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Tracing the Origins of the Hermeneutic Circle:
An Exploration of Plato's Ion, Meno, and Cratylus

Abstract: This article explores the origins of the hermeneutic circle through an analysis of three Platonic dialogues: Ion, Meno, and Cratylus. It argues that these works prefigure key hermeneutic concepts, such as the interplay between part and whole, the role of pre-understanding, and the ontological dimension of language. In Ion, interpretation is depicted as a chain of divine inspiration, while Meno introduces the paradox of inquiry and the theory of anamnesis as a circular structure of knowing. Finally, Cratylus examines the relationship between language and reality, challenging and enriching the hermeneutic circle. The study reveals that Plato's thought already embedded the foundational elements later developed in modern hermeneutics, particularly by Heidegger and Gadamer.

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Artikel untersucht die Ursprünge des hermeneutischen Zirkels anhand einer Analyse von drei platonischen Dialogen: Ion, Menon und Kratylos. Es wird argumentiert, dass diese Werke Schlüsselkonzepte der Hermeneutik vorwegnehmen, wie das Wechselspiel zwischen Teil und Ganzem, die Rolle des Vorverständnisses und die ontologische Dimension der Sprache. Im Ion wird Interpretation als Kette göttlicher Inspiration dargestellt, während der Menon das Paradox des Forschens und die Theorie der Anamnesis als zirkuläre Wissensstruktur einführt. Der Kratylos schließlich untersucht das Verhältnis von Sprache und Wirklichkeit und fordert den hermeneutischen Zirkel heraus, bereichert ihn aber zugleich. Die Studie zeigt, dass Platons Denken bereits die grundlegenden Elemente enthielt, die später in der modernen Hermeneutik, insbesondere bei Heidegger und Gadamer, weiterentwickelt wurden.

摘要：本文通过分析柏拉图的《伊翁篇》《美诺篇》与《克拉底鲁篇》这三部对话录，追溯诠释学循环的起源。文章试图论证，以上这些作品已预先蕴含了关键的诠释学概念，如部分与整体的相互作用、前理解的作用以及语言的存在论维度。《伊翁篇》将阐释描绘为神圣感应的传递链条；《美诺篇》提出学习悖论，并以"回忆说"构建了知识的循环结构；《克拉底鲁篇》则通过审视语言与现实的关系，既对诠释学循环提出挑战，又丰富了其内涵。文章表明，柏拉图思想中早已埋下现代诠释学——尤其在海德格尔与伽达默尔理论中——所提出的核心要素。

Keywords: hermeneutic circle, Plato, pre-understanding, anamnesis, language and reality, phenomenological hermeneutics

Introduction

In his paper on the hermeneutical circle,[1] Jean Grondin succinctly notes that this intriguing figure originates from classical rhetoric, where it was previously recognized. Nevertheless, the emergence of the hermeneutic circle as a theme will remain an implicit thread throughout the history of hermeneutics. Particularly, the writings of *Cicero* and *Quintilian* furnish the earliest interpretative tools for reading texts, already disclosing the initial implications of interpretation from both subjective and objective perspectives. However, these interpretative tools are fundamentally grounded in Greek philosophy, shaped by both Platonism and Aristotelianism. To trace the roots of interpretative concerns, particularly those related to the hermeneutic circle with contemporary relevance, it is essential to reference the initial primary formulations from Plato's dialogues, mainly those concerning the role of language and interpretation.

The idea of circularity in philosophy has existed since the antiquity, predating even the introduction of the expression "hermeneutical circle" itself, which emerged later in the 19th century with Friedrich Ast. Formerly, the

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1   Jean Grondin, *What is the Hermeneutical Circle?* in: N. Keane and C. Lawn (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, Oxford: Blackwell 2016, p. 301.

hermeneutical circle was conceived as the process of understanding the parts of a text or any parcels of meaning in relation to a general idea of its whole, yet we can only understand the whole from its parts. However, through the development of philosophical hermeneutics, the hermeneutical circle became a kind of paradox. It underlines the understanding or interpretation of something based on certain presuppositions, which can be understood and even corrected through the totality of the comprehension acquired.

To trace the genesis of the hermeneutical circle, this article seeks to investigate the possible roots of hermeneutical circularity—namely, the mutual relationship of elements in thought required for interpretation—which, in turn, has inspired subsequent theories of understanding. For this reason, we propose to turn to three major Platonic dialogues—*Ion*, *Meno*, and *Cratylus*—which offer the most substantial contributions to its formulation and provide a foundational interpretative framework, where metaphysics and hermeneutics are already intricately intertwined. Plato's *Ion*, while often overlooked in hermeneutics,[2] provides a significant reflection on the relationship between the interpreter and the subject of interpretation. This dialogue is crucial for recognizing the presuppositions inherent in all interpretations.

Upon investigating the origins of the hermeneutical cycle, the relationship between "presuppositions" surfaces as both a persistent motif and a challenge. It is necessary to inquire whether all reflection commences from a preceding foundation and whether this foundation impacts philosophical discourse. *Ion* suggests a pathway to be investigated through an innovative approach.

Plato's *Meno* presents these inquiries more formally as a paradox. It arises in a discourse about virtue and its quest. If someone should pursue virtue, it implies prior knowledge of its existence; nevertheless, if it remains unknown, how can it be pursued? The resolution of the paradox finds its place in metaphysics through

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2   Jean Greisch, *Hermeneutik und Metaphysik: Eine Problemgeschichte*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1993, pp. 51-62.

a religious presupposition. Socrates evokes his *anamnesis* theory to address this aporia which guides us through a new approach concerning understanding and pre-understanding. How could *anamnesis* be hermeneutically understood?

Plato's *Cratylus* presents a novel viewpoint on the "circle" exploring the genesis of language by analyzing the meaning of words. Plato's conception of the realm of ideas underpins the comprehension of language, tackling its multiplicity and refuting solipsism, thus assigning meaning to words. Although the scope of our investigation is Platonic thought, we must acknowledge the Aristotelian contribution to classical rhetoric hermeneutic development. Classical rhetoric hermeneutics will rely upon the Aristotelian notion of *equity* (ἐπιεικής).[3] This idea would pervade the history of hermeneutics tacitly. Through the influence of Christian thinking, a substantial shift in its functions will happen. Nonetheless, the hermeneutic task remains the same between the duality of familiarity and strangeness. To comprehend classical rhetoric hermeneutics, which Jean Grondin attributes as the foundation of the hermeneutic circle, one must explore Greek philosophy to discern the influences and contributions for its development. Examining the "context" of Greek concepts will render the hermeneutical circle a clearer and more fruitful endeavor in its pursuit of meaning, which will be tackled by hermeneutic phenomenology in 20th century.

1 The Circle Metaphor in Plato's *Ion*

Ion regards himself as Homer's preeminent rhapsodist, with a profound understanding of the oeuvre of the foremost Greek poet, alongside the capacity

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3   K. Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and Its Humanist Reception*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, p. 5. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ge*sammelte Werke, Hermeneutik I, Wahrheit und Methode*, J. C. B. Mohr: *Tübingen*, 1960/1990, p. 317. Concerning the Aristotelian influence on hermeneutics see p. 323 and 324 where Gadamer develops the notion of equity (ἐπιεικής). Aristotle, Ethique à Nicomaque in P. Pellegrin, *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Flammarion, 2014, p. 2098. V.14.25--1137b25. For a more detailed and genetic treatment of the concept of equity in hermeneutics we recommend the article by Jean Greisch where he discusses the hermeneutics of Georg Friedrich Meier. Jean Greisch, "Le principe d'équité comme âme de l'herméneutique", in: *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 2001/1, n. 29, Paris: PUF, pp. 19-42.

to interpret and elucidate each poem. Following his triumph in a speech competition at *Epidaurus*, *Ion* encounters Socrates and tells him of his success (530a). He concedes, however, that he was unable to replicate the same accomplishment with other poets, such as *Hesiod* or *Archilochus* (531a). Thus, the essential inquiry of the dialogue emerges: what constitutes the art of the rhapsodist? The mathematician, an authority on numbers, can accurately discern an interlocutor talking numerical concepts, much as the physician, a nutrition specialist, can readily identify someone conversing about food with precision. Conversely, the rhapsodist Ion, 'dear head',[4] is unable to recite any poetry except from those of *Homer*. Socrates underscores that proficiency in an art or skill necessitates comprehension of specific cases regarded as components of a larger totality (532c- 532e). Science is, in this way, described as a systematic methodology for investigating a specific domain, grounded on theoretical abstraction. Following this reasoning, we can grasp individual examples to be initially understood within a cohesive framework and subsequently replicated. This definition is elaborated upon the discussion between the two protagonists, when Socrates asserts: "Because if your ability came by mastery, you would be able to speak about all the other poets as well. Look, there is an art of poetry as a whole, isn't there?" (532c).

Socrates hypothesizes that if the poet has a particular skill, he would be capable of enhancing his oeuvre, as illustrated by the assertion: "Since if they knew how to speak beautifully on one type of poetry by mastering the subject,

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4   *"Dear head"* is a Homeric expression from the *Iliad*, Book VIII. 280 (φίλη κεφαλή means *"dear head"* if it is translated literally. In French, this expression was translated as 'chère tête' = *dear head*). It refers to the sincere and tender way in which Agamemnon addressed Teucros, the half-brother of the great Ajax. This expression is taken up by Socrates in the dialogue *Euthydemus*, where he relates it to *Dionysidorus* (293e) to honor him. However, this is a treatment that one would not expect from Socrates towards a sophist, as is the case with *Dionisidorus*. In the dialogue with *Ion* (531d), he makes the same qualification. Is this Socratic irony? The expression is found thirdly in the dialogue *Gorgias*, when Socrates is discussing with *Callicles*, to whom he addresses himself with *"Dear head"*. Now, it seems that the three interlocutors whom Socrates calls "Dear head" are none other than those who are most interested in the discussion concerning the power of speech, each in his own way—*Dionysidore*, *Callicles* and *Ion*.

they could do so for all the others also." (534c) In this sense, philosophy is regarded as the summit of this pursuit, as it examines the broadest inquiries concerning reality. Consequently, *Ion* is incapable of comprehending the poetry of other poets, as Socrates asserts that rhetoric is neither an art nor a skill (533d). Thus, despite the rhapsodist's lack of technique, artistry, or knowledge, he nonetheless succeeds in captivating his audience when reciting *Homer*. What, therefore, is the source of this capacity in the rhapsodist? Socrates acknowledges that *Ion* possesses an exceptional talent, despite his lack of awareness of it. He asserts that *Ion* resembles the poet he represents, as he is similarly motivated by a heavenly influence that propels him (533d).[5] At this point, the analogy of iron rings magnetized by a lodestone enhances significantly the dialogue introducing a metaphorical explanation. Socrates further states:

This stone not only pulls those rings, if they're iron, it also puts the power in the rings, so that they, in turn, can do just what the stone does—pull other rings— so that there's sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another. And the power in all of them depends on this stone.[6]

Let us examine the subsequent metaphor. The lodestone conveys its energy to the primary ring. Subsequently, this ring attains the capacity to attract similarly to the stone. A chain is ultimately established. Accordingly, this metaphor illustrates that the deity (symbolized by the lodestone) motivates the poet (represented by the first ring) to compose his poetry, which subsequently draws the performer/interpreter (the second ring), who likewise receives this inspiration to interpret the poet's inspired creation.[7]

In this scenario, the performer/interpreter, akin to the rhapsode, captivates the audience, denoted by the third circle, through his interpretation, thereby

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5   In the dialogue *Gorgias*, Socrates shows that rhetoric is not an art, nor a technique/skill, but a know-how, a habit of seducing through speech.

6   Platon, *Ion*, in: L.Brisson, *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Flammarion, 2011, p. 576 (533d).

7   It is important to note that the verb and its derivatives "ἑρμηνεύειν—to interpret" in the sense of representation, performance is used throughout the dialogue. In fact, *Ion* must not only declaim Homer's texts but also explain the verses–a kind of performance.

forging a bond rooted in heavenly inspiration. Socrates elucidates the process of inspiration emphasizing the differentiation between science, art, and technology. In one hand, he provides an objective framework through a methodological approach that enables the individual to thoroughly comprehend the numerous components of this chain. In another hand, the process of articulation and creative interpretation relies on subjective inspiration. However, we should not favour one at the expense of another.[8] Hermeneutically, Plato's *Ion* shows the persistence of subjective dimension even in the world of objectivity. This subjectivity is defined by intricate personal motivations stemming from diverse aspects of personality, which Socrates ascribes to a divine influence. The subjective aspect is not in opposition to the objectivity inherent in the domains of science, art, or technology, but rather an essential component of all. It is, in fact, the product of human interaction that encompasses will and emotions articulated through language, enabling us to comprehend an artistic component, due to the multifaceted nature of human existence. The philosopher Michael Polanyi has identified this type of knowledge that surpasses objectivity as "Personal Knowledge"[9]—a fundamental form of understanding, developed through personal experiences, and implicitly used in every scientific investigation.

Subjectivity, derived from divine inspiration according to *Socrates*, establishes connections among individuals through a discourse that unifies them in a realm of collective communication. *Ion* interprets *Homer* to render him comprehensible to his audience, and he can promote this accessibility that forges a connection between individuals and texts through the medium of interpretation, thereby positioning *Ion* as the preeminent figure in his domain. To fulfill his duty as *Homer's* preeminent rhapsode, *Ion* needed to learn the entirety of his oeuvre to be faithful to his genius.

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8   J. Russon, Hermeneutics and Plato's *Ion. Clio* 24:4, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 418. Russon argues that one contribution of the dialogue is precisely to show that just as magnetism needs the ring, the poet's *poiesis* needs to develop into *techne*.

9   M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Each component was analyzed in connection to its entirety.[10] Greisch shows that *Ion*, at this juncture, transforms into the loyal acolyte of *Hermes*, the deity of business and trade, serving as a mean between the poet's text and the audience.[11] *Socrates* asserts 'The middle ring represents you, the rhapsodist, and the actor.'[12] The initial ring represents the poet himself. Through these rings, the deity compels the souls of humanity to his desired destination, as his power traverses these interconnected rings. Jean Greisch refers to the connection among the various components as an 'integral hermeneutic act' paralleling it with Austin's 'speech act' theory.[13]

As a result, a kind of hermeneutical circle is manifested in the interconnected links of this formidable chain of heavenly inspiration.[14] Thinking is expressed through language, necessitating interpretation to attain comprehension of both of thinking itself and the reflective process. *Ion*, inspired by god, must reach a novel type of comprehension, demanding a reasoning process mediated by the text and adapted to a new existential framework. He cannot directly reach the truth itself, but he contemplates it through the text that is presented to him. Platonic philosophy avoids all kind of mediation in the contemplation of truth. Thus, *Ion* inaugurates a kind of thinking that will be developed by Augustin of Hippo in his *De Magistro*, that is, the search for the truth by the medium of the signs.[15] Ion anticipates this mediated comprehension in an embryonic way offering an occasion to recognize the affinity with Augustinian endeavor of a semiotics. We

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10   Cette conclusion du rapport tout et partie peut se dégager facilement lors de la quatrième partie du dialogue (536e—541a) lorsque Socrate discute d'une façon plus extensible du rôle de la *techne*. J. Russon, Hermeneutics and Plato's *Ion*. *Clio* 24:4, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 413.

11   Jean Greisch, *Hermeneutik und Metaphysik: Eine Problemgeschichte*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1993, p. 58.

12   Platon, *Ion*, in: J. Russon, *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Flammarion, 2011, p. 579 (535-536a).

13   Jean Greisch refers to the theory of "speech acts" by the English philosopher John L. Austin. John L. Austin., *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1965, 2e ed., 2005.

14   Jean Greisch, *Hermeneutik und Metaphysik*, p. 58.

15   And yet, if I were to say that there is a happy life, and that it is eternal, where I would like us to be led under the guidance of God, that is to say, of the Truth itself, by stages appropriate to our weakness of progress, I would fear to appear ridiculous, I who have begun such a long journey by taking into consideration, not the very things which are signified, but the signs. Augustin, *De Magistro*, p. 21.

can conclude that, through a hermeneutic act, he is compelled to situate the text inside his context, following the experiences of his audience. The achievement of this hermeneutic act transpires when the listener comprehends the poet within his existential reality. *Ion* thereafter steps aside to permit the poet's message to illuminate it. He must attain a comprehensive understanding of Homer's complete oeuvre, not merely to accurately comprehend each portion, but also to effectively articulate its content and potency through language. In doing so, he would attain the desired objective. It is not solely a question of delivering accurate information, but also of ensuring that the format is suitable for effective communication. In this situation, the hermeneutic task acquires its complete significance, as Jean Greisch has aptly noted:

As an orator, explicator, and paraphraser of poetic texts, he performs a kind of continuation and completion of the poet's original self-interpretation. It all depends on how one imagines this doubling effect: is the commentary merely a redundant paraphrase of the work's content? Or is it creatively productive? How far do you go in "adapting" a work? To this day, these are questions that occupy the theory of interpretation.[16]

Then, a rudimentaire form of the hermeneutic circle appears showing that it does not rotate upon itself; instead, it serves as a mechanism through which understanding achieves its complete realization. From the outcome of *Ion's* dialogue, it becomes clear that reading is not merely the reception of information but an event of interpretation. The reader is drawn beyond passive acquisition toward an introspective encounter, mediated through the voices and perspectives embedded within the text. Such interaction opens the horizon to new viewpoints, concepts, and clarities. The hermeneutic process thus aims at deepening the reader's awareness of their existential condition, fostering genuine self-reflection through understanding. As Jean Greisch observes, this dynamic unfolds within the question-and-answer logic elaborated by Hans-Georg Gadamer.[17]

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16   Jean Greisch, *Hermeneutik und Metaphysik,* p. 58.

17   Ibid., p. 58.

After examining the interpreter's role in mediating meaning within the hermeneutic circle, and the reader's task in constructing knowledge through introspective reflection, it becomes necessary to return to the first link in this chain: the poet. Like the rhapsode, the poet draws inspiration from the Muses or the divine, shaping this gift into language and giving it form in the work. According to *Socrates*, "Poets are merely interpreters of the gods, each possessed by the deity that inhabits them." (534e).[18] The poet can apprehend reality from singular perspective, shaped by experiences that continually reconfigure his personal vision to use a heideggerien perspective of circularity. In a heuristic movement, he discloses the essence of reality by transcribing it into language, encoding it with symbols that encompass a plurality of meanings. Reality thus reveals itself as intelligible—capable of being understood—yet still marked by strangeness for human beings. This tension demands an unceasing work of interpretation. Through narrative, the poet translates the strangeness of reality into familiarity, enabling it to be grasped as it manifests. Yet, because reality is inexhaustible, the poet can only convey it through the mediating power of symbols. What emerges here is not a hermeneutic circle as such, but rather to a hermeneutic circularity discernible in the conceptual approach to reality.

Socrates maintains that the poet sets aside rationality in order to receive inspiration and to compose. Yet the poet does not simply abandon reason; he transforms it into another way of thinking. He becomes the architect conceiving a symbolic interpretation of the structure of reality. In this way, he grants the reader an opening to the whole through the singular meanings that reality lets appear. The metaphysical endeavor meets hermeneutics through the exploration of meaning in reality disclosing its concealed essence. Consequently, the poet serves as the interpreter of an original understanding (Οὐκοῦν ἑρμηνέων ἑρμηνῆς γίγνεσθε — 535a).

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18   Platon, *Ion*, 2011, p. 580 (534e).

We may conclude that language gives the access to this metaphysical dimension of reality through meaning. A distinctive relation between reality and conscience can be grasped from the human capacity of interpreting and being interpreted by the understanding of what is given. Language reflects, in this way, human capacity of transcendence making comprehension possible. Then, the metaphor of magnetic field from *Ion*'s dialogue gives us a glimpse of the roots of hermeneutic circle where the interpreter is always an interpreter of an originary interpretation. The claim of a brute fact can be misleading since a meaning is always present requiring more explication to a better comprehension. As a result, we can conceive interpretation as an infinite task due the interdependence of the elements that compose interpretation. It is not a coincidence wether mythology was a key dispositif for the development of the understanding of reality. Here we can see the functioning of language as a shared chain link through which the force of inspiration flows akin to an electric current traversing effortlessly in an ionic solution.

It is inspiration (ἐνθεάζω), defined as the condition of being divinely inspired or possessed (ἔνθεός—534b), that ionizes this sequence turning each iron ring into a magnet in succession. Under the sway of this divine inspiration, the poet becomes a creator. Ion shares the same inspiration that gives him the capacity of interpreting and transmitting this inspiration to others. In this way, he cultivates a new form of reasoning through symbolic mediation. Here the unknown discloses itself, the unseen takes form, and the strange becomes familiar through the work of language. This passage is marked by the hermeneutic movement itself: a ceaseless oscillation between opposites, sustained in reciprocal motion.

2. The Circularity of Inquiry: Reexamining *Meno*'s Paradox

The dialogue between *Socrates* and *Meno* explores the origin of knowledge by the biais of searching the definition of virtue and its manifestation in certain instances (71a,b). This dialogue is remarkable for its examination of the structure of

comprehension, emphasizing the connection between the parts and the whole, so paving the way for the formulation of the concept of *anamnesis* to be articulated in the dialogue *Phaedrus*. Nonetheless, it presents a significant paradox when *Meno* interrogates Socrates:

And how will you seek, Socrates, this reality of which you have absolutely no idea what it is? For what of the things you are ignorant of will you take as the object of your search? And even if, at best, you were to stumble upon it, how would you know that it is this thing you did not know?

I understand what you mean, Meno. You see how eristic this argument you trot out is, according to which it is impossible for a man to seek either what he knows or what he does not know! Indeed, what he knows, he would not seek, because he knows it, and knowing it, has no need of seeking; and what he does not know, he would not seek either, because he would not even know what he ought to seek.[19]

Following *Socrates*' reasoning, *Meno*'s sophistic paradox rests on two possibilities: either the knowledge sought is already fully possessed, or it is entirely absent (80e). The first case nullifies the very need for inquiry, while the second renders inquiry impossible. Yet the fact of searching suggests a middle ground: some prior, tacit grasp of the matter under investigation. Knowledge, then, is neither wholly present nor wholly absent, but ambiguously situated. This ambiguity grounds the possibility of inquiry. It arises from the fact that knowledge is formalized within a system that renders it communicable, reproducible, and intelligible due to the discursive aspect of thought, namely the inner discourse.

Knowledge is often hindered by misconceptions or by an inadequate grasp of its object. The paradox is untenable in practice because it presumes that knowledge must be either complete or absent, whereas in fact it is always partial and hybrid. It moves in a circular rhythm, oscillating between parts and

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19   Platon, *Ménon*, in: Brisson, L., *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Flammarion, 2011, p. 1064, 1065. 80d–81a.

the totality, each striving toward a unity. Socrates suggests that the soul, once illumined by the contemplation of the world of ideas, could attain knowledge and subsequently recollect it trough dialog as a second step. Yet this very presupposition only reiterates the paradox, leaving it unresolved. Still, the paradox itself is instructive: it reveals the circular structure of understanding, where comprehension emerges through the interplay of the part and the whole, incorporating ever-new elements into its grasp.

According to Socrates, the soul, through repeated reincarnations, would contemplate truth in the world of Ideas. Then, it may recover this truth through dialectical recollection. But recollection is never complete; it demands further reincarnations—unless, in principle, a single lifetime could suffice to retrieve all that the soul once beheld. *Anamnesis* can be hermeneutically understood as the soul's beholding the totality of an idea contemplated in the world of Ideas, subsequently retrieved through dialectic; this primordial vision is then reshaped in order to articulate more adequately the concepts it engenders. Socrates acknowledges, however, that this mythic framework requires justification. Without such a foundation, the paradox would entail that discovery and the advancement of knowledge are impossible—a conclusion belied by the very reality of inquiry and progress.[20]

In response to *Meno*'s paradox, *Socrates* advances his theory of *anamnesis*, recognizing that the paradox rests upon a kind of circular mode of thinking. The constituted framework of the paradox interweaves perception, experience, and tacit knowledge into a system that makes possible the progressive growth of understanding. Socrates' statement is thus not simply a reaction to the paradox but a disclosure of the anteriority of the epistemological framework itself. The world of Ideas becomes the condition to fully understand something. When

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20   Michael Polanyi highlights this problem when discussing *Meno*'s paradox in the following way: "So we are faced with the fact that, for two thousand years and more, humanity has progressed through the efforts of people solving difficult problems, while all the time it could be shown that to do this was either meaningless or impossible." M. Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1966, p. 22.

methodically articulated, the underlying structures of comprehension reveal this circular form, produced by the oscillation inherent in the pursuit of knowledge. To pose a question already presupposes a partial knowledge, even if it must be retrieved through repeated questioning. This circularity, later emphasized and developed by Martin Heidegger, highlights the primacy of pre-understanding, which discloses the conditions that make understanding possible in the first place through his conception of the hermeneutic circle. At the same time, the posterior aspect of the circle can be seen in the heuristic dimension of understanding, which reaches beyond itself, integrating the unfamiliar into the already known and thereby enabling a new understanding of the object.[21] The theory of *anamnesis* and the immortality of the soul, evoked by Socrate, indicates that knowledge always involves a moment of personal recognition—a theme Ricœur would later underscore in his reflections on memory and personal identity.[22]

Socrates maintains that knowledge depends both on a preexisting framework of comprehension and on the heuristic activity of the soul, which forges new connections. From this perspective, concepts must already in some sense reside within the soul in order to be recalled. His response, though seemingly incomplete, nonetheless opens a decisive path. Socrates approaches the question philosophically, yet under the horizon of religion, which he treats not as marginal but as inherent to inquiry. What might at first appear secondary proves decisive: religion discloses possibilities otherwise inaccessible, offering a perspective that frees thought from the constraints of a closed system indifferent to transcendence. Understanding thus requires a personal approach, for religion

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21 Could this be what Thomas Kuhn called the "paradigm" of scientific discovery? cf. T. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, Cambridge: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

22 Michel Meyer shows that Socrates' response to *Meno*'s paradox is insufficient when he points out that if one had forgotten knowledge of an object, one would have no way of searching for it, since one had forgotten it. If one had not forgotten, then one would have knowledge. In this way, there is no point in searching for it. M. Meyer, *La Problématologie*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004, p. 13. Furthermore, according to Ricœur, self-recognition is attestation and object recognition is identification. Thus, the identity of objects and the identity of the subject are intertwined through the idea of consciousness.

constitutes an existential ground of personality, providing a unifying horizon within which reality can be apprehended as a whole.

The paradox exposes a reflexive structure intrinsic to epistemic activity, revealing the interplay of subject and object while pointing to the transcendental dimension of the hermeneutic circle, as Heidegger articulated. The comprehension of an object or phenomenon necessarily passes through judgments conditioned by prior possibilities of understanding; without such a horizon, articulating the given in an intelligible form would remain impossible. The hermeneutic circle manifests above all in language, through which judgments are articulated and knowledge rendered propositional. The propositional aspect guides any sort of inquiry through the analysis of the object searching for the totality from the parts that form the propositions.

The hermeneutic significance of the paradox lies in its disclosure of the external reference within a dialectical framework. Every question presupposes an act of comprehension, which in turn generates further questioning through interpretative engagement with the object through language. Without propositional articulation, the very relation between prior knowledge and new insight would collapse. At the same time, the personal dimension of understanding—grounded in the structures of pre-understanding—animates and directs the inquiry, echoing the dynamics of *anamnesis*. Thus, *Meno*'s paradox not only illuminates the circular, axiomatic structure of ontological research but also underscores the existential motivation that drives questioning itself. Inquiry arises from a deep personal concern, which becomes the force that directs the movement toward comprehension.

The paradox persists—and must persist—requiring no final resolution, for it discloses the subjective framework of knowledge with its inherent circularity. Every system of thought rests upon prior axioms, whether explicitly affirmed

or tacitly assumed.[23] Thus, the circularity of the paradox—articulated through propositions—discloses the hermeneutic dimension of knowledge. Propositions, framed as judgments referring to external reality, make possible confrontation, verification, confirmation, inquiry, and the contestation of presuppositions or conclusions. They expose the underlying assumptions that structure thought, which require a hermeneutic approach for their clarification, even as they reveal their own limitations. In this way, the paradox underscores the reflective and scientific development that arises from acknowledging the subject's cognitive framework. Meno's paradox thereby reveals the circular relation inherent to intellectual process in its propositional form. It demonstrates the interplay of understanding and knowledge, where what first appears unfamiliar becomes familiar through the integration of new insights into a prior understanding.

Socrates' appeal to religion represents an effort at reconciliation through the paradox—a fruitful though incomplete attempt to connect philosophy and religion. This articulation toward a path discloses an evolution of human thought, opening an alternative mode of comprehension of the same problem. The circularity that marks the limits of thought implies a reciprocal movement, through which the soul, in its pursuit of knowledge, may attain it. Here the religious dimension functions as a critical tool that all knowledge ultimately rests upon some axiomatic assumptions requiring reflection and critique. Gadamer underscores this point in his commentary, observing that the paradox arises from the conviction that knowledge is not intrinsic to the subject but bestowed upon it. Even if Socrates seeks to separate his mythical formulation from his more philosophical response in order to loosen knowledge from circularity, the demand

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23   The rational tendency is to reject out of hand any thought that appears circular, considering it sophistical, misleading, or biased. It is undeniable that circular argumentation is a vice. Therefore, it must be rejected; however, not all circularity must be dismissed out of hand. This is the case with the notion of paradigm developed by Thomas Kuhn or even Paul Feyerabend's remarks concerning the critique of scientism based on scientific reason and method. See also Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge. M. Polanyi. *The Tacit Dimension*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1966.

for certainty in the pursuit of knowledge nevertheless persists.[24]

Therefore, if this circularity includes a transcendent dimension—as *Meno*'s paradox urges us to recognize—it is articulated through propositions that refer to an external reality grounded in a specific ontology. This structure relies on language that shapes it. From here, the inquiry leads to a further step in the *Cratylus*, where Plato turns to the question of the essence of language itself.

3. Plato's *Cratylus* and the Challenge to the Hermeneutic Circle

For our purposes in this article, *Cratylus* occupies an important place introducing the problem of mediation between subjective thought and the external world, even if it leaves unresolved the ontological status of the relation between language and reality. The mediation enacted by words (ὀνόματα) serves as the mechanism through which hermeneutic circularity is unveiled. Through linguistic articulation, thought achieves a provisional unity and coherence. It is important to clarify that we are not yet discussing the hermeneutic circle itself, but rather a circular structure that demands interpretation grounded in specific intelligibility. The *Cratylus* thus underscores that language is never merely instrumental but constitutes an indispensable phase in the unfolding of both pre-understanding and explicit comprehension. This raises the question: what structural relation binds pre-understanding and comprehension? And by what process are presuppositions transposed into the meaningful expressions that language discloses?

Cratylus and *Hermogenes* embody two contrasting linguistic theories that prompt Socrates to think about language, ultimately leading to his conception of ideas (εἶδος) as a representation of reality. *Cratylus* proposes a naturalist theory,

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24 Hans-Georg Gadame, *Gesammelte Werke, Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode*, J. C. B. Mohr: Tübingen, 1960/1990, p. 351. Michael Polanyi highlights this aspect of assurance in the acquisition of knowledge when he states: "We must recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community of mind: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework. " M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge, Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964. p. 266.

claiming a natural correspondence between words and objects, characterized by their accuracy (ὀρθότης) (383b). *Hermogenes*, by contrast, defends a conventionalist theory, claiming that the meanings of words are stablished by the convention and consensus of people (384d). These two positions delineates polar perspectives on the function of language in thinking. Socrates situates himself in a mediating position between these two extreme views. He contends that the responsibility of the legislator is to designate a distinctive name for entities by the articulation of sounds and syllables (389a), while acknowledging that such designations may vary across different nations (389e). Nonetheless, the actions of legislators should be guided by dialecticians, who alone possess the competence in the art of questioning and answering. Then, dialectics becomes the standard for resolving ambiguities inherent in language.

Through *Cratylus*, Plato aims to demonstrate that, despite attempts to create an exact correlation between words and objects, achieving the truth of objects through language is unattainable. Genuine knowledge resides in the actual comprehension of the objects themselves, rather than merely in verbal expression. For this reason, he proposes that thought should be oriented itself towards ideas (εἶδος) to attain genuine knowledge, while the understanding of the phenomena function as an initial stage in acquiring a deeper comprehension of the entities in their essences. Then, dialectical thought emerges as the path by which we transcend the misleading nature of language, since words are intrinsically ambiguous. According to Socrate, language represents merely the outward manifestation of thinking. The function of discourse is therefore not to coincide with the object as such, but to render its intelligible dimension accessible. Indeed, the word must direct thinking towards a genuine knowledge of the object, or even engender its representation (*mimesis*), not merely as a superficial replica or reproduction, but as the manifestation of being that unveils itself via entities.

The Greeks were not particularly concerned with the contemporary understanding of the hermeneutic circle. Yet, a form of circularity can already be discerned: language perpetually retains a connection to the realm of ideas by making conceptions intelligible. The sole inquiry regarding the hermeneutic cycle among *Plato's* dialogues pertains to the circular nature of thinking in the interpretative process, grounded in presuppositions, as exemplified in *Ion* and *Meno* dialogues which were more explored by twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics. In Plato, however, language remains confined to the mere expression of thought, without bearing its own ontological dimension; this one being reserved for the grasp of concepts. The theory of ideas thus functions as the criterion for the meaning of entities. Consequently, the hermeneutic circle can be disrupted through the intervention of a superior authority, specifically the realm of ideas, which would provide and ensure meaning by removing the ontological aspect of language. It seems that when language, especially in its discursive application, unveils this ontological aspect by bestowing it a degree of autonomy, the hermeneutic circle reconstitutes and reemerges, since it can encapsulate the entity within itself. This same phenomenon reappears in the history of hermeneutics when Protestantism pleads for the concept of *Sola Scriptura* for instance where language will be the key for interpretation of the Holy Scriptures through the contextual analysis. Further, Romanticism in its development of a general theory of interpretation as we can see in Schleiermacher's thought where the hermeneutical circle will appear through the interdependence of the constitutive elements of interpretation such as grammatical and psychological aspects.

If language is granted an ontological dimension, it acquires a relative autonomy that enables it to establish a referential connection to the world through propositions. In Greek thought, however, this was not the case: language was regarded merely as an instrument, lacking the ontological dimension necessary to

generate an external reference of its own.[25] A kind of circularity was stablished as a continual return to a higher order of reality — the realm of ideas — through the mechanism of dialectics. Language served only as the vehicle for the elaboration of discourse (λόγος) which was embedded to the ideas.

Nonetheless, despite the difficulties arising from its inadequacy, language can also disclose an ontological dimension of its own, thereby generating a hermeneutic circle that manifests meaning already embedded in reality. This perspective opened the field of inquiry of twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics. From this perspective, meaning appears as multifaceted, and language is not reduced to mere equivocity, even if it may occasionally arise. The meaning conveyed through language proves versatile, shaped by real-world occurrences, and opens the way to examine the manifold relations it establishes with reality—that is, the very reference of meaning.

This reflection led Heidegger, and later Gadamer, to underscore the ontological dimension of language by moving beyond the notion of *adaequatio ad rem* without entirely abandoning it. Language appears not merely as an instrument of expression but as an entity within the world, from which meaning itself emerges. It surpasses mere externalization or discursive transmission of semantic content and grammatical form. Rather, language opens a horizon of meaning through which reality can be apprehended, mediated by the manifold relations made available in reflection. Truth understood as *adequatio ad rem* highlights the limits of language, which seeks to capture beings within concepts through reproduction. Socrates' inquiry into the word in the *Cratylus* illustrates

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25   Claude Panaccio in his book on inner speech underlines that Greek philosophy, especially that of Aristotle, was never able to propose a philosophy of language. C. Panaccio, *Le Discours Intérieur—De Platon à Guillaume d'Ockham*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999, pp. 45–49. As we can see in Cratylus, the word is a indice that something may existe. The word does not assure the existence of the state of mind of someone. This is the point that the Greeks did not produce a semiotic theory. There was not a link between affection and the word employed. Cratylus shows a technical usage of the language. Then, λόγος in Greek philosophy regards the expression of thinking through words, articulating a concept able to describe something clearly as the triple definition found in the *Theetetus,* cf. Platon, *Théétète,* in L. Brisson, *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Flammarion, 2011, pp. 1970–1972; 206d–208c.

precisely this problem. Yet truth as ἀλήθεια discloses a deeper dimension of meaning, resisting the reduction of language to mere convention. It situates language as a worldly entity that enables communication and sustains thinking, insofar as it manifests through its ontological depth.

The word, in itself, does not inherently communicate truth. Rather, it takes shape within discourse, where entities acquire a coherent meaning in the framework of a given language. It thus transcends mere terminology (ὀνόματα) and points toward the comprehension of meaning as articulated through speech. Accordingly, the question raised by Cratylus concerning words (ὀνόματα) expands into a reflection on discourse (λόγος), since discourse alone can be judged as true or false. The ontological dimension of language is revealed in discourse when predicates are ascribed to existence from a particular standpoint. Through this process, reality is mediated by language, making it accessible to verification or falsification. Discourse thereby intertwines with reality, which is itself shaped by the enunciation of being and inseparably bound to the human capacity for language.[26] In consequence, the understanding of this enunciation itself becomes an interpretation of an interpretation. The meaning drawn from reality through discourse thus embodies what Gadamer describes as the *noetic paradigm*: a pure manifestation of intelligibility that unfolds into a complex network of conceptual relations. In this sense, the word designates not merely a term, but a distinctly articulated concept already recognized and situated within this horizon of understanding.[27] Gadamer arrives at this conclusion:

Thus the problem is reversed in principle. We no longer question the being and mediation of the word, starting from the thing, but, starting from the mediator that is the word, we question what it mediates and how it procures it for the one

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26   Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke, Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode*, J.C.B. Mohr: Tübingen, 1960/1990, p. 416.

27   Ibid., p. 416.

who uses it. It is of the essence of the sign to have its being in its use, but in such a way that its virtue is reduced to that of reference.[28]

Interdependence and reciprocity emerge among the thing, its meaning, and the sign through discourse. Consequently, in this interplay, discourse involves the individual for whom this relationship holds a meaning. The subject is not obliterated;[29] rather, he discovers his rightful place concerning the universe through the ontology of language. Thinking must remain grounded in reality if it is to yield meaning; otherwise, it risks collapsing into confusion, deprived of genuine sense and entangled in subjective projections shaped by particular ideals. As a result, Language, by virtue of its intra-worldly character, sustains this essential bond with thought. By analyzing the relation between reality and personal reflection, we come to apprehend discourse in its propositional form— where meaning is uncovered through the diversity of observable realities, without falling into relativism.

The hermeneutic circle emerges more explicitly within discourse, where the interplay between parts and whole becomes evident in its textual form. Plato acknowledges this interconnection when he insists that every discourse must be shaped like a living organism—possessing a coherent structure without loose extremities, yet ordered with a beginning, middle, and end, each harmonized with one another and with the whole. However, it will be Aristotle who would later deepen the development of discourse by introducing the notion of equity (ἐπιεικής), thereby fostering the growth of circularity in its formulation—a notion that, as we noted earlier, would be appropriated by Augustine in his conception of *caritas* as the guiding principle of interpretation.

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28 Ibid., p. 417.

29 Georg W. F. Hegel, *Jenenser Realphilosophie* I, 210 (que l'on trouvera maintenant dans le tome VI des Ges. Werke, Jenaer Systementwürfe I, Düsseldorf, 1975 quoted in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke, Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode*, J. C. B. Mohr: Tübingen, 1960/1990, p. 417.

4. Conclusion

Hermeneutical circle is more than a figure representing the relation between the parts and the whole as traditionally conceived. It expresses a distinctive mode of thinking, grounded in the ontological dimension of language, through the dynamic interplay of pre-understanding and understanding. In this sense, it opens a field of inquiry into the articulation of the very elements that make understanding possible, tracing the path from strangeness to familiarity.

Examining the roots of the hermeneutical circle in Plato's dialogues reveals that understanding is not simply the decoding of information through sense perception or the linear reading of a text. Rather, it is a complex process in which the interpreter stands as interpreter of an originary interpretation already inscribed within the very idea of meaning. Thus, inquiry into the hermeneutical circle discloses the profound bond between reality and human conscience: reality becomes interpretable by conscience, while conscience reflects reality back as in a mirror. Philosophy emerges precisely in wrestling with paradoxes that stretch our capacity to comprehend reality.

Plato's three dialogues illustrate this hermeneutical structure of thought, which unfolds through language. *Ion* shows that interpretation functions like a chain: the interpreter is always already embedded in the ongoing process of understanding meanings given in reality, awaiting interpretation or discovery. *Meno* discloses the fundamental structure of pre-understanding in a paradoxical manner, introducing the deep entanglement of philosophy and religion. Through this relation, Socrates formulates his theory of anamnesis in a primordial form— later elaborated in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. Here, the recognition of the realm of ideas, where pure forms exist and shape the sensible world, reveals that meaning always exceeds immediate perception. Finally, *Cratylus* poses a decisive challenge to the hermeneutical circle: it exposes the limits of language when detached from its ontological dimension. If language use cannot be arbitrary or

reductive, it must instead reveal the manifestation of being in its phenomenality.

Propositionality fosters a long path as Paul Ricœur would say enabling discourse to be evaluated by the given of reality by the medium of the sign. Meaning can be apprehended, analyzed and communicated through language as the way to being. This ontological dimension of language can be grasped by its capacity of referencing to the world creating new relationships of significance, as Heidegger will note later when he links language with affection.[30] The decisive question remains: Where does meaning reside? Is it merely a subjective attribution, as proposed by Kant and Husserl? Or is it, as the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics has retrieved through Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricœur, and Jean Grondin, something that can be discovered in reality itself?

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30   See M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006, p. 161.