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[Ward Blondé](#)\*

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Article

# Semantic Ascent and Pedagogical Misdirection in the Platonic Dialogues

Ward Blondé 

Independent researcher; wardblonde@gmail.com

## Abstract

This article argues that the Platonic dialogues presuppose a structured, multi-level pedagogical framework that governs how key concepts such as soul, justice, and warfare acquire progressively higher meanings. I propose that this framework can be reconstructed as a “Circle Ladder,” consisting of five successive Circle Types—Public, Misleading, Academic, Philosophers’, and Heavenly Circles—combined with three interpretive systems: the Public, Word, and Circle Systems. Together these yield seven interpretive levels that systematically reorganize the semantics of recurrent Platonic code-words across dialogues, most centrally in the *Republic*. The model explains otherwise puzzling features of Platonic pedagogy, initiation, misdirection, and self-reference and suggests that the dialogues reflect a tradition of esoteric instruction whose historical reality merits reconsideration.

**Keywords:** Plato; esotericism; mysticism; textual analysis; Neoplatonism

## 1. Introduction

The Platonic dialogues have long been recognized as pedagogical texts rather than systematic treatises. Their dramatic form, recurrent use of irony, and frequent resistance to straightforward doctrinal summary have given rise to a wide range of interpretive approaches, including developmental readings (Vlastos 1991; Kraut 1992), literary (Griswold 2010) and dramatic (Gill 2012) approaches, doctrinal interpretations (Ross 1951; Annas 1981), and esoteric (Strauss 1988) or pedagogical (Slezák 1999) readings. Yet despite this diversity, a persistent difficulty remains: central concepts such as *soul*, *justice*, *knowledge*, and *warfare* repeatedly appear to shift meaning both within and across dialogues, often without explicit clarification. These semantic instabilities are commonly attributed either to Plato’s evolving philosophical views (Vlastos 1991; Kraut 1992; Fine 1999), to the dramatic and dialogical context of individual dialogues (Rowe 2007; Griswold 2010; Gill 2012), or to the intrinsic limitations of language in expressing philosophical insight (Plato 1997, Seventh Letter 341c–d; Annas 1981; McCabe 2000). While each of these approaches captures an important aspect of the dialogues, none fully explains the systematic recurrence of identical terms acquiring sharply different meanings across pedagogical contexts.

This article proposes that these semantic transformations are governed by an underlying pedagogical framework presupposed by the dialogues themselves. Rather than treating conceptual instability as accidental or merely literary, I argue that the dialogues operate with multiple, hierarchically ordered interpretive levels that are intentionally activated at different stages of philosophical training. The dialogues are thus not only philosophical investigations but also instruments of instruction whose meanings unfold differently depending on the reader’s level of initiation.

To reconstruct this framework, I introduce the model of a “Circle Ladder,” a structured progression through five successive Circle Types: Public Circles, Misleading Circles, Academic Circles, Philosophers’ Circles, and Heavenly Circles. These Circle Types correspond to distinct social and pedagogical settings in which students learn, discuss, and reinterpret shared vocabulary. The Circle Ladder is complemented by three interacting interpretive systems: the Public System, in which words are understood according to everyday usage; the Word System, in which recurrent terms function as

codewords with deeper meanings; and the Circle System, in which those meanings are further reorganized according to the student's position within the Circle Ladder. Together, these systems generate seven interpretive levels that systematically restructure the semantics of key Platonic concepts.

A central feature of the model is the role of what I call "Misleading Circles." These are non-public instructional settings in which students are deliberately guided toward the partial, unstable, and deceptive interpretations of the Word and Circle Systems. Rather than representing pedagogical failure or moral corruption, Misleading Circles function as a necessary transitional stage: they train students to recognize the limits of using interpretive levels and to detect self-reference, misdirection, and semantic instability within philosophical discourse. This reinterpretation offers a new perspective on the recurrent Platonic theme of false wisdom (Dodds 1951; Brickhouse and Smith 1994; McCabe 2000).

The *Republic* occupies a central place in this analysis, not only because it contains the proposed framework, but also because it presents the most explicit reflections on education, justice, leadership, and ascent. Read through the lens of the Circle Ladder, familiar elements such as the educational program and the Allegory of the Cave acquire a unified pedagogical interpretation. Concepts that appear exaggerated or metaphorical can instead be understood as stable codewords whose meanings shift systematically across interpretive levels.

This article develops a restricted version of a broader interpretive framework presented in Blondé 2025, omitting speculative initiation stages and focusing on reconstructible semantic and pedagogical structures in the dialogues themselves. Methodologically, it prioritizes internal reconstruction over exhaustive engagement with the secondary literature. The proposed framework is derived primarily from close reading, semantic patterning, and cross-dialogical comparison rather than from historical testimony or later philosophical synthesis. While parallels with later traditions, including Neoplatonism, are noted, the argument does not presuppose their influence (Dillon 1977; Hadot 1995; Gerson 2005). Instead, it advances the claim that the dialogues themselves encode a coherent pedagogical structure that has not yet been fully articulated.

Finally, the article suggests that the coherence, recurrence, and explanatory power of the reconstructed framework warrant renewed consideration of its historical reality. While definitive historical conclusions lie beyond the scope of this study, the Circle Ladder model opens a path toward reinterpreting the Platonic dialogues not merely as philosophical texts, but as traces of a lived instructional tradition whose pedagogical and secretive logic can still be recovered.

## 2. Methodological Assumptions

### 2.1. Internal Reconstruction

The present study focuses on internal reconstruction rather than its external historical consequences. Its primary object is not the biography of the Platonic author, the institutional history of the Academy, or the sociological reality of ancient educational practices, but the structural coherence of meaning within the Platonic dialogues themselves (Kahn 1996; Szlezák 1999). The proposed "Circle Ladder" is reconstructed exclusively from recurring patterns in the Platonic use of language, dialogue structure, and pedagogical staging.

This method assumes that the Platonic dialogues are deliberately composed literary-philosophical artifacts whose meaning cannot be reduced to isolated doctrinal claims (Kahn 1996; Szlezák 1999; Rowe 2007). Instead, interpretive weight is placed on systematic semantic shifts: the same terms—such as soul, sports, medicine, or war—are deployed across dialogues in ways that presuppose differing levels of understanding in their audience. Rather than attributing these shifts to inconsistency or development alone, this study treats them as clues to an internally coherent set of suppositions about an external Circle Ladder, without making historical speculations about it.

## 2.2. Semantic Ascent

A central methodological assumption of this article is that Platonic pedagogy operates through what may be called semantic ascent: the progressive reorientation of familiar terms toward always different abstract, technical, or reflexive meanings, a pattern familiar from Platonic pedagogical structures such as Diotima's ladder (Symposium 210a-212b, Plato 1997<sup>1</sup>; Nussbaum 1986; Burnyeat 2000; Fine 2008). In the dialogues, students are not primarily introduced to new vocabulary; rather, they are trained to reinterpret existing vocabulary in light of deeper conceptual frameworks.

This phenomenon is widely acknowledged in Platonic scholarship, particularly in discussions of dialectic, education (*paideia*), and the role of analogy and metaphor (Jaeger 1945; Mackenzie 1981; Burnyeat 1999). However, it is rarely treated as a systematic organizing principle across the corpus. Terms such as being, beauty, knowledge, or soul do not simply receive definitions; they undergo semantic transformation as the interlocutor's epistemic position changes.

The present study treats these transformations as indexed to interpretive levels rather than to chronological development or dramatic context alone. Semantic ascent is thus not merely a feature of individual arguments, but a structural mechanism by which the Platonic dialogues differentiate audiences and stages learning. The interpretive systems distinguished here—the Public, Word, and Circle Systems—are proposed as analytical tools for tracking this ascent with greater precision.

## 2.3. Pedagogical Esotericism and Extra-Textual Knowledge

The interpretive framework proposed in this article presupposes a graduated form of esotericism. In the early stages of the Circle Ladder—corresponding to the Public and Misleading Circles—esotericism operates primarily at a procedural and semantic level. At these stages, no determinate body of hidden doctrine is presupposed. Instead, students are guided through controlled ambiguity, partial insight, and semantic ascent, learning to reinterpret familiar terms without yet being granted access to stable theoretical knowledge.

This situation changes, however, at the level of the Academic Circles. At this stage, the Circle Ladder presupposes the existence of structured bodies of knowledge—such as medicine, warfare, or mathematics—that are not fully articulated within the Platonic dialogues themselves. The dialogues, on this view, deliberately point beyond themselves to other forms of instruction, a view consistent with the explicit Platonic remarks on the limits of written instruction (cf. *Phaedrus* 274b–278e; *Seventh Letter*). Accordingly, the Circle Ladder model implies a principled incompleteness of the written dialogues. What is “hidden” is not a secret doctrine embedded cryptically in the text, but advanced knowledge that is intentionally withheld from the written medium and reserved for appropriately prepared students within higher Circle Types.

## 3. The Three Interpretive Systems

The Platonic dialogues make use of a relatively limited set of frequently recurring terms drawn from a small number of broadly accessible domains. The most important domains are arts, disciplines, health, household, literature, metaphysics, mysticism, professions, psychology, and state affairs. Examples of such terms are medicine, shoemaker, sports, and soul, and they will be called *Public Subjects*.

### 3.1. The Public System

The first and most accessible interpretive framework presupposed by the Platonic dialogues is what may be called the Public System. This system corresponds to the ordinary, everyday understanding of the dialogues and the Public Subjects. Terms such as *soul*, *sports*, *war*, *shoemaker*, or *medicine* are understood in broadly conventional ways, reflecting common social usage rather than advanced interpretation. This results in the following claim: no passage in the Platonic dialogues escapes the

<sup>1</sup> English translations of the Platonic works are from Complete Works, ed. J. M. Cooper, assoc. ed. D. S. Hutchinson (Hackett, 1997), modified where necessary.

Public System. First of all, the statements that can be interpreted according to the Word and Circle Systems are typically surrounded by many statements that only make sense according to the Public System. This makes deliberate dilution the primary Platonic technique to hide the interpretive layers. In addition, generalization, abstraction, comparison, metaphors, literary digressions, drama, exaggeration, and fanciful reasoning are frequently used to conceal the more advanced interpretations of the Word and Circle Systems. Consequently, no passage appears as incomprehensible code language. It is the task of the student to discover the non-public interpretive layers independently, without ugly hints like 'the soul is a shoe.' The Public System is therefore reconstructed from the surface intelligibility of the Platonic dialogues.

### 3.2. *The Word System*

The second interpretive framework presupposed by the Platonic dialogues will be called the *Word System*. It is a highly restricted and self-referential system in which the practice of coding concepts by means of ordinary terms is itself encoded using those same terms. Rather than introducing a wide range of hidden doctrines, the Word System operates with a minimal conceptual distinction between *codewords* and *encoded concepts*.

This distinction is expressed through a stable polarity among frequently recurring Public Subjects. Terms with negative, earthly, or derivative connotations function as codewords for the notion *codeword*, while terms with positive, exalted, or original connotations function as codewords for the notion *encoded concept*. Concretely, Public Subjects such as *reflection, deception, darkness, body, the mortal, the many, the changing, the becoming, and the visible* systematically indicate the level of codewords, whereas *original, truth, light, soul, the eternal, the one, the unchanging, the being, and the invisible* indicate the level of encoded concepts.

The asymmetry between these two levels is significant: the Word System contains far more codewords than encoded concepts. This semantic economy is reflected in the recurrent opposition between *the many* and *the one*, which does not here designate a metaphysical thesis but a structural feature of the coding system itself.

The Word System is nowhere presented explicitly as a doctrine within the Platonic dialogues. It must instead be reconstructed from persistent patterns of opposition, substitution, and semantic alignment, and from its indispensable role in enabling the more elaborate interpretations characteristic of the Circle System.

### 3.3. *The Circle System*

The third and most advanced framework is the Circle System. Unlike the Public and Word Systems, the Circle System presupposes an explicit pedagogical structure—the Circle Ladder. Within this system, key terms are interpreted not merely through generic concepts but institutionally, as referring to positions, roles, or stages within the Circle Ladder as witnessed by the students.

The Circle System is an extension of the Word System and is therefore hard to discover without hypothesizing the existence of the Word System. It initially extends the Word System with a single concept: practicing with codewords. The following Public Subjects are most often used to encode this concept: sports, jurisdiction, medicine, warfare, and playing music. From these, the meaning can also be inferred of codewords such as battlefield, court, doctor, gymnasium, injury, jurist, musician, sick person, and wrestling. They concern the teachers in dialoguing with codewords, the Circles of students in which codewords are practiced, and the shortcomings of those students.

This shows that the Circle System possesses an almost endless source of encodable concepts. By organizing the Circles of students in such a way that concepts such as teacher, practice Circle, and failing student actually arise, new encodable concepts can be created. In the opposite direction, connections can be made between concepts that naturally arise in Circles of students on the one hand, and Public Subjects on the other. For example, shoemaker means 'person who introduces new codewords in a Circle' and shoe then logically means 'codeword.' Likewise, the meaning of 'piece of music' and 'clothing' can be derived from the codewords 'playing music' and 'weaving', which

both designate 'creating a text or dialogue that uses codewords.' And warfare can be deliberately organized as a discussion contest between two Circles, with winners and losers. Such interpretations are not isolated inventions but follow from the consistent reuse of the same Public Subjects to encode instructional activity across dialogues.

#### 4. The Five Circle Types on the Ladder

The Circle System presupposes a structured pedagogical reality in which students advance through a sequence of distinct Circle Types. These Circles are not merely metaphorical but correspond to different modes of instruction, access, and evaluation, each governed by its own norms of discourse and interpretation. Together they constitute what has been termed the Circle Ladder.

##### 4.1. Public Circles

Public Circles function as the entry point to the Circle Ladder. They are openly accessible and designed to attract potential students by engaging them in philosophical discussion without requiring prior initiation. Instruction in these Circles is guided by an experienced philosopher who has himself progressed through the different Circle Types. The familiar image of Socrates conversing with young Athenians—for example, as portrayed in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*—may be used illustratively as an instantiation of such a Public Circle. Whether or not this identification is historically exact, it captures the essential function of Public Circles as sites of recruitment rather than advanced instruction.

##### 4.2. Misleading Circles

The Misleading Circles occupy a central position within the Circle Ladder and form the primary pedagogical setting presupposed by the Platonic dialogues. Admission to these Circles marks the beginning of a prolonged and isolated instructional route, plausibly extending over at least a year, during which students are exposed to a dense array of phenomena encoded through Public Subject terms. These encodings are generated by the combined operation of the Word System and the Circle System.

Within the Misleading Circles, students move from maximal uncertainty about the structure of the Circle Ladder toward increasingly elaborate—yet still partial and distorted—understandings of it. They acquire what appears to be knowledge, but this knowledge primarily concerns the manipulation of non-public interpretive systems rather than mastery of the Public System. Advancement within the Misleading Circles therefore does not coincide with genuine ascent along the Circle Ladder.

A defining feature of this stage is that further progress requires a conversion. Students must abandon the desire to excel endlessly in the Circle System itself and return to speaking and listening according to the Public System. The Platonic dialogues themselves model this requirement: every passage remains interpretable within the Public System, even when it simultaneously sustains more advanced, non-public readings. Students who begin to grasp these non-public systems are initially praised and characterized as beautiful or gifted, but those who persist in exploiting them for admiration, dominance, or self-display are consistently condemned in the Platonic dialogues.

Crucially, this condemnation is itself encoded within the Circle System. A paradigmatic example is the term *sophist*, which at the Circle-System level designates a non-converted student who remains trapped in the Misleading Circles. In this way, the Circle System is—at least in some Platonic dialogues—self-rejecting: it generates its own criteria for repudiation.

Any realistic reconstruction of the Misleading Circles must proceed hypothetically, mirroring the epistemic situation of the students themselves. Both the interpreter and the student must posit provisional models in the absence of transparent guidance. Among the most significant hypotheses suggested by the dialogues are the following:

- students can acquire money and visible tokens of honor during discussions;
- beginning students are systematically favored and rewarded, especially when they show aptitude for non-public interpretive systems;

- students remain largely ignorant of the broader structure of the Circle Ladder, including:
  - the advancement of other students,
  - the criteria of genuine success,
  - the existence of higher Circle Types,
  - the mechanisms of evaluation and direction,
  - the fate of students who disappear,
  - and even the identity or existence of their own mentor.

#### 4.3. Academic Circles

Admission to the Academic Circles marks a decisive transition. Here students receive genuine training in specific domains of knowledge, such as warfare, medicine, or governance. The contrast with the Misleading Circles is stark: knowledge of warfare, for example, no longer concerns winning verbal contests with rival Circles but involves substantive mastery of the discipline itself. The Academic Circles contain the true hidden knowledge of the Circle Ladder, and this knowledge is conspicuously absent from the Platonic dialogues, which do not purport to transmit it directly.

#### 4.4. Philosophers' Circles

Philosophers in the Philosophers' Circles have completed their academic formation and possess a synoptic perspective on the Circle Ladder. This overview corresponds roughly to the epistemic distinctions articulated in the line analogy of *Republic* 509d–511e, which differentiates Imagination (Eikasia), Belief (Pistis), Thinking (Dianoia), and Understanding (Noesis). These four cognitive states align approximately with the Public Circles, Misleading Circles, Academic Circles, and Philosophers' Circles, respectively. Philosophers are frequently encoded in the Circle System using terms such as *god* or *divine*, reflecting their elevated perspective without identifying them as literally divine beings. The philosophers secretly guide the whole Circle Ladder, without necessarily being present in the Misleading Circles themselves.

#### 4.5. Heavenly Circles

The association of philosophers with divine attributes, while stopping short of deification, creates a structural need for a final Circle Type. The Heavenly Circles complete the Circle Ladder by providing a genuinely divine domain, corresponding to participation in the afterlife. The existence of such Circles is consistent with the persistent promotion of postmortem existence in the Platonic dialogues and allows the Circle Ladder to extend beyond mortal pedagogy into a fully eschatological framework.

#### 4.6. The Allegory of the Cave and the Circle Ladder

The Allegory of the Cave presents prisoners living deep inside an underground dwelling, chained in such a way that they can only look straight ahead (*Republic* 7, 514a-517a). Behind them burns a fire, and between the fire and the prisoners various objects are carried that cast shadows on the wall before them. When the prisoners converse, they take these shadows to be reality itself. Honors are bestowed upon those who are quickest at recognizing the passing shadows, who best remember their sequence, or who can most accurately predict what will appear next.

One prisoner is freed and compelled to ascend. He is shown the fire, the objects that caused the shadows, the passage upward, the world outside the cave, and finally the sun itself. Initially blinded, he longs to return to his former condition. Once his sight adjusts, however, he no longer values the honors associated with shadow-recognition. Yet Socrates insists that this liberated individual must descend again, exposing himself to ridicule. The remaining prisoners conclude that ascent only damages the eyes and resolve to kill anyone who attempts to force them upward. They prefer to continue their verbal struggle over the shadow of justice in their subterranean courtroom.

Socrates observes that there are two kinds of blindness: one that occurs when ascending toward the light, and one that occurs when descending back into darkness. A reasonable person, he notes, is more inclined to laugh at the former than at the latter.

The allegory can be systematically translated into the Circle Ladder framework. The prisoners correspond to students in the Misleading Circles; the carried objects correspond to Public-Subject codewords; and the shadows correspond to the endlessly shifting Circle-System interpretations attached to them. The competitive distribution of honors and the verbal struggle are literal features of the Misleading Circles as reconstructed here. The freed prisoner corresponds to a student who ascends into the Academic Circles and later the Philosophers' Circles.

When such a student returns to the Misleading Circles, he has lost fluency in Circle-System interpretation and therefore appears incompetent, even childish, to those still immersed in it. If he attempts to guide others upward, he is perceived as threatening or unfit and is expelled. This explains both the hostility toward philosophical return and the structural necessity of that return within the Circle Ladder.

## 5. The Seven Interpretive Levels

The seven interpretive levels proposed in this article are not explicitly encoded as such in any single Platonic passage. They are, rather, hypothetical and speculative reconstructions intended to systematize recurring pedagogical and semantic patterns across the dialogues. Nowhere do the dialogues present a fully articulated hierarchy of seven levels of understanding. What comes closest to such a structure is Diotima's ladder of love in *Symposium* 210a–212b, which traces a progressive ascent from attachment to a single beautiful body, through increasingly abstract objects of beauty, culminating in the vision of Beauty itself. The present model should therefore be understood as an extrapolation rather than a direct exegetical claim.

The seven levels represent distinct modes of understanding presupposed by the Circle System and reflect different relationships to the Public, Word, and Circle interpretive systems. They are defined as follows:

- Level 1: Persons possessing only Public-System knowledge
- Level 2: Misled students with only Word-System knowledge
- Level 3: Misled students with Circle-System knowledge
- Level 4: Converted students within a Misleading Circle
- Level 5: Converted students possessing academic knowledge
- Level 6: Initiated philosophers
- Level 7: All-knowing gods

Progression through these interpretive levels broadly parallels progression through the five Circle Types—Public, Misleading, Academic, Philosophers', and Heavenly Circles—but the correspondence is not rigid. Advancement may depend on the intelligence, imagination, and responsiveness of individual students. This variability is especially pronounced in the early stages: the first four interpretive levels may be partially or unevenly adopted while a student remains within the Public and Misleading Circles.

The interpretive levels are best illustrated through concrete examples of Public Subjects that admit multiple readings depending on the level of understanding.

### 5.1. Example: Beauty

Level 1: What humans ordinarily call beautiful

Level 2: A text or dialogue whose higher interpretation conveys a valuable message

Level 3: A beginning student who displays insight into a higher interpretive system

Level 4: A student whose texts and dialogues sound natural according to the Public System

Level 5: Academic knowledge acquired in the Academic Circles

Level 6: An entity that genuinely possesses a good-making property

Level 7: What the gods call beautiful

### 5.2. Example: Sick Person

- Level 1: What humans ordinarily call a sick person
- Level 2–3: Someone who misuses codewords by focusing on the Public System
- Level 4: Someone who misuses codewords by failing to focus on the Public System
- Level 5: Someone who requires medical treatment
- Level 6: An entity that must be freed from a harmful property
- Level 7: What the gods call a sick person

### 5.3. Example: Truth

- Level 1: What humans ordinarily call truth
- Level 2–3: The higher-order interpretation of a statement
- Level 4: The meaning of a statement according to the Public System
- Level 5: A taught statement
- Level 6: A fully examined statement
- Level 7: What the gods call truth

### 5.4. Example: Upbringing

- Level 1-2: What humans ordinarily call upbringing
- Level 3: What is taught in the Public Circles in preparation for the non-public Circles
- Level 4: What is taught in Public or Misleading Circles in preparation for higher Circles
- Level 5-6: What is taught in preparation for life
- Level 7: What the gods call upbringing

### 5.5. Example: The Visible

- Level 1: What humans ordinarily call visible
- Level 2: The codewords and their Public-System interpretation
- Level 3: The Public Circles
- Level 4: The current Circle in which a student finds himself
- Level 5–6: The changing, observable world
- Level 7: What the gods call visible

These examples illustrate the structural irony faced by students who attain Level 4 understanding within the Misleading Circles. Such students have come to recognize that non-public interpretive systems distort meaning and must therefore return to the Public System, which corresponds to Level 1 understanding. In doing so, however, they may lose the ability to recognize further implicit confirmations of their conversion, since these confirmations are encoded precisely in the systems they have renounced. Despite this epistemic tension, such a conversion is a necessary condition for further ascent along the Circle Ladder.

## 6. Signs of Interpretive Layers

### 6.1. Public-System Evidence

The Platonic dialogues themselves provide abundant Public-System evidence that language admits of multiple interpretive layers and that the misuse of such layers is both possible and dangerous. This issue is not merely presented as a technical concern of semantics, but as a central problem of education, persuasion, and philosophical method.

A clear and explicit example occurs in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates warns against deceptive re-description under the guise of expert rhetoric:

ὅτε δὴ σπουδῆ σε πείθοιμι, συντιθεῖς λόγον ἔπαινον κατὰ τοῦ ὄνου, ἵππον ἐπονομάζων

“But if I were seriously trying to convince you, having composed a speech in praise of the donkey in which I called it a horse”  
(Phaedrus 260b)

The example is intentionally absurd, yet its structure is precise: a speaker exploits a listener’s ignorance by relabeling one thing as another, relying on persuasive description rather than shared understanding. The danger lies not in falsehood alone, but in the uncontrolled substitution of names and meanings, which allows persuasion to proceed independently of truth. This passage functions as a Public-System warning against exactly the kind of interpretive manipulation that more sophisticated students might mistake for insight.

More generally, the dialogues are saturated with references to images, imitations, reflections, likenesses, and shadows, often introduced through extended comparisons that strain ordinary usage.<sup>2</sup> Such comparisons frequently invite readers to move beyond literal meaning, while simultaneously emphasizing the risk of confusing image with reality, or resemblance with identity. The recurrence of these motifs prepares the reader to expect layered interpretation, even while repeatedly cautioning against premature or uncritical ascent.

This concern culminates most explicitly in the *Cratylus*, a dialogue devoted almost entirely to the correctness of names (Sedley 2003). There, Plato stages a systematic exploration of whether words naturally reflect their objects, whether naming is conventional, and how easily etymological ingenuity can slide into arbitrariness. The dialogue demonstrates, on the Public-System level, that names can be made to say too much, and that interpretive excess may masquerade as philosophical depth. Importantly, *Cratylus* does not resolve the issue by endorsing a hidden doctrine of naming, but by exposing both the power and the limits of semantic explanation.

Taken together, these passages indicate that the Platonic dialogues do not merely permit layered interpretation; they actively thematize its possibility, utility, and danger. Long before any non-Public interpretive framework is reconstructed, the dialogues themselves insist that meaning can be displaced, inverted, or inflated—and that philosophical education consists in learning when such moves illuminate, and when they mislead.

## 6.2. Heterogeneous Domains at a Single Evaluative Level

A further sign that the Platonic dialogues presuppose multiple interpretive layers is the systematic placement of conceptually heterogeneous domains on a single evaluative level. Practices that are clearly distinct within the Public System—such as medicine, jurisdiction, physical training, and music—are repeatedly grouped together, praised or criticized in parallel, and treated as functionally equivalent. From the standpoint of ordinary interpretation, these juxtapositions appear strained or even perplexing. From the perspective of layered interpretation, however, they strongly suggest a shared higher-order meaning.

In the *Republic*, Socrates explicitly unites medicine and law when he presents the need for skilled doctors and lawyers as a sign of poor education and moral disorder in a city (*Republic* 405a). Within the Public System, medicine aims at bodily health and law at civic order, and there is no obvious reason to condemn them together. Their conjunction becomes intelligible only if both are interpreted as corrective practices that intervene when an underlying educational process has failed. On this reading, medicine and jurisdiction do not primarily refer to their public functions but encode a deeper concept: remedial regulation within a malfunctioning instructional environment.

The same interpretive leveling appears when Socrates remarks that physical training is “mixed with medicine” (*Republic* 406b). Publicly understood, gymnastics and medicine pursue different ends—strength versus health. Yet Plato repeatedly allows their boundaries to blur. This suggests that both are operating as codewords with the same higher-order meaning.

Most revealingly, Socrates states early in the dialogue that education must begin with music and gymnastics (*Republic* 376e). Music and physical training here function as foundational practices

<sup>2</sup> On the pedagogical role and ambiguity of Platonic images and likenesses, see e.g. Halliwell (2002), chs. 1–3.

that shape the soul and body before any higher instruction can occur. The fact that education merely begins with these domains implicitly signals that they are preliminary rather than ultimate. From the standpoint of the Circle System, this aligns with their role as encoding the same most elementary form of structured practice in the Misleading Circles: learning how to engage in rule-governed discussion activity, imitation, correction, and improvement.

Taken together, these passages show that Plato consistently treats medicine, jurisdiction, music, and gymnastics as occupying the same functional position, despite their Public heterogeneity. This is difficult to explain if the dialogues are read strictly within the Public System. It becomes intelligible, however, if these domains encode a single Circle-System concept: the formative stage in which students learn to improve themselves in mastering the Circle System through disciplined, rule-bound practice, prior to the acquisition of genuine knowledge. Their repeated conjunction thus serves as a detectable signal that a deeper interpretive layer is in play—one in which disparate Public Subjects converge upon a shared pedagogical meaning.

### 6.3. *The Republic's "Weird Proposals" and Interpretive Dislocation*

One persistent difficulty in reading the *Republic* arises from a series of proposals that appear, under ordinary interpretation, implausible, authoritarian, or deliberately provocative. These include, among others, the communal rearing of children without knowledge of biological parentage, the abolition of the private family among the guardians, the regulation of poetry and music to an extreme degree, the deliberate use of noble falsehoods, the exclusion of most citizens from political decision-making, and the claim that philosophers—often socially awkward or politically ineffective—should rule the city. Taken at face value within the Public System, these proposals strain credibility and have frequently been treated as ironic exaggerations, thought experiments, or symptoms of Plato's alleged political extremism (Popper 1945; Strauss 1964; Ferrari 2005).

The Misleading Circles encoded by a Circle System offer an alternative explanation for why such proposals are formulated in the way they are. On this interpretation, the *Republic* is not primarily concerned with designing a workable political constitution, but with encoding pedagogical structures and instructional dynamics that operate within non-public Circles of students. The proposals that appear "weird" under the Public System become intelligible once their reference shifts from civic institutions to instructional ones.

For example, the proposal that children be raised without knowledge of their parents ceases to describe a literal social policy and instead encodes the epistemic situation of students in Misleading Circles, who are intentionally kept ignorant of their mentors, evaluators, and institutional position within the Circle Ladder. Similarly, the abolition of private property among guardians corresponds not to economic communism but to personnel or advanced students who have a special, rule-enforcing role in the Misleading Circles, but who do not accumulate money or tokens of honor. The heavy regulation of poetry and music reflects not aesthetic censorship but the controlled introduction of morally appropriate textual forms and discursive practices suitable to specific stages of training.

The noble falsehood functions in the same way. Read publicly, it presents an ethically troubling justification for mass deception. Read through the Circle System, it encodes the pedagogical necessity of misdirection in early stages of instruction. The repeated insistence that philosophers are unfit for ordinary political life but necessary for rule reflects the idea that the Misleading Circles are guided indirectly by the Philosophers' Circles through intermediate personnel or Academic-Circle students.

What unites these proposals is not their political content but their systematic resistance to straightforward Public-System interpretation. Each becomes increasingly coherent when understood as referring to instructional roles, epistemic constraints, and stages of advancement within the Circle Ladder. Their function within the dialogue is therefore diagnostic: they mark points where readers are forced either to abandon the expectation of literal political theory or to hypothesize the presence of a non-public interpretive framework governing the text.

#### 6.4. Self-Referential and Negatively Qualified Codewords

Certain passages in the Platonic dialogues employ highly specific, lexically marked expressions that appear disproportionate, awkward, or even inappropriate relative to their immediate argumentative context. While such expressions are often dismissed as stylistic ornament, comic relief, or incidental imagery, their distribution and framing suggest a more systematic function. These expressions operate as *self-referential, qualified codewords*: they do not merely refer to an external object, but reflexively comment on modes of discourse, interpretation, or pedagogical misalignment within the dialogue itself. They strain interpretation within the Public System, while exerting pressure on students operating within the Word and Circle Systems.

The following three examples illustrate this phenomenon across different dialogues.

##### 1. Attic pastries

In *Republic* 404d, Socrates refers to refined Attic pastries in the context of bodily training and moderation:

οὐκοῦν καὶ Ἀττικῶν περμάτων τὰς δοκούσας εἶναι εὐπαθείας·

“What about the reputed delights of Attic pastries?”

(*Republic* 404d)

The culinary specificity of this reference is striking. The argument concerns the dangers of excessive refinement in diet and lifestyle, yet instead of remaining at the level of general principles, Socrates invokes a culturally marked, almost trivial luxury. The phrase is not merely illustrative; it is lexically excessive relative to its explanatory role.

Within the Public System, the passage reads as a mildly ironic condemnation of gourmet indulgence. However, for students operating within the Word and Circle Systems, the specificity invites layered interpretation: the pastry risks becoming a bearer of hidden meaning simply by virtue of its conspicuous detail. The Circle System may then multiply interpretations, reading the pastry as a sign for any number of refined but corrupting practices in the Circle reality.

The context and the evaluative qualification—“reputed delights”—undercut such interpretive inflation by stressing excess. The codeword does not reward interpretive elaboration; instead, it subtly exposes the tendency to overvalue lexically rich but philosophically marginal details. In this way, the passage functions as a self-referential signal: an example of a term that is *nice to know* but philosophically dispensable, thereby testing whether the student can resist interpretive excess.

##### 2. Flatulence and crude remedies

A more forceful corrective appears shortly thereafter, when Socrates discusses inappropriate medical practices:

ῥευμάτων τε καὶ πνευμάτων ὥσπερ λίμνας ἐμπιπλαμένους φύσας τε καὶ κατάρρους

“with flows and winds, being filled up like lakes, with bloatings and catarrhs”

(*Republic* 405d)

Here the codeword is not refined but deliberately unpleasant. The sudden introduction of bodily emissions disrupts the tone of philosophical discussion and resists allegorical elevation. Unlike the Attic pastries, this expression cannot easily be aestheticized or spiritualized.

For students entrenched in the Word or Circle Systems, the term functions as an irritant. It defeats the impulse to assign elevated symbolic content and instead confronts the reader with interpretive discomfort. The pedagogical effect is negative but therapeutic: the expression operates like a philosophical emetic, purging the reader of excessive reliance on codewords as vehicles of insight.

The context reinforces this function. The passage criticizes practitioners who misuse techniques and invent names for them without understanding underlying principles. The crude vocabulary mirrors this misuse at the level of language. In doing so, it self-referentially enacts the very error it condemns, thereby inviting the attentive student to abandon such practices altogether.

### 3. Beast-like sound

A similar strategy appears in the *Laws*, where musical education and imitation is discussed:

ἀνευ λόγου γιγνόμενον ῥυθμὸν τε καὶ ἁρμονίαν . . . ὅτι τὸ τοιοῦτόν γε πολλῆς ἀγροικίας μεστὸν πᾶν, ὅπόσον τάχους τε καὶ ἀπταισίας καὶ φωνῆς θηριώδους σφόδρα φίλον

*“Rhythm and harmony produced without speech . . . that such a thing is entirely full of boorishness, insofar as it is excessively devoted to speed, technical precision, and beast-like sound.”*

(*Laws* 669e)

The expression is marked not by vulgarity but by stylistic incongruity. In a discussion of orderly musical education, the imitation of animal noises appears misplaced and even faintly ridiculous. The term is neither metaphorically transparent nor symbolically inviting.

Once again, the codeword resists elevation within the Word System and frustrates circular interpretive elaboration. Its very awkwardness serves as a signal that something has gone wrong at the level of discourse.

#### Interpretive function

Taken together, these examples suggest a pattern. The codewords are:

- lexically conspicuous,
- evaluatively marked as excessive, unpleasant, or inappropriate,
- self-referential (codewords for ‘codeword’),
- contextually qualified (creating a coded relation to misled students).

They therefore occupy an intermediate position between the Word and Circle Systems. While they invite attention as possible codewords, their qualification prevents stable symbolic assignment. Their function is not to disclose hidden content but to provoke interpretive self-correction.

Within the framework of the Circle Ladder, such passages are best understood as targeting Level 3 students—those who use higher-order interpretation without restraint. By frustrating interpretive proliferation, the passages encourage a transition to Level 4, where the student abandons both the Word and Circle Systems in favor of renewed attention to the Public System.

In this way, these self-referential codewords serve as signs of interpretive layers without constituting an esoteric doctrine. They diagnose misaligned interpretation rather than transmitting concealed knowledge, and their pedagogical force lies precisely in their resistance to being decoded.

## 7. Historical Hypothesis

The reconstruction proposed in this article is primarily internal and interpretive. It proceeds from patterns within the Platonic dialogues themselves and does not presuppose independent historical confirmation. Nevertheless, the model raises an unavoidable historical question: if the dialogues presuppose a structured pedagogical progression with restricted access, what social or intellectual practice could plausibly have sustained it? The following remarks therefore outline a historical hypothesis, not as a conclusion, but as a framework for further investigation.

The core hypothesis is modest. It holds that the Platonic dialogues reflect, in encoded form, a real but limited pedagogical tradition in classical Greece that made systematic use of staged instruction, selective disclosure, and controlled misunderstanding. This tradition need not have been uniform, centrally organized, or doctrinally fixed. It need only have been stable enough for its practices to be recognizable to advanced participants and reproducible across generations. The Circle Ladder is thus not posited as a formal institution with clearly demarcated membership, but as a recurring educational pattern embedded in conversational, civic, and instructional settings.

Within this framework, the Public Circles correspond naturally to the well-attested culture of open philosophical conversation in classical Athens: discussions in the marketplace, gymnasia, private homes, and public gatherings. Nothing in this stage requires secrecy or special initiation. The Misleading Circles, by contrast, presuppose restricted access and prolonged participation. The

dialogues themselves provide ample literary evidence for small, recurring groups of interlocutors who engage in sustained discussion over time, often marked by rivalry, prestige, and competition for recognition. Whether such Circles were formally organized or informally constituted remains an open question.

The Academic Circles, as reconstructed here, represent a further escalation: environments in which genuine technical or scientific knowledge is transmitted. The existence of such circles in antiquity is uncontroversial, as evidenced by medical training, military instruction, mathematical schools, and rhetorical education (Jaeger 1945; Marrou 1956). What remains speculative is the claim that access to these circles was conditional upon a prior pedagogical conversion—namely, the abandonment of competitive display and the disciplined use of ordinary language. This claim cannot be verified independently, but it coheres with the repeated Platonic insistence that true learning requires a reorientation of desire and attention.

The Philosophers' Circles occupy the most conjectural position in the model. They are not identified with a historical academy in the institutional sense, nor with a clearly articulated doctrine. Rather, they designate a stage at which participants are capable of reflecting on the entire pedagogical structure itself and ruling it from above. The dialogues' recurrent association of philosophers with the divine, the eternal, and the intelligible suggests that such a stage was conceived as rare and exceptional, even if its precise social realization remains opaque.

The appeal to Greek mysticism as a historical background must be handled with particular caution.<sup>3</sup> The hypothesis advanced here does not claim that the Circle Ladder derives from any specific mystery cult, nor that the Platonic author belonged to an identifiable mystical community in the narrow sense. Instead, it proposes that the dialogues reflect a broader Greek cultural landscape in which initiation, graded revelation, and transformative learning were familiar ideas. Eleusinian initiation, Orphic traditions, and Pythagorean practices provide suggestive analogies, but no direct lines of dependence are asserted.

Crucially, the model does not require the existence of a unified "Greek mysticism" with shared doctrines. It requires only that certain pedagogical techniques—deliberate misdirection, delayed clarification, and selective disclosure—were culturally intelligible and practically feasible.<sup>4</sup> The dialogues themselves remain the primary evidence. The historical hypothesis serves to render their internal structure plausible, not to explain it away.

In sum, the Circle Ladder is proposed as a historically grounded possibility rather than a demonstrable fact. Its value lies in its explanatory power with respect to the dialogues' persistent semantic instability, pedagogical structure, and self-referential complexity. Whether future historical work can corroborate, refine, or limit this hypothesis remains an open and productive question.

## 8. Conclusions

This article has proposed a reconstruction of the Platonic dialogues as presupposing a layered pedagogical framework organized around three interpretive systems—the Public, Word, and Circle Systems—and a progression through five Circle Types forming a Circle Ladder. Together, these elements yield seven interpretive levels through which key Platonic terms acquire systematically different meanings. The model offers a unified explanation for a range of otherwise puzzling features of the dialogues, including semantic instability, deliberate misdirection, self-referential terminology, competitive pedagogy, and the recurring tension between apparent instruction and genuine understanding.

In particular, the model clarifies why central concepts such as soul, sports, medicine, warfare, and music are repeatedly discussed in contexts that strain ordinary interpretation. Rather than attributing these tensions to doctrinal inconsistency, literary excess, or developmental shifts in Plato's thought, the Circle-Ladder framework interprets them as functional features of a staged educational

<sup>3</sup> For careful distinctions between mystery cults, initiation, and philosophical appropriation, see Burkert (1987); Bremmer (1999).

<sup>4</sup> Burkert (1987) provides evidence that such pedagogical techniques were culturally intelligible in classical Greece.

process. Misleading arguments, exaggerated proposals, and ironic condemnations serve not to confuse indiscriminately, but to guide students through successive interpretive reorientations. The dialogues thus appear not merely as philosophical texts, but as instruments within a broader pedagogical practice.

At the same time, significant questions remain open. The historical realization of the Circle Ladder cannot be directly verified, nor can the precise social mechanisms governing access, evaluation, and progression within the Circles be reconstructed with certainty. The relationship between the practices implied by the dialogues and known forms of ancient education, initiation, and philosophical association requires further comparative and historical study. Likewise, the extent to which Aristotle and later philosophical traditions preserved, transformed, or abandoned these pedagogical structures remains an open field of inquiry.

Nevertheless, the coherence and persistence of the proposed interpretive systems across dialogues, genres, and thematic domains strongly suggest that the Circle Ladder was not merely a literary construct, but once socially instantiated in some form. Even if its historical contours remain partially obscured, the model provides a systematic framework for rereading the Platonic corpus as the residue of a living pedagogical tradition.

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