Echoing the Cicadas:

Neo-Sophism, Gamification of Knowledge & the Expertise-Illusion
in the
Contemporary Infosphere

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Abstract: For Plato, writing's power for sophistry and its authority over the reader is founded on writing's nature as incomplete without the embodied presence of the author, creating an asymmetrical reader-text relationship wherein the reader is active, and the text passive. The modern infosphere presents a new problem but at the same time connects back to this Platonic issue. The relationship between agency and patiency in Plato's world of textuality is transformed by the mechanisms of the contemporary infosphere. Instead of silence, modern readers are confronted with a bombardment of voices competing for their attention. Conceived as a new tradition, the infosphere presents readers with an unbounded and ever-shifting horizon of texts and references as already interpreted answers. From this unbounded horizon—a product of what I call the collective memory paradox—the expertise-illusion arises within the consciousness of certain types of readers, when the dialectic between question and answer is dissolved through the isolating character of textuality, which is intensified by its form in the internet age. Genuine communication is corrupted when the reader's agency is unknowingly replaced by the info-sophist's agency. This is exemplified and amplified through various forms of the 'gamification' of knowledge, which encourages readers to seek compulsive accumulation of information, diverting them from thinking their own way to knowledge. This gamification can provide a false sense of agency, making readers think they 'have' knowledge, and thereby expertise. However, they have merely won the game of acquiring it within a framework that provisions them to do so.

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A painting's creations stand there as if alive, but if you question them, they
remain in complete and solemn silence. The same for words written down.
— Plato, *Phaedrus* 275d5-7

Plato's distinction between opinion and knowledge highlights the importance of the means by which one pursues and communicates truth. Considering the active role that the soul plays in the pursuit of truth, Plato raises serious metaphysical and epistemological concerns about writing as a form of communication. Writing seems to remain silent—as the epigraph above states, a text can neither question nor respond to the reader. At the same time, writing is not entirely passive and, in trying to say *something to someone,* affects the disposition of the reader. Since writing is not entirely passive, sophistic abuse of language has the ability to corrupt the rational and empower the irrational portion of the soul, as an imitation of truth under the guise of authoritative expertise; sophists follow the path of communicating opinion rather than knowledge. In such a situation, for a reader who does not actively pose questions but silently listens to the text as a trusted authority, writing as a form of communication seems to be pernicious with regard to gaining comprehensive knowledge. Throughout the *Phaedrus*, Plato juxtaposes orality (ensouled speech) with the experience of its image (unensouled speech), showing how the author's ensouled presence is lost in the move to textuality.

To understand the significance of Plato's critique of writing, we must bear in mind that before reading silently was a common convention in ancient Greece, writing was read aloud. Jesper Svenbro (1992) argues that in order to ascertain meaning, early Greek readers needed to sound out the written text. Readers would take up the author's absent voice through their own, and experience reading as consisting in an external source speaking in and through them—such that, one would be surprised to discover, after speaking a whole sentence out loud, that the line is an insult directed at oneself. This externalization of the text, through the reader sounding it out, is similar to the experience of spectators watching a play, where the actors, through their performances, induce thoughts and emotions in their

onlookers. In both cases, the reader sounding out a text and the spectator waiting for actors to speak, there is a certain passivity, since the reader and spectator are waiting to hear a speaking voice that enters into them. Throughout the paper, I refer to this phenomenon, in the case of reading, as *ventriloquization*: vocalized reading, in which the reader speaks aloud, gives voice to the text, as if the reader is a ventriloquist's puppet (the etymology of 'ventriloquy' roughly means 'speaking from the belly', referencing the throwing voice). I contrast this with *intraloquization*: silent reading, in which text is not spoken, and can be thought through by the reader who is following along with it, through their own inner voice, versus being ventriloquized by it from outside. I discuss these phenomena to shed light on the possible ways in which reading written information affects the reader's experience. Specifically, these phenomena provide insight into how the reader's perceptual and intellectual horizons are permanently altered by the isolating character of textuality. Without the remaining embodied element of ventriloquization (the voice), intraloquized readers become even further isolated from the lived, generative experience of language inherent in face-to-face conversation with others.

In our contemporary context, written text is perceived as information. Certain types of readers take this information to be constitutive of knowledge, in the sense of reducing their uncertainty about the world, and therefore informing them about reality itself—as if knowledge required no further work, as if knowledge were merely 'having information', or being able to access it. Indeed, we consume and regurgitate information at historically unmatched speeds, accessing cultures and traditions which, for everyday individuals, were previously accessible only with great difficulty and truncation. However, the easy availability of information within our modern age ought not be equated with accessibility of *knowledge*. That is an illusion. This illusion of easy access, that being able to readily retrieve information thereby makes it accessible as *knowledge*, is what I call the *expertise-illusion*. The modern infosphere, as well as readers within it, perpetuate this illusion. They mistake availability of information for accessibility of knowledge. Simply because one can readily collect information does not make one

an expert because one may not fully grasp the content or how it can be applied. The illusion is that the individual's ability to accumulate and consume information according to publicly determined standards is sufficient to claim expertise. This is evident in the example of "I did my research" sentiments circulating during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The illusion here is that discovering, retrieving, and possessing information within the infosphere (finding something through a search engine or social media "news" feeds) is an activity that, on its own, counts as research, as grasping a question, working out an answer, and understanding how the answer *answers* the question, according to some method or procedure of research. Put otherwise, the infosphere offers and profits from the illusion of giving the feeling that one has done one's research, in much the same way that virtual reality games offer and profit from the illusion of giving the feeling that one has slain a dragon. Indeed, in our contemporary infosphere this illusion is often generated by drawing on strategies that game designers use, for example, strategies that draw or divert attention, conduce clicking of links, following bread-crumb trails, or the feeling that one is solving a puzzle or a problem. This is what I indicate when I write of the 'gamification' of knowledge. While the game that empowers one with the feeling of being a dragon slayer is entertaining, and likely does not lead to delusions that one can actually slay dragons, gamification of knowledge leads to an expertise-illusion that deludes people into thinking they know what they do not in fact know at all. Through a seeming authoritative expertise, texts and the way they are read in the infosphere empower readers with a sense of agency, but it is a borrowed agency that actually disempowers the reader's own agency to think for themselves. Gamification is the most extreme version of this.

Sophistry as seen by Plato is thus transformed by the mechanisms of the modern infosphere. With the opening up of public discourse in the Athenian *agorá,* the rise of Ancient Greek sophistry undermined *tékhnē* (skill, art, craft) and blurred the line between the *tekhnikós* (skilled person) and *atekhnikós* (unskilled person).[1] Similarly, the contemporary preoccupation with gathering and sharing

information blurs the distinction between expert and non-expert sources. Thus, a distinction, akin to the one Plato draws between communicating knowledge and opinion, arises within the contemporary *milieu*, between information that holds the *potential* for knowledge acquisition and, what I call, info-sophistry, which impedes this potential—by the allure of search engines that empower us into thinking we are 'doing research' without our needing to activate or develop any intellectual potential of our own. Plato's concern about writing's *dúnamis* (power) for sophistry and its authority over the reader is based on the incompleteness of the written: its silence. My position is that the infosphere thereby introduces a new kind of problem—not of incompleteness but of what we might call overpotential. Any one is empowered to have a big voice if they "did their research." Beneath this historical difference, though, is a perennial issue which harkens back to the Platonic insight into the tension between writing and sophistry. This tension has produced a neo-sophistic movement that differs only in *form* from Plato's conception. The consequences associated with such movements remain just as troublesome, not only for the individual but for public discourse as a whole.

To show the continued salience of the Platonic position, I turn to an exposition of Plato's concern about writing in the *Phaedrus*.[2] In particular, I narrow in on the relation between question and answer as fundamental to building comprehensive knowledge—a position that is evident in Plato's choice to write dialogues rather than systematic treatises.[3] Plato's concern with writing is that it breaks down the dialectical relation between question and answer, which I understand as embodied in the dialectical relation between reader and text. This is not to say that all types of reading or readers dissolve this dialectic between question and answer. I highlight this point through Josef Pieper's lucid take on modern communication that pinpoints sophistic corruptions of language as well as through Hans-Georg Gadamer's insights into hermeneutical dialectic with respect to horizons of understanding. These ideas, notably Gadamer's interpretation of horizons, allow me to argue that the infosphere produces the

expertise-illusion by what it does to the horizons of reading. The written word for Plato remains silent regarding the reader's questions, such that what the text says is poured into them without their experience being opened up through the indeterminacy of the question. This problem is exacerbated in the modern infosphere, where readers encounter an unbounded and ever shifting horizon of texts and references as already interpreted answers that amplify the illusion that the bit of text one has easily found rides and builds on an authority. Thus, one's claim to knowledge is empowered. The expertise-illusion arises not only from the easy availability of information, but from being pulled in countless different directions—between a manifold of texts and their unlimited horizons of support, that is, the endless regress of links to other references that functions as "evidence" for information, leading to profound disorientation. The silence of Plato's world of textuality is replaced by an inundation of voices urgently striving to be heard, each one of these bolstering one's claimed authority.

The unbounded horizon of texts and references within the infosphere seem to voice authority without the reader ever having to actually read them. This is to say that readers within the infosphere are presented with information in such a way that it seems to require no further investigation: they are confronted with a myriad of tailor-made answers to any possible question (indeed, generative AI search engines will do just this). Instead of silence, the reader is confronted with a cacophony of authority that would answer every question, such that finding any bit of information that speaks to one's questions sufficiently qualifies as having 'done research'. But such an activity does not require nor lead to expertise. In the Platonic context, to use mythological language, we might call these texts oracular—they speak for themselves with the weight of an apparent authority that puts an end to genuine curiosity. Unlike the silent scroll hidden under Phaedrus' cloak, readers in the infosphere have oracles that speak to them and say beautiful sounding things—entrancing and mesmerizing—when whispered to in just the right way. The expertise-illusion provides the reader with a borrowed oracular power that binds the unbounded and shifting horizon of the infosphere into a closed horizon that speaks to the answers they

want to hear. But, as seen with Oedipus, oracles are dangerous to those who do not understand their function as self-fulfilling. In a supposed age of enlightenment, distracted modern minds seek guidance from and offer tributes to the internet pantheon, pouring libations in worship of content creators and social media influencers.

Communication needs to be "stocked-up" to a certain extent for the purpose of aiding with the collective memory of a given culture and their traditions. This stocking takes on the form of written communication. In this process of stockpiling, however, communication loses its fundamental reciprocity. With the loss of the living dialectic between question and answer, written communication turns into mere information which runs the risk of being misinterpreted, contorted to subjective purposes, and subsequently misconstrued in communicating with others, even becoming altogether indecipherable. This risk is amplified when we develop machines and procedures for taking stockpiled information as inputs for transformative procedures, especially with the sorts of procedures we find with AI algorithms. It used to be that human readers read the stockpile and thought in order to understand it, and in doing so, added to the stockpile, but now we have machines that can do this without any understanding and also without our being able to understand every detail of their computational processes. A collective memory of things grasped and understood by us thus turns into a stockpile for operations that produce results far from understanding and knowledge (e.g., ChatGPT as creative non-sense). This paradox, which I have named the collective-memory paradox, is the condition of possibility for the expertise-illusion previously mentioned. The expertise-illusion involves taking the products of embodied expertise and turning them into a stockpiled resource, undermining the knowledge dimension of written communication. This, in turn, allows those who suffer from the expertise-illusion—those simultaneous victims and propagators—to become empowered to take up this stockpile as if they possessed irrefutable truth.

As Plato emphasizes, *lógos* can be employed either as a curative or destructive *phármakon* or "drug" that affects the disposition of the reader; moving them either toward truth or away from it. This distinction between curative and destructive applications of language is the difference between the medium of communicating knowledge as opposed to opinion. Within the infosphere, the power of language, thereby sophistic manipulation of the world, is amplified to near deafening. By the cacophony of voices claiming authoritative expertise in providing tailor-made answers, *lógos* is employed as a destructive *phármakon* through the gamification of knowledge by the modern neo-sophistic movement of our era.

§1 Dissolved Dialectic: Writing's Incompleteness & the Asymmetrical Reader-Text Relationship

My focus in this section is the *Phaedrus'* discussion of rhetoric, deception and what is needed to mitigate the risks inherent in writing's nature as incomplete. This exegesis will show that the reader-text relationship involves a general asymmetry between agency and patiency that requires the active involvement of the reader to supplement written forms of language. Outlining Plato's concerns about writing's power for sophistry will help elucidate the new problem posed by the unbounded and ever shifting horizon encountered by readers within the infosphere.

Through a mixture of *lógos* (discourse) and *mûthos* (narratives), Socrates of the *Phaedrus* shows the relationship between soul and speech on a multi-dimensional level. The lesson is that human discourse and narratives take on many forms and have many parts, just as ensouled bodies do, and can either be employed as curative or destructive *phármakon*. (This Greek term, *phármakon,* is working on several levels in this context. It refers to a medicine or drug in the sense of a healing remedy, but also to a harmful drug or poison. In addition to these, *phármakon* also means a charm, a spell or an enchanting potion, all of which refer to secret means of effecting something.) Since *phármakon* is ambivalent, feasting on discourse and narratives without raising questions can corrupt rather than nurture the rational

part of the soul, even without one's awareness. Socrates gently guides Phaedrus, the *atekhnikós*, toward a clearer understanding of what is at stake—the virtue of soul—when *lógos* is not aimed at truth itself. Their use of *lógos* is what differentiates the philosopher, who has a genuine *érōs* (love) for discerning stable truth among the multiplicity of human experience and discourse, from the *poiētḗs* (a maker, poet) as well as the sophist. Plato's *Phaedrus* can be perceived as a *lógos* (an account) speaking of *lógos* (speech) in the form of a *mûthos*,[4] warning readers about the unquestioned consumption of seemingly beautiful *lógoi*.

Socrates claims that the "self-regarding politicians," whom Phaedrus pursues for the sake of feasting on their speeches, are those very same ones who seek praise for their writing (*Phdr.* 257e1-6).[5] Having received praise and approval from the *dẽmos* (the people), i.e., gratification and pleasure, "the maker of the speech leaves the theater rejoicing," considering themselves godlike and immortalized by leaving their writings for future generations (258b4-c4). This is not to say that writing is in itself shameful because the desire for praise and the only kind of immortality humans can achieve (besides through progeny) are likewise not in themselves shameful. What is shameful, though, is speaking and writing regardless of the truth of the matter. Seeking gratification and praise as ends in themselves, rather than as biproducts of saying or doing something significant, i.e., good and beautiful (*agathós kaì kalós*), disregards virtue for the sake of pleasure. What is required for speech that is good and genuinely beautiful is "a discursive understanding [*diánoian*] of the truth" (259e5-7),[6] rather than an adherence to rhetorical techniques, even if these are pleasing to the ear and eye. This suggests that when committing something to writing, which can be picked up and read by anyone that is capable—and keeping in mind that the written is, in an important sense, immortal—it is crucial that what is written is done so with careful consideration for its reception, in the sense of how well it can precisely remind readers of its encoded knowledge.

Writing's reception matters because speech and language have the capacity to guide and move individuals, that is, it both *says* and *does* something to someone. One could say that speech can in a very real way produce actions, compelling the audience to not only think but also behave in a certain way. However, the written word, more so than spoken, holds the potential for being contorted into something altogether different from the author's intent, leading to real soul- and world- effects not explicitly foreseen by the author nor coinciding with the text's original purpose. In the Platonic context and looking ahead to Gadamer, the purpose of non-sophistic discourse is characterized by an open horizon which is simultaneously its purpose, in that it allows for a genuine questioning of human experience and thought. Texts are an image of this open horizon, but it is closed off in its materialization, creating closed horizons within textuality and its stockpile. Sophistic discourse functions on these stockpiled closed horizons, and its purpose is determined by the ulterior motives of the sophist in compelling their audience to think and act in a certain way.

As such, Socrates first defines rhetoric as linguistic *psukhagōgía* (soul-guiding) used both in public and in private (261a7-9). This definition catches Phaedrus off guard because it runs against popular opinions of the time about rhetoric.[7] However, for Plato's Socrates, rhetoric is far-reaching, affecting not only the audiences of public orations or court cases, and students of rhetoric learning from "well-written" handbooks, as Phaedrus assumed, but also individuals reading written compositions more generally, such as epic poetry. All speech holds the potential for this, meaning speech and rhetoric share a fundamental nexus and the use of rhetoric happens regardless of one's knowledge of its proper form. Rhetoric's power can be wielded without knowledge, and this makes it potentially harmful. This power is the ability to change the way someone thinks, how they see the world, and how they act, affecting the intellectual, perceptual, and practical realms of human experience. All forms of speech are understood here as linguistic *psukhagōgía.* The connection between persuasion, trust, and teaching is what makes language so powerful and rhetoric so far reaching.[8] Speech possesses the ability to induce profound trust

and belief in its recipients regardless of whether the orator or writer knows fancy rhetorical techniques, although these may enhance its power. Thus, Socrates takes on the role of *psukhagōgós* (*psychagogue*) and becomes a guide for Phaedrus's soul in turning his eyes away from the multi-coloured adornments of beautifully formed speeches, and their attractive makers, toward an image of dialectical and discursive thinking.

Because all speech is linguistic *psukhagōgía*, there is a certain *aretḗ* (virtue or excellence) involved in the artful application of rhetoric. There are three speeches involved in this dialogue: one by Lysias, two by Socrates. Lysias' speech and Socrates' first speech lack the *aretḗ* needed to be good and beautiful. These vicious speeches demonstrate "how someone who knows the truth could play around with words and lead his audience on" (262d1-3). This comes from the realization that it is impossible, or at least very unlikely, for someone without knowledge to *knowingly* lead someone to deception. In other words, someone who does not know the truth could not lead someone away from it without being deceived themselves. The tricky part is that, in individuals holding opinions that stray from how things really are, deception "slips through certain likenesses" to the truth (262b2-4).[9] People are more easily deceived, and rhetoric is most powerful, when the words encountered belong to the category of words that cause us "to flounder about" (263a-263b6). These types of words make deception especially easy, turning what is like into unlike and vice versa. Socrates and Phaedrus place *érōs* (love)*,* the topic of all three speeches, within this class of disputed words. This is why it was possible for Socrates' two speeches to contradict one another—the first, that love is harmful to both the lover and the beloved, and the second, that love is the greatest of good things.

When speaking about disputed subjects, unvirtuous rhetoric "just needs to have discovered some contrivance of persuasion to make it *appear* to those who don't know that it knows more than those who do know" (*Grg.*, 459b-c; emphasis added). Sophistry employs logical argumentation, and this resembles the method of communicating truth. However, these arguments are fundamentally empty and compel

only by virtue of their form rather than through a persuasion that teaches truth dialectically. Thus, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between sophistic and philosophic (dialectical) discourse by means of argumentative criteria alone. As Hans-Georg Gadamer observed, Plato recognized this point very well and employed myth as counterarguments to the purely formal arguments of the sophist, ironically highlighting their non-substantive and non-reflective nature. In fact, sophistic discourse undermines reflective thought through an appearance of winning (Gadamer 2004, 340). Eristic argumentation—wanting to win the game of discourse for the trophies of praise, gratification, and clout—results in a loss of wonder and curiosity essential to reflective thought. It is no surprise that love is the topic of a dialogue about philosophical dialectic, about philosophical *érōs*. Love is the greatest of good things because it requires a radical openness to being moved, just as genuine questioning does within an open horizon that fosters true wonder and curiosity. Against this, there is the closed horizon of stocked up certainty within textuality that does not invite thoughtful questioning, fostering a dogmatic adherence to a certain way of thinking.

In their discussion of the proper construction of speeches, Socrates says that "every speech like a living creature should be put together with its own body so that it is not without a head…written in such a way that its parts fit together and form a whole" (*Phdr.* 264c3-6). However, Lysias' written speech did not have a head (i.e., a definition of *érōs* to anchor its reasoning) nor a properly formed body. It would not matter in what order each line was read, signaling that it lacks internal consistency. For Phaedrus' sake, Socrates quickly moves on from Lysias' speech, even though he acknowledges that it is rife with examples which are pedagogically beneficial to investigate, so long as no one attempted to imitate them. This caveat tells us that Socrates is concerned that Phaedrus is not quite ready for this exercise, and it would not only tempt him to imitate them, but also leave him upset because of Phaedrus' adoration for Lysias. This strategy shows that Socrates knows his audience's soul, namely, Phaedrus' affinity for all speeches and speech makers. If the reader does not have the strength of mind to resist internalizing a

text's content because of their respect or infatuation for the writer as an authoritative voice, then the reader would be tempted to imitate them—parroting, as Phaedrus did, the content without really questioning what it was saying, how it was saying it, and where the content came from.

This point is emphasized again in both of Socrates' speeches (that love is harmful, and that love is the greatest good). They were cut a certain way such that their parts logically determined their trajectory, while maintaining a compelling and pleasing form. Even with the right technique, it is possible to be led astray by making uncareful divisions in thinking about the *thing* spoken of. This is what Socrates intentionally does with his first speech, leading him to say love is harmful because he simply took on Lysias' content. These first two vicious speeches depict a non-identity between the thing spoken of and the discourse that seeks to describe it; love is not harmful in such an absolute way, as Socrates' virtuous speech tells us. There is serious risk in taking on Lysias' content, without question, and simply rearranging it so that it had a head and properly formed body. The fact that Socrates felt that he had to cover his head before speaking, so that he "won't lose [his] way in shame," shows that he knew where he was headed before he even began (237a4-6).[10] This recalls the idea that someone who knows the truth can lead another away from said truth, yet this can happen even when the one leading is deceived themselves. Rhetorical techniques, such as argument by plausibility (*eikóta*), are mere prerequisites for the genuine art of rhetoric (269b-c6).[11] What is needed in addition to technique is discursive interrogation, for "to approach the subject without asking other questions would be like traveling with a blind man" (270d9-10). Such a situation becomes more problematic when dealing with the written word. As Plato's concerns tell us, the written cannot always fully defend itself against all types of readers nor can it question the reader. Even if a text is written with all the seriousness and careful consideration for its reception, *bad* readers can misuse and misconstrue its intent.

For Socrates, anyone who takes teaching rhetoric seriously describes the nature of soul and of the different kinds of speeches *in full precision*: whether each is simple or multi-formed, and what each

does, or suffers, by virtue of its nature (270d1-8). When an account of a thing's nature is not sufficiently thought through before communicating it to others, neither what is spoken nor written is done so with *aretế* or *tékhnē* (271a-c). In addition to thinking well and ensuring these thoughts coincide with reality, one must also understand "the appropriate times — both opportune and inopportune — for speaking and for holding back" (*kairós*), and for employing each form of speech (271d9-e - 272a-c). Therefore, while genuine rhetoric requires knowledge of the content, it also requires a practical knowledge of the audience's nature. Unlike oral speech, written speech, given its incompleteness and longevity, is more dangerous when artlessly employed. Without the ensouled presence of the author, its content can be manipulated in a multitude of ways, disseminated at the most inopportune times to inappropriate people, and subsequently redistributed through the reader's subjective lens.

In true Platonic fashion, and seemingly against the notion of precision outlined above, Plato's Socrates employs yet another *mûthos* when the dialogue turns to focus on writing. This time it is about the Egyptian divinity, Theuth, who was said to have invented letters (274c5-275b4). About letters, Theuth said the following (274e6-8): "This branch of learning, my king, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory. The drug [*phármakon*] for memory and wisdom has been discovered!" Thamus responds:

> And now you, father of these letters, *have in your fondness for them said what is the opposite of their real effect*. For this will produce a forgetting in the souls of those who learn these letters as they fail to exercise their memory, because those who put trust in writing recollect from the outside with foreign signs, rather than themselves recollecting from within by themselves. You have not discovered *a drug for memory, but for reminding* (275a1-7; emphasis added).

Thamus claims that those who think they are "leaving behind an art in written form" and receive a written work thinking that "there will be something clear and secure in these written forms" (275c6-9) are mistaken. It is misleading to think that written words are anything other than reminders for those who already have knowledge of the subject. This, Socrates states, is what makes writing clever and

analogous to painting. Recall the epigraph to this paper: "A painting's creations stand there as if alive, but if you question them, they remain in complete and solemn silence. The same for words written down" (275d5-7). Even if you ask a text a question, the words will always, at the level of perception, literally say the same thing, but for different readers what the words signify or reference will differ for everyone as a situated being with a particular set of experiences and perspectives. Once something is committed to writing, it is "whirled about every which way, picked up as well by those who understand as by those who have no business reading it" (275e1-3). Written words run the risk of being taken and twisted to suit the reader(s), especially something written thoughtlessly which does not know to whom it should be speaking or not: "Ill-treated and unjustly abused, a speech [such as this] always needs the help of its father [its author] because it is unable by itself to defend or help itself" (275e5-6).

Writing is problematic because it breaks down the dialectical relation between question and answer that is the foundation of animate, dialogical communication. In this situation, the written is seen as passive while the reader is active, resulting in an asymmetry in the reader-text relationship. Yet, the relation between reader and text ought to embody the dialectical relation between question and answer as much as possible to help mitigate this asymmetry. That said, it must be acknowledged that the written is not entirely passive, and, as an image of spoken language, it still holds the power of persuasion in trying to change the opinions and behaviours of person. However, when the reader assumes a passive role in this relationship, they also assume a symmetry between themselves and the text—conceptualizing the reading process as one of simple transference and assimilation of the written word into their pre-existing knowledge base. It is perceived as an additive process of mere memorization that pours knowledge directly into the mind of the reader.

Even though a well-written text cannot defend itself and in this way is incomplete, there is still a distinction between artful and artless writing. Socrates provides a helpful analogy between a farmer and a writer to explain this difference. A farmer can either sow seeds in a flower box in the summer and

rejoices (*khaírō,* to take pleasure in a thing) when they grow beautifully in a short period of time, or sow seeds in proper soil in the spring and, after a longer period, adore (*agapáō,* to love dearly, familial love) what was planted. Both involve the "joy of play" (*khárin paidiãs,* the delight of child's play, a game, a pastime) because even serious writers are just "build[ing] up a treasure trove of reminders" both for themselves and others (276d3). One is written with the aim of immediate gratification and pleasure, while the other is written with benefits that are not so immediate nor obvious.[12] The writing born from the vulgar play (*phaúlēn paidián*) of an unserious thinker is incapable of defending itself and is unable to teach the truth sufficiently, resulting in short-lived pleasure or delight (*kháris*). Yet, because all forms of speech and writing are linguistic *psukhagōgía,* it can still compel the reader to internalize what is written. On the other hand, the all-beautiful and good play (*pagkálos paidiá*) of the serious thinker selects "an appropriate soul, sowing and planting his speeches with knowledge, speeches which have the means to defend themselves and the one who plants them" (277a); resulting in an adoration that is only built over time *(agápē*). Nevertheless, because writing is left for future generations and can be taken up by anyone at any time, even if one plants them in a serious manner, they risk becoming misinterpreted or altogether indecipherable. We witness this today when reading Platonic dialogues, having been planted centuries ago with much playfulness as well as seriousness, they are often misinterpreted and contorted to fit modern perspectives; many readers struggle to grasp their intended meaning without the knowledge with which they were sown.

The speech of someone who knows and understands— "a speech living and ensouled, the written version of which would justly be called an image" (276a-b)—seeks to implant in the soul seeds of knowledge and truth, yet its written form is still just an image, albeit more carefully constructed. But even well-tended writing can never really fully defend itself. There are always grounds for reproach when the difference between "a waking vision and a sleeping dream" goes unnoticed, even if it is extoled and honoured by the masses (277d4-e).[13] However, for the person who believes that in every

written form there is "necessarily much playfulness," they realize that no written form can ever be taken

too seriously and without question (277e3). This is because anything in written form is just a reminder

for others who are also in the know (278a1-3). The intent and means of communication should coincide

with the form of persuasion that teaches truth and leads to knowledge, rather than a persuasion leading

to true or false belief/opinion. Otherwise, we run the risk of propagating false beliefs and opinions,

which eventually gain their own momentum through repetition over time and create their own realities,

taking on the appearance of plausibility in their consistency and as such resemble truth.

 Phaedrus pokes fun at Socrates, saying how easy it seems for him to make up such stories about

divinities. Socrates' responds that, for their ancestors, it was enough to listen to "an oak or a rock so

long as it spoke the truth," and that Phaedrus should consider one question and one question alone:

"whether it is as they say, or not?" (275b7-c5). Socrates is leading Phaedrus away from, what we would

now call, the logical fallacy of an appeal to authority. It is a warning about the impulse to blindly trust

the enchanting words of famous writers, as if they speak with prophetic, authoritative wisdom. Part of

the problem is that *plausible* arguments resemble truth, often coinciding with the opinion of the masses,

and are propagated, turning into *éndoxa* (opinions held in high repute) regardless of whether they

coincide with the reality of things. However, as Socrates says, those "self-professing speech artists

couldn't give a fig for the truth…only for what is persuasive" (272e), carrying the motto: "Always be in

pursuit of the Plausibility, and bid the truth a hearty farewell" (273d2). This makes knowing what to

believe difficult for the everyday person—those who may not be able to discern truth from plausibility

are the very same people who would not be able to discern between the expert and non-expert. The

everyday person is not likely to discern sophistic from dialectical discourse, between the empty formal

arguments of the sophist and the reflective, substantive arguments of the knowledgeable expert.

 The incompleteness of the written requires a supplement for its inability to fully respond to the

various types of readers that take it up. Because of the asymmetry of the reader-text relationship,

wherein the text is viewed as passive and the reader active, it is necessary that the reader does not mistake their active role for a passive one—what can be described as a paring down of the asymmetrical dialectic into a symmetrical one of mere transference. When the reader fails to recognize and acknowledge their agency, the potential risks outlined in the *Phaedrus* become actuality. Since not all of us have such a thoughtful teacher as Socrates to guide our reading, the onus is on us to supplement the incompleteness of the written word to safeguard against potentially vicious writers seeking to dominate their hungry audiences.

§2 From *Ventriloquization* to *Intraloquization*: The Reader's Perceptual & Cognitive Dissonance

In order to amplify my reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, I turn now to discuss the reader's experience through Jesper Svenbro's insights into the evolution of reading in Ancient Greece. This is important for three reasons: 1) It shows how the perceptual horizons of the reader are altered by different modes of reading; 2) It illuminates the asymmetry of agency and patiency within the reader-text relation that underscores the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*; and 3) It elucidates the ways in which a written text can speak to and through the reader, providing a framework for understanding the processes of internalization and externalization involved in the reading experience. Furthermore, this analysis foreshadows the disembodying and isolating character of textuality that fuels a bad form of language internalization, discussed in §3.1 in ways that advance my argument to issues distinctive of the infosphere.

In the early 8th century B.C, literacy was still a new phenomenon in Greece. Since the Ancient Greeks valued the "sonority of the word," silent reading went against the purpose of writing and had no function. This is especially true if inscriptions were, as Svenbro (1993) posits, "machine[s] for producing *kléos*" or "acoustic renown" (164). Reading aloud, as was custom with early Greek funerary inscriptions, forces the reader to assume, to some extent, the *psūkhḗ* (soul) of the author and is guided by

it to produce intelligible, audible sounds. A text being read "exercise[s] power over the body of the reader, even from a distance, possibly a great distance both in space and in time" (142). Thus, as Plato's *Phaedrus* tells us, in such a society, writing is perceived as incomplete and in need of a voice to supplement it, that is, to reanimate and defend its renown. This is what I call a 'ventriloquization' of the reader: the reader lends their voice to the text, but under its power, since the reader has to sound out the text, read it aloud, to understand what it says. (Here I am drawing on yet modifying the etymology of ventriloquy, which would mean 'voiced through the belly from the outside'.) According to Svenbro, in this early form of reading in ancient Greece, what is understood is not written forms recognized with the eyes, but their verbal meaning once those forms were reanimated by the voice (165). The act of reading out loud thus does not separate the eye from the ear. Svenbro claims that with the advent of silent reading, written words now "represent the same by means of the other" or "the voice by means of written signs" (167). Recognition of meaning is no longer achieved through the voice, rather, it is by means of the eye—the written, i.e., the signs representing the voice and *psūkhḗ* of the author, is internalized within the reader. This entails losing to some extent its dialectical counterpart, the externalized voice. This is what I call 'intraloquization', speaking on the inside from the outside, in contrast to ventriloquization. The author's voice, which corresponds to a potential dialectical interlocutor, is no longer externalized, as it is in ventriloquization, by taking over the reader's body when a text is being sounded out. Instead, the author's voice is internalized within the silent reader's consciousness, without the reader having to first voice, then hear the text to grasp meaning—the reader only needs to see the text and any externalization happens much later, if at all. Consider how we read much faster when reading silently, which is a result of this passive perceptual relation to the text; a phenomenon that leads to overlooking significant aspects and nuances of a text.

    To help clarify how the perceptual horizons of the reader change within the dialectic of ventriloquization (externalization) and intraloquization (internalization), I look at Svenbro's connection

between the separation of word and reader within textuality and theatre. There is distance between the dramatic text and its performance, just as there is distance between a text and its reader. Svenbro (1993) calls theatrical performance a "vocal writing" because the actor's voice replaces the text entirely as it is memorized; such performances speak to the spectators, who are listening passively, with complete autonomy (170). This separation between spectator and the autonomous voice of the actor, Svenbro argues, would have been clear enough to suggest a new attitude toward the written word: a movement from an active relation to the written in reading aloud toward a passive relation in reading silently (171). (The actor's vocal writing has an agency that the reader's vocal reading (ventriloquization) does not because the reader is bound to the text to understand it, whereas the actor is freed from the text by memorizing it. The actor's performance is not a reading but a vocal re-writing, so far as they add intonations, facial expressions, actions, etc., as they perform, inducing thoughts, feelings, and new perspectives in the passive spectators.) Influenced by the actor's autonomous performance, spectators form a habit of sitting back and being spoken to; they do not have to voice the text themselves.

When silently reading, the text does not have autonomy over the reader's body, instead writing directly exercises its power over the reader's mind through the eyes. The text no longer needs to be heard with the ears first for meaning to be recognized. Like the actor performing, the written words recognized through immediate visual perception have a certain kind of autonomy (Svenbro 1993, 171). While there is the possibility that meaning would be more immediately recognized within intraloquization, given that the words no longer ventriloquize the reader by speaking through them (remembering that we read faster when reading silently), engagement with the written word becomes more passive and less embodied. This results in the written word taking on a different kind of authority over the reader. Rather than exercising a power through the reader's body, the autonomy of the written word is direct without the mediating voice between the reader and the meaning of a text.

     In the above analogy, the reader-text relationship stands in the same relation as the spectator-actor relationship in theatre. The reader and spectator are interchangeable, as is the text and actor. Ultimately, both relationships are characterized by an interplay between internalization and externalization (Svenbro 1993, 178-82); this interplay is what I refer to as the dialectical movement of the reader-text relationship. The written dramatic text assumes a question for which the events and dialogue provide an answer. This answer is then interpreted by the autonomy of the actors' vocal writing during their performance (178). For instance, Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus* trilogy contain distinct, but shared, social messages, and everyone is supposed to hear the same thing when these plays are performed, even if performed differently by different actors' vocal writing. We could call these tragedies oracular cautions that have authoritative autonomy over their audiences. Their performative answers speak to the spectators who are passively listening.[14] Not only are those listening not required to intervene in the unfolding of the performance, but they are actively discouraged from doing so. It would be a major *faux pas* to interrupt a theatrical performance to question the actors about the dramatic content. Moreover, theatre is a spectacle that assumes the presence of the other and the presence of a world about which we have questions—just as genuine dialogical communication and conversation require the other and a world. These questions are presumed and answered by the playwright and realized through the performance of the actors; while the spectators, as with intraloquized readers and the texts they read, passively await the answers fed by the actors' performing.

     This analysis of the internalized voice can be contrasted with what was learned from the *Phaedrus*. For Plato, the written is inherently incomplete because it cannot respond to the reader in its own defence nor correct any misreading, making the reader active and the text passive. However, in the reader-text / spectator-actor comparison laid out above, the movement runs in the opposite direction, with the reader as passive and the text active. It is notable, however, that the agency and patiency of the reader-text relationship is reversed when we focus on the perceptual aspects as opposed to intellectual processes.

The intellectual processes are what Plato focuses on in the *Phaedrus*. What I mean by reversal here is that perceptually the reader-text relationship is characterized as passive-active insofar as in the reading moment the reader is taken over by the autonomy of the words they read; at the level of intellectual processes, the reader-text relationship is characterized as active-passive insofar as the reader is able to question, react, and respond to the text. But the text cannot—the reader has a form of agency the text lacks. The reversal of the movement between agency and patiency shows a dissonance between the reader's perceptual and intellectual faculties during the reading experience. This dialectic between agency and patiency creates a complex framework for understanding the relationship between the written word and various types of readers.

A more nuanced distinction should be made, then, between passive and active readers. It is rare, if not impossible, that readers assume a role of pure passivity, but the phenomenon of intraloquization does increase the isolating and disembodying character of textuality. While the voice is no longer externalized in intraloquized reading, a passive reader will still in a crucial sense be ventriloquized insofar as they internalize (*intra*-loquize) the written words, and then externalize (*ventri*-loquize) what was read by thinking it over and sharing it with others, either through writing, conversation, or even actions. But the dialectic between internalization and externalization of the passive reader is more direct, symmetrical, if you will—the written seems to be poured into the reader's consciousness, then poured out unchanged. However, this is not what happens. Subtleties are missed in the "efficiency" of silent reading. Alongside this, textual ambiguities are disambiguated (often unconsciously) by the reader with what they want to hear—retrieving information from their matrix of perspectives and experiences, they place what they think belongs without questioning. Thus, passive reading is not a passivity to the text *per se* but to one's own horizons and biases that inform this activity of "filling in the gaps."

On the other hand, a serious and thoughtful intraloquized reader is not ventriloquized in the same way. Internalization and externalization still occur in the active reader, but these take on a different

form, namely, they do not merely parrot what was read and memorized, as Phaedrus does with Lysias' written speech. The dialectical relation between the reader and text in this situation would embody the dialectical relation between question and answer—the very relation that the *Phaedrus* claims is dissolved by writing as a form of communication. Actively asking questions during the reading experience breaks the text open, creating an indeterminacy that opens the thoughtful and serious reader to new horizons of meaning and understanding. The written, here, is not simply poured into the reader, but consciously synthesized by their matrix of perspectives through their questioning; and, when eventually externalized, the written is not merely parroted back, but rearticulated with view to the question in its context. Said in another way, the difference between the passive and active reader is the same as the one between a dogmatic and an undogmatic thinker. The passive reader closes off the potential for new understanding and experiences of the text. They close off possibility.

The link found by Svenbro between reading and theatre can be expanded by considering the nexus between communication and *theōría. Theōría* means a looking at, viewing, beholding, observing; of the mind, contemplation, reflection; a sight, spectacle. Most interestingly, *theoriás heíneken* means 'for the purpose of seeing what was to be seen, for the sake of seeing and learning, or seeing the world (*ekdēmeîn*).' Textual information leads one to read words and the world in a certain way, similar to theatrical performance. Reading, whether it be natural signs or human script, can also lead one to perceive the world in a different way. The written word has an authority and autonomy that is intensified within intraloquization, when the reader assumes a passive role in the dialectical reader-text relationship. This means that their dogmatic perception of the world is bolstered and empowered by the power of writing. In these cases, communication, in its dialogical form, ceases and *theōría* is precluded when what is written does not initiate reflective thought in the reader. Even if not oriented toward reality and truth, the power of *lógos* as linguistic *psukhagōgía* can move readers to take up what is written as if it

could be no other way, effectively bracketing their own share of reality through the illusion of no other possibilities.

§3 An Existential Imperative: Communication & the Collective Memory Paradox

The precondition for communication, and the creation of written texts, consists in a seeing of the world, a beholding of human experience. Communication, as an existential imperative, expresses the urgent and inexorable impulse humans have to lend their share of reality to others in speaking and writing—to disclose this beholden world of ours through language, art, and the myriad means of human expression. For this reason, I now discuss communication and, what I have identified as, the collective memory paradox of our modern era. Section 3 shows what is at stake when genuine dialogical communication is corrupted by sophistic abuses of language, and how our imperative to create and gather texts produces the conditions for what I have named the expertise-illusion. Section 3.1 highlights how, while the agency of the reader is an important aspect in supplementing writing's incompleteness, the way in which information is communicated today actively subsumes the individual's freedom and replaces it with the appearance of true agency.

Human words have a twofold purpose: they disclose reality and are a means for intersubjective communication. For Josef Pieper (1992), words and language are the medium through which "the common existence of the human spirit" is maintained: we speak in order to name or identify something that is real *for* someone else (15). If words are what sustain the shared existence of human beings and seek to convey the reality of such an existence, then "the reality of the word in eminent ways makes existential interaction happen…so, if the word becomes corrupted, human existence itself will not remain unaffected and untainted" (15-6). This captures the seriousness of Plato's epistemological and metaphysical charges against writing as a form of communicating truth and knowledge.

It follows, from these two essential characteristics of human language, that there are two possible forms of its corruption. The first is the corruption of our relationship to reality, i.e., truth, and the second is the corruption of communication itself. Even when we simply seek to understand reality for ourselves, which amounts to describing it, communication is already presupposed because the question "To whom?" is implicit in the act of *describing reality* (Pieper 1992, 16). Otherwise, as Pieper states, we are merely engaging in monologue, which has little significance for genuine communication, especially for philosophizing. Pieper asks, can a lie be communication when communication is understood as the disclosure of reality? He denies this, saying that "it [deception] means specifically to withhold the other's share and portion of reality, to prevent [their] participation in reality" (17). For example, Lysias' speech arguing that favours should be granted to the non-lover rather than the lover because love, as a form of madness, weakens their rational faculties and this would not provide immediate benefits to both partners. The non-lover possesses more control over their emotions, i.e., is more rational, and as such immediate pleasure as well as future benefits are increased—this runs against our lived experiences and intuitions about love, yet it is convincing. This shows the manipulative power of *lógos* used to further Lysias' motive to convince Phaedrus to grant him favours regardless of love. On this account, human language can then be conceived more readily as an instrument of power, since what is at stake is an individual's existential share of the world.

One implication in saying that language is an instrument of power is that from one moment to the next the relationship between the speaker and hearer, or writer and reader, changes. When a speaker or writer is guided by anything other than the truth, which amounts to communicating reality as it truly is, then this person no longer regards the other as a mutual partner. Pieper goes as far as saying that they cease to regard the other as a human person, and communication ceases altogether (Pieper 1992, 18-20). In this case, where the status of *persona humana* is denied, genuine dialogue and communication is corrupted and comes to a screeching halt.[15] Of course, this is not the case with respect to fictional

storytelling, where the purpose is, in the first place, to communicate a shared fictional reality with others as mutual participants who have agreed upon engaging in this activity—their agency was not subsumed by the agency and authority of another.

What arises in the space where genuine communication once existed is flattery. However, along with Pieper, I maintain that this word "has lost its bite" since Plato's use of it.[16] In the contemporary context, flattery no longer signifies a disregard for the other as equal, but a term signifying speech that aims at "what the other likes to hear, telling [them] something nice, something to tickle [their] vanity" (Pieper 1992, 21). For Plato, and the Ancient Greeks, flattery signifies a type of speech that aims at an ulterior motive and is "designed to get something out of [the one flattered]" (22). In the movement from mere compliment toward flattery, the other becomes "an object to be manipulated, possibly to be dominated, to be handled and controlled" and "the word is perverted and debased to become a catalyst, a drug (*phármakon*), as it were, and is as such administered" (23). For Pieper, people want flattery and want to be deceived, but also want the right to disguise themselves; people wish to easily ignore the fact that they are being lied to:

> As I enjoy being affirmed in my whims and praised for my foibles, I also expect credibility to make it easy for me to believe, in good conscience or at least without bad conscience, that everything I hear, read, absorb, and watch is indeed true, important, worthwhile, and authentic! (25-6)

There is a paradox here. While humans desire being flattered (being lied to, most often in the form of "white lies") and their experiences affirmed, they also expect some level of credibility in the things they hear and see from others. Advertisements, the products and people of the entertainment industry, and other ways by which the modern human internalizes information is expected to be authentic and important (true and significant). Yet the average person still does not wish to hear or see unadulterated truth regarding their own personal "whims" and "foibles." This dissonance creates room for sophistic performances that appease this subjective desire, while also fulfilling the appearance of trusted authority.

Pieper is speaking of human language in its most general conception which includes "the entire arsenal of the means of communication" (Pieper 1992, 27). When communication itself is corrupted on such a general scale, then it follows that public discourse itself becomes detached from shared notions of truth. Whenever the purpose of speech or writing is flattery and deception, i.e., withholding another's share of truth, consequently denying their status as *persona humana*, language and communication themselves are corrupted. Instead of genuine communication, we are left with an unequal power dynamic between, what Pieper calls, "pseudo-authority" and a "state of mental bondage" (29-30). This is evident in Plato's thinking when he claims that the sophist's art of flattery masquerades as the legitimate processes of politics and rhetoric. According to the *Gorgias,* sophistry, slipping into the guise of expertise, amounts to making educated guesses based on experience and repetition for the sake of mastery, rather than dialectically building comprehensive knowledge (*Grg,* 464b-465). In other words: "the abuse of political power is fundamentally connected with the sophistic abuse of the word" (Pieper 1992, 32). In place of "authentic reality," we get "fictitious reality" wherein our perceptual gaze still has an object, but rather than an object coinciding with the truth of reality, it coincides with a *pseudo-reality* constructed through the use and abuse of language for ulterior motives (34).

From this we can deduce that communication through language, either spoken or written, is both world-disclosing and world-building: it involves an attempt to disclose our share of reality and in this process, we build upon our matrix of perspectives and experiences about this world, creating new meaning and significance—building a new world for ourselves through others. The *pseudo-realities* created through deception and flattery, i.e., sophistic performance, participate in this world-building activity but impede genuine world-disclosure. In the contemporary context of the infosphere, Pieper's conception of communication, as existentially tied to maintaining the human spirit, has serious implications.

With the subsumption of oral tradition by the seeming ease of the written, we have hit a philosophically interesting yet problematic point in history regarding communication. The knowledge encoded in written communication is backgrounded and detached from the lived human experience of the world and, thereby, becomes stockpiled information. There is the very real possibility that this information becomes meaningless without the knowledge of how to decipher it—of how to make the right moves in our thinking to fully understand what a text is trying to remind us of. Collective memory requires, to a certain extent, the supplementation of the written, and the written in turn runs the risk of becoming indecipherable. This is what I have named the collective memory paradox. As Thamus responds to Theuth in the *Phaedrus,* letters are not a *phármakon* for memory and wisdom but for reminding those who already know.

To elaborate the connection between the collective memory paradox and the neo-sophism of our modern age, I offer an analogy. Even through comparative linguistics, the Linear A tablets of the Minoan civilization are undecipherable today; we know by its form that it is indeed a language and says something. However, without knowledge of what its signs signify, we are unable to develop a codex to ascertain what it *means.* Info-sophistry is like Linear A: a person may think they can just read and understand, but they only have the information and not the knowledge which requires more than just passive reception. Like the Ancient Greek sophists, modern info-sophists speak but do not know—they function within the medium of opinion as "dissembling imitators" who "present [themselves] to others in the figure of a knower" (*Soph.* 268a-b).[17] I am in no way advocating for a form of elitism that demands people must have comprehensive knowledge and expertise before reading any kind of information, nor do I believe Plato was of such a persuasion. This would preclude learning. But learning requires that we maintain an openness to the contextual question that the writing addresses. However, info-sophistry actively closes the open horizon necessary for genuine questioning, for genuine curiosity that initiates productive learning. Ironically, the infosphere is characterized as an unbounded, unlimited

horizon of information, but its mechanisms actively and silently close the reader's own horizons, blocking their ability to gain better understanding and new experiences.

An individual can read information without having any expert knowledge or understanding of its contents, nor the question it was originally meant to answer. However, this is paradoxical if one believes that writing and reading are supposed to communicate answers to questions, because question and answer are connected in a fundamental way. Ignoring one side of this dialectical movement leads to misinterpretation and, consequently, misunderstanding. Genuine communication requires mutual grounds between participants—it requires that we treat the other subject as equal in the sense of *homólogos* and *homología* (speaking together and common ground in agreement).[18] Otherwise, what could be fruitful, genuine communication about our share of reality, leads to an intensification of already existing power dynamics of dominance and submission found in social and political relationships. Info-sophists assume unequal ground, wherein readers of their carefully tailored information are deceived into thinking they have attained truth, empowered by the info-sophist's "teachings." This creates a sense of gratification and pleasure in the reader through *seeming* to be in the know. Although, in reality, they have been carefully guided to a certain answer through the manipulation of language within sophistic performance.

The dialectical movement we find in generative, animated conversation or "ensouled speech" involves a reciprocal tie between question and answer between interlocutors. I have referred to this as dialogical communication. In writing though, this back and forth between participants is no longer equal or symmetrical, it becomes asymmetrical. In this situation, understanding the meaning, contextual significance, and application of the text requires knowledge of the implicit question the text answers; not a mere possession of the information espoused as a straightforward answer. Dialogical communication in its original sense is difficult to replicate in written form, but good readers make this attempt by reconstructing the question. For instance, one can see that Plato's dialogues attempt to teach us to read in

terms of the question—to activate in the reader a moment of spontaneity within *theōría*, a curiosity and wonder that allows them to question the text and their own preconceptions, reaching beyond what is explicitly said. This activity in the reader initiates a reproduction, albeit imperfect, of genuine dialogue that seeks a mutual ground of understanding based on shared notions of truth.

Today, the sheer vastness of texts and references encountered within the infosphere presents readers with a new hermeneutical horizon that impedes, for many, genuine reflective thought and questioning. An unbounded horizon of tailored made, easily procured, already interpreted answers to undisclosed questions consistently, and persistently, undermines the knowledge dimension of writing. Readers within the infosphere are bewitched into an intellectual slumber and led away from seeing all other possibilities, as their share of reality is bracketed-off by the flattering and entrancing performances of the modern info-sophist.

§3.1 A New Hermeneutical Horizon: The Isolating, Unbounded & Ever Shifting Infosphere

I turn now to discuss the hermeneutical horizon of the modern infosphere. The world we navigate and seek to understand is scripted in various ways. For example, my perception of a page from a book or a streetscape are drastically altered by my ability, or inability, to read human script as written characters. Likewise, my perception of a landscape is drastically altered by my ability or inability to read a 'natural script' such as we find in trails of animal markings and weather signs. Both natural and human script involve the same process: as sources holding the potential for knowledge, these scripts involve a reading, an internalization of *sēmeîa* (signs by which something is known), but the two scripts differ in their mediums. As human beings, we learn to read information encoded or scripted in the world around us and, once this information is read, it becomes an object of knowledge, even if only potentially. Since information only holds the *potential* for becoming an actual object of knowledge, information is not knowledge in-itself.

We have the ability to interpret signs and create meaning not present in information itself—to find information even where no one has intentionally put it. This information only becomes knowledge when we understand what it *means* for us as this particular kind of being, and our purpose for it. For example, there is a pot of boiling water on the stove. Having the information that this pot of water is 100 degrees Celsius does not equate to me knowing that I should not immerse my hand into it, unless I already *know* that this would result in severe burns. So, what is the question at play when we look at the pot of boiling water? I can surely boil an egg in this water to make a hard-boiled egg for breakfast, yet I wouldn't dare bathe my infant in it! The question at play determines how we process, and subsequently act on, information.

The infosphere is a manifestation of a purely human reality. It is a particularly human activity to process, record, collect, and store information, and as such storing the potential for knowledge acquisition. Valuable information depends on our purpose for reading the information and our intentions for using it, such as the example of the boiling pot of water above demonstrates. I define information in the way that Pieper defines communication. It is everything than can be read, grasped, or absorbed by the human's reasoning and perceiving faculties, that is, "the entire arsenal of the means of communication" which includes all visual and verbal information such as art, movies, texts, and music. Knowledge, on the other hand, refers to comprehensive knowledge that requires understanding not just the information read but why it was created in the first place, its contextual significance, its problematics, and how it should be applied given these elements. Admittedly, my conception of information is too broad. As such, I narrow in on the distinction between *written* information that holds the potential for gaining knowledge and info-sophistry which interferes with this potential. Info-sophistry interferes with one's potential for acquiring comprehensive knowledge because it is designed to be taken at face-value without question, given that it takes up a certain form that is pleasing and persuasive. This is evident with the seeming beauty of Lysias' scroll, but, under closer scrutiny, it is a

monstrous imitation of the rhetorical art—a Frankenstein's monster of unjustified opinions about the non-lover, lover, and the beloved, constructed for the gratification of its creator.

The infosphere, within which the info-sophist performs, presents readers with an unbounded and ever-shifting horizon of texts and references; the inevitable result of our existential imperative to communicate and to stockpile communications in order to maintain the collective memory of various traditions. In *Truth and Method* (*TM*), Gadamer claims that tradition has a certain kind of "nameless authority" that possesses a very real power over our attitudes and behaviours, shaping culture and society; moreover, tradition serves as the basis for the validity of its own claims (281-2). This means that it holds its own grounds of truth. If we can view the infosphere as a new tradition unfolding before our very eyes, then we can use the Gadamerian notions of hermeneutical experience, understanding, and horizons for insight into the functioning and breakdown of reading written information. Since the infosphere is a new tradition, we can also see how it propagates its own claims, and circularly serves as its own grounds of truth.

For Gadamer (*TM*), humans are historically situated beings, such that as readers we approach a text with *fore-conceptions* that are structured by our expectations of the text as well as our *prejudices* (2004, 269-273). Our prejudices, understood as either negative (unproductive) or positive (productive) pre-judgments, condition our understanding—these are negative when they lead to misunderstanding, and positive when they lead to understanding (279; 295). Therefore, what the text tells the reader is determined by the play between the reader's prejudices and the otherness of the text—a dialectic between familiarity and strangeness. Understanding is not the purely subjective experience of the reader, but an experience of the text and what it has to say as *other* than the reader (295-6). This means being open to a text's claim to truth, yet not merely accepting it at face-value either.

In a typical reading situation, we approach a text as an object. However, as Gadamer writes in *The Beginning of Philosophy*, a text, tradition, or culture should not be viewed as an object or problem in the

sense of a scientific object, but rather as a subject in its own right because "we all stand in the life-stream of tradition" (17-19). Since the human experience of encountering themselves within history is a certain kind of dialogue, there can be no true separation between subject and object: "Culture, however, exists as a form of communication, as a game whose participants are not subjects, on the one hand, and objects, on the other" (20-22).[19] There can be no denying that the infosphere has become a fundamental part of modern culture, as such it can be viewed as subjects confronting subjects. This Gadamerian sentiment is also in line with Pieper's view of communication discussed above.

Genuine communication requires mutual participants, not as subject against object to be dominated and manipulated, but subject against subject both striving for their existential claim to truth. However, it is difficult to remind ourselves that there exist, for the most part, very real human beings behind written language, especially when masked by the mechanisms of the infosphere. The disembodied, isolating character of textuality outside the infosphere, described by Plato above and Eva-Maria Simms below, is exacerbated within the online infosphere. Even though the infosphere is fundamentally unbounded and open, and seems to be anything but isolating, it has a curious effect on individuals who find themselves all consumed by its enchantments. Those who are entangled within the virtual realities of social media and online communities become further isolated from the lived experience of human social interaction. In such situations, the infosphere is a literal *phármakon,* a drug, that affects the way individuals think about and move, or not, through the world. This effect turns the potentially positive unbounded, open horizon of the infosphere into a negative unlimitedness that captures the reader's horizons of understanding and experience. The reader becomes lost in its disorienting and isolating mechanisms, unable to disconnect as it restructures their perceptual and intellectual faculties.

Understanding, according to Gadamer (*TM),* begins when provoked by what is alien to us. To genuinely understand the other requires that we bracket our prejudices in order to view those prejudices

encountered in the text. The suspension of judgements, which are determinate claims reached through the play of prejudices within the movement of understanding, enables a *foregrounding* of what is other. This process has "the logical structure of question and answer" (Gadamer 2004, 298). Gadamer can be seen here as spelling out Plato's concerns in the *Phaedrus* regarding the dissolution of the living dialectic between question and answer that is necessary to mitigate the risk of writing's incompleteness—to counteract the absence of the author's voice that is so easily forgotten when one is lost in the reading moment. This forgetting or loss of vision is due to the reader's horizons as a situated being. Humans are always within a 'situation' that refers to a particular standpoint; these horizons "represent that beyond which it is impossible to see" (301; 304). Our prejudices, the delimiting element of our horizons, are properly foregrounded when they are "put at risk" and become questionable (298-9). It is not merely an assimilation of the strange into the familiar, but an attempt to reach common ground through the horizons we hold in the present moment, resulting in a *fusion of horizons* (303-4).

A fusion is possible because fore-conceptions and prejudices do not refer to a fixed set of opinions and valuations, making foregrounding a reciprocal process between the unfixed horizons of the text as well as of the reader. Viewing "the otherness of the other" as an "object of objective knowledge" means supressing their claim to truth as situated (Gadamer 2004, 303). This reminds us of Pieper's claim that genuine communication ceases when we view the other as an object to be manipulated by withholding their claim to truth, to their share of the world. With respect to the reader-text relationship, understanding that a text is the manifestation of another as a subject rather than an object, helps mitigate the inherent asymmetry of the text's inability to respond. This is done when the reader puts both the text's and their own claims to truth—their prejudices and expectations, their horizons—into question within a state of radical openness: "The essence of a *question* is to open up possibilities and keep them open" (298).

Now, let us connect this rich view of reading tradition to the reading of information within the infosphere. There is a tendency for recipients of information to judge reliability based on the coherence of new information with their previous knowledge base, which is not entirely surprising, as confirmation bias is nothing new. However, the problem is that what was previously known could not be justified and is thus, contingent. Anton Vedder posits that reliable information amounts to something that we are justified in believing. As such, reliability does not necessarily signify truth because "what is reliable, trustworthy, justified is a matter of what we already know" (Vedder 2005, 114). This tendency to seek coherence or confirmation is exactly what the info-sophist counts on to carry out their sophistic performance. As Vedder frames it, in the "many-to-many character" of the online infosphere, recognizing pedigree criteria (whether the source is expert or not) is very difficult. Transmitters of information in the online environment are increasingly anonymous or assume virtual identities, sometimes completely run by AI without any direct human interaction. Moreover, intermediaries, such as librarians, libraries, and specialized publishers, are lacking as access to information online becomes less restricted (116-7). This means that many individuals for whom the information was not originally intended, and was at some point off-limits, are now able to not only find it but distort it as well as share it freely within the infosphere.

For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, public access to medical research papers resulted in the circulation of misinformation and disinformation. Readers without comprehensive knowledge in the medical field took what they (mis)interpreted from these papers, from the little that they could grasp, and shared it freely through their subjective lens. I maintain that the free sharing of information is not an inherently negative phenomenon, nor is the ability to connect with others from various traditions and cultures, creating a space for open expression and a deep sense of community; these are certainly positive aspects. But there are serious concerns regarding echo-chambers that use decontextualized

information to propagate harmful opinions that turn into dangerous, widespread ideologies that have real-world effects by influencing not just thought, but behaviour and action.

Surely, issues with assessing reliability are not caused only by the providers of information or by problematic information (misinformation and disinformation) itself. The habit of recipients of information to use coherence between their prejudices and new information to assess reliability also contributes to these issues. Certainly, the recognition of reliable sources has always been a concern, but the issues with reliability are magnified within the infosphere, wherein anyone can write anything to anyone without restriction and shame via anonymity. The notion of shamelessness through anonymity reminds us of Socrates covering his head while recounting Lysias' content in new form, so that he wouldn't lose his way in shame—hiding from the direct line to the gods and muses, from the listening cicadas (*Phdr*. 259a-e). It is a well-known phenomenon that individuals will say things that they would never say to someone face-to-face when they are veiled by a screen. As one can see, the traditional flaws with assessing information, such as the inability to evaluate content or pedigree criteria, are brought into new light within the many-to-many character of the online infosphere.

If recipients of information tend to use coherence as a marker of reliability and significance depends on subjective purposes, as Vedder astutely observes (115-6), they do not put their horizons into question when confronted with the otherness of information read within the infosphere; therefore, they do not open themselves up to other possibilities. This means that they do not attain the experience of openness required to foreground their prejudices up and against the horizons of the text they read—their horizons do not become questionable amongst the plethora of belief and expectation confirming texts that are so easily found at a click of the mouse. The reader finds themselves in an echo-chamber that does not lead to genuine insight, but only affirms their previous matrix of expectations and perspectives. When the reader's experience conforms to and confirms their expectations, there is no new experience attained; conversely, new experiences emerge from a "curiously productive" negativity (Gadamer 2004,

347). This negativity consists not in the mere correction of deception but in building up one's comprehensive knowledge dialectically. We acquire better knowledge of our "object" (that is really a subject) and of what we knew before through the determinate negation of our experience (348). This points to the inherent and fundamental openness required for the acquisition of new experiences that build upon one's knowledge base. The experienced person, then, is essentially someone who is undogmatic and willing to be open to possibilities (349-50)!

Openness is fundamental to the notion of experience, and openness has the structure of a question—it is an openness to the possibilities of something being this or that kind of thing. There is a negativity involved in the logical structure of the question that leads to the knowledge that we do not know: "The famous Socratic *docta ignorantia* which, amid the most extreme negativity of doubt, opens up the way to the true superiority of questioning" (Gadamer 2004, 356). This form of the question is the opposite of the rhetorical question that already knows the answer. Plato surely recognized that priority should be given to the question when our discourse is aimed at attaining *insight*, understanding the difference between the object (as subject) of discourse and the discourse itself. Insight, for Gadamer and Plato, consists in self-knowledge, resulting from the negativity of doubt within the acquisition of new experiences when expectations are *not* confirmed (350-2). Therefore, to gain new experience, and thus comprehensive knowledge, one must not simply seek out opinions and information that cohere with and confirm our previously existing body of knowledge. Discourse that is directed at knowledge and genuine insight demands that the topic or thing at hand is put at stake alongside the questioner's identity itself. Furthermore, gaining new experience and knowledge takes time, and, like our horizons, these cannot be acquired or possessed, downloaded and read—they involve a constant reciprocal motion between what one knows and does not know. The temporality of gaining experience and comprehensive knowledge is opposed to the speed and convenience of the online infosphere.

The medium of seeking and communicating knowledge happens via the negative structure of the question which brings something into indeterminacy by opening up possibilities and keeping them open within understanding. Info-sophistry presents information in such a way that persuades its recipients that they have acquired a new horizon and thus understanding and knowledge. However, as mentioned, one does not 'acquire' or 'possess' horizons in a determinate and final sense because they are always moving, and thus must always be questioned up and against the otherness of what one reads. The answers given by these info-sophists are tailored such that they *appear* to be substantive and final, but, as Plato recognized, they are non-substantive, that is, belief or opinion. Yet, in appearing to be the end of the process, they bind the dialectical movement necessary to reach genuine, comprehensive knowledge. This also means that such sources of information withhold the recipients' claim to truth. The reader within the infosphere is not aware of this bracketing-off of possibility. The dissonance produced by being pulled between countless competing external compulsions creates a hostile environment for the reader who is simply trying to learn and understand.

The info-sophist gamifies the process of learning, instilling in the reader the illusion that they have reached the answers to their questions on their very own, that they have attained expert knowledge through "research." But what is occurring is merely a process of collecting, possessing, and reading information that is structured to lead one in a certain direction through a design tailor-made to each reader. What is more terrifying, these tailors may not even be a human being, but an AI algorithm that functions on pattern replication and a resemblance to truth through form and form alone; a transformative process that even the AI's creators do not fully understand. This calls back to the *Gorgias*, where sophistry is said to be a matter of making guesses founded on repeated experience, playing with a stockpile of opinions and techniques that affect the emotional states of audiences.

The gamification of knowledge becomes more problematic if we consider the isolating character of textuality. This is clarified when we conceptualize textuality as technology. Eva-Maria Simms (2011)

describes textuality as the technologization of human experience that results in the simultaneous intensification, decontextualization, and reduction of others (25). Simply put, it reduces some features of the general experience of language, while intensifying others. The structure of the oral language experience involves five essential themes that suffer from intensification, decontextualization, and reduction (24). The most pertinent here is the generative nature of language which refers to the fact that speaking is an intentional act located in active human experience. This means that it is productive and not merely the repetition of a stockpile of words. When we converse with someone face-to-face, we build upon each other's thoughts and experiences through the words chosen and uttered, which means dialogical communication is not prescriptive nor merely descriptive, but generative (25). This is very Gadamerian, recalling how comprehensive knowledge is achieved through the generative interaction of our own horizons with those of the *other*, not an assimilation of the strange into the familiar. Ensouled or animate speech leads to a creation of meaning that is structured and expressed according to the interplay between the differing inner lives of the interlocutors.

Agreeing with Simms, reading restructures the perceptual experience of the human through changes to oral conversation when we turn to deciphering letters. Textual engagement requires a certain reflective distance, or separation, from the speech act, as we saw with Svenbro's work. Intraloquized reading is no longer an intuitive and unconscious extension of the body; whereas the oral speech act is "performed in a synesthetic sensory environment" and "seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching make sense of the flow of conversation and its context" (Simms 2011, 25). This means that textuality disembodies the experience of human language, giving it an isolating nature. The distinction between the oral and visual experience of language lies in the distinction between voice and voiceless (26), as was argued above, between the ventri-loquization and intra-loquization of the reader. The power of a text emerges from the reduction of the actual, social, and embodied dimensions of the experience of

language—in the movement from dialogue toward monologue in the solitary and disembodied act of reading (27-8).

Out of textuality, a world arises that transcends the author's intended meaning. This creative aspect of textuality can be a wonderous thing; however, it also leads to a world-building activity not based on truth. Such non-truth based, newly built worlds gain momentum over time, reverberated until made consistent, thereby seemingly plausible, and fuel harmful real-world actions—it is a modern version of Plato's destructive *phármakon.* For a recent example, the community of men known as "incels" (standing for involuntarily celibate) gather bad, decontextualized evidence that informs their view that, by no fault of their own and no matter how hard they try, all women see them as sexually undesirable. This view usually stems from the propagated opinion that women only desire a certain type of man (rich, fit, conventionally handsome, and "alpha", i.e., aggressively misogynistic), leaving these self-proclaimed "nice guys" on the wayside; a mindset that effectively and drastically oversimplifies the complex nature of intimate relationships and human attraction. Their sense of resentment against all women builds up over time, leading them to say and do horrible things to women in real life, including physical harm. In 2018, a 29-year-old man purposely drove a van onto a busy Toronto sidewalk, using it as a weapon, killing 9 woman and 2 men. When questioned by investigators, this man claimed he had accomplished his mission in setting out to kill as many people as possible and that he was inspired by misogynistic online forums dedicated to incel ideology. Online echo-chambers devoted to this ideological community, as found on Reddit, reinforce their opinions through affirmation by others who share this view of women, circularly serving as its own grounds of truth with insidious real soul- and world- effects. The irony is that these self-proclaimed "nice guys" turn into the very type of personality that they criticize women for supposedly pursuing—coming full circle in a vicious self-fulfilling prophecy.

This brings us back to Pieper's insights into sophistic communication in the modern era, namely, the creation of *pseudo-realities* through the bracketing-off of another's share in truth, while disclosing a world that is distorted from how it really is. Accordingly, the reader's thoughts and feelings are taken over by the author's, resulting in the demarcation of new boundaries and (mis)understandings within the reader's personality. The fact that new boundaries are demarcated within the reader's consciousness and their orientation to themselves, to others, and to the world is restructured points to the fundamental risk found in the dialectical relationship between reader and text. In the context of the modern neo-sophistic movement, these boundaries are not demarcated only through the agency of the reader, but also the agency of the info-sophist. Their sophistic discursive performance aims at instilling in the soul of the spectator a sense of gratification, pleasure, and misplaced empowerment to propagate opinions gained in the guise of truth, knowledge, and expertise.

§4 The Modern *Phármakon*: Neo-Sophism, Gamification of Knowledge & the Expertise-Illusion

As elaborated in the previous section, understanding is not mere reproduction but is also productive; it is world-disclosing and world-building just as communication is. The disembodying nature of textuality, combined with intraloquized reading, undermines both of these generative elements of language, such that pseudo-worlds can be constructed to disastrous effect in the real, shared world. The info-sophist rarely has knowledge of those fancy rhetorical techniques that Socrates speaks of in the *Phaedrus*. Regardless, their performative discourse is still very convincing. This shows the amplified power of *lógos,* conceived as linguistic *psukhagōgía,* in conjunction with the isolating character of textuality. In addition to these, the gamification of knowledge by info-sophists uses *páthos* (emotion, passion) to imbue their audiences with a sense of empowerment and pleasure in seeming knowledgeable, leading to what I have identified as the expertise-illusion.

Discourse excites passions within the reader when it acts on their *nous pathētikós* (passive

reason, *D an.* 430a10-25) through speech that arouses temporary, irrational states of feeling (*páthos*).[20]

Such speeches are what Aristotle calls speeches for display or *epídeixis*, which captures the essential

character of sophistic discursivity as a performance. Opposed to demonstration (*apódeixis*), consisting in

making obvious necessary truths through accusation and defense using *lógos* (argument), *epídeixis*

involves putting the virtues and vices of individuals, groups, or institutions on public display in order to

say something about what is beautiful and shameful (*Rh.*, 1356a-b; 1358b29); both of which are highly

disputed categories that the *Phaedrus* warns will cause us to flounder about. This form of rhetoric

attempts to show whether someone or something is admirable or reproachable by affecting the personal

disposition of the readers or hearers. While all speech has the ability to both say and do something to

someone, this type of talk is especially good at it. With *epídeixis* there is no immediate possibility for

defense, but there is certainly accusation: there are no questions, only answers. This amounts to a form

of showing off and performance, a form of pandering and flattering before an audience, that requires

repetition of form, rather than knowledge of content (*Grg.*, 463a-e). Moreover, it requires a certain

engagement and exploitation of both the subject matter and the audience, not as subjects but as objects

to be manipulated. This, I argue, remains true of the info-sophist's performance within the infosphere.

   Epídeixis, as an essential characteristic of sophistic discursivity, and the ambiguity of the subject

matter upon which this performance relies, allows the sophist to turn a phenomenon into its contrary.[21]

As Cassin and Goffey (2009) state, "the phenomenon [the subject matter at hand] becomes the effect of

the all-powerful *lógos*" (354). What is at stake within sophistic discursivity as *epídeixis* is that rather

than moving from the phenomena toward discourse, there is a movement from what is said toward the

phenomena (354). In this way, the kind of discourse sophists engage in turns the strange into the familiar

by taking their starting point, not in a demonstration or observation of the phenomena, but with their

conclusion about said phenomena and working their way toward their object. This leads to objects of

discourse becoming consistent according to the discourse that describes them, creating a *chimera* object, apart from the real-world object. This would be *contra* Gadamer's insistence that what is strange not be merely assimilated into the familiar. Rather, they ought to be brought together and put at risk to reach new common ground through a fusion of horizons.

The expertise-illusion, arising from the collective memory paradox, functions on the same asymmetrical dialectic that sophistry does. If there exists a confirmation bias, i.e., the reader of information abides by the coherence tendency identified by Vedder, then the reader fails to act on the moment of spontaneity arising from the "in-between" of familiarity and strangeness, assuming a straightforward subject-object relation between themselves and the text. The reader goes: "Aha! This must be true, because it fits my worldview and confirms my opinions, thus I am justified in believing it and my previous beliefs are justified by this textual evidence." Moreover, the recipient of information then redistributes this information but has either left it unchanged or transformed it (unconsciously) through the lens of their biases and expectations—distorting the original purpose and intention of said information even further. The reader within the infosphere then says: "All these likes and shares further supports my illusion of having found the answer, once and for all. I have stumbled upon irrefutable truth!" But we must remember that reliability based on coherence is highly contingent. Empowered by this process of affirmation, the reader suffers from the illusion of having authoritative expertise and being an expert themselves.

On the one hand, the intraloquized reader takes ventriloquization (externalization in being able to respeak the text) for *auto-loquization*, that is, they now see themselves as *the* authority in being able to speak about the matter. This type of reader is like Phaedrus who was empowered and excited to respeak Lysias' *lógos* through memory, rather than consulting and questioning the actual scroll. On the other hand, the info-sophists—those content creators and social media influencers—that make up the unbounded horizon of the infosphere are like the cicadas in the *Phaedrus*: like sirens, their bewitching

and persistent songs put the idle minds of passive readers in a deep slumber. In this slumber, the authoritative clamoring of voices in the infosphere silently takes over the reader's own horizons of understanding, replacing the reader's subjective agency for their own. These seemingly authoritative, self-proclaimed experts imbue their followers with a sense of true agency in thinking for themselves, transferring their supposed authority and expertise to the reader, exciting momentary irrational states of feeling. Similar to the cicadas, these info-sophists are a direct oracular line to the internet pantheon of the immortalized stockpile of texts and references. But, in actuality, they actively close the reader's horizons by bracketing-off their view of all other possibilities, and the knowledge encoded in writing.

The infosphere produces texts addressed to bad readers, but at the same time, cultivates bad readers in various ways: attention grabbing headlines, click bait, and the gamification of knowledge. This is connected to the temporality of the infosphere: the more time it takes to read a text, the more it invites questions, and the less likely the text is going to circulate quickly. The reader is hostage to information retrieval, to there being a horizon of unlimited information behind the search result. This is much different than being able to navigate an open horizon of questions by understanding them, which Platonic non-sophistic discourse demands—a generative system that at once defines its own limits but is thereby endlessly generative in inspiring more questions and genuine curiosity. As such, the infosphere's unbounded horizon is, in theory, a positive unlimitedness, but, in practice, has shown to be increasingly negative as it constantly grows and shifts. Against the more stable and static kind of immortality and gratification resulting from being praised by the masses that Plato speaks of with regard to famous speech makers and writers, the infosphere's speakers and writers' desire for likes and shares is ephemeral and unstable as content, and how "well-received" it is, constantly and quickly changes.

The expertise-illusion arises when there is no acknowledgement that belief in certain information may not have been actually justified in the first place. Information and its significance are skewed by a failure of the reader to question not just the text but also their own pre-existing knowledge base. In

Gadamerian language, they fail to put their prejudices and the otherness of the text at risk through the negative experience of the question. Moreover, the reader's knowledge base, their matrix of perspectives and experiences, affect the way they receive information. For such an individual, knowledge and expertise is just a matter of consuming enough answers (information) so long as they are plausible and reinforced by public assent. This is no different than what Phaedrus assumed. This view of "learning" is cognate with the view of education as merely a process of memorization, rather than a process of synthesizing information in order to understand its intent, its contextual significance outside of the reader's subjective experience, its problematics, and its practical applications in view of these problematics. Expertise involves both theoretical and practical knowledge, and the ability to synthesize these two in evaluating written information, but it also involves knowing that one does not know! This is what it means to be an expert with comprehensive knowledge.

With respect to info-sophists and readers in the infosphere, the expertise-illusion is intensified by the gamification of knowledge. Info-sophists simulate the discovery of knowledge by providing bits and pieces of information in such a way that the recipient feels like they have attained this through their own agency, through their own investigative means. This is akin to the Theuth myth of the *Phaedrus*, where the text remembers for you, rather than nurturing true memory and wisdom—it is a simulated remembering guided by external signposts. It is almost as if the info-sophist leaves carefully placed coins, like the rewards and weapons collected in a video game, for their readers to pick up, leading them toward a pre-determined end without the reader's awareness. The mechanisms of gamification, such as making the process fun and enticing, as it is in virtual reality games, are not necessarily negative because making the process of learning pleasurable increases the persuasiveness involved in teaching. What is pernicious within gamification is not the mechanisms but the drivers behind it that push individuals in a certain direction according to the info-sophist's ulterior motives (e.g., internet fandom, self-gratification, and social or political agendas). Gamification, then, is a system of drivers that leverages the arbitrariness

of rules set forth by the info-sophist that provisions or even conduces readers to follow a certain path. What makes gamification destructive is when it leads reader's away from truth and developing their own intellectual potential, captivating them with their accomplishments when they advance on the path of the game, which at the same time conduces the negative effect that I call the expertise-illusion—the experience (of individuals or groups) that what is being accomplished in this process is knowledge acquisition, expertise. Gamification of knowledge, then, is not driven by the generative positivity and mutuality of genuine dialogue and communication, but by instrumental use of language.

The empowerment and pleasure felt by the reader in winning this game, i.e., achieving the trophy of Knowledge through a system where the arbitrary rules of the game orient them in a certain direction, instills an ignorance that further fuels the power of opinion. The power of opinion is not to be underestimated as it actively restricts questioning, hindering *theōría*, and "has a curious tendency to propagate itself" (Gadamer 2004, 359). The consequence of self-propagating opinion is consensus reached not through critical thinking but through acceptance of claims based on the loudest and most entrancing opinions—often formally "well-argued" for, thereby gaining public assent—without considering all possibilities. That said, the everyday individual is, more often than not, simply duped, pulled in by the clever tricks of the sophist. It should be noted that this problem is not only seen in the everyday individual attempting to exercise their agency within the infosphere but is evident even amongst so-called experts within credibility conferring institutions. The sense of empowerment and pleasure of appearing to be knowledgeable can cloud even the most seemingly learned minds, restricting their horizons and their ability to see past their own situation.

Info-sophistry remains structurally the same as Plato's conception of sophistry insofar as there is an identity between their causal structures and tendencies. The conditions for both ancient and contemporary sophistry are psychological, playing on the dissonance between the reader's perceptual and cognitive faculties created by the reversal of the movement between agency and patiency within the

reader-text relationship with respect to perceptual and intellectual processes. The means through which info-sophistry is executed have transformed, allowing it to function much more anonymously, with further reach and at unprecedented speeds, affecting more people in a shorter amount of time and to a greater extent. The difference between contemporary and ancient sophistry is thus a matter of kind *and* degree, that is, in the quality and the extent of its effects, but not a difference in the underlying structures that drive it. Sophistry in both contexts is not a simple subversion of the dialectic between question and answer, but takes advantage of instrumental usages of language which are culturally scripted and set expectations. However, when it comes to writing, the asymmetry caused by the dissolution of the dialectical relation between question and answer worsens the situation. As Simms (2011) claims, literacy and textuality as technology extracts the essence of oral speech and instrumentalizes it through alphabetic notation, an epistemological practice that affects both mind and culture (3): "Book content is the cultural currency that is transmitted in the conversations of literate people and determines the intellectual and moral climate" (10).

Similarly, within the infosphere, the immortalized stockpile of texts and references becomes a new tradition, a new canon, by which intellectual and moral expectations are developed and sustained. Today, information is taken as given and is perceived as neutral, objective data. Therefore, in contrast to the interpreted text that entangles us within its inherent subjectivity, it is easy for individuals to pretend that information read in the infosphere is not in itself persuasive. This functions as a short-cut that bypasses the temporal distance necessary for the evaluation of prejudices and fore-meanings, projected onto the text, which are the delimiting elements of the reader's horizons—of what they are able to see— leaving no room for reflection. Info-sophistry capitalizes on this shortcut, functioning on a stockpile of words and confirmed experiences structured by the culturally scripted, instrumental use of language, while the interpreted text functions on genuine communication structured by the productive and generative nature of dialogue. Within the infosphere, a new dimension of experience is established that

worsens the already isolating nature of textuality as disembodied, of which Plato and Simms spoke, effectively neutralizing the lived, generative experience of language, and bypassing the temporality needed to develop true expertise and comprehensive knowledge.

The Question: What Did You Just Read?

As I developed this topic through research, spending a year reading and reading article after article, book after book, spanning a wide range of interrelated topics (included in the extended bibliography), I found myself lost amongst the answers I was given. I was bound by these texts, unable to move forward with my own thoughts and position on the problem I was trying to address: What does sophistry look like today given the way we communicate and in what ways does it corrupt meaningful communication? I've described this period to my peers as the "hump" between research and writing, which at the time seemed as big as Mount Everest.

As I write this concluding section, the realization hit me like an unexpected, fast forming storm at the peak of a mountain: I myself suffered from the disorienting nature of "too much information." How did I overcome this and start writing in a meaningful and productive way? I returned to the inspiration for my topic, to Plato's *Phaedrus*. I spent time with it in true leisure, slowly reading every line as if I had never read it before. New questions emerged in this close reading, and, as it always happens when I re-read a dialogue, I saw its nuances and elements in a new light within an openness that refreshed my curiosity, my wonder. I slowed the reading moment down. I took the time necessary to see past my own expectations of a text I had already read at least a handful of times.

This paper first looked at the results of this slow reading of the *Phaedrus*, homing in on writing's nature as incomplete, and how the dialectic between question and answer is fundamental to supplementing this feature of textuality. I framed this as an asymmetrical dialectical relationship between reader and text—between agency and patiency—that requires the reader to actively question the

text instead of internalizing its content without question that results in a paring down of this inherent asymmetry into a symmetrical process of mere transference. Although it has been almost 2500 years since Plato's lifetime, I saw its relevance to a phenomenon I observed within our contemporary infosphere: the authoritative pseudo-expertise of content creators and social media influencers. I also saw the effect these so-called experts had on the minds, personalities, and actions of readers within the infosphere. I then asked: What is it about communication that gets corrupted such that it can create new boundaries in the human consciousness? What happens to the horizons of reading to allow for such quick and drastic restructuring of readers' perceptual and intellectual faculties?

Through Svenbro, I was able to amplify my reading of the *Phaedrus* by highlighting how perceptual processes are altered in the movement from reading aloud to reading silently, what I referred to as the ventriloquization and intraloquization of the reader. In this analysis, I found that the reader-text relationship, on the perceptual level, is characterized as passive-active; while, in the *Phaedrus*, the reader-text relationship, on the intellectual level, is characterized as active-passive. This shows a dissonance between the human's perceptual and cognitive faculties. What emerges in the space created by this dissonance? With Pieper's conception of communication as an existential imperative, I was able to argue that genuine communication is both world-disclosing and world-building. When it is corrupted, both our relation to reality and communication itself break down. Sophistic discourse withholds our share of reality through flattery and deception, just as Aristotle and Plato maintain—bracketing-off our claim to truth and impeding us from seeing the world in an authentic way. In this process, pseudo-realities are built that preclude genuine world-disclosure. The sophist, instead of functioning on the mutuality inherent to genuine dialogical communication, instrumentalizes language and intensifies the already existing power dynamics of dominance and submission found in social and political relationships. These corruptions have new significance when we consider our historical position that has created what I called the collective memory paradox. This paradox is the condition of possibility for the

expertise-illusion that functions on stockpiled written communications that have turned into

decontextualized information, effectively backgrounding the knowledge dimensions of writing.

Using Gadamer's insights into reading tradition, I was then able to frame the infosphere as new

tradition that can be understood as a novel hermeneutical horizon. This clarified how readers both suffer

and propagate the illusion of authoritative expertise within the infosphere. Without foregrounding their

own prejudices by putting them at risk up and against the otherness of the text's they read, they do not

maintain the openness necessary for gaining new experience and better understanding through the

determinate negation of expectations—through the negative experience of the question. They assimilate

the strange into the familiar, rather than fusing their horizons with those of the text. Sophistic

performance, *epídeixis,* moves from the conclusions about the phenomenon toward the phenomenon

itself, creating a *chimera* object that becomes consistent according to the discourse that describes it—

creating pseudo-realities that reverberate over time and seem plausible in their consistency.

In the contemporary infosphere, this takes on new forms. Readers are empowered by the

gamification of knowledge from which the info-sophist profits, which is exacerbated by the isolating and

disembodied nature of textuality, as both Plato and Simms helped me argue. Like a video game, they

simulate knowledge discovery that leads the reader to a certain answer, while closing their horizons to

other possibilities. I pushed the notions of ventriloquization and intraloquization further by claiming that

auto-loquization is what happens when readers in the infosphere suffer from the expertise-illusion: the

seeming authoritative expertise, with which the unbounded horizon of texts and references within the

infosphere speak, is taken up within the reader's consciousness and empowers them to feel

knowledgeable having retrieved the answers in the form of compulsive information retrieval. The

agency of the info-sophist is poured into the reader, and in being able to respeak the answers given, the

reader claims to have authority, and thereby thinks that they are themself an expert in this feeling of

empowerment. Through assent and affirmation, through likes and shares, they are further empowered by this "newfound" knowledge.

The neo-sophistic movement of our age has very real soul- and world- effects, as demonstrated through several recent examples. I discerned that ancient and contemporary sophistry remain structurally the same with respect to their structures and tendencies: in both contexts, the conditions for sophistry are psychological, capitalizing on the dissonance between the reader's perceptual and intellectual faculties created by the reversal of the movement between agency and patiency in the reading moment. The difference between ancient and contemporary sophistry was then shown to be a matter of kind *and* degree, but maintain an identity between the underlying structures that drive it. Both forms of sophistry take advantage of instrumental usages of language that are culturally scripted and that set expectations, functioning on a stockpile of words and experiences. Contemporary sophistry differs from ancient only in its quality and the greater extent of its effects.

While there are many great, nuanced readings of Plato's critique of writing in the *Phaedrus,* my close reading saw something new, pushing its relevance to our contemporary *milieu* even further without falling into anachronisms. The Platonic dialogue form fosters the very generative, open horizon that is required for prolific questioning, and this unbounded positive horizon, *contra* the unbounded negative horizon of the infosphere, is simultaneously its purpose. It is a system that is endlessly generative in inspiring genuine questioning, a genuine curiosity in those who are open to it. Through perplexity and the nature of the question, Plato emphasizes the radical openness needed for being moved, for being undogmatic in our thinking, to developing our knowledge dialectically—his work teaches the reader to think in terms of the question.

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[1] All Greek terms are referenced from the *Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon,* and crossed-referenced with *Logeion: University of Chicago* (https://logeion.uchicago.edu). These reference someone who lacks skill in a particular *tekhnē*, as opposed to a skilled and knowledgeable person.

[2] In-text, the Stephanus pagination is used to cite Plato and the Bekker pagination to cite Aristotle.

[3] The reasons for choosing dialogue form are three-fold: 1) to protect it against *bad* readers or dogmatic thinkers, 2) to protect himself from the kinds of charges brought against the historical Socrates, and 3) initiates in the reader dialectical understanding through conversation that has the fundamental structure of question and answer.

[4] I'm using *mûthos* in a multifaceted sense: "anything delivered by word of mouth" and "talk, conversation: also, the subject of conversation, the matter itself" (Liddell-Scott). This captures Plato's multilayered construction of the *Phaedrus*: it is a dialogue between interlocutors, whose conversation's subject matter is both spoken and written speech, which uses both rational accounts and myth to initiate dialectical thinking of its interlocutors and its readers.

[5] For this section, the Stephanus paginations in-text will all refer to the *Phaedrus,* unless otherwise noted.

[6] In the Greek: διάνοιαν εἰδυῖαν τὸ ἀληθὲς / *diánoian eiduîan tò alēthès.*

[7] This definition is analogous with that of the *Gorgias* (452e, 453d-54a), minus the reference to soul-guiding/leading and consideration for private or philosophic rhetoric because it is guided by Gorgias' definition of rhetoric and he is a different kind of interlocutor than Phaedrus. In the *Phaedrus,* the question is about the artfulness and artlessness of rhetoric. They show both circumstances (good and bad rhetoric). Since Socrates cares for Phaedrus and worries for his soul, the setting demands a different approach; while Gorgias is somewhat of a lost cause, with Socrates not really being able to persuade, i.e., teach, him.

[8] Socrates of the *Gorgias* sees a connection between persuasion and teaching, and between persuasion and trust/belief (*Grg.* 453d-e). Rhetoric is not simply the persuasive art, otherwise all arts would be considered rhetoric as they involve speech and persuasion to teach and hand down their expertise. There are two forms of persuasion: one that leads to comprehensive knowledge and truth dialectically, and the other leads to either true or false belief without knowledge.

[9] Referencing deception's complicated nature, namely, that a lie may very well hold some semblance of the truth from which it diverges, Socrates in the *Republic* tells us: "[A] true lie…is the ignorance in the soul of someone who's been lied to, since the lie in words is a sort of imitation of the experience of the soul, an image that comes afterward, and not a completely unmixed lie" (382c).

[10] Invoking the opening line of the dialogue: "My dear Phaedrus, where have you been? And where are you going?" (227a).

[11] The technical terms listed by Plato (266d7-267e8) are quite different from the more substantial rhetorical theory given by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric.* Plato's list includes 18 parts of composition from preface to recapitulation, which seem to be presented so that they may be scrutinized, emphasizing that these are only a small part of the rhetorical art.

[12] Referencing the short(er) way versus the long(er) way, mentioned in many Platonic dialogues; the long(er) way coincides with dialectical investigation.

[13] A parallel to the distinction between speeches that are living and ensouled (*émpsūkhon*) and a written composition as its image (*eidolon*); see 276a8-9.

[14] The Greek term is ὑποκριτής (*hypokrîtēs*), originally referring to one who answers, an interpreter, whose "interpretation constituted his answer" (Svenbro, 172), implies that a question must first be asked

or received in order for the *hypokrîtēs* to answer. This term eventually refers to a dissembler, pretender, or hypocrite. This is correlated to a change in social and political discourse as knowledge and *tekhnē* become no longer restricted to family traditions as "private tokens of power" (Vernant 1982, 51). Social transformations led to an openness, wherein knowledge, values, and mental techniques were now accessible to the public. As writing became the medium of common culture, of common communication, the possibility of disseminating knowledge was more easily acted upon (52).

[15] The phrase, *persona humana*, does not simply categorize people as human beings, but refers to their essential character and personhood as human. This feature cannot and should not be taken away by another, as it is the foundation of an individual's dignity, and their right to be treated as an equal as well as to authentically access their share of the world. Pieper in his work, *The Concept of Sin*, speaks of this as the norm that underscores all forms of human activity: "…a norm that transcends [procedural norms], one that binds man not simply as an artist, technician, expert, but as a *persona humana* – a norm that has from time immemorial been called a "moral" norm" (26).

[16] In Plato's *Gorgias* and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* the term is *kolakeía*. While this is often translated in the sense of friendly complement, there are other Greek terms that signify the kind of talk that is used among equals without ulterior motives: *aréskeia, thōpeía, hēdulogía*. Aristotle and Plato use *kolakeía* to refer to speech that plays to the tastes and desires of others for their own benefit or advantage.

[17] Remembering the evolution of *hypokrîtēs* from interpreter and expounder to someone who is merely a dissembler, pretender, or hypocrite.

[18] Vernant describes this in terms of social change affecting intellectual change in Ancient Greece, where reciprocal relationships replaced hierarchal relations of dominance and submission in the movement from kingship to democracy (55-60); a movement from *hómoios* (alike, a resembling insofar as individuals are all citizens under the king's rule) to *isonomía* (equal rights and participation in exercising political power) (61). Svenbro also touches on this saying there is an intimate relationship between *némein/nómos* (law) and *légein/logos*: "*nómos* turns into a *basileús*" or king, and "*lógos* into a *dunastēs*" or master, making law a voice by giving language power (160-1).

[19] *The Beginning of Philosophy* lectures are a translation whirlwind: recordings of Gadamer's lectures given in Italian were transcribed and published. Later, Joachim Schulte's translation from Italian to German was revised by Gadamer and published as *Der Anfang der Philosophie* (Gadamer 2016, 11). This German edition was then translated into English by Rod Coltman. Copies of the Italian and German versions are difficult to locate, and the English translation does not provide a glossary entry for the German word translated to 'game'; therefore, the meaning could be different depending on the word Gadamer "originally" used. I interpret 'game' not as a framework with rules for winning, but as play or gamble (especially given *TM*, where we gamble with our prejudices and expectations by making them questionable against those of the *other*).

[20] For Aristotle's "treatise" on the passions, see *Rh.* 1378a30-1388b30.

[21] This functions on the class of disputed words from the *Phaedrus* that cause us to "flounder about." As Socrates says in the *Philēbus* (15d-e): "It is through discourse that the same thing flits around, becoming one and many in all sorts of ways, in whatever it may be that is said at anytime, both long ago and now."

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Abbreviations
Phaedrus — Phdr.
Gorgias — Grg.
Sophist — Soph.
Rhetoric — Rh.
De anima – D an.

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