

A Passage to Philosophy: Derrida's *Plato's Pharmakon* and the Meshing of the Philosophical and the Mythological in *Phaedrus*

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ABSTRACT

This paper relates the implications of Derrida's reading to the historical context of the passage into philosophy and metaphysics as explained in classical works like Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1952). The paper shows the specific ways Derrida used to deconstruct Plato's text and how this connects with the historical context of the text itself, the inception of philosophy and metaphysics as we know it now. The first step Derrida takes is showing the importance of the myth element in the work's structure. One is his etymological analysis of the word "pharmakon" and its double meaning. The second mechanism is the structural laws of oppositions, such as speech/writing, good/evil, life/death, first/second, and original/copy. The paper concludes that Derrida's reading of Plato is different from Havelock's in being a form of "textual contextualizing." Derrida is putting *Phaedrus* in the wider project of the passage into philosophy and into the dawn of Western metaphysics, but unlike Havelock, he is concerned with textual mechanisms rather than historical turns. Derrida's reading indicates that Plato introduced metaphysics and philosophy not merely by making up terms and expounding notions but, more importantly, by a set of textual mechanisms that will live on with Western philosophy and thought.

Keywords: Derrida's reading of Plato, *Phaedrus*, *Pharmakon*, Western metaphysics.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Derrida's readings of Plato are well-known and have been approached from several angles in previous literature, such as Rinon (1993), Brogan (1989), and Wheeler (1999). In the present paper, I would like to look into how Derrida (1981) deconstructs Plato's (1952) discourse in terms of the relationship between the philosophical and the mythological or between mythemes and philosophemes in order to show the inseparability between philosophy and mythology. I will also try to relate the implications of Derrida's reading to the historical context of the passage into philosophy and metaphysics.

Derrida's deconstructive reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* reveals the inner workings of the text and its contradictions and discrepancies, but it does not end here. I think Derrida's (1981) article's significance is its overreaching implications as a deconstruction of philosophy and metaphysics and their discourse of truth and meaning. Platonism was the dawn of Western metaphysics and philosophy, and this coincided with a historical turn in the culture towards literacy and empirical science (the separation of the known), as illustrated well by Havelock (1963). Plato was drawing boundaries that would demarcate disciplines. He wanted to define and limit the scientific and rational methods of knowledge and separate them from the pathological and mimetic ones. The tendency to create binaries is evident in this approach. This inherent dualism in Plato's approach takes an important form in *Phaedrus*, the dichotomy between philosophy and mythology. As Derrida's reading shows, the basic element in *Phaedrus* is the futile, self-contradictory attempt to supplement and control the myth, and the attack on writing is an integral part of this attempt. Plato introduces the Thoth myth to emphasize the kinship between writing and mythology. Myth and writing are accused of repeating without knowing, but this truth about their nontruth, like them, cannot be known in us. Therefore, Plato resorts to mythology or repeating without knowing. This is one of the many self-contradictions in the text revealed by Derrida.

The first step Derrida takes is showing the importance of the myth element in the work's structure. Far from being an external or annexed part, the Thoth myth is an integral part of the text. *Phaedrus* used to be looked upon as an incoherent work because of this element. However, Derrida argues that this element maintains coherence and unity in the text. As he puts it, the introduction of the Thoth myth does not take place as a denouement but rather a structural climax. It is the point where the "contagion" and communication between philosophy and mythology are at their highest. Moreover, this part is most significant as it indicates that mythemes and philosophemes are interchangeable and mutually dependent

in Plato's discourse. This is the general framework of Derrida's deconstruction of the text.

To further this argument, Derrida engages in several deconstructive procedures. One is his etymological analysis of the word "pharmakon" and its double meaning. The concept signified by this word is more significant, and it is assigned to writing and, by extension, all its kinship of supplements. Writing is a supplement to speech, a cure to memory, but it is also a poison and a copy of the original. This exposition of the double effect of curing and poisoning is not a condemnation, and Plato fails to make it appear as such. Pharmakon (writing) is necessary as a cure, and its condemnation as a poison is part of affirming that necessity; this is why it is condemned because if it were something that can be dispensed of, it would not take such a position in the discourse. It is also dangerous because you cannot supplement something without supplanting it. This duality of poison/cure, danger/necessity, supplementing/supplanting runs through the discourse and the futile attempt to master it. This attempt is futile because the origin or source of writing supplements is unattainable and irreproducible in its pure form. In other words, it is transcendental, much like the sun, that cannot be looked at except through reflection. This reflection is a cure to looking as it provides a medium, but it replaces the original, the sun, with a copy.

The Platonic scheme of separating writing from truth and supplementing it with speech is based on two structural mechanisms: hierarchy and opposition. By Thoth's myth, Plato assigns the origin and power of speech, precisely of logos, to the paternal position. Writing needs to be presented to God, the King, and the Father to be approved, but he condemns it. Equally important is that it comes to him from outside, from below. This applies also to speech, but in the case of speech, the father adopts it as a son. Far from degrading writing, this patriarchal positioning "deconstructs" the very idea of hierarchy because writing and speech seem to have no difference in their inferior positions in relation to the father who is unattainable and irreproducible. Both replace and supplant him. In other words, there are two versions of parricide, but one is proclaimed while the other is prohibited, as Derrida phrases it. I can put it differently by saying that writing is illegitimate while speech is legitimate. What is given by the father is not truth but a right to "represent" truth, attendance to the representation of truth in and by speech, which is denied to writing. Without the father's attendance, the son would be destroyed in his very presence and be nothing but writing.

The second mechanism is the structural laws of oppositions, these sets of binaries in which one part is supplemented to the other: speech/writing, good/evil, life/death, first/second, original/copy. This opposition system is created in and through language and can not exist outside it. No opposition is possible without differentiation, which is dependent on the system of language. Nevertheless, again, this differentiation or the origin of the opposition is mythicized, and it is another manifestation of the father; it is the unattainable source that gives meaning and life. The supplementarity and secondarity in these binaries are not only prerequisites for the privileging of the other part but also an attempt to master the free "play" of signification or difference. So, this opposition is a structural necessity in anchoring meaning and saving it from floating away with the play of language. This is why the Thoth myth represents this necessity and is a climax, not just a minor or annexed element. In other words, the nontruth of the mytheme is a precondition for the truth of the philosopheme, and this is a basic element in Western metaphysics.

To sum up, two basic points in Derrida's reading reveal the inner workings of Plato's text. The first one is that using language entails a free "play" of signification that is impossible to master. Concepts and ideas float in language, and the point is that there is no exit outside of language. Contrary to what Plato is trying to prove, language, basically writing, is not just a form to document speech; rather, it creates concepts and controls content. Nothing is possible without language and its differences. Concepts like paternity, truth, or origin cannot be created outside and without language. This is why textuality is the only form possible for knowledge, which depends on the play of differences. This is also extended to other disciplines of human life, like history and culture, which are forms of textuality.

It follows that philosophy is a form of textuality with a set of mechanisms. These mechanisms are meant to master the play of signification and anchor the floating meaning. Now we can understand the futility of this attempt, and this is the second point in Derrida's reading. Plato manipulates a set of textual mechanisms to anchor his meaning, the origin of the truth he is trying to secure. As the above discussion showed, these mechanisms are self-deceptive in perpetuating what they are trying to dismantle. One of these elements that Plato is trying to dismantle and anchor outside the free play of signification is the dichotomy between philosophy and mythology as a broad framework of duality that includes other binary oppositions referred to in the discussion. If Plato's text proves anything, it proves the inseparability of these two disciplines, and more than that, any attempt at philosophical knowledge will constitute a meshing of the philosophical and the mythological in which a non-philosopheme is turned into a philosopheme and, hence, mythology is brought to philosophy or philosophy to mythology. This meshing of the two is an indispensable structural necessity of the discourse.

I see Derrida's reading of Plato as similar to that of Havelock, but it is textual contextualizing here. Derrida is putting Phaedrus in the wider project of the passage into philosophy and the dawn of Western metaphysics. However, unlike Havelock, he is concerned with textual mechanisms rather than historical turns. Derrida's reading indicates that Plato introduced metaphysics and philosophy by making up terms

and expounding notions and, more importantly, by a set of textual mechanisms that will live on with Western philosophy and thought. The structure of Phaedrus is the structure of philosophy, and the discourse is the discourse that is running in later texts, as Derrida's other readings of philosophical texts show.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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