Derrida's Logos
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The *Phaedrus* is one of Plato's more perplexing dialogues, and has confused translators and philosophers for centuries. In addition to major questions about its chronology within Plato's corpus, there have been questions about its composition, questions about specific examples and metaphors used, and most important, a deep confusion as to why Plato would take such a negative view on writing.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida attempted to answer these questions in his controversial 1972 essay *Plato's Pharmacy*, which raised many new questions. In this article, we'll take a look at some of the points he raised, and consider how they might impact how we should interpret the dialogue.

Background

On reading the *Phaedrus*, the location immediately stands out: this is the only dialogue in which Socrates has ventured outside the city walls of Athens. He encounters a friend, Phaedrus, who has just left the company of Lysias, a famous rhetorician, who was composing a speech on the nature of love. It turns out that Phaedrus has a written copy of this speech to memorize, and Socrates demands he recite it to him. After hearing it, Socrates, his feathers ruffled by its poor composition, responds with his own speech on the same topic. Then, unsatisfied with his first attempt, Socrates delivers another speech which stands apart from the other two on its creative and artistic qualities. The speeches completed, Socrates and Phaedrus proceed to discuss the merits of rhetoric as an art in itself. Socrates recalls two myths, one about the Cicadas and one about Egyptian gods, and ends the dialogue with a harsh attack on the merits of writing. This last part in particular has drawn especial scrutiny.

Structure of the *Phaedrus*

Let us begin our review by examining how the *Phaedrus* is constructed, and how Plato likely relates it to his other dialogues. In a simple breakdown, we get three speeches (one from Lysias, and two from Socrates) followed by two myths (the Cicadas and the Egyptians), ending with a discussion on the nature of rhetoric and writing. Schleiermacher[1] suggests it should be read in two parts, the speeches marking the first, the myths and discussion the second. Breaking it up this way opens a very interesting possibility for interpretation, which we will address shortly.

The two dialogues most similar in theme are the *Symposium* and the *Gorgias*, which fit nicely into the two halves of the *Phaedrus*. The *Symposium*, as with the three speeches, deals with the topic of love, with a colorful cast of characters. It is more lively than mythological. But one of the key factors which stands out for the *Symposium* is its origin: the entire dialogue emerges from a chance encounter between two friends, and is delivered from memory through speech. Compare this to the *Phaedrus*, in which Phaedrus narrates the first speech from a written scroll, using words of Lysias rather than his own. The *Gorgias*, on the other hand, is a full scale assault on rhetoric, arguing that it might be used to sway citizens and lawmakers in a predetermined direction, regardless of the truth. Socrates has quite a lot to say on this topic in the second part of the *Phaedrus*, which brings up questions about the dating of these dialogues. If we accept the theory that the *Phaedrus* was influenced by these two other dialogues, it implies that it was composed after them. We can also assert that, the later a dialogue was

[1]In his 1836 *Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*

composed, the less it is Socrates speaking and the more it is Plato, as time and experience necessarily create distance between them. This idea will come into play later on.

As for the speeches themselves, there is a noted increase in quality as they go along. The first speech is effectively second-hand, read from a pre-written scroll, and Socrates feels the need to respond with his own speech, in an effort to prove the written speech bad through his own effort. Then, after some more discussion, Socrates delivers a third and much longer speech, one which includes rather colorful mythologies and numerology, and introduces some theories of the soul, perhaps revisiting and expanding on the *Phaedo*. The contents of these speeches are less important for us than the artistic value of them, especially how the third greatly improves upon the second. We find similar evolutions in oral tradition, such as in the works of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, and we might wonder if this is an attempt by Socrates to show, in his opinion, the superiority of oral to written tradition. This theory would work nicely with Schleiermacher's assertion that the latter half of the *Phaedrus* should be considered the primary, thus the speeches create the groundwork or evidence to present the theories first alluded to in the myths and then made explicit in the "closing" comments.

Derrida's Opening Shot

And now we turn to to this second part to consider some of the assertions Derrida made in his essay *Plato's Pharmacy*. He glosses over the first myth, skipping directly to Socrates' story of Theuth. To briefly summarize: in Egyptian mythology, there exists a divinity called Theuth, who among other things, is the god of writing. We are given a scene in which Theuth goes to Thamus, the King of the gods, and offers up the concept of writing as a "*phármakon*." Derrida pauses here to reflect, and claims that the lesson so far is that "writing will have no value, unless and to the extent that god-the-king approves of it.[2]" Derrida further points out that the King himself is illiterate, and uses dictation to have his scribes create a sort of record which he considers second-class, inferior to his spoken word. He then proceeds to draw out a hierarchy, suggesting the spoken word to be "logos," the person who speaks the word to be the "father of logos," concluding that writing falls at the bottom, relegated to be an unwanted child of logos. He drives this analogy to a close by calling writing an "orphan." This makes sense to a degree: if we limit logos to the spoken word, there then exists a relationship between the person who speaks and the word which is spoken, which ends when the speaker leaves the stage. With this interpretation, the written word acts as a sort of orphan child, and books become "dead and rigid knowledge.[3]"

Here we might pause and push back on Derrida's interpretation. In the scene, Thamus is asking about the *usefulness* of each item presented to him, not the *value*. This is not a judgement of whether things should be permitted to exist, or whether they constitute good or evil, but simply whether they are able to perform a function better than what currently exists. Because the King has no desire to write himself, he sees it as a task best left to his underlings, which lines up with the analogy of the orphan. But this is only a comment on its functionality, not its moral nature. This exchange may also remind of us of a similar story from Kafka's *The Trial*, in which a man tries unsuccessfully to advance past a guarded door, a metaphor for questioning an authoritarian government. However, the situation with Theuth is different because, unlike the stoic guard in Kafka, here the King provides a reason, which is worth quoting in full:

[2]*Plato's Pharmacy*, page 76
[3]*Plato's Pharmacy*, page 73

> "... one person has the ability to bring branches of expertise into existence, another to assess the extent to which they will harm or benefit those who *use* them.[4]"

Derrida is correct when he says that writing has no value in itself, because writing is a tool, something which we might use to advance a greater good or ill. Therefore his later comments about the meaning of *phármakon* resonate quite well: if we accept that a tool has no inherent moral value, but derives its value in its use, then translating *phármakon* as either "remedy" or "poison" works. Both translations are valid, but neither of them complete, because the translations depend on context.

Life and Death

In the next part of the essay, Derrida goes into an exposition of the Egyptian mythology. At first we might be confused as to why this gets so much attention, while the Cicada myth is left almost unmentioned. By the end of the chapter, the purpose is clear: in addition to being the god of writing, Theuth is the god of death. Derrida uses this fact to explain both why Plato chose this example to illustrate his point, and why Derrida himself has written this essay. The *Phaedrus*, according to Derrida, is very meticulously constructed, and nothing is an accident. We are only told the Cicada myth because they chatter in the background, and they only chatter in the background because the dialogue is outside the city walls of Athens. Likewise, although not explicitly stated, Plato (Derrida argues) is well aware of Theuth's domains, and has specifically chosen this myth to emphasize the idea that if Theuth is the god of both writing and death, then writing and death must be somehow related. This concept linking opens a whole new range of questions and contextualization.

Before continuing, we need to step back and look at the bigger picture. Derrida writes his essay in 1972, just twelve years after Albert Lord published *The Singer of Tales*, a landmark exposition in how oral tradition prospered in then Yugoslavia, and a theory how it might have functioned for Homer. In particular, there is a question of succession: how did massive epics like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* survive for centuries without the benefits of writing to carry them along? Lord proposes the idea of an oral continuum, in which each individual singer contributes to a larger stream of living memory, and also demonstrates how, at least in Yugoslavia, introducing writing completely changed the process by which such stories were passed down to the next generation.

We should also consider Plato's likely view on these matters. Notice how in many of the dialogues, Homer is venerated as almost divine, and Socrates constantly criticizes the rhetoricians like Gorgias and Lysias. Homer appears to be the last link in a centuries-long unbroken chain of oral composers, and may represent to Plato the nostalgia of a better world. After all, not only do the rhetoricians like Phaedrus rely on written speeches so they can memorize the words– but not the meanings– but these same rhetoricians helped lead the charge to condemn and execute Socrates, whom Plato often exalts as the new Achilles. It then makes logical sense that Plato would harbor animosity against these people, and seek out authoritative sources to justify his sentiments. He may also resent the fact that, unlike his hero, he must resort to writing the dialogues down.

With this context in mind, we can watch as Derrida takes several shots at Theuth. As the god of writing, he claims Theuth is "a subordinate character, a second, a technocrat without power of decision, an engineer, an ingenious servant.[5]" He then suggests him to be a puppet, as "whatever he has to enounce or inform in words has already been thought by Horus.[6]" Based on this, we can refer back to the "father

[4] Translation by Robin Waterfield (2002), emphasis mine
[5] *Plato's Pharmacy*, page 86
[6] *Plato's Pharmacy*, page 88

of logos" metaphor to really bring home the meaning. We must revisit the idea that books are "dead and rigid knowledge." If speech based logos exists, as in oral tradition, on a continuum, then the act of writing something down interrupts this flow and stymies it. We might describe speech and dialectic as a running stream of water, full of life and oxygen. If we dip a cup into the stream and pull a bit of water out, although the water is fresh at first, over time, it loses its vitality and becomes stagnant. It is precisely this dynamic that Derrida does and Plato may wish to ascribe to writing. But why?

Fluid, living speech has many properties. When speaking, we may have in mind a point, and use a specific set of words to employ the point in a way the listening audience will understand. Our engagement with the audience is an interactive process, and we can readily modify the words we use accordingly. Milman and Lord saw this in action when they studied the Yugoslavian singers. In a sense, speech is about flow, tempo, and a focus on the future. Writing is about the past and the ever-evasive present. When we write something down, it is an attempt to freeze an idea within and thus remove it from time. The problem with this approach is that the meaning gets its life from time itself, and when it is removed, the idea will die a slow and painful death.

Consider: is a written constitution *really* superior to an oral one? Is it possible for a "living document" to be written down? How many legal battles are fought over the nature of what an individual word means today, versus what it may have meant when the document was crafted? And think of how many phrases have changed meanings over time, and the consequences that writing something in one time period may have for another period when the same words carry a very negative intonation. Attempts to retain the meanings of written words are always in vain. For example, Jesus spoke in parables using metaphors that his audience, mostly farmers, would readily understand. Over the centuries, theologians have had to constantly reach into the deeper meanings of these parables to draw out new metaphors that a changed environment would understand. Plato might have argued, had he been alive for Jesus, that these reinventions were required because the words were written down.

This brings us to the King's primary objection, the impact of writing on memory. Socrates draws a distinction here between "good" memory (*anamnesis*) and "bad" memory. It is clear that the "bad" memory is that of repetition, where we read words written by others and parrot them about, completely orphaned from any "father of logos" origin. "Good" memory is more ambiguous, but the text of the *Phaedrus* hints at an answer. In the third speech, during his artistic but ridiculous exposition on the nature of the soul, he brings up the concept of reincarnation. This may sound familiar because he touched on a similar point in an earlier dialogue, the *Meno*. There, he made an argument that when we are born, we are really simply emerging into the physical world from another realm, and when we learn something, we are simply remembering knowledge which we already knew but had forgotten during this transition. We might then wonder: is "memory" in fact a larger, much more encompassing concept for Plato, and in addition to oral tradition, could he be accusing writing of disrupting the very process of remembering? On the other hand, if the *Meno* was one of the earlier dialogues, this could have been Plato testing out an idea before tossing it away in favor of the more sophisticated arguments in the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*. Ironically, the fact that these dialogues were written down means that we are forced to confront such ideas, even if they might not make sense as compared to later ideas. But it also means that we are able to see the evolution of such ideas as a whole.

END PART 1