Derrida's Logos Part 3
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In Part 1 of this series, we examined the first four chapters of Derrida's essay Plato's Pharmacy*, focusing on both a reinterpretation of the structure of the Phaedrus, as well as the relationship of writing to speech. Part 2 picked up on some nuances Derrida attributed to definition itself. In this final act, we cover some of the larger themes in the remaining chapters of the essay.*

Upon completion of reading *Plato's Pharmacy*, the reader may be left with some ambivalence. Derrida makes several lofty claims, which seem at times preposterous and presumptuous. We must remember that he is a very, very close reader of Plato, and that we cannot dismiss these claims without sufficient investigation. In this concluding essay, we will examine three major themes of Derrida's claims: the dualistic binaries, the inferiority of imitation, and presence in absence.

Derrida has two things working against him: his writing style is byzantine and off-putting, and he assumes that the reader shares his familiarity with his source material. This is not to say every point he makes is correct, but that we risk two errors: either we dismiss a valid point because it is not clearly presented, or we misunderstand or misinterpret one. To avoid these obstacles, this author engaged in extensive background research which included the vast majority of Plato's corpus, and in the duration changed opinions about Derrida's conclusions several times.

This or that?

Let us begin our examination with the binaries, a concept which emerges from an analysis of the myth of Theuth, which Socrates invokes to argue against writing. At first glance, it seems to be a throwaway line:

> "The loyalty you feel to writing, as its originator, has just lead you to tell me the *opposite* of its true effect."[1]

From this single statement, Derrida delivers pages and pages of exposition in his essay about the word "opposite," and this reader was left asking if this was the philosopher's equivalent of pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Along the way, Derrida drops various bread crumbs of reference to other dialogues, but the significance of the crumbs is unclear. How could anyone conclude from this sentence that Socrates was obsessed with contrary values, opposite binaries?

The answer only arises when we look at other dialogues. Socrates generally poses questions in a binary form: do we do this or that? Is this good or bad? Is this or that outcome to be desired? With rare exception, they are posed as yes or no questions, which can be extremely frustrating for interlocuters like Gorgias, as well as observant readers. This comes to a full head in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, where a "Visitor" from Elia tries to "help" one of Plato's puppets define what a sophist and statesman are, using the logarithmic method: he defines a set, finds a way to divide it in two, and then selects the most germane of the two to proceed. In this way, he starts with a very large group and slowly whittles away until left with a satisfactory definition. An example from the *Sophist*:

> "Visitor: Aren't there two types of expertise in acquisition? Is one type mutually willing exchange, through gifts and wages and purchase? And would the other type, which brings things into one's possession by action or words, be expertise in taking possession?
> Thaetetus: It seems so, anyway, given what we'd said.

[1] *Phaedrus*, 275a, tr. Waterfield, emphasis added

Visitor: Well then, shouldn't we *cut* possession-taking in two?
Thaetetus: How?
Visitor: The part that's done openly we label combat, and the part that's secret we call hunting.
Thaetetus: Yes.
Visitor: And furthermore it would be unreasonable not to *cut* hunting in two.
Thaetetus: How?
Visitor: We *divide* it into the hunting of living things and the hunting of lifeless things."[2]

This process is even more pronounced in the *Statesman*, where, upon reaching a dead end in attempting to define "statesman," the visitor retreats to a previous "fork" and determines that they made a faulty cut. Socrates is obsessed with definitions– often arguing that we cannot know what a topic like "justice" is if we cannot easily define it– and his primary method of crafting definitions seems to be these cuts.

We should ask two questions here: first, is this a reasonable way to define something? And second, are definitions always paramount when trying to elucidate truth? As we saw in the previous essay[3], Derrida clearly does not believe so. He attacks the notion of these divisions as a division itself, and thus maintains that achieving a satisfactory definition is impossible– ironically, quite in line with arguments of Zeno or Parmenides, two famous Eliatic philosophers whom Socrates despised. Another objection is that we come to definitions through multiple methods, including pattern recognition. If we observe that turning a key starts a car motor, we might define that key as "the thing which starts the car motor" rather than going through a long and convoluted list of possible yes/no questions. So we might argue that while this binary method might be one reasonable way to arrive at a definition, it is by no means the only route.

We ought also note that the path to a definition will differ depending on what we are trying to define. To borrow examples from the *Statesman*, we can easily say that a doctor is one who practices medicine, and a carpenter is one who builds houses, but if we find calling a statesman "one who maintains a just society" insufficient, we wind up with another long line of clarifying questions. One major difference between these examples is that both carpenters and doctors work with materials, whereas statesmen work with ideas. When we focus on the material realm, definitions come far more easily, but in the conceptual realm they are fleeting at best. We can see the difficulty of attempting to merge these realms when we say that a chair is an embodiment of the form of "chairness" but then are at a loss to explain what "chairness" is.

Before continuing, we should pause and question Socrates' method: must we define something in order to understand it? Are concepts like good, evil, and justice such that we must have an agreed upon set of words to elicit meaning, or is there a more emotional or instinctive component involved? We do not need to read Plato's *Republic* to know that stealing candy from a child is bad, and there are countless examples of situations that *feel* unjust, even though we cannot fully explain *why.* Socrates would likely argue that this falls into rhetoric persuasion taught by his opponents like Gorgias, but for someone who puts so much weight into the notion of the soul triumphing over the body, it seems that he fails to fully grasp what a soul is.

"Who Am I This Time?"

Next, one of Plato's primary arguments in the *Phaedrus* relies on an understanding of imitation. He suggests throughout the dialogue (and in others), extending from his view that writing is inferior to speech, that imitations are by definition inferior to the "real" thing. He returns to this idea quite

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[2] *Sophist*, 219d-e, tr. Nicholas P. White, emphasis added
[3] *Derrida's Logos Part 2*

often, both in the *Phaedrus* itself (claiming that a painting is inferior to its subject), and in other dialogues like the *Laws*, where he draws a distinction between "real" doctors and "slave doctors," claiming that the former practice with skill and wisdom, while the latter simply repeat what they have been told. Derrida attacks this idea by arguing that "a perfect imitation is no longer an imitation.[4]"

Socrates himself slips into inconsistency here: in both the *Cratylus* and the *First Alcibiades*, he calls into question the nature of words as separate from logos; that is, logos, or pure thought, is distinct from the language we craft to express it. Contrast this with the *Phaedrus*, in which speech is seen as pure, and writing somehow diluted and dead. We might argue (as Derrida does) that we are looking at a chain of signifiers, where pure logos leads to words, which then lead to written words, each link in the chain risking added pollution and departing from the intended meanings. But if this is true, then why not have the mythical Theuth attack speech in general?

From this chain of signifiers, Derrida seems to invent a metaphor of father and son, and then becomes obsessed with it. If, as Derrida argues, speech represents the father and writing represents the son, then, once the speech concludes, the written word represents an "orphan." He carries this metaphor ad absurdum, and in this reader's opinion, spends far too long on it, focusing on various elements within the metaphor rather than the original argument from Socrates– ironically, his metaphor in some ways becomes an orphan from the written word of the *Phaedrus*. However, there are two very important ideas embedded here: imitation and succession.

There are two ways to view imitation: as fraud and as likeness. In fraud, something attempts to portray itself as that which it is not. For example, many people have a copy of the Mona Lisa, but if someone were to bring their copy to an auction house and pass it off as the original, it would be quickly identified as a counterfeit. Likeness is a much more positive form of imitation: from it we get role models, as well as artists who are inspired by the Mona Lisa to create their own artistic expressions. This even extends to music, where certain melodies and instruments may be used to simulate sounds of nature.

A moment ago we said that Derrida *seems* to invent the father/son metaphor, because he probably takes it from Plato's *Timeus*, a dialogue that attempts to explain the origins of the world. In the dialogue, once time is introduced, it is followed by the notion of succession. The gods are created, who in turn create humanity. In the midst of a long exposition on how the body is formed, Plato explicitly uses a family metaphor:

> "It is in fact appropriate to compare the receiving thing to a mother, the source to a father, and the nature between them to their offspring."[5]

As the surrounding context is full of discussion about imitation and reproduction, it is clearly relevant to the discussion at hand. But Derrida's approach contains a pernicious snag, which one could argue exists in Plato as well: if writing is the child of the logos, and writing is inferior, by this metaphor, the son is inferior to the father, the grandson will be inferior to the son, and so on. Plato might argue that humanity is inferior to the gods, and he would also likely argue that life before Socrates was executed was better than life following it. This plays into a nihilistic yearning for some paradise-like before time which doesn't exist. Is adoration of the known past a binary contrasted with fear of the unknown future?

The *Timeus* presents another way to express this concept in the distinction between being and becoming: something which exists in a stable motionless position, and something which either

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[4] *Plato's Pharmacy,* p 139
[5] *Timeus*, 50d, tr. By Donald J. Zeyl.

comes into existence or ceases to exist, in a constant state of change or flux. If the father is the known constant, the son is the one who comes into existence, always striving to eventually take the place of the father. Derrida picks up on this for his metaphor and, incorrectly calls this replacement of the father by the son "violence," and then applies it to writing, suggesting that a written word that survives the death of the speaker of the original word has somehow overthrown the speaker. This plays into the final point we should make on this theme, involving Plato's forms.

Famously in the *Republic*, but also in other dialogues, Plato uses the concept of the forms to both praise the higher realms of conceptualisation, but also to chastise the material world. If, as he suggests in the famous "cave" allegory, what we see in the world is just shadows on the walls of a cave– imitations– this means that, according to Plato, the world of the forms is the real world. However, for someone so focused the need to define things, a very young Socrates is taken to task in the *Parmenides* for the inability to articulate precisely what the forms *are*. How is it that someone who is so convinced that we cannot know something unless we can define it fail to define the very thing he believes to be greater than the known world itself? And yet, Socrates carries this attitude to the end, choosing in the *Crito* to drink the hemlock and die rather than be disabused of the idea that the physical world is lesser than the world of the soul.

To Be or Not To Be Present

Now to the final theme: one of Derrida's prized achievements in this essay is the alleged discovery that a pillar of both the *Phaedrus* and the entire body of Plato's dialogues is a word which never appears in that same corpus. Perhaps borrowing from Saussure, he notes that while two words, pharmak*on* (drug/remedy) and pharmak*eus* (sorcerer/magician), can be found in the texts, one additional but highly relevant word which would complete a linguistic triumvirate is missing: pharmak*os*. Translated in English as "scapegoat," *pharmakos* would be a fitting cornerstone to the legacy of Socrates, a man who, in addition to being executed on grounds which seemed more implicit than explicit, poetically celebrated the Pharmakos, the day on which Athens would expel two outcasts from the city, as his birthday. To make his case, Derrida points to several breadcrumbs and triumphantly concludes that the word is "strikingly absent[6]," expecting the reader to fill in the gaps.

We might initially dismiss this as haughty arrogance, in accordance with Derrida's opaque writing style, and point to a long line of celebrant followers, each seeking "between the lines" in other literary works before announcing their own specious discoveries. After all, there is no shortage of rubbish conclusions drawn by people who follow a pattern and then begin forcing unrelated elements to fit. Derrida himself makes an imperfect presentation on page 68: he asserts with pride that the question of logography is raised– "the reader can count the lines"– at the exact center of the *Phaedrus*, 257c. This reader did just so, and found the actual center to be 253b.

But let us give Derrida the benefit of the doubt, and treat the crumbs as pointers to full loaves of bread. Following this trail brings us to the *Cratylus*, a dialogue that focuses on the nature of language and raises questions about the origin and nature of words. At some points, it reads nearly identical to Saussure, although aimed at different languages given the two thousand year time difference. In the midst of a long exposition of explaining why a given name or noun is structured to contain a specific meaning, we find this nugget from Socrates:

> "See how right I was to say, Hermogenes, that people make huge changes in the meaning of names by adding or subtracting letters…"[7]

[6] *Plato's Pharmacy,* p. 129
[7] *Cratylus,* 418a, tr by C.D.C. Reeve

Was Derrida trying to nudge us in this direction, pointing to passages like this where Plato comments extensively on the use of language to convey meaning, and, in Derrida's likely opinion, all but admits that there are hidden meanings within his dialogues? We must be cautious in our examination and avoid jumping to hasty conclusions.

Mathematical statistics brings us the wonderful mantra that correlation is not causation: just because two (or more) things seem related, does not mean they are. Beyond this, a hallmark of the intellect is to find patterns within chaos, to look at the world and identify laws of nature, to create order. But we must be careful that our intention is not misguided. Just as Derrida seems to have focused too much on his father/son metaphor, when we focus too much on trying to find a pattern, we will find it everywhere, everpresent. At a certain point, we must pause and ask whether the evidence points to a conclusion, or whether a pre-ordained desire collects relevant supporting points.

The other precept working against us is time. While there is always a degree of uncertainty in life– for example, will the train arrive on time or be delayed?– the farther removed from the event, the greater the uncertainty. Our senses may betray us, but each passing day further dilutes the shared memory of what transpired or was intended in the past. From more than two millennia afield, it is not possible to realize anything but an educated guess. Thus we must make our guess as educated as possible.

Was Derrida's assertion of this missing word plausible? Clearly yes. A political environment that would execute Socrates in revenge for the violent revolutions of Athens would not likely welcome missives supporting an alleged scapegoat blamed by the political class for said revolutions. Might Plato have cast an acrostic within the nest of meanings of his writings? This is also possible, and from the *Cratylus* we know that he understood such mechanisms.

Yet, we must pause and consider the opposing arguments. First, while he discusses the construction of words in the *Cratylus*, he does not discuss hiding words or hiding messages. The art of hidden messages was known to the ancients– it is mentioned in Herodotus– but it was typically used to conceal information from one party and to be found by another. Assuming Plato chose to embed this word by leaving it out, for whom was this message intended? Derrida provides no answer. Second, why focus on this one word? Was Plato's motivation to poke the bear, and possibly risk distracting from his major points, such as his attempts to define justice? And finally, while there may be prominence of meaning in words like *pharmakon*, why not weigh it against groups of other words, rather than other individual words? If Saussure is correct, a signifier inherits its meaning from its relationship to other signifiers. Why not group signifiers together and rebalance the scales? As such, this reader must conclude that while Derrida's theory is not completely implausible, it is also not fully convincing. But, because there is sufficient evidence to prevent its outright dismissal, we are left ambivalent.

To conclude these examinations, we must extend an olive branch. Derrida's ideas are fresh and interesting, and require a deep textual archeology to sift through. At some points, though, he seems to run with vanity, and it is unclear how much of this is due to the French writing style of the era, and how much is legitimately earned. The inaccessibility of his prose both supports and confronts his points, made worse by the far less careful analysis of his imitators. In the end, although we might not agree entirely with Derrida's conclusions, we have no choice but to admire his methods.