*Rep.* 617e; my trans.). For he who chooses must deal with the consequences of his actions and give response to them. Accordingly, anyone who presumes to be rational cannot escape from determining by itself what is right in view of different concrete situations, without resorting neither to the historically available *exempla* (in sharp opposition, for example, to what the National Socialist philologist Hans Drexler suggests in 1944 through his concept of *parádeigma*¹⁷) nor to the gods. *Areté*, as a hermeneutical virtue, emerges here as constitutive of existence, it is what defines humanity as such, that is, it is its supreme possibility and end.

Furthermore, according to Gadamer, Platonic ethics are dialectical because the hermeneutical dimension of *areté* grounds on a conception of men as entities “on the road” (*Unterwegs*) and “in between” (*zwischen*),¹⁸ as well as on a characterization of philosophy as men’s more excellent potentiality and proper task. It is a dialogical activity that belongs both to the temporal and plural domain, and which, in turn, reveals the finitude of the “I” in facing the “Thou” and the limits of the own lifetime.¹⁹ “In conceiving,” philosophy “remains on the road to the concept [*unterwegs zum Begriff*.”²⁰ This road of mutual understanding about the subject matter in common is a path marked by “a demand for accountability [*Rechenschaftsgabe*],”²¹ a practical dialectical and dialogical clarification of the existential possibilities of the human being, “of that which man claims to be.”²²

As stated at the beginning of this section, for Gadamer, *Republic* remains an exercise of an alternative and transhistorical educational State aimed to having an indirect political effect in the historical *pólis*. Through this dialogue as well as the Aristotelian *Protrepticus* it is possible to understand the “true” politician as someone who acts “philosophically,” i.e., someone who recognizes the need of knowing the grounds of the social world in which he lives as a personal responsibility. Nevertheless,

¹⁷ Hans Drexler, “Zur Humanismusfrage. Versuch einer positiven Antwort,” *Kant-Studien* 44 (1944): 79–80.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6.

¹⁹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 7.

²⁰ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 73.

²¹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 40.

²² Gadamer, *GW* 5, 73.

this knowledge cannot be obtained by studying exclusively the positive laws and the social conventions that shape the *poleis* nor by trying to resort to an ideal and unconditional model in order to execute it as a program of institutional reforms. The authentical politician and citizen must be aware of the changing relations and mutual intertwining between the individual soul or character and the customs and positive laws while he is making his decisions in view of an absent and unitarian good. As Francisco J. González accurately summarizes:

This relation to a good that can never be made fully present, this constant struggle with indeterminacy and multiplicity in the ever-renewed effort to impose measure on life, this ceaseless mediation between the process that is pleasure and the stable being sought by the understanding: it is all this that makes ethics inherently and inescapably dialectical.²³

By acting in this way, citizens can achieve an understanding of the deep and not-so-obvious socio-educational causes and consequences of their actions, deeds, and words. However, understanding one own's place within a political community means not only that human beings can become aware of their political responsibilities and shared values, nor even to recognize their own humanity as such, i.e., to unveil how they are existentially and mutually related to their other fellowmen, but also it renders real for them the possibility of “denying their own *tópos*” as the only possible world. This means that human beings are able to recognize a socio-political ethically conditioned order and, at the same time, to clarify dialectically their own existential possibilities in order to transcend it, making possible what seemed not to be such, “unforgetting” what the inherited world has concealed. As a consequence, it could be said that, in Gadamer's eyes, it seems possible for politicians and citizens to go “beyond” a particular shared understanding of a culturally located common world by means of the unconditional transformative (and confrontationist) potential of philosophical action, opening the road in which human existence transiently dwells. In the following section I aim to show how these are the grounds on which Gadamer's early utopian interpretation of Plato developed later.

²³ González, “Plato's Dialectical Ethics, or Taking Gadamer at His Word,” 183. As early as in 1924, Gadamer already stated that “the essence of the philosophical position” lies in “bearing the problem in its undecidability and its patent lack of certainty” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Zur Systemidee in der Philosophie,” in *Festschrift für Paul Natorp zum 70. Geburtstage von Schülern und Freunden gewidmet* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1924], 57).

Gadamer's Early Reading of Platonic Utopian Thinking and the *Platoforschung*: In Search of “a State in Words”

As Stenzel acknowledged in his 1932 review of Gadamer's first book, Gadamer's reference to the Socratic accountability would have allowed him to present in detail “the connection between, on the one hand, dialogue, conversation, and language in general with, on the other hand, a dialectic founded on action.”²⁴ In Plato's theoretical investigation of the good, dialectics would have the strength to destroy the peace of the symmetries that is set by normative dogmas through habituation. Thus, dialectics would provide an understanding of human beings as entities that do not dispose definitively of themselves and whose highest possibility lies in experiencing finitude: the limit that does not entail an obstacle, but the possibility of, on the one hand, the emergence of oneself as another, and, on the other hand, a deviation that denies the very idea of place by means of its unrealizability and that demands the overcoming of current injustice and ignorance. As stated at the end of the previous section, it is possible to find here the first features of how Gadamer's utopian interpretation of Plato's political thought was initially conceived. As we will see next, these views will be ultimately shaped by Gadamer's explicit and implicit later theoretico-political rejections and endorsements of other authors interpretations.

This utopian reading of Plato's political thinking was harshly rejected in Weimar Germany and afterwards. After the First World War, Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, the main reference of *Altgriechische Philologie*, dismissed the utopian character of Plato's thought, which, from his perspective, would have brought him unsustainably closer to the (Christian) impotence of Thomas More's “superfluous fantasies.”²⁵ Instead, for Wilamowitz, “Plato was sacredly serious about his reform; he was well disposed to lend a hand in implementing it. . . . The fact that this was denied to him was the tragedy of his life.”²⁶

Although Wilamowitz's Plato, as Arnaldo Momigliano notes, “anticipates that of the followers of Stefan George. . . in the fact of being a *Führer*,” the influential

²⁴ Julius Stenzel, “Hans-Georg Gadamer [Priv.-Doz. Philos. an d. Univ. Marburg], Platos dialektische Ethik. Phänomenologische Interpretationen zum ‘Philebos’,” Leipzig, Felix Meiner, 1931,” *Deutsche Literaturzeitung: Wochenschrift für kritik der internationalen Wissenschaften* 53, no. 49 (1932): coll. 2311.

²⁵ Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Der griechische und der platonische Staatsgedanke* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1919), 4.

²⁶ Wilamowitz, *Der griechische und der platonische Staatsgedanke*, 4. Basically, Wilamowitz's conception of Utopia was the inverted image of the Cohenian idealistic reading. See Hermann Cohen, *Werke. Band 17. Kleinere Schriften VI 1916–1918*, ed. Hartwig Wiedebach (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2002), 320, 328.

Georgekreis members found it “too bourgeois.”²⁷ In fact, Kurt von Hildebrandt published the critical article “*Hellas und Wilamowitz: zum Ethos der Tragödie*” in 1910. Hildebrandt’s publication was a real milestone, highlighting the rupture, mediated by the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy, between the new generation of philologists around George (some of them Wilamowitz’s early pupils) and the school of Wilamowitz.²⁸

In 1933, Hildebrandt joined the Nazi Party and published *Platon, Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht*, a book that presented an irrationalist, heroic, and caudillesque Plato. He even added a famous note to the 1935 edition in which he stated, in a corporatist fashion, that the “principle of *Politeia*” was the “clarification of men in the estates within the State” as well as an obvious eulogy of the National Socialist regime: “For what today we call ‘the total State’ there is no more perfect figuration than Plato’s *Politeia*.²⁹ Accordingly, it was from a very different point of view that Hildebrandt, like Wilamowitz before, also engaged in an open battle with the utopian understanding of Plato’s *Republic*. In his own words, “Plato’s kingdom [*Das platonische Reich*] is of this world!”³⁰

Gadamer retorted to Hildebrandt’s remarks on the relevance of Plato’s philosophy as an exhortation to direct and programmatic action in the frame of an exercise of intellectual legitimization of National Socialism, by defining Platonic *kallipolis*—as he would say in 1934 in his *Plato und die Dichter*—as a “State in words,”³¹

[a] State in thought, not a State on earth. That is, its purpose is to illuminate something and not to provide a plan of action for an improved order in real political life. Plato’s State is an original image in the heavens for anyone who wishes to ordain himself and his internal constitution. Its only scope is to allow the recognition of oneself in an original image. Whoever recognizes

²⁷ Arnaldo Momigliano, “Premesse per una discussione su Wilamowitz,” *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Classe di Lettere e Filosofia* serie III, vol. 3, no. 1 (1973): 116.

²⁸ Therefore, a new movement of philologists was born, represented by Karl Reinhardt, Wolfgang Schadewaldt, Hermann Friedemann, and Paul Friedländer. Furthermore, from 1927 onwards, Werner Jaeger, Julius Stenzel, and other followers of the Third Humanism were seduced by a similar plastic, creative, artistic, and political-pedagogical vision of Plato. Also, the members of the *Georgekreis* published vast numbers of books and articles on Plato from the point of view of his historical figure and on the political role of *eros* in his philosophy, all within the framework of a very strong Nietzscheanism. Among them stood out—along with the text of Kurt von Hildebrandt—Edgar Salin’s *Platon und die griechische Utopie* (1921), Hans Leisegang’s *Die Platondeutung der Gegenwart* (1929), and Kurt Singer’s *Platon, der Gründer* (1927).

²⁹ Kurt von Hildebrandt, *Platon. Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht* (Berlin: Bondi, 1935), 364.

³⁰ Hildebrandt, *Platon*, 131.

³¹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 196. See also *Rep.* 472d–e, 592b; *Leg.* 702d.

himself in this does not, however, do so as an isolated and Stateless entity. It recognizes in itself the ground on which the reality of the State is built despite how degenerate and deformed the actual State in which it lives may be.³²

Far from being reform proposals for the implementation of sovereign projects, as Aristotle (*Pol.* II 1260b36–1261a22; 1261b9–32; 1262b36; IV 1291a11) or Karl Popper³³ acknowledged, the way Platonic dialogues operate would be that of the ironic—and even grotesque—criticism of the present.

In fact, this Gadamerian understanding of Plato was first developed in 1933 in an article called “*Die neue Platoforschung*. ” This essay, published in *Logos*, was devoted to reviewing the last German publications on Plato written by Third Humanism proponents and renowned *Georgekreis* classicists.³⁴ By means of his comments, debates, and criticisms, it is possible to reconstruct Gadamer’s initial reflections on the utopian character of Plato’s philosophy.

One of the main books Gadamer analyzed in his review was Stenzel’s *Platon, der Erzieher* (1928). Gadamer shows himself concerned about Stenzel’s rejection of the utopian character of *Republic*. Stenzel’s arguments resorted not only to Plato’s Syracusan experience, but also to the literal contents of *Republic* and the political undertakings of the members of the Academy. On the other hand, Stenzel assumed, like many of his colleagues, an internal analogy of destiny manifested in the persistence and triumph of sophistry in modern times.³⁵ Gadamer’s review explicitly rejected Stenzel’s “apologetic attitude”³⁶ towards some specific *Republic* passages, considering it a theoretically and politically insufficient interpretative exercise. In Gadamer’s view:

The expulsion of poets from the State, for example, is not a serious reform proposal for the political body—as neither is the community of women—but a reactive provocation whose meaning consists in showing that what exists is already corrupted. Positively, such ideas only mean an enhancement of the image of man in his own true possibility. The more radical the reform ideas are, the more effectively they show what is properly relevant—and not *in concreto*: how it should be.³⁷

³² Gadamer, *GW* 5, 194.

³³ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1945).

³⁴ The works Gadamer critically addressed were authored by Julius Stenzel, Kurt Singer, Karl Reinhardt, Paul Friedländer, and Werner Jaeger.

³⁵ Stenzel, *Platon, der Erzieher* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1928), 110.

³⁶ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 218.

³⁷ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 218.

Furthermore, for Gadamer, philosophy enables friendship, politics, community, and the State because “the being of the genuine man makes possible a genuine State.”³⁸ Accordingly, a State is not “genuine” for the sake of its own activity and productivity, but because it flourishes from politics, that is, from the coexistence of friends “in the common thing that philosophy is.”³⁹ Thus, Platonic education means, in Gadamer’s eyes, “education for philosophy, and it is only education for the State to the extent that the project of a State foundation projects a being proper to man, to whom all education ultimately points to.”⁴⁰ In contrast, Stenzel’s interpretation of Plato as an educator does not renounce an image of the personified State. In fact, for Stenzel, *Republik*’s citizens receive their own personal dignity and freedom through self-chosen subordination to the authority of the demiurgic leaders—creators of free human beings—or more exactly, “from the idea of the State-personality which lives” in those pedagogue-leaders.⁴¹ In this sense, for Stenzel, the philosophical leaders are the only creators of the correct and non-degenerated human type (*Menschentypus*).⁴² It is possible to observe how Stenzel’s interpretation, as Jaeger’s,⁴³ worryingly empowers a State-based determination of *humanitas* that could institute and realize the highest human type, determining a differential ontological rank to the citizens holders of such *humanitas*.

Gadamer explicitly rejects that Platonic thought could be understood as a “philosophy of education”⁴⁴ when he writes, “if one wishes to grasp the core of the Platonic work, it is forbidden wanting to reach something immediately from it for the idea of education.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, Gadamer, cannot accept Stenzel’s “Nietzschean” passage on the notion of *paideia*: “the ‘generation’ [‘erzeugen’] of human beings out of the community that integrates them underlies this idea of pedagogy. Yet, Plato reaches

³⁸ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

³⁹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

⁴⁰ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

⁴¹ Stenzel, *Platon, der Erzieher*, 116.

⁴² Stenzel, *Platon, der Erzieher*, 116.

⁴³ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia. Die Formung des griechischen Menschen*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1946), 12–14; *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), xxiii.

⁴⁴ This was the title of Ernst Krieck’s first book, *Philosophie der Erziehung*. In this book and in his later works, Krieck, who eventually became a keen National Socialist, developed, through his reading of Plato, a theory of political education aimed to “breed” a “higher racial human type” by means of a unitary State-based national community. I defined this metaphysical and political framework, which also encompasses key features of Jaeger’s and Stenzel’s reception of Plato’s thought, as “State Typohumanism” (Facundo Norberto Bey, “State Typohumanism and Its Role in the Rise of *völkisch*-racism: *Paideia* and *Humanitas* at Issue in Jaeger’s and Krieck’s ‘Political Plato,’” in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 12 (2020): 1272–82).

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

the idea of education from the idea of human being.”⁴⁶ The irreparable rupture between Gadamer’s reading of Plato and Stenzel’s would materialize in the latter’s effort to extract from Greece the powers that Weimar’s Germany lacked, to “annex the strength of antiquity, the δύναμις and the οὐκεία ἀρετή, by means of a complete submission to its concrete reality” and his exhortation and will to “grasp immaterial Ideas, ασώματα εἰδεῖς in the embodiments, εἴδωλα, of antiquity,”⁴⁷ as he mentioned in in a 1930 speech entitled “What is Alive and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Classical Antiquity?” at the Seventh International Congress for Philosophy held in Oxford.

Even more interesting are Gadamer’s reflections on Kurt Singer’s *Platon, der Gründer*.⁴⁸ Gadamer takes the occasion of his review to clarify some points that will have programmatic importance in his further interpretation of Plato, i.e., the refusal to understand Plato as a State thinker, the operational power of ambiguity and enigma derived from the mimetic dimension of language (and the subsequent problem of literality), the mythical status of the *kallipolis*, and the complexity of the relation between philosophy and political power. To begin with, Gadamer, as indicated, agreed with Singer’s rejection of Plato as a State thinker. Thus, Singer’s Plato offered Gadamer an interesting alternative starting point to reconsider Plato’s political philosophy disregarding any “will to State” that is, an alleged “unequivocal-positive attitude towards the ‘State’” on the part of Plato.⁴⁹ Singer’s main contribution, which Gadamer did not hesitate to call “a truly hermeneutic approach,”⁵⁰ was to show that it is possible to rescue the political dimension of Platonic thought without reducing his life and work to anachronistic praise of “government institutions.” But, if not a State, what does it mean that Plato “the founder” founds? What is this enigma of sovereignty about? The main strength of Singer’s text would lie, in Gadamer’s words, in the fact that it “captures the sense of the indissoluble ambiguity of this founding will, whose ‘foundation’ is a State and yet it is not. If it were a state, this would mean: a utopia.”⁵¹

Gadamer reclaims the operational power of ambiguity and enigma, which emerges in the mimetic dimension of language, and enshrines it as the founding principle of all Platonic politics (without neglecting the radical risk of written language and its claim towards autonomy). Thus, Singer provides Gadamer with the framework

⁴⁶ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 219.

⁴⁷ Julius Stenzel, *Kleine Schriften zur griechischen Philosophie* (Bad Homburg: Hermann Gentner, 1966), 301.

⁴⁸ Kurt Singer, *Platon, der Gründer* (München: Beck, 1927).

⁴⁹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

⁵⁰ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

⁵¹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

for his own further reflections on the impossible ground of the only possible Platonic State: an absent terrain for a State that is not and that will never be as literal mimesis of *kallipolis*.

Although Gadamer did not quote them in his review, he could have not but agreed with Singer's words: "as a myth. . . *Politeia* is beyond the question of the possibility and impossibility of its realization."⁵² Accordingly, for Gadamer, if Plato's "founding will" were understood "as an educational system it would be an aplatonic dogmatism." On the other hand, if it were considered as "the foundation of a cult for a community," there is a risk of "overlooking that this community is not there yet."⁵³ Thus, the utopian character of *Republic* (and *Laws*) acquired an original meaning for Gadamer insofar as it reveals "the political" as a potentiality inscribed in the being of man, unintelligible outside the paths of the "laborious game" (*Parm.* 137b) of dialectical interrogation, rendering the possibility to rethink the relationship between philosophy and politics. Unlike Jaeger's reading of Plato's *paideía*, the community to which the Platonic founding force is directed is not a homogeneous and harmonious product of an external "formative will" that embodies a program, of a *Bildung* that reveals itself to be a *téchne* at the service of a *makros paidagogós*. In Gadamer's words:

What it is founded here does not matter by itself, but rather [what actually matters is] the foundation, the very act of a philosophizing of a royal nature [*königlichen Philosophentum*], which has no kingdom or subjects and, nevertheless, is sovereign; a founding that does not find that which gives itself to found and yet establishes a real foundation [*wirklichen Grund*].⁵⁴

Gadamer's retrieval of Singer's Plato also entails an ambiguous message on ambiguity with enormous philosophico-political resonances for its contemporaneity.

Accordingly, we find such an actual remarkable and controversial reflection in the only textual quotation from Singer that appears in Gadamer's review. The statement in question asserts that Plato, the sovereign founder, would be such precisely by being a "master in letting-being-not-deciding [*im Dahingestellt-Sein-Lassen*], in not-being-himself—yet-resolved [*Noch-Nicht-Entscheiden*]". Thus, Plato becomes visible as a sovereign "in hesitating and in persevering [in his hesitation] with virile resistance."⁵⁵

⁵² Singer, *Platon, der Gründer*, 119.

⁵³ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

⁵⁴ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

⁵⁵ Singer, *Platon, der Gründer*, 34.

Read this way, Plato is a tricky philosopher who publicly exposes himself behind a warrior's disguise, but whose manliness is not visible to the naked eye.⁵⁶

On the same page from which Gadamer draws Singer's quotation, the latter characterizes Plato as someone who is neither "resolved" nor solves problems or discussions, since "accepting and rejecting a solution to problems is not something that occurs linearly with a living thinker."⁵⁷ Singer compares thereupon in this passage Plato to Dante Alighieri. It is interesting to note that, on this last comparison, Singer refers in his text to Dante's famous *Epistle XIII*, addressed to the Veronese *condottiero* and patron Cangrande della Scala. In this letter, Dante refers to the meaning of his *Commedia* as "polysemos, that is, of many senses" (*Ep. XIII*, [20] 7; my trans.), and declares the double meaning, literal and allegorical (*lato sensu*), of his own work. For Alighieri, these allegorical meanings, also called "mystical" (*sensus mystici*), are such because they are beyond any "literal or historical" sense, "for allegory comes from Greek 'alleon,' which in Latin is 'alienum' or 'diversum'" (*Ep. XIII*, [22] 7).

As a consequence, for Singer, the "logic" of Platonic dialectics could not be reduced to what it fits in *lógos*, since *lógos* itself exceeds its own limits in its movement towards what it results from the interruption or suspension of a cognitive relationship, i.e., *álogon*: "A hint [*Wink*] and a return [*Wendung*] of a spirit who loves to hide in the light and to reveal itself in the mask."⁵⁸ What Singer calls *Alogisches* is not exactly the irrational or the non-rational, neither the absurd nor the insane. *Alogisches* is the ineffable, the unspeakable; it would be a moment of *lógos* in which its aspect recognizes an insurmountable limit; it is what we may call an "al-archic" and "an-archic" moment of an essentially multiple, dia-logical, reasonableness. Accordingly, the existential encounter with this limit would be the experience of language and reason itself, an experience that can be said only metaphorically.⁵⁹

Up to now, Gadamer's utopian interpretation of Plato's political thought can be summarized through three axes: firstly, the role played by the individual, the community, and the State in determining human beings' existential possibilities. As suggested previously, for Gadamer the individual-singular dimension is never annulled by community life, nor does the latter appear personified or incorporated in a State-based form. We cannot find in Gadamer's account of Plato's political philosophy the

⁵⁶ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 214.

⁵⁷ Singer, *Platon, der Gründer*, 34.

⁵⁸ Singer, *Platon, der Gründer*, 34.

⁵⁹ As Dante stated in another letter: "For there are many things that we behold with the intellect for which we lack vocal symbols: Plato insinuated this sufficiently in his books by the use of metaphors [*per assumptionem metaphorismorum*]; for he beheld many things by an intellectual light which he could not express with his own exhortative speech [*sermone proprio*]'" (*Ep. XIII*, [29] 84).

idea that neither the State nor the leaders would be the “creators” of the community nor of its individual members in a corporeal or territorial (in short, “topical”) sense.

Secondly, Gadamer’s view on the necessity and task of a philosophical *paideía* is that instead of being a tool for the “production” or “breeding” of a higher human type by the State, *paideía* is rooted on what could be called the “archeomythical” ground of the soul, the *arkhé* of *kinesis*. Gadamer, as we can read in *Plato und die Dichter*, implicitly accepted Karl Reinhardt’s view for which the true Platonic myth is the myth of the soul, a soul that is originally split by two dissonant principles: meekness (*praienia*) and spiritedness (*thymós*).⁶⁰ (*Rep.* 375c6–7). Thus, *paideía*’s mission, humans’ own supreme task, would be to philosophically combine these principles in order to give rise to the true political and philosophical human being. For on this interpretation the State is not the end of political man, nor is it the cause of his being human, any more than is the just State, which only exists in the words of philosophy, i.e., in eloquent negatives of the worst features of the historical *póleis*. In short, Platonic *paideía* can never be exhausted in the modern frame of State education. As Gadamer will state one year later in his conference *Plato und die Dichter*, Plato aims to bring the possible (the education of the political man by minding his own care) closer by granting us a metaphorical image of the impossible (a *paideia* whose unlimited capacity derives from itself and not from an already existing *éthos*).⁶¹ Therefore, the philosophical education is able and should be looking askance at the objectified *pólis*.

Thirdly, the empowered image of Plato as the philosopher of dialogue who is aware of the unavoidable risks of (written) language ambiguities.⁶² In this regard, the passage on Plato by Dante is also quite interesting because it highlights an additional issue that is of interest both to Singer’s book and to Gadamer’s review: the parenetic and homiletical character of Platonic saying (*eíro*), that is, on the one hand, its protreptic purpose—in contrast to the aprotreptic force of the monological discourse of sophistry—and, on the other hand, its dialogical discursive modality, contained in the Latin term chosen by Dante, *sermone*, which reminds the reader the importance of conversation partners for any education, as can be read in Plato’s warning in *Republik*,

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 198–200.

⁶¹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 197.

⁶² Claude Therien summarizes with clarity how, in Gadamer’s phenomenological analysis of the dialectic speech in *Platos dialektische Ethik*, dialogue exposes the power of language and critically addresses the dangerous, continuous, and inevitable pretension of sophistry of dominating speech (“Gadamer et la phénoménologie du dialogue,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 53, no. 1 [1997]: 175).

when he points out that achieving moderation in the soul is always endangered by the combination of certain *homilias* together with bad tutoring (*trophes kakes*) (*Rep.* 431a).⁶³

In the next two sections, the first two aforementioned critical issues will be addressed. In the following section, I will express my own views on the relevance of reconsidering *areté*, but now from the point of view of its mutual relation with *andreía* and *phronesis*, I shall address some possible “subversive” features of a utopian reading of Plato’s *kallipolis*. My proposal aims to explore a compatible framework to Gadamer’s latest reflections on political courage and his account of the problem of political power abuse in Plato’s thought (which will be exposed in the conclusion) but going beyond Gadamer’s assessments of these questions. In order to do this, I will show how political courage and civil disobedience relate in Platonic dialogues with the intention of reading under a new light what we may consider a philosophical departure point to reflect on a topic that was actually not at the center of Gadamer’s theoretico-political concerns. Finally, in the conclusion, I will resort to Gadamer’s approach to the Platonic utopia as a dialectical myth which enables human beings to recognize when politics were or are being reduced to mere power abuse by the State.

Areté as Political Courage and the Question of Civil Disobedience

Although in an implicit way, Gadamer’s early phenomenological analysis of *areté* as hermeneutical and existential virtue will be later integrated, on the one hand, with virtue’s traditional, martial and masculine connotations (which migrated to the stem *vir* in the Latin term *virtus*), as well as with the Socratic notion of accountability as being brave enough to conflict with oneself. However, before continuing with Gadamer’s theoretical developments, I consider it appropriate to go beyond them and briefly review how the notions of *areté*, *phrónesis*, and *andreía* are already related in Plato’s dialogues. My purpose is to enrich our initial insight on Gadamer’s interpretation of *areté* in section two and to provide us with a more solid ground to address Gadamer’s late reflections on political courage and its relations with his dialectical understanding of Platonic utopia as a myth intended both metaphorically and dialectically to reveal the political possibilities of what is assumed to be impossible as well as expose the actual existing injustices in the *pólis*, whose fundamental features were presented in the previous section. Lastly, I will address the problem of civil disobedience as a possible

⁶³ Something similar could also be said in the opposite sense; for instance, when looking at the question that Socrates asks Adeimantus later: “do you suppose there is any way of keeping someone from imitating that which he admires and therefore keeps company with [*homilei*]?” (*Rep.* 500c; trans. Bloom).

genuine mode of utopian political action which can enact a true deviation from the sophistic *pólis* and its understanding of power.

As it is widely known, the term *areté* is etymologically linked to the god of war, Ares, and, consequently, to being skilled on the battlefield and overcoming the enemy and the obstacles it may pose. In this light, virtue is related to confrontation and survival. Accordingly, for this traditional understanding of *areté*, what would make a human being excellent is the unfolding of his warrior potential. Consequently, the fact of being brave would be the maximum expression of human excellence. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that, as Gadamer stated in 1931, “the Socratic question on *areté* is a demand for accountability.”⁶⁴ For Plato, the utter mode of participation of human beings in *areté* would be linked to a knowledge (*Meno*. 89a), which is neither exclusively technical nor theoretical: it entails a practical and shared reasonableness, which is neither a tool nor a faculty aimed at providing “solutions” but an existential disposition—which already supposes courage—led by the idea of the good.⁶⁵

The Platonic Socrates found the recklessness of Homeric-traditional heroism insufficient as a paradigm of excellent courage. From *Laches* and *Protagoras* to *Laws*, Platonic *andreía* is always deeply related to *phrónesis* (*Lach.* 197bc). As Nicias acknowledges in *Laches*, only the right-minded (*phrónimos*) deserve to be called brave and courageous. It is possible to observe something similar when looking at a late dialogue such as *Laws* (630b–635b), where it is clearly stated that if there is any human intention of consolidating mutual trust between men, friendship, and peace,—i.e., *sympáses aretés* (*Leg.* 630b; 631c), *aretés pásēs* (632e), or integral virtue—the only solid basis for a justice directed towards its own proper end (630c), *andreía* cannot be conceived as separated from *dikaiosýne*, *sophrosýne*, and *phrónesis*. Those who are willing to fight and die only for the sake of war, like the citizen-warriors that Tyrtaeus praises in his poetry, are reckless (*thráseis*), unjust (*ádikoi*), arrogant (*hybrista*), and completely devoid of *phrónesis* (630b). These individuals are unreliable and unable to trust others. Their actions exacerbate violence and conflict, especially when the most terrible and fearsome phenomenon (*tó deinón*) lurks and spreads over the *pólis* (630c).

However, although incredibly significant, these are not the only Socratic-Platonic statements that challenge the traditional conception of courage, previously understood as recklessness and pure superior physical strength—an interpretation fostered and updated by the sophists, as Thrasymachus intended in *Republic* (338c) and

⁶⁴ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 40.

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 246.

Megillos, the spartan citizen, in *Laws* (638a).⁶⁶ As it is stated in *Republic*, courage is not only knowing what is fearsome but also being able to preserve (*soteria*) one's own opinion about what is to be feared even in circumstances where pleasure, pain, fear itself, and desire indicate something other (*Rep.* 429a–430c; 442b11–c3; *Leg.* 633d). This kind of courage is called by Plato *andreían politikén* (*Rep.* 430c2–3), “political courage.”

That is the reason why we read in *Laws* that whoever acts virtuously needs reflection (*phrónesis*) no less than courage (*andreía*) when a judgment regarding a particular situation is to be made (*kríno*) (659a3–4). When judging an issue, the virtuous citizen, warrior, and politician must give in neither to the threat of the pedagogical claim of fevered mobs (659b) nor to his own arrogance as individual. An aphantonic *andreía* does not allow to fully participate in common life, i.e., to take care of oneself as well as the others. It retreats man into an isolated realm characterized by “boldness, daring and fearless recklessness” (*Lach.* 197b; trans. Waterfield). As a matter of fact, in Platos *Staat der Erziehung*, when Gadamer referred to *andreía* as the specific virtue of the warriors, he stated that this is not the “‘bestial’ [courage] of the combatants,” but “of the man who uses weapons for everyone and never for himself alone.”⁶⁷ Gadamer’s need to make this clear distinction cannot but to point to the coercive nature of State power and not only to the weapons issue itself. This means that, although the extreme case of weapons should not be excluded, Gadamer’s reference points globally towards any type of differential advantage or benefit for the rulers over the ruled, which in turn would reinforce the coercive aspect of the State. As we will seek to show, it is the aforementioned boldness of the arrogant men that, from an ethico-political point of view, ultimately turns them into slaves of the pleasant seduction of State power and the paths of abuse and flattering corruption.

At the cost of Laches’s stupefaction, courage, in turn, is described in the homonymous dialogue not only as a part of *areté* but also as a certain kind of *sophía*. Yet, what kind of knowledge could it be? And, in what way now would courage participate of virtue? To answer these questions, it will be necessary to go through the characterization that appears at the end of *Protagoras*, where *andreía* is also called *sophía* (*Prot.* 360d)—as happens later in *Republic* (441cd)—and even *episteme* (*Prot.* 361b). In this dialogue, courage is defined as a kind of wisdom consistent in knowing “about what is to be feared and what isn’t” (360d4; trans. Taylor). However, as Gadamer remarked in *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Plato und Aristoteles*, this last definition poses for

⁶⁶ Although Thrasymachus refers to justice, as can be read in *Rep.* 441c–d, this is inseparable from wisdom and courage.

⁶⁷ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 257.

Plato the further problem of establishing what is to be understood within *tó deinón*. Thus, in this context, courage remains still within the dialectic (and controversial) Socratic appropriation of the traditional *aretaí* by means of a mediation between the different kinds of virtue and its unity.

Areté's etymology could also largely reinforce the Gadamerian interpretation. Although Gadamer never mentions it, the Greek word *areté* derives, on the one hand, from the Proto-Indo-European root **h₂rehₚ* (**h₂ṛh₁-téh₂*). On the other hand, the root **h₂rehₚ* belongs to the Proto-Germanic *raphjō*, from which, in turn, not only the modern German verb *Reden* comes, i.e., to speak, to have a conversation (cognate with the Latin term *ratio*), but also the term *Rechenschaft*, i.e., to render accounts, to give an explanation, or to estimate. Thus, *areté* was already for the ancients, and not exclusively for the Gadamerian interpretation of the Socratic reformulation of virtue, a quality able to be seen in actions that entailed self-understanding through dialogical reasoning, carried out with courage and reasonableness. Then, it does not seem inadequate to suppose that, for Plato, the danger that must be recognized as such is that which threatens the possibility of accountability through authentic dialogue.

Now, the enigma of *tó deinón* begins to be clarified. Courage can no longer be, for sure, *mimesis*, an imitation of traditional heroism. The virtuous and brave judge and warrior are called equally to determine what is to be feared. On the other hand, the fearsome is not always obvious and, therefore, requires a phronetic knowledge that may render it recognizable. For in the polis the visible laws are not the only ones that need to be subjected to criticism, but also the *ágrapha nómina*.⁶⁸ In fact, these “hidden” and “hegemonic” unwritten political laws, archaic communitarian customs, and ancestral opinions that hold the political order together as a whole and shape citizens’ characters and their common understanding of justice, secretly warp the actual written laws, as Gadamer remarks in *Plato und die Dichter*.⁶⁹

Yet, what happens with the unjust laws, those which tend to consolidate the advantages of one single man over the others and that lead to an unjust community order, as it is implied in *Republic* when the sophistic apology of power and strength is discussed (338c)? Could it be legitimate to subvert these laws by means of a practical and dialectic mediation between unity and multiplicity (in epistemological and political terms) that is neither exclusively a technical knowledge, nor even the kind of programmatical solution that a monarchical socio-productive order could promise as

⁶⁸ On the question of written and unwritten laws, see Jacqueline de Romilly, *La loi dans la pensée grecque: des origines à Aristote* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1971), 25–49.

⁶⁹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 194–95; see also *Leg.* 793a–d.

the one referred in *Statesman* through the model of the government of the bees (*Plt.* 300a ss.)?⁷⁰ In fact, the discussion on the problem of the need of obedience to the positive law that happens in that very dialogue, *Statesman* (300b–e), can give us a hint for answering these questions.

However, we should deviate from the common stress on the statements regarding the fact that ignorant crowds must always observe the law and that they are not fit enough to rule or contest it because of their lack of “political *tekhnē*” as well as the remark on their ethical inclination to replace law by blind mimetic models. In emphasizing the relevance of these considerations, it is very easy to draw an excessively aristocratic and technocratic insight of the figure of the “philosopher-king”—several times rejected by Gadamer in his writings—and to neglect another significant issue that may be raised from this same passage: the inconvenience resulting from obeying when the rules are truly ignorant, be these the rules of either tyrants or assemblies. In this regard, wise citizens (and rulers) have no need of being unconditionally bound either to the authority of written laws or to ancient customs, not even to the pressures of the crowds.

Thus, Socratic-Platonic philosophy, as Gadamer acknowledges, paved the path to an “authentic political task”⁷¹ grounded on a deviation from the sophistic *pólis*—whose center are the margins of the city itself—and its hegemonic understanding of justice. After Gadamer’s account of Plato’s political philosophy, for example, we are able to avoid using the already mentioned *Statesman* passage to reduce Platonic dialogues to a mere *laudate dominium*. Rather, we may inquire if a deducible kind of genuine disobedience may illuminate Socrates’s insubordinate compliance with the Athenian laws that ultimately led to his death sentence. The ec-centric Socrates takes philosophy out of place, challenges its limits, redefines the contours of thought itself, and addresses them in every corner of the *pólis*, even to the very edge of the *agora* where minors and convicts circulate without permission to trespass (for instance, at the house of Simon, the shoemaker-philosopher, perhaps a pioneer of philosophical dialogue as Diogenes Laertius recalls in DL, II, 122–24). “Socrates,”—comments Jacques Derrida in *Khôra*—“thus pretends to belong to the genus of those who pretend to belong to the genus of those who have (a) place, a place and an economy that are their own. But in saying this, Socrates denounces this *genos* to which he pretends to belong.”⁷² Since then, the philosopher,

⁷⁰ Gadamer undoubtedly rejects in *Platos Staat der Erziehung* any corporativist reading of Plato’s *Republik*. See Gadamer, *GW* 5, 257.

⁷¹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 6.

⁷² Jacques Derrida, “*Khôra*,” in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 108, original emphasis.

this atopic–phronetic creature—that reminds us of the characterization of Eros in Diotima’s speech in *Symposium*—accused of impiety, corruption of the young, and cowardice (*Gorg.* 485d), is “*ápolis*, the displaced *par excellence*, expatriated in his homeland, homeless at home, outsider and outlaw, the dissident, dissentient, who diverges, deviates, and transgresses,” as Donatella Ester Di Cesare eloquently summarizes.⁷³ Thus, the *átopon* philosopher, the placeless, frees thought by exposing it to a suspicion of mind that ultimately leads it to the experience of wonder.⁷⁴

It would be enough to remember that Socrates himself refused to arrest Leon of Salamis, disobeying the order of the Thirty Tyrants, in the same fashion in which some years before he had rejected the majority decision of the assembly during the trial of the Arginusae generals (*Ap.* 32b–d), even though he knew that he was possibly facing jail or death (*Ap.* 32c). As we can read from Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates, in his defence, argued that his concern in both acts of disobedience was to not commit unjust and impious acts (*Ap.* 32d), as the orders he had received and the decisions that tried to collectively engage him were contrary to an already existing law. Nonetheless, it seems an exaggeration to claim Socrates disobeyed those orders merely in defence of existing written laws. What was really at stake in each of these cases? Which was that threat even more fearsome than death that a frightened Socrates bravely faced? The answer seems quite clear: the destruction of any future *bios philosophikos*, the ultimate closure of political life in the hands of power, be that legally constituted or not.

Conclusion: Utopia as Dialectical Myth

In the previous sections I proposed to briefly reconstruct the relation between the problem of political power and the utopian structure of Plato’s thought through the notions of *areté* and *andreía*. On the one hand, the aim of this article is to enable a new potential for the current critical reception of the Gadamerian reading of Platonic political philosophy. On the other hand, I considered it necessary to go beyond Gadamer to theoretically complement his reflections and to provide us with a broader framework to explore the notion of “political courage” and how it relates to the

⁷³ Donatella Ester Di Cesare, *Utopia of Understanding: Between Babel and Auschwitz*, trans. Niall Keane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 211. See also Antoine Pageau-St-Hilaire, “Philosophy and Politics in Gadamer’s Interpretation of Plato’s *Republic*,” in *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics* 21, no. 3 (2019): 169–200.

⁷⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Language and Understanding,” trans. Richard E. Palmer, *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 1 (2006): 13–27.

problem of power in Plato's thought, especially by exploring the role of civil disobedience. My intention is to conciliate Gadamer's early interpretation of Plato's political thought with an additional reading that may contribute to avoid reducing the place of Plato's reflections on politics and education exclusively to the realm of the State in our contemporary reception.

In 1942, Gadamer's *Platos Staat der Erziehung* was published. In this essay, in which Gadamer specifically addressed the political meaning of education from a point of view not exclusively grounded on the State and its alleged pedagogical functions or tasks, he emphasized that the question of utopia in Plato's dialogues would be inseparable from the question of power abuse, an idea he would develop throughout his work, well beyond 1942. Although with a certain ironic (and understandable political) prudence, this text readdressed the question of the utopian character of *kallípolis* in opposition to the scholars who saw in *Republic*'s and *Laws*' institutions a model for the best organization of the modern State. As expected, in this essay Plato's figure is by no means treated as a Nietzschean human-breeding master nor as a plastic creator of a new superior human type, something that cannot be assumed as unintentional or politically neutral taking into account the context of the publication of this piece.⁷⁵ In this text, it is once again possible to find Gadamer's assertion that *Republic* must be read neither as a reform program to be fulfilled nor as an absolute unreality that exposes and stresses an originary irreconcilability between philosophy and politics.

As suggested before, in Gadamer's opinion, the Platonic dialogues would not constitute a resignation from public affairs at all, but a rejection to politics as mere political careerism and power abuse.⁷⁶ In his eyes, this relationship between power and utopia becomes clearer in Plato's proposal of a State in which the political authorities should be educated on the ruling by philosophers, that is, by the less manipulable and self-interested in power members of the *pólis*. For tyrannical abuse becomes possible when rulers lose the criteria that would provide them the measure of their limitations, the discernment to determine what they know and what they do not know, and prompt a growing attachment towards the conformist perpetuation of the factual situation of advantage that they would hold over the ruled. In other words, power abuse would be

⁷⁵ Furthermore, when referring to the *Platoforschung*, Gadamer not only did not mention in his text the enormous amount of the existing Platonic studies at that time—which ranged from Third Humanism's Plato to the National Socialist readings of *Republic* and *Laws*—but also exclusively referred to two authors and his main works on the Athenian philosopher: Wilamowitz and Hildebrandt (see Gadamer, *GW* 5, 249). In Gadamer's eyes, these texts clearly synthesized positions that “still” had to be considered and, we can also assume, contested.

⁷⁶ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 250.

the result of the assimilation of politics to a kind of violence, i.e., a superficial, external, patrimonial, and mercantile understanding of justice and law. According to Gadamer, the true aim of the education of the guardians in the ideal State is that they may become aware:

that the power which they have is not theirs, not power at their disposal. They must resist public adulation and the hidden seductiveness of power which tempts the one who has it to seek his own advantage by any means of persuasion and to call such action “just.” They must be unaffected by all these appearances and keep the true well-being of the whole in mind.⁷⁷

Thus, for Gadamer, Platonic utopian thought, which is part of a pre-existing literary genre of criticism of the present, raises, in a new fashion, an answer to the problem of abuse of power, a question utterly neglected by the *Platoforschung*. Conversely, the utopian (but not eutopian) character of *kallipolis*, this “allusion from afar” (*Anziehung aus der Ferne*),⁷⁸ enables the configuration of alternative ways of thinking and acting which cannot be adequately understood except from a dialectical and operational point of view that never loses its subversive connection with the present.⁷⁹ In this regard it should be remembered that Gadamer had previously stated in his *Plato und die Dichter* that Platonic dialogues “are nothing more than slight allusions which say something only to those who receive from them more than their literal contents and allow these allusions to take effect within them.”⁸⁰

Hence, for Gadamer, the distance between the existent *pólis* and the Platonic allegorical city is not a historical one, for the political destiny of communities are neither the temporal future, nor the State-based political planning of society, not even the Heideggerian “new beginning,” but rather *anámnēsis*, i.e., the enactment of a timelessness transhistorical dialectic.⁸¹ From the Gadamerian perspective, Socrates gave birth to an “atopic” philosophy that questions the existing order displacing its borders, and, later, Plato’s utopian thought opened the path to render the current time and place one among other non-places yet to think as well of times yet to come.⁸²

⁷⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Plato’s Educational State,” in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 91.

⁷⁸ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 251.

⁷⁹ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 251.

⁸⁰ Gadamer, *GW* 5, 210.

⁸¹ Gadamer’s position in this regard seems to be close to that of Cohen.

⁸² Cesare, *Utopia of Understanding*, 211–12; see also *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. Niall Keane (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 119–20.

As Gadamer indicates, *Republic's* utopian force consists in being a “great dialectical myth”⁸³ that allows one to provocatively confront the political frustration of abuses criticizing the present *e contrario*. The anti-conformist *éthos* of Socratic-Platonic philosophy demands human beings break into the new in order to avoid remaining locked up in the suffocating trap of an irreconcilable separation between thought and action. That is what Gadamer meant when he stated that the institutions and structures of the ideal *pólis* are “dialectical metaphors”⁸⁴ as well as when he adds decades after that *Republic* and *Laws* are works “that truly drive us to think again, to reflect on our circumstances; it is enough that we understand how to read. They do not act as invocations to do here and now this or that.”⁸⁵

Although with less theoretical emphasis than in the 1930s and 1940s, Plato’s utopian thought continued to be a subject of reflection for Gadamer in his further production. It became a much more explicit reference point to interrogate such modern phenomena of his (and also our) own time, i.e., social alienation, contemporary injustices, and the reduction of politics to pure economic and military State power, planning policy, and technical administration. As we can read in a later work,⁸⁶ utopias are projections that still have the possibility of rendering human beings capable of breaking their isolation and revealing the already existing—although overshadowed—solidarities within their political communities, whose borders are not limited to national frontiers. In fact, Gadamer’s late reception of Platonic utopia aimed at the realization of an unrealizable desire for unconditional ethical friendship and freedom. What is unfeasible for Gadamer is that these solidarities may be the effect of a sovereign philosophical and political will (embodied in the State or/in the *mores*). Utopias’ unrealizability infuses into, from, and against the existing communities a weak but inexhaustible force that aspires to challenge the oppressive comfort that “feasible” programmatic solutions may offer under the assumption that politics are reducible to the right application of prescriptions or recipes. In his own words, “Plato remains correct . . . Self-knowledge alone is capable of saving a freedom threatened not only by all rulers but much more by the domination and dependence that issue from everything we think we control.”⁸⁷

⁸³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Plato im Dialog*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 7: *Griechische Philosophie III* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 167. Henceforth cited as Gadamer, *GW* 7.

⁸⁴ Gadamer, *GW* 7, 167.

⁸⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer im Gespräch. Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, praktische Philosophie*, ed. Carsten Dutt (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1995), 74.

⁸⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft. Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976).

⁸⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 150.

Utopias bring the present to another temporality, celebrate distance, interrupt and trespass its limits, broaden the historical horizons of their reasonableness, and reveal the inner plurality of human experience. As *Umwegen*, they render possible that *zwischen* or “in-between” that constitute “*the real place of hermeneutics*,”⁸⁸ that permanent passage that may become the truly *tà eautoù prátein* for philosophy and politics.

The *detour* that utopias entail is a permanent subversion of the obvious that demands of us responsibility and courage to find out on what it is worth to reflect. Rather than being martial Spartan physical toughness or harsh asceticism, courage enables human beings to struggle against the danger of conformity and self-condescension and, I may add, to disobey the written and unwritten laws of the city, literally or metaphorically. For (Platonic) courage always is, in Gadamer’s words, “civic courage” (*Zivilcourage*).⁸⁹ Gadamer’s confrontation with Plato is the “act of reason” through which his philosophy ultimately embraces and aims to preserve the utopian tradition. This is also the ambiguous hermeneutical play between strangeness and familiarity in which his “political Plato” circularly moved from the beginning and that we cannot exhaust by only accepting it or rejecting it as a whole, whether we are contemporary readers of Plato or Gadamer. It is up to us to decide to what extent it takes courage to think again (and again) in utopias.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1: *Hermeneutik 1* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), 300.

⁸⁹ Gadamer, *GW* 7, 163.

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