Rhetorizing Philosophy: Toward a “Double Reading” of Philosophical Texts

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Abstract:
Philosophy consists primarily in or of texts. The implications of this very basic fact for the subject – both as a writer and a reader – and philosophy’s conception of itself as a privileged form of argumentation and for establishing the truth have, however, been largely neglected. In order to address these issues, the article reconsiders Foucault’s “double reading” of Descartes’ *Meditations* as “demonstration” and “exercise” that both affects and transforms the meditating subject. I will argue that such a double reading is not only proper to the *Meditations* but constitutive of all philosophical texts. This leads to a revised notion of truth that derives its argumentative consistency precisely from the entanglement of demonstration and exercise.

Keywords: Derrida, Foucault, discourse, *parrhēsia*, text, truth

The problem is to reintroduce rhetoric, the rhetorician, the fight of discourse into the field of analysis . . . . The problem is to “rhetorize” philosophy.

—Michel Foucault, *La verité et les formes juridiques*

Philosophy takes place in the medium of language, in spoken and written discourses, which are themselves given as texts. Texts are written, read, memorized, reproduced, and cited; they circulate and are disseminated, but may also get damaged or lost, censored or forbidden, or become opaque and unreadable. This textual constitution is not a contingent but an essential attribute of Western philosophy (see IJsseling 1981). In fact, the staging of dialogic and agonial orality in the medium of text is one of the characteristic features of Greek thought. Thus, the question of what it means to philosophize cannot be answered without taking into account the media of philosophical work and articulation (see Krämer 2003, 78). Surprisingly, though, the textuality of philosophy has been largely ignored by Western thought, or passed over to the “province of rhetoric or poetry” (Aristotle 1962, 17a)—a gesture still prevalent today. This neglect is backed by the widespread view of language as a means of communication that, albeit necessary for the expression and transmission of truth and knowledge, does not directly affect them. Accordingly, as Jacques Derrida has demonstrated, “the philosophical text, alt-
hough it is in fact always written, includes, precisely as its philosophical specificity, the project of effacing itself in the face of the signified content which it transports and in general teaches” (Derrida 1997, 160). Or as Theodor W. Adorno puts it in his *Negative Dialectics*: “In its dependence—patent or latent—on texts, philosophy admits its linguistic nature [*sprachliches Wesen*] which the ideal of the method leads it to deny in vain. Like tradition, this nature has been tabooed in recent philosophical history, as rhetoric” (Adorno 1973, 55).

This tendency to overlook its linguistic and, thus, its textual and rhetorical ‘being’ is also reflected in philosophy’s common conceptualization of the philosophizing subject. While in the wake of the *linguistic turn* of 20th century philosophy it has been widely acknowledged that language plays a crucial role in the constitution and construction of our social world, the language-using subject still tends to be conceptualized as a neutral author-subject that is neither affected nor transformed by the textual and discursive practices it performs (such as reading, interpreting, commenting, publishing, disseminating, archiving, etc.). However, given that language is generative—in the sense that it does not only transfer a propositional content, but shapes the modalities of our thought, perception, experience and communication (see Krämer 2000, 14)—as well as performative—in the sense that speech acts do not only produce what they name but also constitute the individual as a speaking subject by assigning specific subject positions—we must consider the consequences this entails for the philosophizing subject that depends on language in order to establish and articulate the truth. Such a subject would no longer be a quasi-transcendental entity unaffected by the operations it performs; rather we are dealing with a subject that is both constituted and transformed by the textual and discursive practices it has to carry out if it wants to know the truth. This has far-reaching consequences for philosophy’s self-image as a privileged form of argumentation and of establishing the truth. For if the philosophizing subject is constituted and transformed by the textual and discursive practices it has to carry out to qualify as a rational subject, then this means that texts do not just have a demonstrative but also a practical dimension. Accordingly, it would no longer be possible to determine in advance who will count as a truth-telling subject, the argumentative rules it has to follow and what it actually means to argue.

In order to address these questions, I will proceed in five steps: To begin with, I will briefly discuss Samuel IJsseling’s reflections on the textual constitution of philosophy and his concept of “rhetorical reading” which he juxtaposes to philosophical and hermeneutical forms of reading. I will then turn to Michel Foucault’s article “My body, this paper, this fire” (1972), originally published as a reply to Jacques Derrida’s critique of Foucault’s *History of Madness* (1961), as a possible exemplification of such a rhetorical reading. In this text, Foucault not

only undertakes a subtle re-reading of Descartes’ *Meditations* but also accuses Derrida of ‘textualising’ discursive practices by reducing them to mere textual traces (Foucault 2006b, 573). In doing so, Foucault proposes a “double reading” of the *Meditations* as “demonstration” and “exercise” that both affects and modifies the meditating subject. I will argue that this double reading is not only applicable to the *Meditations* but basically to all (philosophical) texts—thereby providing a model for doing philosophy that consistently takes into consideration the textuality, historicity, and rhetoricity of philosophical discourse. Thus, my aim is not to revive the rather ‘unfortunate’ debate between Foucault and Derrida. Instead, it is to inquire into the consequences of Foucault’s *double reading* for philosophy’s self-image as a privileged form of argumentation—thereby also shedding light on Foucault’s later analyses of the Greek concept of *parrhēsia*. This leads me, finally, to a notion of truth that can be reduced neither to an objective truth nor to a subjective truth-telling, but rather derives its argumentative consistency precisely from the systematic entanglement of demonstration and exercise.

**Textuality of Philosophy**

Against the background of the “forgetfulness of language [*Sprachvergessenheit*] in Western thought” (Gadamer 2013, 436) and philosophy’s privileging of speech over writing (Derrida 1997), Samuel IJsseling, in his programmatic article “Philosophy and Textuality: Concerning a Rhetorical Reading of Philosophical Texts,” argues that philosophy has remained blind to and in oblivion of its textual constitution: The irrefutable fact “that philosophy consists primarily and principally in or of texts usually either is viewed as a pointless triviality or else it encounters vehement and symptomatic resistance” (IJsseling 1981, 178). In truth, however, philosophy’s textuality is not at all a contingent or external feature; rather “it belongs to philosophy’s very essence to be a text” (178).

The specific mode of being of texts manifests itself, according to IJsseling, on different levels and in various perspectives. Most obviously, texts are part of our everyday reality: “We use them in the most various ways and we do things with them” (179). Moreover, “texts do something with us;” “they have their own effectivity or operativity” (180). Therefore, a text is never just the product of an author-subject, rather the author herself and her articulated thoughts are part of “that which is [performatively] brought about by the text” (180). In addition, texts are always already parts of a much larger web or fabric (*textura*). Consequently, “[t]here is no zero-point in writing, for every act of writing necessarily repeats and refers to other texts or fragments of texts, which in one way or another are absorbed or transformed”
Moreover, texts are discursive conglomerates of power and knowledge, which, as Foucault (1981) argues in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970, cannot be separated from the material conditions and mechanisms of proliferation, exclusion, rarefaction, control and censorship as well as from the procedures of canon formation and the institutionalization of disciplines. According to IJsseling, “[o]ne ought not regard these material activities lightly. They form the material basis of philosophy and without them philosophy would not be what it is” (IJsseling 1981, 183).

Based on his analysis of the various aspects of the being of texts, IJsseling distinguishes three different forms of reading: The philosophical reading focuses on the propositional content and the logical consistency of texts and evaluates them in relation to their stated truth and validity claims. Although this is the kind of reading most philosophers do, it is not without pitfalls. On the one hand, it reduces the text to a mere means of expression. The text is not taken into account as text; instead, “[o]ne directs one’s attention immediately to the state of affairs or the thoughts which the text expresses” (IJsseling 1981, 184). On the other hand, such a reading aims at an unequivocal concept of truth, thereby ignoring the fact that the true/false distinction is only one criterion among many to assess linguistic forms of expression and that different types of texts and literary genres may imply different concepts of truth.

The hermeneutical reading tries to get at the intended meaning of what is written or said, seeking to reveal and decipher a proper or hidden sense ‘behind’ the text. It goes beyond a mere propositional reading, since it does not reduce a text to its truth content. Still, according to IJsseling, “In hermeneutical reading, too, the text usually fails to be regarded as text. One takes one’s point of departure from the text and, of course, one tries to read it thoroughly and carefully. But the text as such is left behind almost immediately in order to seek behind or beneath the text for its real meaning or message” (185).

Only the rhetorical reading is “a way of reading in which, in contrast to various other forms of reading, the text is taken seriously as text” (177). The rhetorical reading focuses not only on the argumentative structure of the text, its consistency, and logical syntax, but also on its rhetorical modes, functions and effects. Moreover, it takes into account the entirety of its inter- and intra-textual references, including the power relations and truth games in which the text is inscribed and which, in turn, are opened up or reinforced by it. As a consequence, the “structures of argumentation are investigated not so much in respect of their validity as in respect of their actual functioning within the text” (187). This also entails the rejection of the idea that the reader takes up a neutral subject position. Rather, texts assign and determine par-
ticular subject positions that have to be assumed by the reader if the texts are to reveal their ‘truth’ and unfold their effectiveness. Ultimately, this means, as IJsseling claims, that in rhetorical reading “the question about truth is disregarded,” in favor of the question of “what a text actually accomplishes” (188).

Although IJsseling’s threefold division is instructive, it remains too simplistic. This is evidenced inter alia in his description of the hermeneutical reading, which does justice neither to romantic nor to philosophical hermeneutics (see Gadamer 2013, 401–422). Moreover, even though IJsseling’s account goes well beyond common views of rhetorical reading that focus, for example, on ‘absolute’ metaphors (see Blumenberg 2010) or the subversive play of tropes and figures (see de Man 1979), he cannot explain why the problem of truth should not play a role in it. Indeed, precisely by claiming that in rhetorical reading one jettisons the question of truth, IJsseling, against his declared intentions, reproduces the traditional dispute between philosophy and rhetoric, between episteme and doxa, between the claim to truth and the intended effect. Thus, what is needed is a more nuanced account of the form of reading he calls rhetorical.

Madness and Dreaming

In order to fill this gap, I will reconsider Foucault’s reading of Descartes’ Meditations in “My body, this paper, this fire.” This text, published in 1972 as a reply to Derrida’s critique of History of Madness—and, thus, almost ten years before IJsseling’s “Philosophy and Textuality”—can be seen as paradigmatic case of a rhetorical reading that, at the same time, decisively goes beyond IJsseling’s account. For Foucault not only offers a subtle and differentiated reading that analyzes the different layers of the Meditations as text and discourse, but also advances the model of a double reading that, if taken to its logical conclusion, has far-reaching implications for philosophy’s self-image as an argumentative practice and as a method for establishing the truth. The dispute between Foucault and Derrida is sparked by the prima facie marginal question of the particular role of dreaming and madness on the path of Cartesian doubt. This seemingly secondary aspect quickly leads to the much more fundamental question concerning the role and status of philosophical argumentation. What comes to the fore here is madness as the condition of (im)possibility of philosophizing—and thereby the question of what it means to read and to argue in the first place.

In his large-scale study and first major work History of Madness, Foucault maintains that the so-called classical age is based on the fundamental exclusion of madness and the great
confinement of the mad. The aim of Foucault’s study, as he specifies in the later-removed preface of 1961, is to “try to recapture, in history, this degree zero of the history of madness, when it was undifferentiated experience, the still undivided experience of the division itself” (2006a, xxvii). Foucault wants to locate the historical rupture that separated madness from reason so that “there was no longer any common language between madness and reason” (xxviii). This decision, this “strange takeover” by which the classical age of reason reduces madness to silence (44), is, according to Foucault, realized in an exemplary way in the exclusion of madness as a possible stage of doubt in Descartes’ Meditations. In a concise, only three-page-long analysis, which functions as a kind of prelude to the second chapter, “The great confinement,” Foucault argues that in “the economy of doubt, there is a fundamental disequilibrium between on the one hand madness, and dreams and errors on the other” (45). While the dream enables the doubting subject to proceed with its doubt, madness is neither an instrument nor a stage of doubt. Rather, the very possibility of madness is radically excluded and dismissed by the doubting subject: “for madness is precisely a condition of impossibility for thought”; “one cannot suppose that one is mad, even in thought” (45).

In his lecture “Cogito and the History of Madness,” delivered on 4 March 1963 at the Collège philosophique—which, on the personal invitation of Derrida, was also attended by Foucault (see Defert 1994)—Derrida sharply criticizes Foucault’s approach. In doing so, he exclusively focuses on Foucault’s short methodological preface and his three-page interpretation of Descartes, of which he claims “that the sense of Foucault’s entire project can be pinpointed in these few allusive and somewhat enigmatic pages” (Derrida 1978, 37). Derrida’s criticism culminates in the accusation that Foucault himself repeats the “Cartesian gesture for the twentieth century” (66). On the one hand, Foucault fails to reflect on the historical conditions of possibility of his own discourse, “to interrogate certain philosophical and methodological presuppositions of this history of madness” (38), thereby concealing the historicity of his method. On the other hand, Foucault’s “attempt to write the history of the decision, division, difference” confirms “metaphysics in its fundamental operation” by juxtaposing “the division as an event or a structure” “to the unity of an original presence” (48), a presence in which madness and reason are not yet separated and still share a common language.

Derrida, for his part, firmly rejects the idea of such an event of separation. Neither is madness explicitly excluded nor are the Meditations “linked to a determined historical structure.” Every philosophical discourse “must simultaneously in fact and in principle escape madness” if it is “to have an intelligible meaning” (65). As a consequence, “any philosopher or speaking subject (and the philosopher is but the speaking subject par excellence) who must
evoke madness from the interior of thought . . . can do so only in the realm of the possible and in the language of fiction or the fiction of language. Thereby, through his own language, he reassures himself against any actual madness . . . and can keep his distance, the distance indispensable for continuing to speak and to live” (66). Thus, Derrida concludes, there is no fundamental exclusion of madness in Descartes in the sense of an impossibility of thought.

It was not until 1972 that Foucault responded to Derrida’s objections with “My body, this paper, this fire.” Remarkably, the whole question of historicity, which is at the center of Derrida’s criticism, is not tackled by Foucault. In fact, the word “history” is not even mentioned once in Foucault’s reply to Derrida (Campe 1992, 43). Instead, Foucault exclusively concentrates on those three pages of “Cogito and the History of Madness” in which Derrida sums up Foucault’s interpretation of Descartes, thus deploying the exact same rhetorical gesture by which Derrida has pointed out that Foucault’s entire project can be reduced to a few pages.

“My body, this paper, this fire” is, in fact, a rather untypical Foucauldian text. Whereas Foucault usually, at least in his published work, tends to develop historical meta-narratives, this piece is almost a prime example of a close reading that concentrates on just a few passages considered to be crucial for the text as a whole. Foucault’s aim is to demonstrate and to exemplify what it actually means to read a text carefully and thoroughly—that is, both as text and as discursive practice. In doing so, he tries, as it were, to beat Derrida at his own game and with his own ‘deconstructive’ weapons. Even Foucault’s particular way of citing Derrida’s text seems to anticipate the citational strategies that Derrida uses several years later in his debate with John Searle (see Derrida 1988). This appropriation of deconstruction is also exemplified by Foucault’s overall approach and method. On the one hand, he problematizes an apparently secondary aspect of Descartes’ first meditation—namely, madness and dreaming as two examples on the path of methodic doubt; on the other hand, he demonstrates that it is precisely in the marginal aspects of the text that its constitutive outside, which orchestrates not only Descartes’ discourse but philosophical discourse as such, resides.

What is at stake in the debate is indicated clearly: is it possible that there might be something anterior or exterior to philosophical discourse? Could it have its condition in an exclusion, a refusal, a risk eluded, and, why not, in a fear? A suspicion that Derrida rejects with passion. (Foucault 2006b, 552).
In other words, the debate revolves around madness as the limit and the condition of (im)possibility of meaningful discourse. What is at issue here is the very basis of philosophical argumentation as a game of giving and asking for reasons between rational, accountable, and legitimate subjects. While Foucault maintains that madness as mere possibility of thought is already excluded in the first meditation, Derrida argues that the “hypothesis of insanity is . . . not a good example, a revelatory example, a good instrument of doubt—and for at least two reasons” (Derrida 1978, 62). First, the example falls short of the mark. “It does not cover the totality of the field of sensory perception” and is, therefore, argumentatively neither conclusive nor consistent: “The madman is not always wrong about everything”; he can be right and quite reasonable in some aspects. Second, considered from a rhetorical or pedagogical point of view, the example is neither convincing nor relevant but rather ineffective: “It is not a useful or happy example pedagogically, because it meets the resistance of the nonphilosopher who does not have the audacity to follow the philosopher when the latter agrees that he might indeed be mad at the very moment when he speaks” (62). In short, madness is a mere example (and not even a good one), and not a theme of Descartes’ Meditations: “it is not a question of madness in this text, if only to exclude it” (Derrida 1978, 392, n. 15). Instead, dreaming proves to be the more general and convincing example in the path of the Cartesian doubt.

Consequently, from the perspective of argumentation theory, the dispute between Foucault and Derrida can be read on three different levels: first, as an argument about the status and the value of madness as an example in methodic doubt; second, as a meta-argument about the logical, epistemological, and pragmatic value of examples in philosophical arguments;8 and third, as a meta-philosophical argument about the exclusion of madness as a constitutive element of philosophical thought and language. Put differently, while Derrida argues that madness is discarded in favor of dreaming as the more general and convincing example, Foucault maintains that the example of madness is solely mentioned to be excluded: “Exclusion, therefore, for madness, whereas the sceptical tradition, by contrast, had made it one of the reasons for doubting” (Foucault 2006b, 550).

**Double Weave of Demonstration and Exercise**

Indeed, there seem to be good reasons for viewing dreaming as the better example, as Foucault readily concedes: First, dreaming allows for a more general and fundamental doubt than madness. “The first advantage is of a logical and demonstrative order: everything of which madness . . . could make me doubt, dreams too could make uncertain for me” (Foucault
Second, in contrast to madness, dreams occur more often and habitually. This is, according to Foucault, a “practical advantage . . . when what is at stake is no longer demonstrating, but carrying out an exercise and calling up a memory, a thought, a state, in the very movement of meditation” (553). As a result, dreaming appears to have a double advantage: On the one hand, it operates as a generalizable example in reasoning; on the other hand, it is more accessible when it comes to performing an exercise or test. “The extravagance of the dream guarantees its demonstrative character as example: its frequency assures its accessible character as exercise” (553). As such an “immediately accessible” and always “possible experience,” the experience of dreaming “is really and presently produced in meditation” (555). Importantly, the difference between waking and dreaming, between perception and memory, “is not simply noted, but effected by the subject in the very movement of his meditation” (554; my italics). In other words, the decision to carry out the central test of dreaming “does not merely have the consequence of turning sleep and wakefulness into a theme for reflection”; rather, it “takes effect in the meditating subject” (554).

Hence, the essential difference between madness and dreaming resides in the fact that dreaming does not disqualify the meditating subject as a rational and accountable subject: “even transformed into a ‘subject supposed to be dreaming,’ the meditating subject can pursue, in a sure fashion, the path of his doubt” (555). In contrast to this, the hypothesis of madness makes impossible the implementation of methodic doubt. Like children, madmen “do not have all their rights in matters of speaking, promising, committing themselves, signing, bringing legal actions, etc.” (559). Therefore, it is crucial to note that madness is not dismissed as a theme, as an object of critical reflection; rather, it is excluded by the doubting subject itself: “madness is excluded by the subject who doubts, in order that he may qualify himself as a doubting subject” (561).

As a result, we are confronted with an unbridgeable divide between the hypothesis of madness and that of dreaming. To substantiate his claim, Foucault carries out a meticulous analysis of Descartes’ first meditation, aiming at uncovering a whole “system of differences” that is at work on all levels of text—differences that have been systematically overlooked and neglected by Derrida. These are, first, semantic or “literal differences between words;” second, “thematic differences of images;” third, “textual differences in the arrangement and the opposition of the paragraphs;” and finally, discursive differences “on the level of events that succeed one another.” These discursive events include “acts carried out by the meditating subject (comparison/remembering),” “effects produced inside the meditating subject (sudden and immediate perception of a difference/astonishment-stupor-experience of an indistinc-
tion),” and “qualification of the meditating subject (invalidity if he is demens; validity even if he is dormiens)” (562). Importantly, this last group of discursive differences is not only largely overlooked, but provides, as it were, the matrix for all the other differences. Or in the words of Foucault:

[T]his last group of differences commands all the others; it refers less to the signifying organisation of the text than to the series of events (acts, effects, qualifications) that the discursive practice of the meditation brings in its wake; it concerns the modification of the subject through the very exercise of the discourse. And I have the impression that if a reader, even a reader as remarkably assiduous as Derrida, has missed so many literary, thematic or textual differences, it is because he has misunderstood those that are their principle, i.e. the “discursive differences.” (562)

Foucault’s criticism of Derrida ultimately culminates in the claim that Derrida pursues a “‘ textualisation’ of discursive practices,” a “reduction of discursive practices to textual traces” (573). Accordingly, Foucault’s aim is not only to expose Derrida as a bad and inaccurate reader; rather, he sees in Derrida the most prominent representative of a system whose goal it is to eliminate the materiality and eventfulness of discursive practices—a system that manifests itself in “a historically well-determined little pedagogy . . . which teaches the student that there is nothing outside the text” (573).10

This is not to say, however, that Foucault completely rejects the notion of the text. Quite the contrary, for to read a text—such as the Meditations—as text precisely implies, as pointed out, to read it on all its different levels. This eventually leads Foucault to propose a “double reading” of the Meditations as demonstration and exercise: As a demonstration, the Meditations are “a group of propositions, forming a system, which each reader must run through if he wishes to experience their truth;” as an exercise, the Meditations constitute “a group of modifications . . . which each reader must carry out, and by which each reader must be affected, if he wishes in his turn to be the subject enunciating this truth on his own account” (563). To put it in a nutshell: the demonstration is necessary in order to learn the truth; the exercise is needed in order to be able to tell the truth in one’s own name.11

This account has far-reaching consequences for the traditional concept of the subject in its relation to truth. If we understand the Meditations as a pure demonstration, we suppose a subject that is neither afflicted nor affected by the truth stated; “it remains, in relation to it, fixed, invariant and as though neutralised” (562f.). But if we understand the Meditations as a
practical exercise, as a kind of self-technology and self-examination, it “implies . . . a subject who is mobile and capable of being modified by the very effect of the discursive events that take place” (563). This movement is already indicated by the title of the text, *Meditations*, as Foucault points out in his “Reply to Derrida”:

That means that the speaking subject ceaselessly moves, changes, modifies his convictions, and advances in his certainties, taking risks and constantly trying new things. Unlike deductive discourse, where the speaking subject remains fixed and invariable, the meditative text supposes a mobile subject who tries out on himself the hypotheses that he envisages. (Foucault 2006c, 579)

Thus, Descartes’ conclusion “that there is no sure indication allowing a clear distinction to be made between waking and sleeping,” is, according to Foucault, “not simply a logical inference, it is genuinely inscribed at this precise moment of the meditation; it has its immediate effect on the subject who is meditating” (582). The decisive factor here is that the two forms of discourse, *demonstration* and *exercise*, by no means mutually exclude each other. Nor is one simply derived from the other. Rather, they overlap and intersect in all “sorts of ‘chiasms’” to the effect that, for example, “the exercise modifying the subject orders the succession of propositions, or commands the junction of distinct demonstrative groups” (Foucault 2006b, 563). In short, just as *learning the truth* requires practice, *telling the truth* involves demonstration.

**Historicity and Rhetoricity of Philosophy**

With its emphasis on the interrelatedness of demonstration and exercise, on “the intersection of demonstrative and ascetic schemas” (563) (from Greek *askein*: “to exercise”), Foucault’s *double reading* clearly goes beyond IJsseling’s idea of rhetorical reading. For such a double reading neither suspends the philosophical claim to truth nor postulates a simple priority of exercise and practice over argumentation and demonstration. Four aspects are particularly noteworthy in this regard: First, texts do not only possess a specific functionality and effectiveness, but also assume a writing and reading subject to which they assign particular subject positions. This implies, second, the *problematization* of ‘the subject’ as unitary, autonomous entity. Instead, we are dealing with a subject that is constituted and transformed by the textual and discursive practices it carries out and which in turn qualify it as a juridical, political, and
ethical subject. Third, this is true not only of Descartes’ *Meditations* but eventually of any (philosophical) text—from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to mathematical demonstrations. Consider, for instance, how many years of thorough study and practice are necessary for comprehending and retracing a complex mathematical proof. Thus, Foucault’s double reading not only applies to ‘practical texts’ (such as the *Meditations*) but also to texts that present themselves as purely ‘theoretical’ or ‘demonstrative.’ Accordingly, demonstration as the dominant paradigm for *learning the truth* has to be supplemented and modified by exercise. At the same time *ascesis* as the prevalent paradigm for *telling the truth in one’s own name* has to be supplemented by demonstration. As a result, it is, finally, no longer possible to strictly distinguish between a purely demonstrative discourse on the one hand and an ascetic discourse on the other hand, even though it may seem as if there were “moments of pure deduction” or of pure exercise (563). Rather, both demonstrative and ascetic moments are equally operative in every text—though with various explicitness.

Consequently, Foucault’s double reading is not only proper to Descartes’ *Meditations* but eventually applicable to all (philosophical) texts—including Foucault’s own piece “My body, this paper, this fire.” The text is a demonstrative discourse insofar as Foucault attempts to prove that there are argumentative flaws and deficiencies in Derrida’s reading of Descartes; it is an ascetic discourse insofar as the reading subject finds itself entangled in a complex fabric of texts by different authors (Descartes, Foucault, Derrida) and has to undergo a series of events (acts, effects, and qualifications) if it wants to tell the truth on its own account. Furthermore, what comes to the fore here is the particular temporality that is opened up by the text. Whereas the subject of the demonstrative discourse seemingly remains identical with itself, the ascetic discourse involves a specific temporality and historicity insofar as the subject is transformed and modified by the exercise it carries out. Thus, the question of *historicity* that has been excluded by Foucault in “My body, this paper, this fire” on the theoretical-methodological level of *demonstration* now emerges again on the practical level of *exercise*.

In fact, Foucault explicitly emphasizes that the ascetic mode of exercise also applies to his own way of working and writing. Thus, in the second volume of his history of sexuality *The Use of Pleasure*, published in 1984 only a few months before his death, he describes retrospectively his previous investigations as “the record of a long and tentative *exercise* that needed to be revised and corrected again and again. It was a *philosophical exercise*. The object was to learn to what extent the effort to *think one’s own history* can free thought from
what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (Foucault 1990, 9; my italics). With this description Foucault implicitly responds to the methodological difficulties already addressed in the *History of Madness*, namely, in which language and from which point of view one could write a history of madness that does not use the “language of psychiatry, which is a monologue by reason *about* madness,” but offers an “archaeology of that silence” (Foucault 2006a, xxviii).

If we connect these remarks with Foucault’s double reading, it becomes obvious that the question of historicity cannot be answered in a purely demonstrative way but rather requires the “philosophical exercise” of a subject that is willing to think its own history and present. This becomes especially clear in Foucault’s analyses of Kant’s famous text “What is Enlightenment?” When in 1784 Kant poses the question “What is Enlightenment?”, he means, according to Foucault: “What’s going on just now? What’s happening to us? What is this world, this period, this precise moment in which we are living?” (Foucault 2000a, 335). These questions highlight a significant difference to Descartes. Whereas the Cartesian question “Who am I? I, as a unique but universal and unhistorical subject?” apparently presupposes an I that “is everyone, anywhere at any moment,” Kant asks “What are we? in a very precise moment of history,” thereby referring to “an analysis of both us and our present” (335). This is not to say that the question of the present does not matter in Descartes—in fact, Foucault sees a “whole system of actuality” at work in the *Meditations* (Foucault 2006b, 565)—, but it is not before Kant that “we see the appearance of the question of the present as a philosophical event to which the philosopher who speaks of it belongs” (Foucault 2010, 12).

Thus, to engage in a double reading not only means to raise the question of the present—“What is happening today? What is happening now? What is this ‘now’ in which we all live and which is the site, the point [from which] I am writing?” (Foucault 2010, 11)—but to actualize this question in every act of writing and reading. Without doubt, such a double reading that pays particular attention to the “essential discursive determination (the double weave of the exercise and the demonstration)” (Foucault 2006b, 569) meets not only the “resistance of the nonphilosopher” (Derrida 1978, 61) but also the resistance of the philosopher who is oblivious of the textuality, historicity, and rhetoricity of philosophy. In a kind of anticipation of IJsseling’s thesis that to “philosophize is perhaps to make the continuous attempt to escape from rhetoric, without ever being able to be completely victorious in this effort” (1981, 188), Foucault, just one year after the publication of “My body, this paper, this fire”, makes a case for ‘rhetorizing’ philosophy:
The problem is to reintroduce rhetoric, the rhetorician, the fight of discourse into the field of analysis; not to carry out, as the linguists, a systematic analysis of the rhetorical procedures, but to study the discourse, even the discourse of truth, as rhetorical procedures, as manners of winning, to produce events, decisions, battles, victories. The problem is to “rhetorize” philosophy. (Foucault 2001, 634; my translation)\textsuperscript{14}

Such a \textit{rhetorization} of philosophy, surprisingly proposed by Foucault, sees philosophizing not only as a series of acts, decisions, and events, but also sheds light on the mediality and materiality of the \textit{Meditations} as a paradigmatic scene of writing and reading. Remarkably, as Rüdiger Campe points out, with reference to Foucault’s title “My body, this paper, this fire,” “the paper is the only item of the previous list that is not explicitly put in doubt, but tacitly disappears” (Campe 1992, 44). Just as the hypothesis of madness has to be excluded by the meditating subject so that it does not lose its status as a rational being and can proceed on the path of doubt, it is not easily possible to doubt the material conditions necessary for the \textit{Meditations} to be performed as a scene of writing and reading. In other words, whereas all the other acts can continually and smoothly be reduced by the tests of dreaming, fiction, and thought, doubting the very actuality of the writing/reading scene undermines the doubting subject just as much as the hypothesis of madness (see Campe 1992, 44).

Moreover, what has to be excluded from the outset—an exclusion even more fundamental than the exclusion of madness (though mentioned neither by Descartes nor by Foucault or Derrida)—is the possibility that speech and language do not convey sense or meaning, that words do not signify at all. Whereas I can assume that “some evil spirit, supremely powerful and cunning, has devoted all his efforts to deceiving me” to the effect “that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds, and all external things are no different from the illusions of our dreams” (Descartes 2008, 16), I cannot reasonably doubt that the words “sky,” “air,” or even “evil spirit” are meaningful expressions. Thus, the hyperbolic doubt that is meant to establish a firm foundation necessarily relies on the indubitability of the communicative function of language as well as on the mediating role of speech and writing. This becomes especially clear in Descartes’ demonstration of a first undeniable truth. When he concludes “that this proposition, ‘I am, I exist’, whenever it is uttered by me, or conceived in the mind, is necessarily true” (Descartes 2008, 18), he does not refer to the quality or the truth of a proposition but of an \textit{utterance} performed within a concrete speech situation. For the proposition is by no means “necessarily true,” regardless of its concrete articulation, but only insofar as I utter it or conceive it in my mind, thus giving it a material-medial form.
Once again, the discursive determination of the text as a “double weave” of demonstration and exercise becomes apparent. Considered as exercise, as self-practice or self-examination of an I that asks itself whether it is possible to doubt “that I am now here, sitting by the fire, wrapped in a warm winter gown, handling this paper . . . , that these hands themselves, and this whole body are mine” (Descartes 2008, 18–19), methodic doubt requires the singularity of a bodily self actually performing this exercise (see Butler 2015, 22–23). Considered as demonstration that can be performed by anyone, anytime and everywhere, methodic doubt must be independent of its respective context. In other words, as a universal and generalizable method, Cartesian doubt has to be repeatable and verifiable—that is, it must be detachable from its context and “identifiable as conforming with an iterable model,” as we may put it, following Derrida’s notion of iterability (Derrida 1988, 18); yet, as an exercise and ascetic discourse, methodic doubt constitutes a series of singular acts, tests, and self-examinations that have to be carried out by a bodily self.

This structure applies not only to the Meditations but ultimately to every (philosophical) text. Just as the general structure of iterability is, as Derrida claims, “valid not only for all orders of ‘signs’ and for all languages in general but moreover, beyond semio-linguistic communication, for the entire field of what philosophy would call experience” (9), the general structure of double reading—as singular exercise and generalizable demonstration—is valid for all texts in general. In the final analysis, this points to an enlarged concept of the text which “is limited neither to the graphic, nor to the book, nor even to discourse, and even less to the semantic, representational, symbolic, ideal, or ideological sphere” (Derrida 1988, 148). Rather it implies—in addition to the double weave of exercise and demonstration—“all the structures called ‘real,’ ‘economic,’ ‘historical,’ socio-institutional” (148) as well as a writing and reading subject that is called upon, affected, transformed, and qualified by these structures and practices.

Truth-Telling and Truth-Hearing

The point of departure of the previous considerations has been the textuality of philosophy and the resulting consequences for the traditional self-image of philosophy as a privileged form of argumentation. By taking recourse to Foucault’s double reading, philosophizing emerged as a textual and discursive practice in which the questions of who qualifies as a rational and accountable subject and what are the valid norms of rationality are already at stake. This leads to the more general thesis that every argument is ultimately also an argument about
the question of what it means to argue in the first place. This is particularly evident when participants in a discussion accuse each other of not arguing properly, or when it is asserted that what is proposed as an argument is no argument at all. Notorious in this respect is Jürgen Habermas’s claim that “Derrida does not belong to those philosophers who like to argue” (Habermas 1987, 193), accompanied by the allegation that “Derrida is particularly interested in standing the primacy of logic over rhetoric . . . on its head” (187)—an accusation that Derrida vigorously rejects (Derrida 1988, 157).

Foucault’s double reading as double weave of demonstration and exercise escapes such an allegation from the start insofar as it explicitly reflects on the textuality, historicity, and rhetoricity of philosophy—without ever reducing philosophy to text, history, or rhetoric. Such a mode of reading does not disregard the question of truth; rather it points to a differentiated concept of truth that evades the false dilemma between an objective truth on the one hand and a plurality of subjective truths on the other hand. Just as, according to Austin (1970, 247), every utterance contains both aspects relating to truth and aspects relating to action, every text includes demonstrative as well as ascetic elements that constitute and modify the writing and reading subject. In addition, the double reading opens up a specific temporality and historicity, enabling the philosophizing subject to think its own history and ‘becoming-ness’ precisely by positioning itself in the present. As a consequence, we must question the notion of a quasi-neutral subject as well as the notion of an ideal truth that remains unaffected by the textual and discursive practices by which it is articulated.

Instead, what comes to the fore is a notion of truth that can be reduced neither to a propositional truth-value nor to a subjective truth-telling as proposed by Foucault in his analyses of parrhēsia as a form of speech “in which, in his act of telling the truth, the individual constitutes himself and is constituted by others as a subject of a discourse of truth” (Foucault 2011, 3). According to Bernhard Waldenfels, such a conception is unilaterally based on the force of speech and the role of the speaker, whereas Waldenfels himself favors a form of truth-telling which occurs from the outset as a responsive speaking and arises from a “truth-hearing” (Waldenfels 2012, 64). Against this background, Foucault’s double reading provides, avant la lettre, an elucidating reply to corresponding objections. Whereas in his analysis of parrhēsia, Foucault, at least prima facie, seems to focus on the perspective of the speaker, his double reading suggests a truth-telling that is always already a truth-hearing, or rather truth-reading, since, as shown above, every text is “a group of propositions . . . which each reader must run through if he wishes to experience their truth” as well as “a group of modifications . . . which each reader must carry out . . . , if he wishes in his turn to be the subject
enunciating this truth on his own account” (Foucault 2006b, 563). As a result, a philosophizing, which is neither blind to its textuality, historicity, and rhetoricity nor deaf to the various forms of truth-telling, has to fulfill a twofold task: On the one hand, it must conceive of philosophy as an argumentative practice that includes both demonstrative and ascetic aspects that go along with processes of authorization and subjectivation. On the other hand, it has to envisage a non-reductionist notion of truth that draws its strength and consistency precisely from the chiasmatic entanglement of demonstration and exercise, of truth-hearing and truth-telling. Such a philosophy would not be a “little pedagogy” that teaches the student how to write and to read properly or that assumes an ideal text that constantly re-says itself (Foucault 2006b, 573), but at best “the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself,” “the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known” (Foucault 1990, 9).17

Notes

1 Notable examples are Habermas 1984, Brandom 1994, or Searle 1995. Although these authors stress the importance of language for the “construction of social reality,” they neither question the assumption of a rational subject that precedes and controls its utterances nor ask how we are constituted as rational and accountable subjects in the first place. This view is not confined to the field of philosophy but also reflected in the understanding of rhetoric as a techne “governed by a skilled and sovereign speaking subject.” Thus, what is at stake is not only a conflict between rhetoric and philosophy but “a tacit dispute over a speech whose true subject is the formation of the speaker itself or one that represents an instrument of rationally governed intersubjective communication” (Vivian 2013, 372–373). On the multilayered relation of rhetoric and philosophy in the history of Western thought, see the contributions in Hetzel and Posselt 2017.

2 On the subjectivizing dimension of speech, see e.g. Benveniste 1971, 223–238, Felman 2003, Žižek 1989, or Butler 1997. Lyotard even provocatively suggests that “the phrase The meeting is called to order is not performative because its addressee is the chairperson of the meeting” but rather the other way round: “The addressee is the chairperson of the meeting to the extent that the phrase in question is performative” (Lyotard 1988, §142).
3 Such an approach might be quite surprising, since Foucault, “other than in his final lectures . . ., rarely wrote or spoke about rhetoric per se” (Biesecker 1992, 352). Foucault’s relation to rhetoric is, in fact, highly ambivalent. In the *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault maintains that discourse “does not form a rhetorical or formal unity” (Foucault 2002, 131); and even in his late works on the Greek notion of *parrhēsia* as form of truth-telling he opposes *parrhēsia* to rhetorical speech (Foucault 2010, 53–54; Foucault 2011, 13–14). On Foucault’s relation to rhetoric and the relevant literature on this subject, see Walzer 2013, 1 (n. 1). With particular focus on Foucault’s later lectures on *parrhēsia*, see Henderson 2007, Carlos 2010, Tell 2010, Möller 2012, Walzer 2013, Gehrke et al. 2013, Posselt 2013, and Happe 2015.

4 There already exists a vast literature on the so-called Foucault/Derrida debate. Two recent edited collections, which also take into account Derrida’s and Foucault’s later lectures and seminars, are Aryal et al. 2016, as well as Custer, Deutscher, and Haddad 2016.

5 A first version of “My body, this paper, this fire,” entitled “Reply to Derrida,” appeared in the Japanese journal *Paidea*. If one includes this reply, the debate between Foucault and Derrida comprises five texts: *History and Madness* (1961), “Cogito and the History of Madness” (1963), “Reply to Derrida” (1972), “My body, this paper, this fire” (1972), and Derrida’s belated answer “‘To Do Justice to Freud’: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis” (1992).

6 The short preface to *History of Madness*, which is also at the center of Derrida’s critique, is one of the few places where Foucault explicitly reflects on the theoretical and methodological difficulties of writing a history of madness. It was removed by Foucault in the second edition of 1972 and supplemented by “My body, this paper, this fire” as an appendix.

7 Foucault is well aware of the methodological difficulties such a project faces; he even speaks of “a doubly impossible task,” for any “perception that aims to apprehend [those insane words] in their wild state necessarily belongs to a world that has captured them already” (xxxii). Consequently, “[b]eyond any reference to a psychiatric ‘truth’, the aim was to allow these words and texts, which came from beneath the surface of language, and were not produced to accede to language, to speak of themselves” (xxxiv–xxxv).

8 This poses the problem of *exemplarity*—that is, the question of whether an example is just an example, one among others, or rather a constitutive element of what it illustrates: “are we concerned with an example among others or with a ‘good example,’ an example that is revelatory by privilege?” (Derrida 1978, 51).
On the relation of test (épreuve), examination (enquête) and examination (exam) in the “history of truth,” see Foucault 2000b.

See Derrida 1997, 158. In his discussion with Searle, which shows several parallels with the dispute with Foucault, Derrida specifies that the phrase “‘there is nothing outside the text’ [il n’y a pas de hors-texte]”, means nothing else: there is nothing outside context” (Derrida 1988, 136).

In his later analysis of the “technologies of the self” in Classical antiquity Foucault also speaks of “‘practical’ texts, which are themselves objects of a ‘practice’ in that they were designed to be read, learned, reflected upon, and tested out. . . . These texts thus served as functional devices that would enable individuals . . . to shape themselves as ethical subjects” (Foucault 1990, 12f.). Descartes’ Meditations can still be read in this way: The “idea of meditation, not as the game the subject plays with his thought but as the game thought plays on the subject, is basically exactly what Descartes was still doing in the Meditations, and is indeed precisely the meaning he gave to ‘meditation’” (Foucault 2005, 358).

This is not to say that Foucault’s notion of a double reading calls for a specific kind of (performative) writing that already ‘does what is says’ and, thus, ‘rhetorizes’ itself. On the contrary, such a demand would not only prioritize exercise over demonstration—a position explicitly dismissed by Foucault—but also impose a “well-determined little pedagogy” that teaches the student how to write and read ‘properly’ (Foucault 2006, 573). In addition, every attempt to performatively anticipate, in writing, a double reading runs the risk of amounting to a “‘textualisation’ of discursive practices” that allows “indefinitely to re-say the text” (573), an approach Foucault vigorously rejects. One might also think here of Paul de Man’s proposition to call “‘literary,’ in the full sense of the term, any text that implicitly or explicitly signifies its own rhetorical mode and prefigures its own misunderstanding as the correlative of its rhetorical nature; that is, of its ‘rhetoricity’” (de Man 1983, 136).

On the implicit ambiguity of the terms “writing” and “reading” that eludes the common distinction between “the logic of consumption (reading) versus production (writing),” see Muckelbauer 2000, 39, n. 1.

“Et le problème est de réintroduire la rhétorique, l’orateur, la lutte du discours à l’intérieur du champ de l’analyse; non pas pour faire, comme les linguistes, une analyse systématique des procédés rhétoriques, mais pour étudier le discours, même le discours de vérité, comme des procédés rhétoriques, des manières de vaincre, de produire des événements, de produire des décisions, de produire des batailles, de produire des victoires. Pour ‘rhetoriser’ la philoso-
This passage is part of the discussion following Foucault’s lecture “La vérité et les formes juridiques,” presented at a conference in Rio de Janeiro in May 1973. The discussion has not been included in the English translation (Foucault 2000b).

15 See, for example, IJsseling’s claim “that every text . . . possesses its own kind of truth” (184).

16 For a different account that focuses on parrhēsia as “an activity with one other person, a practice for two” (Foucault 2011, 5), see Posselt 2013.

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Works cited


