Derrida's Logos, Part 2
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In part 1, we examined the first three chapters of Derrida's essay Plato's Pharmacy*,in which Derrida makes the case that, contrary to long held opinions, Plato's* Phaedrus *is an extremely well designed and thought out dialogue. He then turns to consider why Socrates would invoke an Egyptian myth to make a case to condemn writing (*pharmakon*), and in doing so, suggests that spoken words are "alive" while written words are "dead." In part 2, we will focus on chapter 4, in which Derrida makes a strong case that the nature of the* pharmakon *is complex, not easily defined, and therefore cannot, despite Plato's best efforts, be thought of as either good or bad.*

In Chapter 4 of *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida turns to what seems at first to be a very simple task: defining the nature of the *pharmakon*. He first looks to how the term was translated in the past, and finds the results unsatisfying. After all, if a word can be translated as both "remedy" and "poison" depending on context, perhaps these translations only cover part of the full meaning of the word. In his examination, he finds something interesting. We can agree that "remedy" and "poison" exist, much like "good" and "evil", as binary opposites; that is, we define "remedy" as the opposite of "poison," to the exclusion of it. If we have a remedy, that means there must be no poison in it, since the presence of poison will negate its very nature of being a "remedy." Another way to look at this: a poison must, by definition, exist within a boundary, and the remedy to the poison is outside of that boundary. But this definition brings us to a new binary opposite, because "inside" and "outside" are also exclusive of each other. What this means, according to Derrida, is that "writing as a *pharmakon* cannot simply be assigned a site within what is situates, cannot be subsumed under concepts whose contours it draws.[1]"

To understand why this is significant, we need to step back and discuss what definitions are. If we break the word "definite" into component parts, we get "de" and "finite"– or, "of the finite." Definitions are a way that we can take a concept, draw a boundary around it, and then use it in communication. It typically takes one of two forms: either a description comprised of words or symbols, or a series of examples. This is especially evident in areas like law, where we might have both the specific text of a law, as well as instances where the law would be properly applied. In some sense we could describe this as inductive and deductive definitions, where we either create a general definition and then craft examples around it, or we look at various examples and find a common pattern, thus inferring a definition. Both forms of definitions have the same aim: to encapsulate a signified meaning in a way that can be communicated.

Socrates would likely argue that we cannot define a concept solely through examples, because what we aim to describe transcends the examples, a kind of pattern or principle inherent within every example. Without concretely stated rules, there is too much wiggle room, and it is easy for someone to use persuasion and rhetoric to attempt to draw people to a false conclusion which seems to live within the examples but does not. While a list of examples can give us a general understanding for future reference, it lacks a certain mathematical and scientific rigour, and leaves too much open to interpretation. Heavily influenced by the Pythagorean school, Socrates approaches with a mathematical background. We can see evidence of this in many dialogues, such as in the Meno, in which Socrates invokes geometric proofs to illustrate one of his points, using them to set out defining laws.

Why does Socrates care so much about definitions? Recall that Plato's dialogues were written after the Peloponnesian War, and in the dialogues, Socrates brings up many points which were obviously

[1] *Plato's Pharmacy*, Page 103

reflections about what happened during the war. Why should he be seeking ways to fully understand concepts like truth, good, and justice, if not to create an golden standard against which to hold future governments? Thucydides showed us that, despite Solon's reforms, Athens still managed to find itself at the center of a major power struggle. In many ways, the "perfect" city of the *Republic* was likely Plato's indirect response to people like Thucydides. If we examine the questions posed in the *Republic*, they have a feeling of mathematical rigor to them. How often does Socrates bring up a suggested ideal, only to then deliver examples which show its failings? Critics would call them straw men arguments, deliberately crafted to be easily ripped apart, but a mathematician might see Socrates as creating philosophical "equations" and then running a series of "variable" questions through it to see how well the results hold up. In some sense, these inquiries comprise a "pre-scientific" scientific methodology.

The idea that we could have formulas which describe the "correct" way that societies operate is tempting, but efforts to create them always fall short. Newton tried to harness all of physics into simple and comprehensible rules like his laws of motion, which, if taken literally, would transform the entire world into a giant math equation. However useful his laws have been for physics, they neglect the concept of free will, and they fail to explain how motion begins in the first place. They also focus exclusively on the material world, which Socrates would have hated. Likewise, for international relations, we see many attempts to explain how wars happened after they happened, but the calculations for preparing for or preventing wars always fall short. The Prussian general von Clausewitz comments on this in *On War*: "so-called mathematical factors never find a firm basis in military calculations. From the very start there is an interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry.[2]"

Such calculations assume that, unlike the world of definitions, mathematics remains a world of purity. But is this really the case? Several developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries raised this question, to astonishing results. Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist and one of the founders of semiotics, proposed that words (signs) consisted of a signifier (the symbol) and a signified (the meaning). Meanwhile, in mathematics, far more disruption was happening. To understand this better, we must turn to Nagel and Newman's excellent essay *Godel's Proof*.

The heart of mathematical consistency as established by Euclid maintains that from a given set of fundamental axioms, we can make statements of fact, and use these statements to craft formulas. Inherent to this logic are the assertions that all statements can be derived from these axioms, and none of the derived statements can or will contradict each other. For example, if we assert that "1+1=2" is true, this also means that "1+1=3" is false. Prussian mathematician David Hilbert, possibly borrowing from Saussure, proposed the notion of symbolic "mapping." If a math statement is 1+1=2, then a mapped statement might be "one plus one equals two." In this way, we can take the symbolic structures which represent mathematics and translate them into a new system without breaking any of the relationships between the symbols. Russell and Whitehead used a similar technique to craft their opus *Principia Mathematica*, in which they attempted to reduce all mathematical notation to use the simplest possible signifiers.

In 1931, Kurt Gödel showed that such attempts would in principle always fail. He demonstrated that any formal system able to prove even basic arithmetic statements consistently would also include a statement that the system could neither prove nor disprove, thus establishing that any consistent formal system would be incomplete. In other words, the mythical purity of essence for which Socrates yearned remained just that, despite millennia of adherence to Euclid's axioms.

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[2] Book 1, Section 21 (translation by Howard and Paret)

With this in mind, we return to Derrida's argument. If a word is a signifier which points to something being signified, we need to somehow ensure that everything bounded in the "signified" is relevant, that nothing unrelated is signified, and that nothing that should be signified is left out. That is, we have meaning inside the bounds of signified, and non-meaning outside of bounds. Just like how in math, we need to ensure that 1+1=2, and never 3, if we treat signifier words as a sort of mapping, then in theory we can arrive at a perfect harmony of signifier and signified that would finally make Socrates happy. But Gödel showed us that mathematics itself lacks this harmony, and therefore it can also not be found in philosophy. To quote Derrida directly: "We cannot qualify it, name it, comprehend it under a simple concept without immediately being off the mark.[3]"

If Gödel's theorem was a response to Socrates, showing that, despite appearances, mathematics lacks the purity he sought, then perhaps Derrida's observation is a response to Plato, showing that erasing writing does not somehow retain a purity of *logos*. Rather than trying to blame the instrumentation or a memory lapse, Derrida points out that the very words themselves contain elements of impurity. Why else would we need the interactive nature of speech, if not to correct misunderstandings brought on by incomplete signifiers? While it is true that writing captures these shortcomings and through time magnifies them, it is only enhancing something that already existed.

According to Derrida, Plato claims that writing "is not simply a recourse to memory but, within such recourse, the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory, of the prosthesis for the organ.[4]" It is easy to see why Derrida disagrees with Plato here: the invention of the phonograph. If Plato's (and Socrates') argument is essentially that writing overtakes speech as the dominant path by which logos propagates, the ability to record, not simply a *graphein* (written) representation of signifiers (words), but to record the phonetic sounds of the words themselves, suggests that the spoken word is *itself* a signifier. Therefore, as Saussure (and subsequently Derrida) would argue, the link to *logos* does not come from the spoken word, but from some unison or intersection between the spoken sound and amorphous thought[5].

Based on this, we can see several challenges Derrida might make to Plato's assertions. Consider issues with translation. Let us assume that Plato is correct, that writing something down is an attempt to foil time, to create a fake permanence that weakens our memory. If the spoken word contains a certain purity, why not translate it into other languages, so that others can enjoy the pure lessons of Socrates? Suddenly we run into the same problem: rather than having one continuum of spoken word, and one of written, we have two independent continua of spoken words. While shared words between languages do exist, we know that languages also evolve over time. Socrates would know this too, because of the different dialects used within Homer. So if we have an idea which is spoken, then translated via speech into a parallel oral tradition, in a few centuries when semantic drift has occurred, which language best represents the original *logos*? It seems that we run into all the same problems that we would with writing.

The same issue arises with the changing nature of time itself. Let us assume the role of the King, and argue that writing destroys our memory. And, in our fantasy illusion, we want to hear the purity of the *Iliad* from the bard himself, Homer. We invite Homer to come sing to us at our royal palace, and over the next three or four days, are filled with a sense of awe and wonder. When Homer departs, we retain fond memories of the experience, sharing them our subjects, children, and so on. Twenty years later,

[3] *Plato's Pharmacy*, Page 104
[4] *Plato's Pharmacy*, page 108
[5] *Course in General Linguistics*, Part 2, Chapter 4, Section 1

steeped in nostalgia, we decide we want to relive the experience, and so invite Homer back to sing a second time. Now, instead of experiencing the song fresh, we are comparing it to our twenty-year-old memory. Does it live up to the hype? Surely many of the words and phrases have changed, and the song may be markedly different from how we remember, and bear little resemblance to what our children were expecting. It may also be that certain phrases grew or fell out of favor, depending on circumstances which have transpired. Which form should take precedence, our memory or the new spoken word?

If we take Plato's argument at face value, we have three competing paths to *logos*: the spoken word, the written word, and the spoken word against its past and future incarnations. Which should take precedence? If we re-examine Parry and Lord's findings on oral tradition, we might understand why this conflict has arisen. Without the written word, the speaker (or singer) joins a timeless tradition with no known beginning, no known end, and no sense of ownership. The moment words are written down, we introduce time. In effect, the act of writing down words creates a record in time, and this creates a past, present, and future. It is naive to suggest this is the *only* way in which we discover time: after all, we are born and we eventually die. But it is clear that introducing time to the oral tradition is offensive to Plato, who then writes down his complaint.

And now we should turn to what is actually signified by words. Derrida (controversially) reduces the entire dialogue of the *Phaedrus* to this singular word *pharmakon*, and argues that every point made within the dialogue can trace its roots back to an argument over what a *pharmakon* is, and whether it has the impact on memory and morality that Socrates (or Plato, or the King) claims. What is truly fascinating is how, by reducing the dialogue to a single word, rather than casting aside shells husks of meaning and simplifying things, Derrida's analysis has the impact of splitting the atom. Notice how his essay, carefully crafted and analysing a single word, is somehow longer than the original dialogue itself.

At this point, we could introduce a strong objection: by hyper-focusing on a single word, Derrida neglects the importance of everything else. But how true is this? Saussure claims that spoken language, captured in a period of time, consists of a multitude of signifiers which relate to each other, as well as to the signified. One way to visualize this might be to envision characters in a complex play, who all relate to each other somehow. Perhaps we could connect together characters who appear on stage together, who talk with each other, or who talk about each other. Once we do this, we could count the lines connecting to each character, and use the numbers to determine who is the protagonist, the supporting actors, and so on. If we now replace each character with a word or signifier, and propose that this spoken dialogue (here, the *Phaedrus*) resembles a play, we compile the words or themes within the dialogue, and sort by these links. Derrida's argument will be that the word *pharmakon* will have more connections than all others. This does give the word prominence over other important themes (like *logos*), but it does help explain his hyper-focus.

END PART 2