Is There a Problem of Writing in Historiography? Plato and the *pharmakon* of the Written Word[*]

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Abstract. This investigation concerns first what Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricœur consider to be «the question of writing» in Plato's *Phaedrus*, and then whether their conception of a general philosophical problem of writing finds support in the dialogue. By contrast to their attempts to «determine» the «status» of writing as the general condition of knowledge, my investigation has two objections. (1) To show that Plato's concern is not to define writing, but to reflect on what is involved in honest and dishonest inquiry. (2) To argue that Derrida's and Ricœur's determination of the instrumental (epistemic and moral) «status» of writing, overlooks crucial difficulties of dishonest writing that Plato's discussion of the *pharmakon* reveals. The argument proposed is that honest and dishonest inquiry is not tied to the moral status that writing, as an invention or instrument, unconditionally involves, but to the moral quality of what a human being does when inquiring.

Keywords. Ethics; Writing; Responsibility; Moral understanding; Plato; Derrida; Ricœur.

* I would like to thank Hugo Strandberg, Kalle Pihlainen, Bennett Gilbert, Göran Torrkulla, Camilla Kronqvist, Jonas Ahlskog, Markus Kortesmäki, Alexander Öhman, Olli Lagerspetz, the editors of this theme issue of *Metodo*, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their insightful suggestions to this article. This work has been conducted with financial support from Victoriastiftelsen.

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Metodo Vol. 7, n. 2 (2019)
DOI: 10.19079/metodo.7.2.225

1. Introduction

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricœur writes:

> I shall speak in the manner of Plato's *Phaedrus* of the mythic birth of the writing of history. That this extension of the myth of the origin of writing may sound like a myth of the origin of history, thanks to rewriting, is, if I may put it this way, authorized by the myth itself, inasmuch as what is at stake is fate of memory, even if the irony is directed in the first place at the 'written discourses' of orators such as Lysias. [...] But it is to true memory, genuine memory, that the invention of writing and its related drugs is opposed as a threat. How then can the debate between memory and history not be affected by this myth?
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> To get quickly to the point, what fascinates me, as it does Jacques Derrida, is the insurmountable ambiguity attached to the *pharmakon* [elixir/medicine/poison] that the god offers the king. My question: must we not ask whether the writing of history, too, is remedy or poison?[1]

I begin with this quote because it is a statement about the (epistemic and moral) *status* of the «invention of writing». This and similar statements that define the general character of writing will be the object of my investigation. Let me therefore begin by explaining closely Ricœur's line of thought in this particular discussion. First, Ricœur alludes to Jacques Derrida's propositions in *Of Grammatology*; namely that «writing is the condition of the *episteme*» and «historicity itself is tied to the possibility of writing».[2] Writing, both for Derrida and Ricœur, is the condition of knowledge and historical identity.[3] The status of the «invention of writing», Ricœur says, will hence be a

1 Ricœur 2006 [2000], 141.

2 Derrida 1997 [1967], 27.

3 Derrida 1997 [1967], 3-4, 27, 121-2; cf. Ricœur 2006 [2000], 138-40, 351-2, 497-9; de Certeau 1988 [1975], 209-10.

«background music» to our «epistemological inquiry» about what history as a specific form of writing about the past will involve.[4] Second, Ricœur alludes to settling the character of the «invention of writing» as fleshed out by Plato in the *Phaedrus*,[5] and by Derrida in *Plato's Pharmacy*.[6] In Derrida's and Ricœur's reading, the *Phaedrus* shows that writing is a *pharmakon* (elixir, medicine, poison); a drug that supplements authentic memory, alienates us from reality, and poisons our minds. The invention of writing, it is argued, has an indeterminate meaning, and therefore one ought to be suspicious towards it.[7]

At stake, in this discussion, is not only an epistemic problem peculiar to historiography, but a general philosophical problem concerning the very idea of what writing *as* a «condition of the *episteme*» must involve. Derrida and Ricœur read the *Phaedrus* with the attempt to settle what the «status» of writing generally is as a condition of knowledge.

Although Derrida, and particularly Ricœur, relate «the question of writing» in the *Phaedrus* to our idea of historiography, I am not here concerned with problems that characterize historiography in particular, for example retrospectivity or narrativity.[8] Instead, this investigation concerns first what Derrida and Ricœur consider to be «the question of writing» in the *Phaedrus*, and then whether their conception of a general philosophical problem of writing finds support in the dialogue. My main concern is Derrida's and Ricœur's plea to ground the founding principles of writing philosophically. On this point, I contend that their readings of the *Phaedrus* simplify the philosophical depth of Plato's discussion, as they argue Plato attempted to determine the «status» of writing. By highlighting, instead, the *moral questions*[9] that arise in the dialogue in connection to

4 Ricœur 2006 [2000], 139.

5 Plato 1953b [n.d.].

6 Derrida 1981 [1972], 60-172.

7 Derrida 1981 [1972], 71-3; Ricœur 2006 [2000], 142-5.

8 The logically retrospective character of historical propositions/descriptions is vindicated in Danto, 1985 [1962], 152; and developed further in e.g. Roth 2020, 7-10. The problem of the narrative form and function of historiography is usually ascribed to White 1973.

9 I use the term moral and not ethical throughout the text, for I speak of "moral agent",

various forms of writing, my two arguments are as follows. (1) Plato's claim is not to define the character of writing, but rather to reflect on the morality of what speaking, writing, and understanding honestly involves. This invites a different phenomenology of writing than the one Derrida and Ricœur undertake. (2) Derrida's and Ricœur's tendency to put «the question of writing» in the form of the intrinsic epistemic and moral «status» of writing as an invention or instrument, overlooks the difficulties of dishonest writing that Plato's discussion of the *pharmakon* concerns. I contend that honest and dishonest inquiry is not tied to the moral «status» of an invention or instrument, but to the moral quality of what a human being does when inquiring.

With this argument, I break with Derrida's and Ricœur's vision of writing. Instead of asking what writing is (remedy or poison), I ask what sense there is in raising a general question about writing being either remedy of poison. Do we need to agree with Derrida and Ricœur that there is a question of *writing* that can be raised in general, and that needs a general answer to serve as a condition of our idea of historical and cultural knowledge? Again, this question should not be understood as a general yes-or-no question; in terms of there being or not being any problems in historical or cultural knowledge because of its written character. The problem I deal with in this essay arises exactly when we start to think in such terms and start to answer the question generally, as if it had a given answer regardless of the uniqueness of the particular cases we engage in and respond to. My critique, therefore, concerns a form of reasoning that still occurs in historical, cultural and textual theory today,[10] which implies that it would be possible and meaningful to entertain this question generally and establish the answer as a general rule as to what historiography

"moral judgment", and "moral understanding". Morals, or morality, should not be understood exclusively as *mores*, customs, or conventions here. It should be understood as our attitude and relationship to other people, and the normativity that enters such relationships. The attitude we have to other people, may be related to *mores*, but morality cannot be reduced to what *mores* prescribe. Cook 1997, 130-8; Murdoch 1997 [1957], 72-3.

10 A few recent examples of this tendency are, Ermarth 2011, 35-9, 60-1, 92; Munslow 2017, 480-1.

(or indeed any kind of writing) unconditionally should predispose.

Before entering the discussion, some delineations are necessary. My interest is Derrida's and Ricœur's framing of «the question of writing» with regard to Plato's *Phaedrus*,[11] thus, my investigation is not a general exegesis of their extensive work. Even if this investigation is a critique of one particular question that I regard as troublesome in their thinking, it does not imply a necessary disagreement with other claims in their philosophical *oeuvre*. It also does not disregard that, when it comes to matters other than writing as *pharmakon*, Derrida and Ricœur may have internally different visions.

2. «The Question of Writing» and Moral Agency

In order to understand how Derrida and Ricœur frame «the question of writing», then, we must first consider the myth of the origin of writing in the dialogue. It is from this myth that they mainly seek justification for their arguments. What does the myth suggest? Near the end of the *Phaedrus*, after an extensive discussion of the force of *Eros* in relation to the oral and written work of rhetoric, it is Socrates who tells a mythic story of a charming elixir for the improvement of memory:

> **Socrates:** I heard, then, that at Naucratis, in Egypt, was one of the ancient gods of that country, the one whose sacred bird is called the ibis, and the name of the god himself was Theuth. He it was who invented numbers and arithmetic and geometry and astronomy, also draughts and dice, and, most important of all, letters. Now the king of all Egypt at that time was the god Thamus, who lived in the great city of the upper region, which the Greeks call the Egyptian Thebes, and they call the god himself Ammon. To him came Theuth to show his inventions,

11 Derrida 1981 [1972], 69, 73-74. Ricœur uses the formulation «the invention of writing» to indicate that writing is a problematic case that needs to be settled. Ricœur 2006 [2000], 138-143, 393.

> saying that they ought to be imparted to the other Egyptians. But Thamus asked what use there was in each, and as Theuth enumerated their uses, expressed praise or blame, according as he approved or disapproved. The story goes that Thamus said many things to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts, which it would take too long to repeat; but when they came to the letters, 'This invention, O king,' said Theuth, 'will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir [*pharmakon*] of memory and wisdom that I have discovered.'
>
> But Thamus replied, 'Most ingenious Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir [*pharmakon*] not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise.'[12]

Beginning with Derrida, we must reflect on the mode in which he understands this myth. In his reading, this myth is the main source of what he calls «the trial of writing»; a trial of the necessary features of the phenomenon or invention of writing.[13] Thus, even if he claims that the «the question of writing» for Plato is predominantly one of

12 PLATO 1953b [n.d.], 274c-275b.

13 DERRIDA 1981 [1972], 144.

dialectics and *morality*, Derrida is not inquiring into what is involved in being a good writer or reader. The trial is not a trial of a person or her action, it is a trial of writing as such; a phenomenon or invention to which dialectics and morality responds. The myth, Derrida says, concerns the «status of writing» itself:[14]

> The truth of writing, that is, as we shall see, (the) nontruth, cannot be discovered in ourselves by ourselves. And it is not an object of a science, only of a history that is recited, a fable that is repeated. The link between writing and myth becomes clearer, as does its opposition to knowledge, notably the knowledge one seeks in oneself, by oneself. And at the same time, through writing or though myth, the genealogical break and the *estrangement* from the origin are sounded. One should note most especially that what writing will later be accused of—repeating without knowing—here defines the very approach that leads to the statement and *determination* of *its status*. One thus begins by repeating without knowing—through a myth—the *definition* of writing, which is to repeat without knowing. [my emphasis][15]

What does this perspective on «the question of writing» entail? In the quote, Derrida speaks of writing in terms of the written word in itself as an agent. *It* (*writing in itself*) – not the *person* writing or reading – is «accused» of «repeating without knowing».[16] Of course, even for Derrida, a phenomenon (in terms of invention or instrument) cannot have the same type of agency as a human agent has, but he talks of writing as *behaving* in ways not connected to human agency. «Estranged» from its origin, writing lives, so to speak, its own life.[17]

14 Derrida 1981 [1972], 68-9, 73-5.

15 Derrida 1981 [1972], 74-5.

16 This is evident from several formulations throughout «Plato's Pharmacy». Cf. «it hides from the first comer» (63), «before writing ever comes to leave its traces» (111), «breaking with its origin» (148), «it is not of good birth» (148), etc.

17 For Derrida, writing is a *logos* of its own. Derrida 1981 [1972], 142-4; Derrida, 1982 [1972], 316; cf. Barthes 1978 [1967], 142-3.

This perspective on the instrumentality of writing is remarkable. To replace a person's agency with the agency of an instrument (or invention), will affect how we further understand «the question of writing». If «the truth of writing» is that «its status» as an instrument is «repeating without knowing», how is this not to claim that writing will behave in a repetitive way *as* an agent? We say that the *instrument* (or invention, phenomenon) has this inherent «status», even a moral «status» in terms of leading us astray and so causing us harm.

In contrast, if the *person* who writes is conceived to be the agent, it dismisses the claim that writing in itself behaves in such and such a way, or has such and such a «status», for it is the behavior of the writer, or the context of understanding of the readers of the text, that we are interested in. What a person writes, then, may well be «repeating without knowing»; he might simply memorize things and write them down without understanding the meaning of them. Yet, the fact that he is memorizing does not say anything about the «status» of writing in general, nor anything about the instrument or technique he uses; «repeating without knowing» is rather the «status» of that person's action.

Thus, on this occasion, one could raise a set of questions about the moral meaning of the way Derrida frames «the question of writing». What would it mean to «accuse» writing itself, not the person who writes, of «repeating without knowing»? Is not a written word always in the first place to be understood as the meaningful action of a *human* agent, even though we do not necessarily know who it is?

In this light, Derrida's statement about writing in itself causing inauthentic repetition, externalizes moral agency by assigning it to an impersonal entity. An analogous statement to this would be if someone hurt another with a bread-knife and I were to accuse the knife of hurting people and not the person who used the knife. There, it is clear that the bread-knife itself did not hurt people, neither did it *cause* anyone to hurt people, nor was it designed for such purposes. If

it hurt someone, someone used it in that way. Reproach belongs to that person. To «accuse» *writing in itself*, then, seems misfocused from a moral point of view, because it is only justified as long as one speaks of writing as estranged from human agency.

Thus, the difficulty that an emphasis on moral agency actualizes is not only the meaningfulness of morally questioning the instrumental value of writing, but more importantly whether it is meaningful to think of writing in such instrumental terms at all. What are the consequences of thinking of writing itself as estranged from human agency the way Derrida proposes? Jesper Svenbro, for example, argues that the inscribed word as such never had *instrumental* value for the Ancient Greeks, but where rather dependent upon *someone* speaking them. When reading aloud, «This is the *sēma* of Archias», the reader's voice became the voice of the stele, of the inscriptor, or of the dead person resting in the grave. The voice of the reader was no longer the reader's own, but this did not mean the inscription bewitched the reader and used him to speak, or that it caused him to repeat what was inscribed. Instead, the reader consciously gave away his voice in a careful act of commemoration; he gave another his voice.[18]

What Svenbro challenges, then, is Derrida's idea that *writing in itself* exists (as entity, agent, substance, structure, or instrument of inquiry) independently of the different kinds of human meaningful actions written words happen to be. It is, as Seth Benardete has argued, more reasonable to understand writing as a moral deed that, as in the case of inscription, shows itself in our lovingly reading and understanding.[19] Thus, it is a deed that is part of human moral intercourse as much as speaking is.[20]

Derrida would object to my claims here by arguing that «[t]he disappearance of the Face» and «the structure of repetition» belong to

18 Svenbro 1993 [1988], 3, 44-7; cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 1996, 160-2. For a similar idea in the Egyptian New Kingdom, see Lichtheim 1976, 120.

19 Benardete 1999, 21; cf. Plato, 1953b [n.d.], 228e, 242d-e, 277e.

20 *Pace* Derrida 1981 [1972], 77. From Wilhelm Dilthey's critique of psychological abstractions, one could also ask whether it is meaningful to hold a thesis where «written words» are not anchored *in* human life. Dilthey 1989 [1883], 82-3.

«generalized writing».[21] This is to say that the loss of the empirical presence of a speaker, and the loss of any original meanings and attendances of a written utterance, are inscribed in the very idea of writing.[22] However, one need not disagree with this phenomenological insight about the empirical absence of the writer in order to question the moral consequences that Derrida (and Ricœur) draw from it. Based on this reading, I only hope to have brought light on a crucial distinction with regard to *agency* in writing.

There is, namely, an important difference between conceiving, (a) the person who writes, or, (b) the written word itself, as having moral status (or agency). One's emphasis affects what one can meaningfully expect of a written word in moral terms. It affects, for instance, *who* (i.e. writing in itself or the person) we claim is responsible for a written utterance, and what responsibility or duty we ourselves have in the face of it. It is, for sure, less challenging to «accuse» an impersonal entity (say, a linguistic/ideological structure or an instrument) of «repeating without knowing»,[23] than saying the same thing to a person to her face.[24]

If we look to Ricœur, however, he first gives the impression that writing itself – the instrument – has nothing to do with the *morality* of what it means to write. Moral agency seems to fall on the human doing the action:

21 Derrida 1981 [1972], 168, cf. 111. Cf. Svenbro 1993 [1988], 46-7. For a moral defense of Derrida see Critchley 1999, 44-5; Bauman 1995, 101-2.

22 This is more strongly stated in Derrida 1982 [1972], 316-7; cf. Ricœur 1981 [1970], 108.

23 It needs to be noted that Derrida's accusation is directed toward historical or structural meanings that our written words bring in. In his estimation, the written word gains its meaning from an impersonal «structure of repetition» that hides and uses tensions, elements, and relationships historically existent in this very structure itself. Derrida 1997 [1967], 99; Derrida 1981 [1972], 168; Derrida 1982 [1972], 326; cf. Murdoch 2003 [1992], 188-9; Moi 2017, 71-2. The relevance of historical or structural meanings, hidden in our writings and performances, is imperative to the idea of a «hermeneutics of suspicion». Scott-Baumann 2009, 36-7; cf. Sedgwick 2003, 125-7; Felski 2015, 30-9. My concern, however, is where the thought that texts always express historico-structural meanings would take us morally.

24 Cf. Lévinas 1979 [1961], 199; Murdoch 2003 [1992], 193-5.

> The blame [in the *Phaedrus*] does not fall on writing as such but on the relation of the discourse to the just and unjust, the bad and the good. It is with regard to this that the criterion that discourses 'written in the soul' win out over all others and why one must bid farewell to all these others. [my emphasis][25]

Despite this statement, and the further insight that the *Phaedrus* does not merely concern "epistemological" but also "ethical" matters,[26] Ricœur concurs with Derrida, because he constantly phrases the question about *morality* in writing as following:

> [...] what fascinates me, as it does Jacques Derrida, is the insurmountable ambiguity attached to the *pharmakon* [elixir/medicine/poison] that the god offers the king. My question: must we not ask whether the writing of history, too, is remedy or poison?[27]

Nevertheless, if we, as Ricœur does, ask whether historiography, too, is either remedy or poison *due to* its written character, we talk of the intrinsic moral status of «writing as such», as an invention or instrument. We ask whether the instrument itself is remedy or poison (or has such an effect), not whether the utterance of a person may be understood (or faultily actualized) in a potentially harmful way. If our concern were actually what it means for a *person* to write in a morally responsible way, we would not ask *what* the moral status of *writing in itself* is. The instrument, I argue, will not affect the moral status of a person's action, any moral status that can be assigned to the written word has this status in terms of *being* a person's action. Therefore, as long as Ricœur puts the question of writing in the above way, his endeavor will be, in Derrida's terms, a «determination» of the «status» of writing.

25 Ricœur 2006 [2000], 144.
26 Ricœur 2006 [2000], 144.
27 Ricœur 2006 [2000], 141, cf. 139, 393, 499.

My contention, so far, is that there are difficulties in Ricœur's and Derrida's framing of «the question of writing» in the *Phaedrus*, because they focus on the intrinsic (epistemic and moral) «status» of writing as an invention or instrument; presuming, then, that writing may be regarded as «autonomous» or «estranged» either from its origin or its addressee.[28] The *pharmakon*, for Derrida and Ricœur, is not regarded as an act of language, but as a toxin externally implemented into the human mind, which justifies their speaking about writing in terms of an invention being either remedy or poison for memory. However, before we turn to the *Phaedrus* itself I must say something more about what *kind* of intrinsic «status» they think writing has, and that in their reading is substantiated by the *Phaedrus*. Consider what Derrida writes:

> Contrary to life, writing—or, if you will, the *pharmakon*—can only *displace* or even *aggravate* the ill. Such will be, in its logical outlines, the objections the king raises to writing: under pretext of supplementing memory, writing makes one even more forgetful; far from increasing knowledge, it diminishes it. Writing does not answer the needs of memory, it aims to the side, does not reinforce *mnēmē* [living memory/remembering], but only *hypomnēsis* [reminding].[29]

This character is to be understood as the «status» or «the truth of writing», or what writing in general is «accused» of in terms of being a *pharmakon* and an agent on its own.[30] But what results from writing displacing and supplementing real memory/wisdom is occasionally even more important. For Derrida endorses a general «suspicion» toward writing that he contends Plato holds throughout the *Phaedrus*.[31] This is, in my vision, Derrida's most difficult remark about what the

28 «Semantic autonomy», Ricœur 2006 [2000], 143, 166; «estrangement from the origin», Derrida 1981 [1972], 74, 137-8.

29 Derrida 1981 [1972], 100.

30 Derrida 1981 [1972], 73-4, 108-10.

31 Derrida 1981 [1972], 167-9, cf. 76.

«status» of writing must be:

> Writing is no more valuable, says Plato, as a remedy than as a poison. Even before Thamus has let fall his pejorative sentence, the remedy is disturbing in itself. One must indeed be aware of the fact that Plato is suspicious of the *pharmakon* in general, even in the case of drugs used exclusively for therapeutic ends, even when they are wielded with good intentions, and even when they are as such effective. There is no such thing as a harmless remedy. The *pharmakon* can never be simply beneficial.[32]

Suspicion may be imagined in at least three different ways here. For instance, I can, as Lars Hertzberg says, ask whether I have sufficient grounds for relying on something *particular* that someone has written. In that case, I think I have «independent standards by which it is to be judged whether or not my reliance on her [writing] was misplaced». This case of suspicion would be analogous to how I am not relying on a damaged *instrument* to do the thing I wish.[33]

One could, however, even go as far as to imagine that I generally do not trust a person, and thus I would not take her words seriously on several matters. Every word she says would be «as though one were drinking from a contaminated well», as Simone Weil says.[34] My distrust of a person grows. Nevertheless, even if we imagine such a case of serious distrust of another person, it does not mean that I have come to distrust what people say or write in general. To judge whether or not reliance on written words of others generally is misplaced, is hardly possible in terms of standards independent of the tacit trust in each other's words that we already presuppose in our everyday lives.[35] There would, in Hertzberg's words, be nothing that would count as

32 Derrida 1981 [1972], 99.
33 Hertzberg 1994, 119-20. Quote from 119.
34 Weil 2002 [1949], 35.
35 Murdoch 2003 [1992], 214; cf. Gadamer, 1989 [1981], 55.

evidence for or against Derrida's sort of proposition.[36] Judging that we ought to suspect people's written words for particular reasons, or that we ought to rely on them for such and such reasons, are questions of evidence. Suspicion as a precondition, on the contrary, is something else entirely. It may be put as a hypothetical attempt to change a profound concept of trust that we already share in our lives with others. Suspicion, then, becomes an attitude to the words of other people – a suspicious conviction or belief.[37]

Contrary to Derrida, however, Ricœur actually tries to refute what may be called a «hermeneutics of suspicion» regarding text,[38] but with the result that he concurs with it.[39] For, he says, in order for a true historiography to be established:

> [...] the suspicion would have to be exorcized that [the writing of] history remains a hindrance to memory, just like the *pharmakon* of the myth, where in the end we do not know whether it [writing] is a remedy or a poison, or both at once. We shall have to allow this unavoidable suspicion to express itself more than one time.[40]

There is one problem with this statement. If I claim that an «unavoidable suspicion» with regards to the writing of history must be «exorcized», I am already presupposing and integrating general

36 Hertzberg 1994, 121.

37 Sedgwick 2003, 133-6; Felski 2015, 34-6.

38 Ricœur's critique, here, is of Friedrich Nietzsche who reiterates the idea of the *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus* by reflecting on what history means for a contemporary society suffering from a «malady of history». Nietzsche, 1910 [1874], 94-7; cf. Ricœur 2006 [2006], 143-5, 287-92.

39 Ricœur sometimes talks about a hermeneutic task of reading text as having a «double meaning», including both a faithful hermeneutic restoration of intentions and a suspicious reduction of illusions. This, however, implies that faith and suspicion are, in principle, equally relevant in every interpretation of text. Ricœur 2008 [1965], 32-3, 48. See also Ricœur 1974 [1969], 62-4. Whether historiography is remedy or poison is by Ricœur regarded as a case of equivocality of meaning. Cf. Ricœur, *Memory*, 287-90.

40 Ricœur 2006 [2000], 145.

suspicion into the idea of writing.[41] This statement, so to speak, already embraces the *necessity* of suspicion as a precondition of writing. In that sense, Ricœur and Derrida speak the same language. In principle, they claim, we can never trust any written word wholeheartedly. And therefore, Ricœur concludes:

> [T]he competition between memory and history, between the faithfulness of the one and the truth of the other, cannot be resolved on the epistemological plane. In this respect, the suspicion instilled by the myth of the *Phaedrus*– is the *pharmakon* of writing a poison or a remedy?– has never been dispelled on the gnoseological plane.[42]

I want to ask what it would mean to say that suspicion as a precondition of writing is «instilled» by the myth of writing – not as an «epistemological» point but as a «gnoseological» one – and has «never been dispelled»? First of all, the statement draws on faulty insights from the *Phaedrus*, because Plato's point, I will argue, was not to instill a *belief* of unconditional suspicion toward people's written words. His concern was, on the contrary, to discuss what the *morality* of what we say and do would involve, including the morality of our attitude to the written and spoken words of others. Secondly, Ricœur's statement (like Derrida's) shows a problematic attitude to other people as he thinks we must, for reasons of *belief*, allow (or presuppose) an «unavoidable suspicion» with regard to people's writings.

What worries me, therefore, in Derrida's and Ricœur's «determination» of the «status» of writing, is not so much whether a person is actually capable of relating to the written words of others with a suspicious presumption, but where such a *belief* in an «unavoidable suspicion», to any written words, takes us morally.

Let us take an example of where this moral difficulty surfaces. Imagine that my friend writes me a letter about his mother who has

41 Scott-Baumann 2009, 158.

42 Ricœur 2006 [2000], 498-9.

died recently. I did not know of her dying beforehand, I had not seen her nor my friend for a while. The letter is an invitation to her burial. After having read *Plato's Pharmacy*, however, I have come to regard any written word with unconditional suspicion. In one scenario, I believe the letter is not from my friend at all, I regard it as a fraud and do not respond to it. In another scenario, I do not doubt that the letter is from my friend, but I think it is dubious whether my friend's mother had died or not. In a third scenario, I believe that my friend's most important message is not that his mother had died, and that we should honor her together; instead I think the letter is a trick for testing my response in such and such a situation. In these scenarios, expressing three different suspicions, I do not distrust something like 'the invitation itself'; I distrust another person's words, with the outcome that I seriously hurt my friend and other people involved if I have no reason to distrust what he says.[43] My not responding to my friend's invitation will surely come up the next time we meet again, given that my friend is still my friend after I have done this to him. To epistemically question the truth claim of whether or not his mother had died would also be difficult, for it would devalue what he says regarding a very serious matter in his life. If I argue, then, that I assumed he mainly meant a different thing than inviting me to the burial to honor his mother, it does not make the situation any better. My *belief* in unconditional suspicion as being, with Derrida, the «status» of any text would damage me morally. There is, of course, no *unconditional reason* why I should suspect my friend's invitation (or any other text) in any of these ways.

3. The Myth of the Origin of Writing

If we turn to the *Phaedrus* now, I argue that there is no unconditional «suspicion» toward writing being «instilled», because for Plato there is

43 Of course, my friend might be upset even though I have good reasons for putting what he says into question.

no question of determining the general «status» of writing. If there is a general question, it is one about the *morality* of inquiry. It is time to look closer at the *Phaedrus* in order to understand what is at stake in the question of writing.

Let us recall the myth of the origin of writing. Even for the Greeks 400 BCE, the society of Egypt was an ancient and mythological one.[44] The context of the story already implies that the event is carried out in a time when it was expected to learn things by heart.[45] This is true both for the mythological society of Thamus, and for Plato's society. Learning things by heart, however, involves a distinction imperative for our understanding of the dialogue. There are two ways of learning things by heart; namely learning as, (a) repeating and, (b) understanding. To learn things by heart as a matter of merely reminding, memorizing or repeating something without really understanding or knowing it, is exactly the sort of hollow learning-things-by-heart that king Thamus fears writing will bring.[46] This is also to say that the king's fears have little to do with the technique of writing itself but rather concerns the attitude to one's writing. In the myth, the features of repeating, memorizing, or forgetting only constitute the sort of impact that the king *fears* writing will have on our memory. People may start to act sloppily as they learn how to write or read. These features, however, are not inherent in writing as such. In other words, it would be a mistake to say, with Derrida, that «in truth, writing is essentially bad, external to memory, productive not of science but of belief, not of truth but of appearances. The *pharmakon* produces a play of appearances which enable it to pass for truth».[47] Contrary to Derrida's contention, I argue that the distinction involved here is not one between the *true* and the *written*.[48] It lies elsewhere.

If Plato's distinction between the true (remembering) and the

44 Thamus is also known as Ammen-Re; the king of gods; the invisible god of life; the sun. Teuth is the messenger god. Wallis Budge 1904, 2-4.

45 Svenbro 1993 [1988], 170.

46 Cf. Griswold 1986, 206.

47 Derrida 1981 [1972], 103.

48 Derrida, 1981 [1972], 68; cf. Derrida 1997 [1967], 34-7.

appearance of the true (memorizing/reminding), is not necessarily symmetrical with the practicing of one's memory and writing things down, what kind of distinction is it?[49] King Thamus says to Teuth, «this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. […] You have invented an elixir [*pharmakon*] not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom.»[50] But the myth itself does not explain the distinction between remembering and reminding. Rather, it presupposes a distinction which is already discussed by Socrates and Phaedrus uptil the point where the myth is introduced. The distinction presupposed is the human moral concern to «describe [show] the soul» of what he does in an act of writing.[51] Thus, one cannot say that the technique of writing is intrinsically bad, immoral, or untruthful, for what is in question is «those who learn to use it».[52] At stake is the writers' moral responsibility in their *acts* of writing. In that sense, Derrida and Ricœur are right in saying that the dialogue concerns moral questions.[53] But it is not the general moral «status» of the instrument or technique of writing that Plato talks about.[54] His concern is what an honest person should and should not do when inquiring.

This dimension – an inquiry into the moral quality of a person's action – shimmers throughout the myth. King Thamus says to Teuth, «one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another [man]».[55] This implies that the meaning of an act of persuasion, and a moral judgement of that action, together belong to our understanding of what an action morally means. Persuasion, however, risks being misunderstood if not related to a Platonic vision of morality and artful

49 Cf. Derrida 1981 [1972], 91.

50 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 275a.

51 I henceforth translate *akribeia* as to «show», instead of to «describe». Plato 1953b [n.d], 271a.

52 Cf. Plato 1989 [n.d.], 341a-d.

53 Derrida 1981 [1972], 68, 74; Ricœur 2006 [2000], 144; cf. Plato 1953b [n.d.], 258d, 274b.

54 *Pace* Derrida 1981 [1972], 68, 77; Ricœur 2006 [2000], 139, 141, 499.

55 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 274e.

performance. For Plato, the one who performs something «with real art» has a responsibility, above all, to «show the soul» of what he is doing, or claiming to have knowledge about.[56] Or rather, to perform something «with real art» already means that the artist actually «shows the soul» of his subject, and this is not only his own judgement but is judged beyond what he himself claims or thinks he does. «[T]o beget arts», or to do something «with real art», then, means that it is not up to me, as a speaker or writer, to *decide* or *judge* what is the meaning of my own action.[57] By contrast, my moral task lies in the duty to «show the soul» of what is at stake; for I who claim to speak and write truthfully should, of course, always be guided by the concern to make sure that that is what I do.[58] One could say that my honesty and responsibility is the concern to «show the soul» of what I claim and do.

In this context, Thamus says something more. To evaluate whether someone in his act of persuasion «shows the soul» or not cannot solely be a responsibility put on the one who tries to persuade people. Other people have a responsibility as well to judge what an act of persuasion morally means. This judgement, Plato argues, is a matter of «understand[ing] the nature of the soul»;[59] the nature of what has been said. Let us consider a strong example form the myth. Teuth, the messenger, having done his best to «show the soul» of what written words may bring, is not, as it were, in the position to contend that these words actually will be an «elixir [*pharmakon*] of memory and wisdom».[60] Thamus the king, who is the god of life,[61] on the contrary, is in the position to judge such matters, as he *is afraid* written words will bring mere appearances of wisdom and forgetfulness to his people.[62]

56 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 271a-c, 277c.
57 Cf. Kronqvist 2019, 983.
58 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 262b, 277c-d.
59 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 277b-c.
60 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 274e.
61 Wallis Budge 1904, 2-4.
62 The criticism of writing in this myth may be an implicit criticism of any craft (*technē*). Griswold 1986, 204-5.

Is the myth then, as Derrida and Ricœur would have it, a «trial» of the *invention* of writing, and thus about the *intrinsic* «status» of this invention?[63] I think we have to leave this idea behind.[64] It would be a simplification of the matters involved in the myth to say that Plato's distinction is between the *true* and the *written*.[65] For the demand to show and see what the written words of others mean – the truthfulness when writing, as well as the truthfulness in understanding what is being said – is a demand that is constantly put on us as moral agents. The Platonic difficulties of writing, on this reading, are not put as matters of inquiring into what true epistemic content an instrument generally communicates.[66] The myth does not explain that the written word in general must be regarded as an indeterminate *pharmakon*, nor does it explain that writing must be approached with unconditional suspicion. It is, I argue, a different *type* of distinction that Plato makes throughout the dialogue; one that is not inherent in any specific technique or craft but may instead be put as our responsibility as craftsmen, performers, rhetors, fellow human beings, to honestly show what we do and speak of.

4. To Guide the Stranger to a Good Place

Let us now set aside the question about the general «status» of writing, and look at different examples of writing that surface in the *Phaedrus*. We have already looked at one, the myth of the origin of writing. But the most striking question about writing arises in the beginning of the dialogue, as an analogy to what is involved in guiding a stranger in to «a good place».[67] This analogy concerns the manner in which we guide or follow each other, as well as the places to where we are taking each

63 Derrida 1981 [1972], 144; Ricœur 2006 [2000], 141-2.

64 The idea that the *Phaedrus* shows the general problem of writing seems to be a common philosophical reading – Van der Heiden 2010, 58-63.

65 *Pace* Derrida 1981 [1972], 68; see Murdoch 2003 [1992], 18-9, 23.

66 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 274b.

67 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 229a.

other in conversation or in life.[68] It is, one could say, this important moral mode in which Socrates' and Phaedrus' later concerns in the dialogue regarding the charm of written and oral rhetoric are situated.

Phaedrus, the story goes, had for once dragged out Socrates from his comfortable city-milieu to the countryside, which was unfamiliar to him:

> **Phaedrus.** You are an amazing and most remarkable person. For you really do seem exactly like a stranger who is being guided about, and not like a native. You don't go away from the city out over the border, and it seems to me you don't go outside the walls at all.
>
> **Socrates.** Forgive me, my dear friend. You see, I am fond of learning. Now the country places and the trees won't teach me anything, and the people in the city do. But you seem to have found the charm [*pharmakon*] to bring me out. For as people lead hungry animals by shaking in front of them a branch of leaves or some fruit, just so, I think, you, by holding before me discourses in books, will lead me all over Attica and whenever else you please. So now that I have come here, I intend to lie down, and do you choose the position in which you think you can read most easily, and read.[69]

I want to suggest that this conversation shows Socrates' and Phaedrus' relationship of friendship or love. In their conversation, *Eros* is involved the *pharmakon*, in the form of desire for being with the one you love, or of admiration of what the other says. Socrates is charmed by Phaedrus and says, «I am so determined to hear you, that I will not leave you, even if you extend the walk to Megara, and, as Herodicus says, go to the wall and back again».[70] This describes very well how one trusts another person and goes along; how one can be seduced by

68 Cf. Kronqvist 2019, 983-4.

69 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 230d-e.

70 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 227d. The distance between Athens and the walls of Megara was about 40 kilometers. Kotwick 2016, 144.

another person, or even does stupid things when blinded by admiration. It shows how written and oral words may affect people, and puts different responsibilities on people depending on the place they have in relation to each other.[71]

We can recognize what enters Socrates' and Phaedrus' relationship. We have experienced it before, in our lives. By telling me certain things, you may take me to places that I am not familiar with where I feel I do not belong. In a material way or in conversation, you may take me to places that you as a teller must know better than me for you say you have been there before and you guide me. In trusting you, my state of mind might be, «now that I have come here, I intend to lie down». Matters are, so to speak, in your hands. Trusting you means that I am open for your suggestions, I let you guide me. I trust that you will lead us in the right direction, to «a good place», for I do not know where we are going, only where you *say* we are going.[72] Heading toward the place you want to show me, I might see something I did not see before. I might, as Socrates occasionally does, come to see how beautiful the place to which you have led me really is. «By Hera», says Socrates, «it is a charming resting place».[73] I might come to see why you wanted to take me there in the first place. I might appreciate this place, and the things you said, in a way I could not imagine before. You drag me out from my convenience, from my «city walls», from the place I know and do not want to leave, my prejudices. But since you tell me you will guide me to this place and no other, it is also your responsibility to do so.

Exactly as Socrates leaves himself in the hands of Phaedrus, I leave myself in your hands when you tell me something. I trust that you will lead me to «a good place», I have no reason to distrust you, you are my friend. Thus, the story illustrates a crucial moral demand regarding what it means to inquire truthfully. Phaedrus has a *responsibility* in this relationship. It is Phaedrus who introduces this new milieu, in which

71 Cf. Benardete 1999, 21.
72 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 229a-b.
73 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 230b.

Socrates indeed is a stranger. It is Phaedrus who carries Socrates in his arms,[74] and must now be prepared to take responsibility for him; must, as it were, guide him toward «a good place». This feature in their relationship, to carry someone else in one's arms, is, then, a demand on Phaedrus. Phaedrus have Socrates seduced, and could lead him astray, «all over Attica and whenever else you please», and had the possibility to do so. But to lead Socrates astray intentionally or due to ignorance would put their friendship into question, would damage them both in different ways. It is not something Phaedrus as a friend could do to Socrates. Socrates will eventually ask where they have ended up. 'Is *this* the beautiful place you said you would lead me to?' He could say he still does not see the promised beauty or goodness of the place. Or even worse, that the place is darker than he thought it would be. In the dialogue, however, Socrates admires the place to which Phaedrus has led him, when he opens his eyes and sees what this place really is. He admires the grass, the cicadas, the breeze, the water, as he eventually says, «So you have guided the stranger most excellently, dear Phaedrus.»[75]

To «guide the stranger» in this way, to try to lead him to «a good place», is, I believe, an analogy for the moral matters that enter telling or writing something honestly. The seducing powers of the *pharmakon* is here a matter of taking responsibility for another person, as he/she trusts you, when you take that person on a journey. It would, however, be wrong to say that «guiding the stranger» to «a good place» is peculiarly tied to one specific art or technique. Likewise, it would be wrong to say that the written word has no capacity to «guide the stranger». «Guiding the stranger» is here illustrated as a moral matter of being truthful and honest toward people involved in the things one does. And it is, of course, something that a *person* does. In more Platonic terms, the metaphor or concept is a matter of leading someone in light of the good; be it in speech, in writing, or in life. In other words, to show, to the best of one's abilities, the soul or nature of

74 Cf. Løgstrup 1997 [1956], 17-8.
75 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 230d.

what one claims.

This lack of honesty is, Socrates says, the problem with rhetoric, as some rhetors do not *show* the soul of what they contend to hold in their hands, although they claim to speak «with art» about their matters. For, he says, «Is not rhetoric in its entire nature an art which leads the soul by means of words, not only in law court and in the various other public assemblages, but in private companies as well?» «Do they not contend in speech, or what shall we say they do?» «About the just and the unjust?»[76] Rhetoric is, then, an art of guiding the soul – guiding other people – which means that the moral demand of guiding someone in the right direction is present at all times as a responsibility of the rhetor. Whether the rhetor guides the stranger in the light of the good, in writing or in speech, is the moral concern Plato has throughout the dialogue. And this concern is, I think, not so much a question of writing as such, as it is a matter of truthful inquiry in general:

> **Socrates:** The method of the art of healing is much the same as that of rhetoric.
>
> **Phaedrus:** How so?
>
> **Sorcrates:** In both cases you must analyse nature, in one that of the body and in the other that of the soul, if you are to proceed in a scientific manner, not merely by practice and routine, to impart health and strength to the body by prescribing medicine [*pharmaka*] and diet, or by proper discourses and training to give to the soul the desired belief and virtue.
>
> [...]
>
> **Socrates:** Then see what Hippocrates and true reason says about nature. In considering the nature of anything, must we not consider first, whether that in respect to which we wish to be learned ourselves and to make others learned is simple or multiform, and then, if it is simple, enquire what power of acting it possesses, or of being acted upon, and by what, and if

76 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 261a-c.

> it has many forms, number them, and then see in the case of each form, as we did in the case of the simple nature, what its action is and how it is acted upon and by what?
>
> **Phaedrus:** Very likely, Socrates.
>
> **Socrates:** At any rate, any other mode of procedure would be like the progress of a blind man. Yet surely he who pursues any study scientifically ought not to become comparable to a blind or a deaf man, but evidently the man whose rhetorical teaching is a real art will explain accurately the nature of that to which his words are to be addressed, and that is the soul, is it not?[77]

The analogy between medicine and rhetoric is not a coincidence; it is vital to the discussion. On the one hand, the practitioners of these arts give the body and the soul the food it needs, both physically and morally. Medicine concerns what is good for the human body, while rhetoric concerns what is good for human mind and moral life together. These arts are necessities for human wellbeing, in terms of human care, first of all for each other. The medic seldom heals his own wounds, the rhetor does not speaks to himself. It belongs to their respective practices that they care for what is good for the body and the soul of other people. On the other hand, it is the capacity to nourish the body or the soul that should be investigated if one wants to understand what a practice means – the «nature» of it.[78] And in order to understand what the «nature» of something is, the one who proceeds scientifically or artfully must first *show* whether the «nature» of the matter under scrutiny is «simple or multiform». His purpose must, as Socrates says, be to show «what its action is and how it is acted upon and by what?» Particular medicines (*pharmaka*) can have certain harmful effects on the human body, exactly as rhetorical arguments may damage a soul or put someone in danger. Therefore, to show what something is, and what it means in what circumstances, belongs to honestly showing the «nature» of the matter at hand.

77 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 270c-e.

78 Irwin 1995, 322-3.

It is important to note that the *instrumental* value of writing (which I previously criticized Derrida and Ricœur for characterizing as «the question of writing») is not in question.[79] Writing is not even regarded as an instrument, but belongs, in this case, to the craft of rhetoric, and is meaningful in terms of being the rhetor's inquiry. What Socrates and Phaedrus discuss is the moral quality of what the rhetor writes; to what extent he cares for the souls of others in his written and oral work. And so, they conclude, «By no other method of exposition or speech will this [speeches and handbooks about the art of rhetoric], or anything else, ever be written or spoken with real art. But those whom you have heard, who write treatises on the art of speech nowadays, are deceivers and conceal the nature of the soul, though they know it very well.»[80] The crucial point is that the rhetor «conceal[s] the nature of the soul» and is dishonest not *because* he writes, but because he does not follow the philosophical «method» of showing what is involved in honest speaking and writing although «he know[s] it very well». In that sense, the rhetor is not honest in what he does.

Yet, this is also how they philosophically scrutinize the «nature» of any kind of inquiry (written or oral such). Namely, by illustrating that the fundamental moral quality of any inquiry surfaces in the question whether we actually show the «nature» of what we do and talk about. And if not, whether we simply ignore it, whether we deceive people on purpose, or whether we do not know what we talk about at all.

5. Reproach and the Divinity of Writing

So far, I have argued that *inquiry* as *pharmakon* refers to a person's responsibility of being honest; his responsibility of, so to speak, giving other souls proper nutrition (*parmaka*) or care, by showing what he writes or speaks of. Simultaneously this involves a question of conscience, of giving one's own soul proper nutrition as well, by not

79 Cf. Svenbro 1993 [1988], 212.
80 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 271b-c.

feeding on the lie that I have helped another or been truthful about what I do when I know I have not.[81] A stranger could be led astray, a soul might be damaged, if we are reckless with words. It would, however, be a mistake to say that we are in principle reckless with words, or that the *pharmakon* generally must involve such possibilities. Plato is not interested in deciding on such questions, in fact he already says on what occasions a rhetor is reckless, namely, when a rhetor does not «show the soul» of what is at hand. On such occasions, his words are poison.

I must now turn to a different aspect of the written word in the *Phaedrus*, which has hitherto surfaced only briefly in the myth of the origin of writing. This is what one could call the divinity of writing. In other words, what in the myth of the origin of writing was put as writing as an eternal gift from the gods that is irreproachable in character, evaluated only by the god of life. We must keep in mind, however, that divinity is tied not to all, but to *one* specific type of writing in this dialogue. It is associated with *logography*, the writing of laws. In this context, Socrates ironically says, «the proudest of the statesmen are most fond of writing and of leaving writings behind them, since they care so much of praise that when they write a speech add at the beginning the names of those who praise them in each instance.»[82] This desire for praise, or divinity, is a dimension of rhetorical work that calls for more analysis.

Socrates critique is of the desire of leaving things behind – or of, as it were, making oneself *eternal*, *immortal*, or *divine*.[83] If this becomes the speech-writes' interest, people, including the rhetor himself, tend to forget both who he is, and what his duty is. The rhetor forgets that he is no god. His duty as a rhetor is always to «show the soul» of what he does and describes. In other words, his duty was to show other people that he is a person and no god, and that he never wrote anything

81 On the importance of self-knowledge in Plato see Benardete 1999, 53-5; Griswold 1986, 223. In Plato's dialogues, epistemic and moral questions are usually related to self-knowledge. Strandberg 2015, 6, 10-2.

82 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 257d-e.

83 Cf. Svenbro 1993 [1988], 48. Plato 1953b [n.d.], 257d-258c.

divine. Speeches are, Socrates implies, written not by gods but by mortals, and should be reproached accordingly. In this regard, he opens what I see as one of the most important aspect of this dialogue by saying:

> Well then, when an orator or a king is able to rival the greatness of Lycurgus or Solon or Darius and attain immortality as a writer of the state [*logographos*], does he not while living think of himself equal to the gods, and has not posterity the same opinion of him, when they see his writings [*grammata*]?[84]

In a slightly different way than Derrida, who argues that the absent writer manifests himself in logography, I think this persistent critique must not be understood as a critique of the writing of law *per se*,[85] but rather as a critique of one particular tendency in rethoric –one kind of attitude that we tend to have to written words.

In the quote, we miss a crucial point of the argument if we do not consider that Lycurgus of Sparta, Solon of Athens, Darius of Persia all were legendary lawgivers, whose writings, legacies, and reputations were on the verge of *divine*. What this means for Socrates' critique is utterly important. Plutarch, for instance, describes Lycurgus as «beloved of the gods, and rather god than man»;[86] after Lycurgus, according to the legend, had consulted the Oracle of Delphi, after the gods had promised him «a constitution which should be the best in the world».[87] This constitution was then the law of Sparta, the rules that maintained a whole way of life. It is, of course, this divine character that Socrates fears ordinary rhetoric and speech-writing may gain, or ascribe to itself, as a consequence of dishonest writing – of thinking of oneself as god and not as human. It is not at all to say that there is no difference between Lycurgus' lawgiving and ordinary

84 PLATO 1953b [n.d.], 258c.
85 *Pace* DERRIDA 1981 [1972], 68.
86 PLUTARCH 1967 [n.d.], 216.
87 PLUTARCH 1967 [n.d.], 219.

rhetoric, just that an honest rhetor shows this difference, shows that he is no god, while a dishonest does not.

The status of writing itself is not at stake here. At stake is rather the concern to be honest when writing. There are different types of writing, and it belongs to a honest person both to show how discourse are different, if it is something he himself claims, and to see their differing moral values, if it is something he tries to understand. The rhetor pretending to be a god is a typical example of dishonest action. That rhetor is, Socrates says, «buying honour among men by sinning against the gods.»[88] But it is not only the rhetor playing god who is a sinner, for Socrates, too, calls himself a sinner as he actually believed the dishonest rhetor who played god.[89]

«Sinning against the gods» is a metaphor for dishonesty; a metaphor of speaking ill of *Eros* as a god, as Lysias did when he claimed that love has a harmful side.[90] But Socrates' concern is not to inquire into whether to think of *Eros* as a god or not, but rather to show that neither Lysias nor Socrates himself in their respective speeches about love did «show the soul» of what they spoke of when they claimed that *Eros* was evil. Thus, Lysias' and Socrates' speeches were not expressions of love as they used *Eros* as an inspiration for speaking from a selfish place in themselves. For, Socrates says about Lysias' and his own speech, «while they were saying nothing sound or true, they put on airs as if they amounted to something, if they could cheat some mere manikins and gain honour among them.»[91] They did not honestly show what they spoke of. But sinning falls back on Socrates himself in yet another sense. For he not only used *Eros* to speak from a place of self-interest, but also conceived Lysias' rhetorical work (as well as his own) as being spoken in light of the good, as being expressions of love, when they were not.

This sinning, then, illuminates a moral failure in myself as I do not *care* for showing or understanding what the particular discourse at

88 This is Ibycus proverb. Plato 1953b [n.d.], 242d.
89 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 242d-243c.
90 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 242d-e.
91 Plato 1953b [n.d.], 242e-243a.

hand means. The sinning Socrates speaks of would enter when I, for example, consider the inquiry at stake to be play, when it is serious reality, or vice versa.[92] It is, in other words, an attitude to other people, and conscientious moral judgment in a life with other people, that is the true moral concern Socrates has. Even in cases of Lysias' acclaimed rhetorical work, «ignorance of right and wrong and good and bad is in truth inevitably a disgrace, even if the whole mob applaud it [his speech].»[93] Sinning concerns the listener as much as it concerns the speaker. To see what something is in what situation, or what is wrong with it, is as much my responsibility as it is yours.

So, Socrates says to Phaedrus, «Now I, my friend, must purify myself», for this belongs to the conscience of trying to be a honest person.[94] The ritual of purification (*katharmos*) in this religious framework means he must *deny* the very qualities of a claim. Purification consists of recognizing what his sin toward another person was; in this case, that Lysias' written speech about love that Phaedrus read to him was not a speech about love at all, but just gave him that impression. Only then, after purification, could Socrates regain his sight.[95] But it would be a mistake to say that purification is skepticism, or that it is blaming a scapegoat (*pharmakos*) in order to deal with my own sins,[96] for at stake is rather my own repentance or grief. To «purify myself» is a matter of me trying to see clearly, of me recognizing what my disgrace toward another person consisted in, as I look again to whom that other person was and what she said, as I see my injustice toward her.[97]

One could say, then, that Socrates reproach of Lysias' written speech,

92 Cf. PLATO 1953b [n.d.], 276d-e.

93 PLATO 1953b [n.d.], 277e.

94 PLATO 1953b [n.d.], 243a.

95 PLATO 1953b [n.d.], 243a-b.

96 For a link between the purification rite of *katharmos*, and the scapegoating of a *pharmakos* see: BURKERT 2012 [1977], 82-4. Sacrifice of animals in the Judaic temple-cult bears on similar ideas as the *pharmakos-katharmos*; and is important in Christian theology describing Jesus metaphorically as a «lamb of God» sacrificed to purify the sins of humanity. GIRARD 2001 [1999], 51-2, 77-8, 153-6.

97 Cf. MURDOCH 1997 [1964], 313.

and Socrates repentance when neglecting the «soul» of it, is a matter of deepening one's «moral understanding».[98] It portrays, Iris Murdoch says, «a change of self-being» that «informs the moral quality of the world»; namely a fundamental change of the relationship we come to have to others.[99] It is not so much a question of blame, or of thinking that there is a right answer to a moral issue,[100] as it is a matter of my close moral attention to the meaning of my own and other person's deeds.[101] This plea for attention, then, shows my responsibly in seeing what kind of utterance something is, namely what origin («father»), or character («soul») an utterance has.[102] Thus, when Plato claims that the written word «needs its father to help it» when «ill-treated or unjustly relieved»,[103] he has in mind a conscientious attitude to the written words of other people. His concern is the moral quality of my responsiveness.

This attentiveness to other persons that Plato is calling for, however, tends to be lost in Derrida's and Ricœur's reading of the *Phaedrus* due to their focus on the generally suspicious «status» that writing is presumed to have. Derrida writes:

> The status of this orphan [written *logos*], whose welfare cannot be assured by any attendance or assistance, coincides with that of a *graphein* which, being nobody's son at the instant it reaches inscription, scarcely remains a son at all and no longer *recognizes* its origins, whether legally or morally. [...]
>
> The *Phaedrus* would already be sufficient to prove that the responsibility for *logos*, for its meaning and effects, goes to those who attend it [written *logos*], to those who are present with the presence of a father. These 'metaphors' must be

98 GAITA 1989, 133-5.

99 MURDOCH 2003 [1992], 177.

100 IRWIN 1995, 164.

101 GAITA 1989, 135, 147; cf. GRISWOLD 1986, 223. Elsewhere Plato speaks directly of philosophy as being a process of *katharmos*; a task, one could say, of moral understanding, or change of self-being. PLATO 1953a [n.d.], 67a-d, 82d.

102 Cf. LARSON 2009, 82-3.

103 PLATO 1953b [n.d.], 275e.

> tirelessly questioned.[104]

This may be considered in relation to a typically hermeneutic utterance by Ricœur:

> The case [of writing] turns out to be even more damning: written down once and for all, the discourse is in quest of some interlocutor, whoever it may be—one does not know to whom it is addressed. This is also the case for the historical narrative that gets written and published: it is tossed to the winds, it is addressed, as Gadamer says of *Schriftlichkeit*, to whomever knows how to read. [...] This is certainly the case for a history book, as for any book. It has cut its ties to its speaker.[105]

Contrary to these persistent (and no doubt very absolute) «determinations» of the «status» of writing, I would argue that Plato is afraid that we no longer recognize the origin and character of a person's written utterance «legally or morally»;[106] but he does not contend that this is necessarily the case.[107] He is, for sure, afraid that a written word may «cut its ties to its speaker» and so may be «tossed to the winds» because of our immorality; our incapacity of understanding how we should properly respond to it. But I have argued that exactly this problem, which Plato discusses, is a *moral difficulty* in our relationship with other people; a difficulty of conscientiously trying to be just to the word of others by reflecting and

104 DERRIDA 1981 [1972], 77-8.

105 RICŒUR 2006 [2000], 142-3. This exact statement is also found in RICŒUR 1981a [1971], 164; cf. GADAMER 2006 [1960], 153–4. Gadamer writes: «Literature, the written word, seems to be poetry alienated from its ontological valence. It could be said of every book – not just the famous one that makes this claim – that it is for everyone and no one.» (153).

106 This may be related to the debate raised around W.K. Wimsatt's and M.C. Beardsley's article «The Intentional Fallacy» from 1946. The debate is reprinted as *On Literary Intention*, NEWTON-DE MOLINA 1976; cf. BARTHES 1978 [1967], 144-8.

107 Jesper Svenbro argues, «At no point in Plato's work is writing 'parricide,' as Derrida would have it.» SVENBRO 1993 [1988], 213; cf. GRISWOLD 1986, 234-5. *Pace* DERRIDA 1981 [1972], 143-8; *Pace* VAN DER HEIDEN 2010, 62-5.

«speak[ing] of propriety and impropriety in writing, how it should be done and how it is improper».[108] The moral difficulty of conscience, attention, reproach, with regard to what other people do, is not a question of settling the principal conditions, and moral qualities, of any written words with sentences such as «at the instant it [a word] reaches inscription, [...] [it] no longer *recognizes* its origins, whether legally or morally». By contrast, in Plato's estimation, we cannot determine what a written word morally means without inquiring into the particular matters at hand. Only then can we say of a particular case whether Derrida's and Ricouer's statements here would be sufficient or whether the statements would mark an ignorance (perhaps even show a moral failure) in ourselves.[109]

The problem with Derrida's and Ricœur's general statements about the presumed suspicious and alienating «status» of writing is that it may permit me to think that we can overlook written words as actually being the moral actions of other humans. In that sense, it may disregard our necessity of deepening our moral understanding of what kind of personal moral actions we respond to. This kind of evasion was, of course, not at all what Plato had in mind; instead he condemned such an approach to another person's words as «ill-treated or unjustly relieved».[110] In theory we may think that a text is written for «whomever» (as Riccœur's hermeneutics entails),[111] or that morality in reading is not our relationship with the words of another *person*, but our personal relationship with «a text itself» (as Derrida's deconstruction entails).[112] But for Plato, such statements already show

108 PLATO 1953b [n.d.], 274b.

109 In his discussion of technical and moral knowledge, Gadamer emphasizes, I think rightly, that the problem of hermeneutic method itself bears on moral questions of various character. GADAMER 2006 [1960], 310-21.

110 PLATO 1953b [n.d.], 275e. *Pace* DERRIDA 1981 [1972], 77-8; DERRIDA 1982 [1972], 316; BAUMAN 1995, 102.

111 Given the alienating status that Ricœur (in a manner similar to Derrida) ascribes to writing in general, in e.g. ''What is a Text?,'' 1981b [1970], 108-10, ''The Model of the Text,'' 1981a [1971], 160-4, and *Memory, History, Forgetting* 2006 [2000], 142-3, he tends to contradict his own question of conscientiousness that he proposes in ''The Self as an Ethical Aim,'' 1994 [1990], 180-1.

112 DERRIDA 1988, 138; CRITCHLEY 1999, 44; cf. HILLIS MILLER 1987, 181-91. John D. Caputo

a «disgrace» (or immorality) in how we respond to the demand that other people put on us, as we in our life already have a responsibility to conscientiously care for the «soul» of others in any kind of human intercourse.[113] In the *Phaedrus*, this is not a juridical or conventional demand set up by social rules, but a caring for other persons as I plant something in «the garden of letters»,[114] or as I try to understand the nature of the words that have been planted there before me.

6. Writing as a Condition of Historiography

In this investigation I have criticized what Derrida and Ricœur presented as «the question of writing» in Plato's *Phaedrus*. My argument was that Plato's concern is not, as Derrida and Ricœur contend, the «determination» of the (epistemic or moral) «status» of writing as an *instrument*, but the moral quality of what a *person* says or writes. The metaphor of guiding a stranger to the right place, for example, refers to my responsibility in being honest in what I write. The metaphor of sinning against the gods and purification from this sin, on the contrary, refers to me having to repent for being dishonest in my pretention to write honestly, or my ignorance of the true character of the words of the other person I respond to. The dialogue, I have argued, shows various moral questions that enters our relationship with other persons in cases of written inquiry.

With this discussion, I have tried to break with Derrida's and Ricœur's vision of writing, even discuss aspects of their vision that are morally questionable. When Derrida argues that the written word «no longer *recognizes* its origins, whether legally or morally»,[115] and Ricœur argues that «in the end we do not know whether it [writing] is a

argues that Derrida's intention was to *end* with the hermeneutic sender-receiver «postal principle» and put «Hermes out of a job». CAPUTO 1987, 153–4, 160.

113 Cf. LÉVINAS 1979 [1961], 201; LØGSTRUP 1997 [1956], 44-6.

114 PLATO 1953 [n.d.], 276d.

115 DERRIDA 1981 [1972], 77.

remedy or a poison»,[116] the written word in itself is characterized as «legally or morally» irresponsible or harmful. The confusion, however, is that writing as an instrument (like the bread-knife) is not a moral agent that behaves in suspicious ways, for the written word is meaningful in terms of being a person's moral action. This distinction is significant as to how we think of morality in writing and understanding. Is our attitude to text an attitude toward another person or an abstracted entity? There is a considerable moral difference in accusing an invention for being «legally or morally» irresponsible, and accusing a person for the same thing. One could not easily say that a person is irresponsible in his writing without good reasons for saying so. The act of accusing someone for being irresponsible, even in theory, certainly calls into question the sincerity of what we ourselves claim.

Finally, I must say what this means for the idea of historiography in terms of being, as Ricœur and Derrida contend, *conditioned* by this indeterminate invention of writing (*pharmakon*) that needs to be approached with suspicion. Ricœur constantly falls back on the question – «[M]ust we not ask whether the writing of history, too, is remedy or poison?» – which is derived from the general question of writing – «[I]s the *pharmakon* of writing a poison or a remedy?»[117] However, we do not come far if we think that the morality of what particular people's written words mean is an issue that could be settled this easily. We may, for sure, say that a particular historiographical work (or argument) can be harmful for someone in some situation, but this depends, among other things, on *what* work we have in mind, in *what* situation, *whom* it concerns, and *what* we may mean by thinking of something as useful or harmful. Understanding the difficulties and varieties of the situations where hiostoriographical arguments appear is to deepen our moral understanding; we look again at what a person's words may mean and how we should

116 Ricœur 2006 [2000], 145.
117 Ricœur 2006 [2000], 141, 499.

respond to them.[118] What I therefore ultimately put into question, here, is whether it is reasonable to presume that there exists «an order of discourse» that can be defined and regulated philosophically,[119] in terms of what written words generally must be taken to involve. When it comes to our moral understanding of what particular historiographical arguments may mean, I think such theoretical regulations or statements are not valuable. Those presumptions rather tend to disregard that our responsiveness to written words is part of a genuine moral intercourse with other people.

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118 MURDOCH 1997 [1964], 313.

119 DERRIDA puts the rules of writing as «the rules of its game» in 1981 [1972], 63. Roland BARTHES puts it as «the structure of discourse» in 1970 [1967], 154. Hayden WHITE puts it as «an order of discourse» in 2000 [1992], 28. This may also be related to Michel FOUCAULT's somewhat different notion of «discourse» in 1971, 7-8.

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