

Plato's Prescription: The Origin Myth of Media Theory

THOMAS SUTHERLAND

University of Lincoln, UK

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Abstract

In certain corners of media theory, the fanciful origin myth of writing furnished in Plato's *Phaedrus*, one of his most enigmatic and intricate dialogues, has in turn come to serve as the origin myth for media critique itself. And yet, having been committed to writing, this is an origin myth that underwrites both its own non-originaryity and non-truth, its very status as a written text ensuring it will never meet the criteria it sets for a reasoned account of things. This antinomy is not a shortcoming of the dialogue though, but a performative device, encouraging the reader to involve themselves in the dialogue and reflect upon their own relationship to it as audience. Plato does not proscribe writing, but he does prescribe a means for guiding one's soul onto the path of knowledge – a prescription enacted within his writing itself, even as it points beyond the limits of the written word. The *Phaedrus* is not just diagnostic, but therapeutic.

Keywords

Plato, philosophy, writing, speech, pharmakon

The *Phaedrus* remains a text yet to be unravelled and deciphered and, first of all, rescued from all the sterilizing, enervating, and euphemizing strategies that the academic tradition has perpetrated against it.

Michèle Le Dœuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* (1989: 106, translation altered).

'As philosophers look down from above at the lives of those below them,' observes Socrates in the *Sophist*, one of Plato's later dialogues, 'some people think they're worthless and others think they're worth everything in the world. Sometimes they take on the appearance of statesmen, and sometimes of sophists. Sometimes, too, they might give the impression that they're completely insane' (216c).¹ Within this dialogue

and its sequel, the *Statesman*, Plato depicts the mysterious Eleatic Stranger trying to distinguish between these two titular professions.² In line with the method of division and collection (*diairesis* and *synagōgē*), the Stranger seeks to divide different types of expertise ‘limb by limb, like a sacrificial animal’ (*Pol.* 287c), in order to provide a reasoned account of their differences.³ This attempt at disciplinary demarcation would live on in the Plato-inspired *trivium* and *quadrivium*, central to the mediaeval European university, and would persist for centuries afterward in various forms. Today, however, the notion of determining a discipline’s haecceity is likely to come off rather quaint. Porosity of disciplinary boundaries is now considered the norm, and newer fields, such as media studies and cultural studies, celebrate the prolific commingling of diverse methods and objects of study.

The question of what media theory *is*, let alone when it began, cannot therefore be answered as easily as one might wish – it is still a young discipline and its peripheries remain nebulous. For the most part, media theory (if we define its emergence in the broadest conventional sense, including American pragmatism and the Chicago School of sociology, Frankfurt School critical theory, the philosophy of technics, information theory and cybernetics, and the behaviourist psychology of propaganda studies) is a response to the mass media revolution occurring from the late nineteenth century onward. As a result, its pedigree has seldom been traced back further than the turn of the twentieth century. And yet, it is not uncommon for media theorists to locate the distant origins of their field within an ancient text: Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which contains a brief but significant exploration of ‘the subject of propriety and impropriety in writing: in what way, when it is done, it will be done well, and in what way improperly’ (274b)⁴. For such theorists, the concluding section of this structurally convoluted dialogue, in which Socrates recounts the mythical origins of writing (in short: the Egyptian god Theuth presents writing as a gift to King Thamus, who is less than appreciative) represents either some essential truth regarding the effects of media upon the human sensorium or conversely the idealist trap into which so many thinkers fall when contemplating these effects.

A key example of the former position comes from Marshall McLuhan, arguing that whilst Plato ‘saw writing as a mainly destructive revolution’, we have now ‘been through enough revolutions to know that every medium of communication is a unique

art form which gives salience to one set of human possibilities at the expense of another set' (1954: 40). For McLuhan, in other words, Plato's concerns are not just applicable to writing, but to all media – the medium is defined by its prosthetic and amputative power with regard to the human body and sensorium.⁵ Illustrative of the latter position, for which there are legion examples, is Régis Debray, who proposes that the media-theoretical perspective (what he calls 'mediology'),

is also disruptive to the *philosophia perennis*. In the latter, the medium – writing in the past, the image today – is typically quite poorly received, and the idea of the middle [*milieu*] is treated as suspect (the diversity of languages, for example, is never brought up). The universal is as averse to the material as it is to the local. With his mythical dialogue on the detrimental effects of writing, Plato depicts our primal scene: writing is opposed to true memory in the same way that one might oppose the outside to the inside, the irresponsible to the responsible, death to life, or the simulacrum to the authentic. These themes stay with us, awakened by each new exteriorization. King Thamus deems it preferable that there be nothing between his voice and his subjects (the medium as screen), and that his utterances remain filially close to him, sheltered within a paternal and unrepeatable enunciation (telecommunication as dispossession of authority) (2000: 163, my translation).⁶

According to Debray's account then, even though the precursors and forerunners of media theory 'are to be found much more in the literary and artistic field than in the philosophical field' (2000: 98), it is nonetheless in the *Phaedrus* and its denunciation of writing that the first instance of an applied media criticism may be located. And yet, for Debray this is a flawed form of criticism, resorting as it does to an instinctual idealism subordinating the exteriority and materiality of the medium to the presence and plenitude of the spoken word. An idealism premised upon immediacy, unfailingly aroused by the introduction of any new medium.

So the *Phaedrus* is viewed in one case as the provision of a rudimentary pharmacology of media which finds renewed relevance in the present day and in the other as the provision of a stubborn idealist aversion to media. Somewhere in-between, we find the

pharmacological approach promoted by Bernard Stiegler, which – following the lead of Jacques Derrida – posits the medium in general as a *pharmakon*, both poison and remedy. For Stiegler, ‘what Socrates describes in *Phaedrus*, namely that the exteriorization of memory is a loss of memory and knowledge, has today become the stuff of everyday experience in all aspects of our existence’ (2010: 29). At the same time though, Stiegler decries the habitual tendency to position this *pharmakon* as a *pharmakos* (i.e. a scapegoat), a poison deleterious to one’s interiority, for ‘in fact there *never was* any interiority’ (2013: 20). Human beings have always been technological – prosthetized – beings, and thus, no interiority precedes this exteriorization. What we need, Stiegler suggests, is to grasp this complex pharmacological relationship between the harmful and therapeutic, destructive and creative aspects of media technologies lying at the very basis of human experience and individuation.

In all of these instances, the *Phaedrus* comes to be figured, in John Durham Peters’ words, as ‘a compendium of anxieties about technology’s effects on human intercourse’ (1999: 36), a primaeval pharmacopoeia of media effects, an *apothekē* or repository of arguments capable of bearing upon two and a half millennia of subsequent media criticism. In effect then, the origin myth of writing Plato provides, via the mouthpiece of his fictive Socrates, has in turn become an origin myth for media theory – an originary moment as ambiguous in its meaning and ambivalent in its ramifications as writing appears in King Thamus’ judgement.

Of course, to speak of the *Phaedrus* in such a manner raises innumerable questions, many of which relate directly to the problems it foregrounds. It is a dialogue concerned, in part, with the medium of writing – the first text we know of that deals with this topic. But of course, the fact we have no earlier examples of such arguments does not mean they did not occur. The *Phaedrus*’ status as the ostensible originary text of media theory results from two material conditions: first, the fact that it was written (allowing us access in a form close to that in which it was first recorded, save for any scribal errors); and second, the fact that, for whatever aleatory reasons, its content has been preserved through to the present day. Even with written texts, the latter condition is never guaranteed – witness the fate of the Presocratics’ works, or even those of Aristotle (none of whose exoteric dialogues are extant) and Epicurus (of whom we possess just three letters), whose schools remained influential throughout Graeco-

Roman antiquity. Who is to say what disparaging remarks and worried commentaries were made regarding writing that didn't happen to be recorded in written form? How much media criticism took place *avant la lettre*?

Moreover, such claims to originarity carry with them the tacit ethnocentric presupposition that writing (and often, phonetic writing specifically) is the first true medium, its advent a singular event in human history, and that Plato's critique of writing reflects the enormity of this epistemological break.⁷ Not only does this exclude a vast array of other techniques used to store, process, and transmit knowledge (e.g. painting, sculpture, song and dance, funerary rites, tattooing and bodily modification, and even just oral tradition), but it relegates the many human cultures that did not develop writing systems themselves, but found such systems imposed upon them through European colonialism, to a pre-mediated state of nature, constrained by the immediacy of speech.⁸

What does it even mean to subsume Plato's references to *graphē* and *gramma* under the anachronistic concept of the 'medium'?⁹ When Plato makes use of similar concepts – *metaxy*, by which he describes the daemon of Eros in the *Symposium*, located halfway between the gods and humankind; or *chōra*, by which he alludes to a kind of formless receptacle in the *Timaeus*, an interface between the intelligible and sensible realms – he is referring to forces far removed from a technical support like writing. What exactly are the 'media' of media theory, and can we transpose this concept onto a text composed two and a half millennia ago?

Whatever the case, the question of interest to me is one of *inheritance*: what does Plato bequeath to us in this curious section of the *Phaedrus*? How does this text address us? Can it still speak to us across two and a half millennia of historical distance? In the rest of this article, I wish to argue that the *Phaedrus*, for all its flaws and archaisms, bestows upon us a sophisticated examination of the recursion still haunting media theory today: namely, the shaping of our practices of theorization by the very media they seek to theorize. In doing so, I concentrate less upon the status of the medium within Plato's text and more upon how Plato thematizes the written nature of his own work. Acutely aware of the medium he is utilizing, Plato furnishes a critique that underwrites its own *non-originarity* and *non-truth*, insofar as its very status as a written text ensures it will never meet its own criteria for a reasoned account of things.¹⁰ But this paradox or

antinomy, rather than acting as an impassable aporia, spurs on an active engagement by the reader in the text's mediated and mediative properties. The *Phaedrus* is not merely diagnostic in its critique of writing, but therapeutic. It is, itself, a *pharmakon*.

A therapeutics of communication

In the final moments of the *Cratylus*, a dialogue focused on etymology and the origin of nouns, Socrates avers that 'no one with any understanding will commit [*epitrepstanta*] himself or the cultivation [*therapeuein*] of his soul to names, or trust them and their givers to the point of firmly stating that he knows something' (440c). Cratylus, his Heraclitean interlocutor, posits a direct correspondence between the name of things and the things themselves, but Socrates warns him that these names are not reliable sources for obtaining knowledge of the things they designate. One should not entrust one's soul to such dubious authorities, he advises. After all, as Plato makes clear throughout his body of work, philosophy consists in the pursuit of 'truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul' (*Ap.* 29e), and one can only achieve the latter via acquisition of the former. It is not just a question of possessing true knowledge (which one can always stumble upon by accident), but of going about this process of acquisition in a properly philosophical manner: one must 'investigate [things] courageously and thoroughly and not accept anything easily' (*Cratylus* 440d), developing the dialectical comportment befitting a philosopher.

The word *therapeuein* used in this passage has a plethora of meanings: in Plato's works alone, it is used to denote medical treatment (*Charm.* 156b, 157b; *Pol.* 293c; *Laws* 684c), rearing horses (*Euthyp.* 13a; *Grg.* 516e), tending to herds of sheep and cattle (*Rep.* 343b; *Pol.* 275e), taking care of one's body and soul (*Grg.* 513e; *Rep.* 403d), looking after or honouring one's parents (*Rep.* 476a; *Meno* 91a), tending to the tombs of one's ancestors (*Rep.* 469a), voluntary servitude (*Symp.* 184c); and fostering good character amongst men (*Laws* 650b).¹¹ In other contexts, it can also mean: to attend to, serve, or wait upon; to honour or treat with deference; to observe rites or celebrate festivals; to court favour; to restore, and so on. In this case, one could interpret Plato's usage of the word as alluding to medical treatment in a narrow sense, offering two different epistemological medicaments for curing the soul of its illusions, or equally to a broader sense of psychagogic cultivation, taking care of and maintaining one's soul.¹² But a

question of authority also presents itself here: namely, the question of who or what one serves.

For Socrates in this dialogue, to cultivate one's soul via reference to the names of things is to place oneself in thrall to the often ill-informed choices of those with whom these names originated. Whereas by investigating things in themselves, through dialectical enquiry, rather than the signifiers attached to them, one is putting trust in one's *own* soul. For in the soul one will, in due course, find the truths for which one is looking. At the end of the *Cratylus*, then, Plato alludes to the *general therapeutics* underpinning his entire project: the concern with how one should cultivate the soul and in whom or what one should entrust it. Such a concern is also central, and brought very much to the fore, in the *Phaedrus*. Indeed, this dialogue notes (271c) that the function of speech (*logon*) is to captivate or allure souls (*psychagogia*), to lead them by persuasion, and one of its overriding aims is to establish how speech (and writing) might be used to foster a genuine philosophical mentality in the face of the sophists' appeal to persuasion as an end in itself.

According to Pierre Hadot, the Graeco-Roman philosophers of antiquity cared less about teaching readymade propositions and theses, and instead sought to instil approaches, methods, and *spiritual exercises*, remoulding the souls of those privy to their lessons.¹³ This conception of philosophy as a means of training souls, notes Hadot, was inextricable from a marked privileging of the spoken word:

all ancient philosophy came to believe in that which we could call the ontological value of speech: “living and animate” discourse transformed the disciple's soul [...] Speech was addressed to a concrete audience. Philosophical discourse was almost always addressed to a group of listeners who made up the school, and was designed especially to induct these listeners into a certain way of living: Stoic or Epicurean, Platonic or Cynic. Philosophical writings were also aimed above all at this social group. The manuscripts of their founder's works were preserved within each school. One only communicated to initiates. A concrete audience needed to be persuaded. One gradually convinced and formed this audience. A philosopher's “theses” would therefore have a rhetorical and pedagogical aspect. Philosophical “discourse” would be as much devoted

to pure intellectual exercises as to preaching (2004: 99-100, my translation).

In the *Phaedrus*, we find explicit reference to this ‘living, animate speech’ (276a) belonging to those who know, of which writing can only be an ersatz image (*eidolon*). Only this speech, proceeding from the soul and addressed to other souls (and tailored to these souls it addresses), possesses the capacity to cultivate a philosophical attitude in its listeners.

It is important to keep in mind that, from a Platonic standpoint, ‘every soul of a human being has by the law of its nature observed the things that are’ (249e) – which is to say, every soul contains the truths it seeks. In order to understand the external world, the philosopher must look inward.¹⁴ Even once they have discovered these truths for themselves, the philosopher’s role is not simply to pass them on to others, but to help the latter discover them for themselves as well. This maieutic process must be facilitated by the aforesaid living, animate speech which is ‘written together with knowledge in the soul of the learner, capable of defending itself, and knowing how to speak and keep silent in relation to the people it should’.¹⁵ A distinctive therapeutics runs underneath this dialogue: to philosophize, and thus to cultivate one’s soul (and those of others as well) requires the dynamic interchange and presence of spoken disputation, and this in turn demands a dialectical approach drawing from and expressed in the soul’s presence, furnishing a reasoned (albeit sometimes still incomplete) account of the ideas toward which one points. The corollary is that this properly philosophical manner of speaking, this mode of address, demands the presence of one’s speech to one’s soul, the self-presence of said soul, and the physical co-presence of speakers engaged in face-to-face discourse.¹⁶ Such speech originates in the soul, expresses itself both in conformity with the truth of one’s soul and in accordance with the needs of the souls to which one directs it, and thus ultimately serves the interests of one’s soul. Dialectics does not place itself in the servitude of external marks, but places trust in the eternal truths the soul harbours.

This need to look inward, to the pure interiority of one’s soul, leads naturally to Plato’s critique, mounted via the character of Socrates, of writing. Of course, as many scholars have remarked, this section of the *Phaedrus* does not set forth a diametrical opposition between the spoken and written word, as if the former were inherently beneficial and

the latter irredeemably deleterious to human knowledge.¹⁷ Instead, Plato suggests that there is an analogy between writing and the specious oratory deployed by the sophists: in both cases, genuine understanding, engendered through a dynamic and dialogic process between speakers, does not arise – books, composed of static inscriptions, can only act as external reminders of facts one has not fully absorbed, and sophistry can only offer the possibility of persuading a crowd through flashy rhetoric and clever wordplay, supplying them no actual understanding of the matter at hand. From both cases, one can only derive a semblance of wisdom; fostering a genuine memory of the truths stored in one's soul is out of the question. But this does not mean writing is without value, nor that one can only use it in a delusive manner. Indeed, Socrates makes this point explicitly: 'writing speeches is not *itself* something shameful', but 'what is shameful [...] is speaking and writing and doing it not well but shamefully and badly' (258d).

Plato does not denounce writing tout court, but portrays it as an appreciable manifestation of language's intrinsic inadequacies. Exteriorized, materialized, portable, and detached from its author, writing opens the possibility of a semantic indeterminacy and boundless, indefinite dissemination – it is an ungrounded medium. Plato sets letters scratched into wax, chiselled into stone, or inscribed with ink upon papyrus, unable to defend themselves and open to interpretation, against the indelible markings of the ideas upon the soul. Writing, like sophistry, he suggests, is slippery. It furnishes 'words that are incapable of speaking in their own support, and incapable of adequately teaching what is true' (276c). Clarity of meaning will always elude it, not because one necessarily intends for a written text to deceive or outwit one's audience (as the sophists do), but because one cannot guarantee the context in which it will be read in advance:

the offspring of painting stand there as if alive, but if you ask them something, they preserve a quite solemn silence. Similarly with written words: you might think that they spoke as if they had some thought in their heads, but if you ever ask them about any of the things they say out of a desire to learn, they point to just one thing, the same each time. And when once it is written, every composition trundles about everywhere in the same way, in the presence both of those who know about the subject

and of those who have nothing at all to do with it, and it does not know how to address those it should address and not those it should not. When it is ill treated and unjustly abused, it always needs its father to help it; for it is incapable of either defending or helping itself (275d).

Hence why writing needs to know its place: it must remain beside speech, close to it; it must retain a filial relationship to its author, to the speaking subject.¹⁸ Writing is only useful as a support or aid to living speech; it can never act as a substitute for the latter.

It is on these exact terms that Plato distinguishes between the philosopher and those who write speeches or verses: if someone ‘has composed these things knowing how the truth is, able to help his composition when he is challenged on its subjects’, recognizing that his writings can only supplement speech, then he can be regarded as a philosopher, whereas ‘the man who doesn’t possess things of more value than the things he composed or wrote, turning them upside down over a long period of time, sticking them together and taking them apart’ can only be looked at as a poet, or speechwriter, or lawmaker (278d). Above all else then, the *Phaedrus*’ concluding section emphasizes that one must ground philosophical communication in the presence of a soul practised in the art of dialectic, oriented toward the truth of things, and capable of helping their audience reach this truth as well, tailoring their message to suit whoever is listening. Writing might assist in this task, but it can never accomplish it on its own. It must serve and attend to the soul – this is its therapeutic function.

The appropriate usage of writing

Although mention of the *Phaedrus* has been commonplace within certain strands of media theory for many decades now, the conceptualization of the medium (whatever it might be) as a *pharmakon* – both poisonous and curative – stems from Derrida’s essay ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, a seminal piece of poststructuralist philosophy. This concept, when deployed in such contexts, is typically used to underscore the equivocal, ambivalent material effects of media technologies.¹⁹ For Derrida himself, however, the stakes are different. He does not pay much attention to the status of writing *qua* medium within Plato’s text (indeed, any sort of medium specificity is hard to reconcile with deconstruction); his interest lies in the undecidability of the actual word *pharmakon*.²⁰

Derrida positions this signifier, in its irreducible (and in some sense dangerous) equivocality, as an anti-substance that ‘resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as non-identity, non-essence, non-substance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity of what funds it and the infinite absence of what founds it’ (1981: 75-76). It remains impervious to all interpretation or analysis, insofar as all such operations will violently and inevitably impose univocality upon it. And yet, this ambivalence it introduces into the text, and the prospect of its suppression, points toward the simultaneous grounding and ungrounding of philosophy in an excess its *logos* will never master. Like so many other central Derridean concepts (e.g. *différance*, trace, arche-writing, etc.), the *pharmakon* symbolizes the conjoined conditions of possibility and impossibility for all philosophies. One cannot ascribe its insertion within this dialogue, and the consequent undecidability it introduces, to Plato as an intentional act of clever wordplay, for it takes place ‘in the back room, in the shadows of the pharmacy, prior to the oppositions between conscious and unconscious, freedom and constraint, voluntary and involuntary, speech and language’ (1981: 132). And likewise, the crude erasure of its polysemy via translation merely foregrounds a Platonic metaphysics – premised upon hierarchical oppositions, most significantly of that between the signifier and signified – already incipient within the text.

The problem with Derrida’s argument, however, as compelling a case as he makes for it, is so much of it hinges upon Léon Robin’s controvertible translation of the word *pharmakon* as *remède*, thus rendering this object univocally beneficial. ‘The choice of only one of these French words by the translator,’ Derrida suggests, ‘has the primary effect of neutralizing the citational play, the “anagram”, and, in the end, quite simply the very textuality of the translated text’ (1981: 101, translation altered). Of course, Derrida is correct, at least to some degree, for the word *pharmakon* admits a multitude of divergent meanings. But if one translates this word, in this specific passage, as English translators do, as either ‘potion’ or ‘elixir’ (words that both also exist in French), the equivocality is no longer effaced to quite the same extent. A potion or an elixir, after all, can be either beneficial or harmful, and sometimes even both at once. The *pharmakon* no longer seems to elude the demands of philosophical language.

Even more problematic though, is that regardless of translation, an examination of the actual passage in question reveals that the opposition between poison and cure, so central to Derrida's reading, is simply not at play in Plato's text:

your invention will produce forgetfulness [*lēthēn*] in the souls of those who have learned it, through lack of practice at using their memory, as through reliance on writing they are reminded from outside by alien marks, not from within, themselves by themselves. So you have discovered an elixir [*pharmakon*] not of memory [*mnēmēs*] but of reminding [*hypomnēseōs*] (275a).

The operative opposition here is between genuine memory (of the truths inscribed within one's soul) and mere reminding (of statements inscribed upon external tablets). The ambiguity between the *pharmakon* as poison or cure does not even enter the equation: in this context, the word could refer to a potion or elixir, a drug, or even just a means of producing a result (see Kakoliris, 2013). Given that, within the same dialogue, Socrates has already argued that the arts of medicine and rhetoric follow the same method, albeit with one applying 'medicines [*pharmaka*] and diets' and the other 'words and practices' (270b), it is safe to say a medical connotation is intended. But the question that King Thamus adjudges is whether this medicament of writing (*graphēs*) Theuth has gifted him will bolster its recipients' memory or merely exteriorize it.

We already know that Thamus' rejection of Theuth's gift becomes the basis for Socrates' strident, although somewhat qualified critique of the written word: he does not outright condemn its usage, but clarifies that it has a limited utility, as an accessory to the spoken word. The *Phaedrus* is not strictly a proscription of writing; it is, on the contrary, a prescription of a certain kind. A *prescription* in the most literal sense, given Plato has chosen to record it in writing. And like all of Plato's dialogues, it tries to prescribe without dogmatically imposing upon its readers. As Victor Goldschmidt observes, we must distinguish the Platonic dialogue as a genre from that of the textbook or manual: whereas the latter 'offers to transmit a collection of knowledge, to instruct the reader', the dialogue '*wishes to form rather than inform*' (1947: 3, my translation). Plato's dialogues do not just attempt to transmit propositions; instead, they illustrate a method, in the hope their readers might follow this for themselves.

The dialogue is a *pharmakon* in its own right. It is therapeutic, meant to transform one's soul, to put its reader on the path toward true knowledge.

Medicine, we learn in the *Phaedrus*, seeks to produce healthy and strong bodies, whilst rhetoric imparts convictions and virtues to souls, using discourses 'in conformance with law and custom' (270b), and in order to achieve such results, both sciences must determine the nature of the object with which they are dealing – bodies or souls, respectively. This principle forms the basis of the *Phaedrus*' prescription: the philosopher needs to consider their audience and the listener or reader likewise needs to reflect upon their own position as audience. Weighing up propriety and impropriety in writing is merely a means to this end. But this does not satisfactorily answer the most pressing question: why has Plato written a dialogue that is, on the face of it, openly hostile to the written word as a medium? One can, of course, point out that this would not be the last time a medium has been critiqued by way of that very same medium. Or that Plato, a masterful prose stylist at a time when oral transmission was still the norm, could never have actually viewed writing as entirely maleficent. Or, as already noted above, that he is equally castigatory of certain types of casuistic speech. Or, that one should not take for granted that the views of Socrates (who did, by all accounts, confine his philosophy to the spoken word) depicted in his dialogues correspond to those of Plato. And yet, even taking these objections into consideration, it remains the case that the *Phaedrus*, as a work of written philosophy, *does not meet its own criteria for a reasoned account*.

Anyone who possesses knowledge of 'what is just, beautiful, and good', we are told, will avoid recording these ideas 'through a pen [*kalamoi*] with words that are incapable of speaking in their own support, and incapable of adequately teaching what is true' (276c). What one needs instead is 'the kind of speech that is written together with knowledge in the soul of the learner, capable of defending itself, and knowing how to speak and keep silent in relation to the people it should' (276a). The latter is precisely what the *Phaedrus* does not and cannot offer us. The bafflement this dialogue has provoked for centuries, if not millennia, in terms of its structure, argumentation, and style surely reflects the fact that, in the absence of its author, this document, as carefully preserved as it might have been, cannot speak in support of itself, cannot reshape itself to suit its audience, and cannot disabuse us of the inevitably flawed interpretations

arising in relation to it. It remains forever orphaned, unable to defend itself, irrevocably cut off from its ‘father’, the speaking subject, and thus from the vitality of living discourse. It has become a memorial deprived of all real memory. Certitude will always elude it.

At the same time, the dialogue makes pretty apparent how one should utilize writing in philosophy. Employing the metaphor of a level-headed farmer who knows what time of year to plant his seeds (so they will not quickly wither, like those of the Gardens of Adonis), Socrates presents the example of a man who exercises prudence in the cultivation of his knowledge and utilizes writing accordingly:

his gardens of letters, it seems, he will sow and write for amusement [*paidias*], when he does write, laying up a store of reminders [*hypomnēmata*] both for himself, for when he “reaches a forgetful old age”, and for anyone following the same track, and he will be pleased as he watches their tender growth (276d).

And whilst, Phaedrus points out in response, this would seem far preferable to those who would spend their time amusing themselves with more sordid activities like drinking parties, Socrates retorts that:

it is far finer if one is in earnest about those subjects: when one makes use of the science of dialectic and, taking a fitting soul, plants and sows in it words accompanied by knowledge, which are sufficient to help themselves and the one who planted them, and are not without fruit but contain a seed from which others grow in other soils, capable of rendering that seed for ever immortal, and making the one who has it as happy as it is possible for a man to be (276d).

At first, this might seem a clear-cut dismissal of the value of writing, which one can only utilize for childlike amusement, counterposed against the gravity of spoken discourse. But two things need to be noted. First, this notion of amusement (*paidias*) may not be as dismissive as it appears at first: for instance, in the *Timaeus*, this same term is deployed in reference to genuine memory, tested and practised through dialectic, exactly like that touted in the *Phaedrus*:

It is amazing, as is often said, how what we learn as children sticks in the memory. I'm not at all sure whether I could remember again all I heard yesterday; yet I should be surprised if any detail of this story I heard so long ago has escaped me. I listened to it then with a child's intense delight [*paidias*], and the old man was glad to answer my innumerable questions, so that the details have been indelibly branded on my memory (*Tim.* 26b).

From this latter passage, we can surmise that such amusement can act as an aid to one's memory, and thus to one's knowledge – it is not just an idle distraction. After all, if rhetoric is the art of captivating and alluring souls (*psychagogia*), it makes sense that amusement might play a role, as long as one directs it toward the right ends.²¹ Second, the accumulation of *hypomnēmata* this allegorical gardener of knowledge pursues for said amusement is not mutually exclusive with respect to the planting and sowing of discourse accompanied by knowledge in an appropriate soul. It may well help in this task. But one must not treat these *hypomnēmata* as repositories of knowledge in their own right.²²

Addressing the reader

None of this is to suggest that the *Phaedrus* is, at any point, especially optimistic regarding the uses that people are likely to make of writing. This is quite clear in Socrates' description of the ideal man whom he seeks:

the person who thinks that there is necessarily much that is merely for amusement [*paidian*] in a written speech on any subject, and that none has ever yet been written, whether in verse or in prose, which is worth much serious attention, or indeed spoken, in the way that rhapsodes speak theirs, to produce conviction without questioning or teaching, but that the best of them have really been *a way of reminding* [*hypomnēsin*] *people who know*; who thinks that clearness and completeness and seriousness exist only in those things that are taught about what is just and beautiful and good, and are said for the purpose of someone's learning from them, and genuinely written in the soul; who thinks that discourses of that kind should be said to be as it were his legitimate sons, first of all the one within him, if it is

found there, and in second place any offspring and brothers of this one that have sprung up simultaneously, in the way they should, in other souls, other men; and who says goodbye to the other kind – *this*, surely, Phaedrus, will be the sort of person you and I would pray that we both might come to be (277e, my emphasis).

Notwithstanding his dubiousness, however, this passage still makes it clear that he regards the function of writing *qua* reminder to be legitimate, albeit limited and secondary, as long as it is reminding those who already possess the knowledge in question.²³ Indeed, earlier in the *Phaedrus*, during a long palinode on Eros, Socrates states:

A human being must comprehend what is said universally, arising from many sensations and being collected together into one through reasoning; and this is a recollection [*anamnēsis*] of those things which our soul once saw when it travelled in company with god and treated with contempt the things we now say are, and when it poked its head up into what really is. Hence it is with justice that only the thought of the philosopher becomes winged; for so far as it can it is close, through memory, to those things his closeness to which gives a god his divinity. Thus *if a man uses such reminders* [*hypomnēmasin*] *rightly*, being continually initiated in perfect rites, he alone achieves real perfection; and standing aside from human concerns, and coming close to the divine, he is admonished by the many for being disturbed, when his real state is one of possession, which goes unrecognized by the many (249c, my emphasis).

In this description, it is through use of reminders (*viz.* worldly instances of beauty) that a philosopher can maintain their presence *vis-à-vis* the truths once witnessed by their immortal soul.²⁴ Plato treats *anamnēsis* and *hypomnēsis* here as complementary rather than antagonistic. So whilst the reference might not be to writing specifically, he nevertheless reinforces the point that one's memory can be legitimately bolstered by material supports.

Likewise, Plato frames the *Theaetetus* with an introductory scene in which Euclid of Megara presents a written account of one of Socrates' disputations, read aloud by his

slave. In this dramatic opening sequence, Euclid explains how he was able to record this account:

I made notes [*hypomnēmata*] as soon as I got home on that occasion, and later, when I had the time, I wrote it out from memory; and whenever I went to Athens, I used to ask Socrates about the bits I didn't remember, and then come back here and make corrections. So I think I've got almost all of it written out now' (*Tht.* 143a).

Or in the *Statesman*, the Eleatic Stranger makes a helpful observation concerning physicians and trainers, and their use of written prescriptions:

if a doctor, or else some gymnastic trainer, were going to be out of the country and away from his charges for what he thought would be a long time, and thought that the people being trained, or his patients, would not remember the instructions he had given them, he would want to write down reminders [*hypomnēmata*] for them.

[...]

But what if he came back unexpectedly, having been away for less time than he thought he would be? Do you think he wouldn't propose other prescriptions, contrary to the ones he had written down, when things turned out to be different, and better, for his patients? (*Pol.* 295c).

Striking in both cases is not just Plato's inclusion of *hypomnēmata* within the sphere of proper intellectual activity, but his emphasis that one needs to temper usage of these written reminders by continued recourse to their sources, refining, clarifying, and modifying records or prescriptions through spoken discussion. One must keep *hypomnēmata* in propinquity to living, animate speech and in the presence of the speaking subject from which they originate. They will always remain subordinate to the spoken word at the same time that it sustains them.

We can assume that Plato intended the *Phaedrus*, alongside all his other dialogues, to be read aloud within the physical and intellectual milieu of the Academy, which would prevent it from being orphaned. It would act as a *hypomnēma*, playing a merely

supporting role in a thorough curriculum of spoken education and debate. Plato was perhaps partly motivated to establish this school, as Stiegler submits, by the perceived need for ‘establishing a therapeutics in order to try and struggle against the poisonous effects of the *pharmakon* that is writing’ (2015: 159-160). A site within which the presence needed for genuine philosophical disputation could be both affirmed and established.

But regardless of whatever epistemic and disseminative surety the Academy might have offered, Plato must have been cognizant that he could not confine his writings to this restricted context, for the precise reason that he had written them down (and thus they were able to be copied, shared, etc.). He was hardly the first philosopher to write books, and he shows familiarity with the writings of a host of thinkers who preceded him throughout the Greek world, as well as those of his sophist contemporaries. Perhaps the burgeoning of philosophy within the ancient Greek milieu was a direct product of the diachronic accumulation of texts from historically antecedent authors and the synchronic acquisition of texts from geographically remote authors?²⁵ So Plato knew the risks that come with committing his arguments to writing, including that they might continue to be circulated long after his death, shorn of their original context, with an inevitable multiplication of readers and corresponding interpretations. He knew they would in due time be orphaned, alienated, left defenceless in their father’s unending absence. He must have known that his own dialogues would meet the same fate as those he describes in the *Phaedrus*, acting not in the service of genuine memory, but attenuating it, leading it awry through these unruly external marks deprived of the paternal proximity that originally lent them a certain provisory legitimacy. And consequently, he knew that the *Phaedrus* would inevitably be read in contexts wherein its prohibitions would seem equally to apply to itself. He was mindful of its iterability.²⁶

This is the fascinating kernel of undecidability lying within the *Phaedrus*: namely, the fact that it seems to negate itself. It is a prescription that contains its own proscription. As gauche as it may appear to dwell upon the observation that Plato *wrote* a critique of writing, I believe that this point demands further attention. For what Plato delivers in this dialogue is not just a critique of writing, but a severe circumscription of its truth value. It is not adequate, at least from a media-theoretical perspective, to rejoin that

Plato is not *really* referring to writing as such – that he is also referring to sophistry, or that he is only referring to certain kinds of writing, and so forth. Both statements are true, but they fail to capture the self-referentiality underpinning this text. Surely, I would argue, the reader is supposed to recognize that the critiques mounted by Socrates against writing apply to the very piece in which these critiques are put forward. In the same way that Phaedrus expresses incredulity at Socrates' blatantly contrived origin myth of writing, perhaps we are supposed to question the extent to which we can trust the *Phaedrus*'s declarations with respect to writing as a medium.²⁷

The *Phaedrus* proffers both a diagnosis and a cure to the forgetting engendered by an unrestrained usage of writing: not abandonment of the latter as a whole, but a more judicious employment. And yet, this cure, when delivered by means of the written dialogue, leads to its own negation. We are faced with an absurd proposition, an antinomy, that we cannot merely dismiss but must instead confront.²⁸ Plato is not just providing us with instructions on when, where, and how we can use writing in the service of knowledge; he is actively dissuading us from taking Socrates' critique of this medium at face value. The *Phaedrus* is a therapeutic text, a *pharmakon* intended to force us to get to grips with the limits of communicability and the dangers of dissemination for ourselves. He who composes speeches, remarks Socrates, must not only possess knowledge himself and be capable of defending his claims when they are challenged, but must also be able to 'show that what he has written is of little worth' (278c). This is precisely what occurs in the *Phaedrus*: it does not merely assert the limitations of writing, for such propositions would, in their written form, be of little value; rather, it helps lead the reader to a dynamic, context-dependent understanding of this medium's affordances. Faced with an ambiguous situation, Plato compels the reader to reflect upon their own relationship with this text and with written texts more generally.

Properly philosophical (as opposed to sophistic) speechmaking, argues the *Phaedrus*, requires a speaker who comprehends the nature of the soul dialectically, 'discovering the form of speech that fits each nature, and so arranges and orders what he says, offering a complex soul complex speeches containing all the modes, and simple speeches to a simple soul' (277c).²⁹ The speaker must adapt the form of their speech to suit their audience. Which is exactly what writing cannot do: one might author a text with a particular audience in mind, but it cannot adjust itself in conformity with

the needs of a specific reader. So instead, the *Phaedrus* encourages the reader to reflect upon their own position as audience and the context in which they are perusing this piece of writing. It does this by indirectly playing up its status as an inscribed, exteriorized *hypomnēma*, such that the reader must consider their own relationship to this text and its according limitations. The dialogue's intricate, layered dramatic structure – with its characters' recounting of others' speeches, the retelling of fanciful stories, the seemingly inelegant shift between the mythical and metaphysical register of the early sections of the dialogue and the much more grounded scrutinization of rhetoric and writing in the concluding sections – serves to not only bring questions of communication (and its varied modalities) to the fore of the reader's mind, but also to complicate the act of reading, ensuring that they interrogate the words that they encounter, rather than taking them for granted.

For Plato, more than any other philosopher in the Western tradition (save, perhaps, Søren Kierkegaard), how one communicates philosophy matters: ideas cannot just be integrally transmitted from a speaker or writer to their audience; rather, the audience must be maieutically guided toward them, gradually reaching a clear awareness of that which has always been latently inscribed upon their soul.³⁰ Their soul must be transformed such that it is once again able to apprehend that which has always been harboured within it, cultivating a properly philosophical mentality which carries with it a properly philosophical way of communicating. The function of Plato's dialogues, argues Jill Gordon, is 'to turn the reader to the philosophical life that is embodied in a lifelong commitment to dialectic' (60-61), but this cannot occur if the reader is treating its words as facts to be memorized by rote – or worse, from Plato's point of view: relying upon the words as inscribed in external marks rather than bothering to even commit them to memory in the first place. Hence the *Phaedrus*'s therapeutic function.

Living in the shadows of the *Phaedrus*

With all the above exposition in mind, I wish to now return to my initial question: what has this ancient dialogue bequeathed to us, as media theorists? To what extent and in what ways is this origin myth of media theory capable of addressing us? In particular, my interest lies in aspects of the dialogue that extend beyond the deconstructionist notion of a textuality undercut by its own binary oppositions or the

pharmacological conceptualization of the medium *qua* poison/cure. Rather than treating the final section of the *Phaedrus* as a straightforward, albeit anachronistic instance of media criticism, thousands of years before such a practice was formalized, I want to ask whether there are ideas or principles that we might still be yet to learn from it. Following this line of thought, I will tentatively put forward three main suggestions.

Firstly, as Plato himself warns us, we have already waded into perilous waters, attempting to make sense of a text that has been orphaned for more than two millennia. Plato did not write the *Phaedrus* with us in mind, and he no longer has any ability to defend it from our interpretations, however far-fetched they might be. But of course, the *Phaedrus* is not unique in this respect. This defencelessness would surely apply to any text or any medium – and indeed, even to face-to-face speech. Plato's warning derives from his conviction that the spoken word, flowing directly from the soul, offers a presence and plenitude in which dialectical enquiry can flourish, and compared to which writing is, at best, merely ancillary. One would hope that, at a time when channels of communication and circulation have multiplied to a degree unimaginable at any other point in history, this kind of appeal to immediation, an interiority without remainder against which all forms of exteriorization seem inferior (let alone the appeal to the speaking subject as guarantor of semantic stability), would no longer seem plausible. And yet, appeals to purportedly authentic modes of human communication persist. As Ganaele Langlois describes,

communication as authentic encounter traditionally implies a rejection of the chatter and noise of mass and social media in order to focus on embodiment and presence of oneself and others in and to the world, on reaching out to touch and be touched – processes that are notoriously resistant to their retranscription via media technologies (2014: 146-147).

This distinction between genuine discourse (*dialektos* or *logos*) and mere opinion (*doxa*) is a legacy of ancient Greek philosophy, from at least Heraclitus and Parmenides onward – and one that the *Phaedrus* augments by tying this hierarchy to a secondary distinction between writing and speech.

Of course, such logocentrism has faced heavy scrutiny over the past few decades, primarily by virtue of Derrida's work. But whilst deconstruction provides a useful corrective to the ingrained belief in some pure, authentic form of communion of which all mediation is a mere spectre (see McQuire, 2017), its utility as the basis for any empirical study of media is severely limited, given that it aims to place all formal distinctions, however pragmatic or provisional they might be, under erasure. The deconstructive approach, argues Friedrich Kittler, 'will not allow itself to say anything definite about how specific systems of notation functioned because it fears that it would thereby become a science' (1981: 92). What we need instead is a media theory that recognizes that human communication is, in a sense, *hypomnēmata* all the way down – a theory that 'presupposes forgetting and disappearance, disintegration and erosion precisely where philosophy decreed presence and retention' (Kittler, 1981: 91, translation altered). And crucially, a theory that acknowledges its own ineluctable implication within this situation. In this respect, the *Phaedrus* acts as a reminder of the importance of reflecting upon the limitations of our various storage devices, and the question of what they omit or are unable to record, but also of the follies of inscribing such an analysis within an idealized economy of authenticity.

Secondly, the *Phaedrus* prompts us to consider the media we use when theorizing or philosophizing, and proffers a still very pertinent examination of the inevitable recursions that arise in trying to critique media through media. In studying media, we usually deal with 'second-order techniques' (Macho, 2013), characterized by a self-referential recursion: one can speak about speaking, write about writing, paint about painting, sing about singing, and so forth. And this is the exact problem with which Plato is also grappling, however obliquely – a problem all the more pronounced at our historical remove. After all, there is so much that is not captured, that is irretrievably forgotten, in this written text, as evocative as it may be. We know, in a basic material sense, what the signifier 'writing' (*graphō*) and its derivatives denote, but can we really grasp its connotations in a milieu so vastly different from our own? Media theory is, like all scholarly output, disseminated chiefly via writing, but it emerged from a milieu in which literacy is taken for granted (hence, perhaps, why this field so rarely treats writing as a medium or mode of mediation in its own right); Plato's philosophy, in stark contrast, emerges at a time when writing (and phonetic writing in particular) is

still something of a novelty. In both cases, there is so much that is left unwritten (and indeed, unspoken).

We need to pay attention to the limitations of our own theorizing, and how it is conditioned not only by the media with which we disseminate it, but more generally by the milieu in which we produce and circulate it. The relationship between the condition and conditioned is necessarily central to any rigorous theoretical account of mediation; it is, however, also complicated by our theorization's own status as a conditioned *hypomnēma* and the posited conditions' status as abstracted products of this theorization. Causality folds in upon and over itself. There is no outside perspective from which we can objectively peer upon the processes of mediation that make our theorization possible. So how do we account for this recursion? The *Phaedrus* does not furnish an answer to this question, but it underscores the necessity of attending to the media and milieux in and by which our theorization takes shape. It does not just take its written character for granted, but brings this character to the fore, with all the antinomic ramifications that ensue.

Lastly, the *Phaedrus* incites us to think more carefully about media theory's therapeutic functions. Certainly, the topic of therapeutics has received much attention from the pharmacological school of thought. Stiegler, railing against what he perceives as a widespread 'state of systemic stupidity that has become the law of drive-based [*pulsionnel*] capitalism and industrial populism' (2013: 55, translation altered). This drive-based economy, he argues, is a destructive economy – it consumes its objects – and in order to counter the generalized stupidity that it engenders, we will need to formulate 'a way of life that constitutes a new way of taking care of the world, a new way of paying attention to it, through the invention of therapeutics' (2013: 88). This is a worthwhile goal. But I am particularly concerned with asking how theorization, as a material practice (a *technē* in its own right, rather than an *epistēmē* defined by its separation from the technical realm), can position itself in relation to such a therapeutics. If it is true that philosophers have often defined the *epistēmē* of their own discipline via an exclusion of all *technē* – reflecting, argues Stiegler, a political context in which 'the philosopher accuses the Sophist of instrumentalizing the *logos* as rhetoric and logography' (1998: 1) – it is equally the case that they have effaced the technical and material status of philosophizing itself (and its derivatives). What would it mean

for us to apprehend media theory not just as a constituent element of the media networks it examines, but as a practice that can intervene in these networks?

The concept of ‘media literacy’ and the perceived importance of such literacy to an informed populace has always been central to the study of media. In McLuhan, to use a formative example, it is only by understanding media that we might effect ‘an increase of human autonomy’ (1964: 56), staving off the determinism so often attributed to them. Certainly, whilst circumstances have changed dramatically in the past few decades, the question of how we navigate and negotiate our media landscape remains central. But the traditional conceptual framework through which such literacy has been taught now appears toothless. The tropes of media criticism have become overly familiar, incorporated into the very media content they are supposed to be questioning, and embedded within everyday discussions that surround this content.³¹ Critique has not at all run out of steam, but the idea that ‘thinking critically’ is an adequate end for media theorization no longer passes muster. We need to consider exactly what media theory does and what we want it to do – how theory might transform us and our relationship to media.³² And in turn, how media continue to shape our practices of theorization. To what extent and in what ways is media theory able to serve *our* interests, both individual and collective, ensnared as we are within an intractable and often imperceptible meshwork of media systems?

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Notes

¹ Citations for Plato's works in this article use the standard Stephanus number system. All such citations refer to the *Phaedrus*, unless otherwise noted. All Greek etymologies are derived from *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021).

² Plato never gets around to investigating the philosopher in the same manner, though this was presumably his original intention (see *Soph.* 217a).

³ A similar metaphor is used in the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates describes, with respect to speechmaking, the need to be able 'to cut up whatever it is again, kind by kind, according to its natural joints, and not to try to break any part into pieces, like an inexperienced butcher' (265e). Depending upon one's interpretation, the method of division and collection either supplements or supplants the theory of forms in the later Platonic dialogues

⁴ For more on the communicative strategies endorsed within the *Phaedrus* as well as *The Republic*, see Sutherland (2023: 29-43).

⁵ Following this same line of argument, Neil Postman suggests that those of us 'who think that "the medium is the message" is a modern conception, should note that twenty-three hundred years ago both Plato and Socrates in speaking of writing addressed themselves to what the written word, irrespective of its content, is capable of doing to a culture' (1979: 239); Walter Ong observes that

‘essentially the same objections commonly urged today against computers were urged by Plato in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Seventh Letter* against writing’ (1982: 78); Paul Levinson suggests that, thanks to Plato, ‘the Greeks [...] were among their many other pioneering pursuits the original media theorists’, or at least ‘the first that we know about in recorded history’ (1997: 18); and Lance Strate describes the *Phaedrus* as ‘the first secular discussion in the media ecology intellectual tradition’ (2006: 80). Frank Haase remarks that it was with this dialogue that ‘media themselves become the subject of philosophical debate for the first time’ (2020: 118). Eric Havelock’s *Preface to Plato* (1963) is also often mentioned in such contexts, though it concentrates almost entirely on *The Republic* and Plato’s critique of poetry therein.

- ⁶ Similarly, Darren Tofts submits that the *Phaedrus* is the distant antecedent of ‘our contemporary suspicions regarding cybernetic systems, with their indifference to, and independence from anyone or anything outside their own machinations’ (1998: 44); John Durham Peters remarks that ‘many have taken Socrates’ critique of the written word at the end of the *Phaedrus* as prophetic of worries about new media more generally’ (1999: 36); Alan Liu views ‘the doggedness of humanities instructors who are sometimes more than just unadapted to new classroom technologies’ (2004: 319) as a nescient reprise of Plato’s polemic; Jonathan Sterne perceives the *Phaedrus* as the progenitor of a long ‘series of laments about the alienation of modern life, the loss of community, and the decline of intersubjective recognition as humans use tools more and more to communicate with one another’ (2006: 96); Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark argue that ‘the *Phaedrus* inaugurated what has proven to be the most influential philosophical approach to media and communication. The dialogue established terms of debate that have been prominent ever since: writing versus speech, absence versus presence, and mediacy versus immediacy’ (2014: 11); and Wolfgang Ernst avers that with the digitization of audiovisual content, ‘Plato’s primary “media” critique of writing as an ambivalent memory technology is valid again’ (2016: 74).
- ⁷ Logocentrism, as Derrida frequently reminds us, consists in ‘nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism’ (1997: 3).
- ⁸ Eric Michaels makes clear the ethnocentric assumptions that predominate in such accounts: ‘Unilinealism surely persists in our theories of media history. The idea that media are either signals or engines of cultural sequence is familiar at least since Innis and McLuhan. Both, in accounting for European media, simplify histories of development to a unilineal historical causality for the West. And both are guilty of generalizing from here to some universal evolutionary sequence, using “primitive” societies in curious and usually uninformed ways to illustrate their points. But the fault cannot be attributed to these scholars alone. The very commonest terms we use to distinguish our civilization from others – “historical” from “prehistorical” – are semantically loaded with precisely the same ammunition, and refer to writing as the pivotal event in this presumed sequence’ (1994: 82).
- ⁹ See Guillory (2010) on the history of the concept of the medium/media.
- ¹⁰ In this respect, I diverge fairly significantly from Derrida, who views Plato as necessarily eliding his own reliance upon the written word. Plato, Derrida insists, ‘must put writing out of the question and yet nevertheless borrow from it, for fundamental reasons, all of its demonstrative and theoretical resources’ (1981: 157), using the image of written letters to explain his concepts (e.g. dialectic, the soul, etc.) but without ever actually providing an explanation for the writing that he himself uses.
- ¹¹ See Foucault (2005: 98), who notes that Greco-Roman philosophical practices of the self often centred upon this notion of *therapeuein*, figured as a kind of medical operation for one’s soul.
- ¹² Victorino Tejera, somewhat unusually, opts unambiguously for the first option in his translation: ‘a thoughtful person will, surely not educate himself by means of names or heal his soul with names alone’ (1999: 430).
- ¹³ See Hadot (1995; 2002) on the concept of the *spiritual exercise* in the context of ancient philosophy. Although Hadot pays comparatively little attention to contemporary philosophy (beyond Wittgenstein and Foucault), this concept has been productively extended by Ian Hunter (2006), who contends that the history of ‘theory’ within the humanities can be characterized as a succession of spiritual exercises, premised upon an ascetic procedure of transcendental *epoché* intended to transform the theorist themselves.
- ¹⁴ This is clearly established in Plato’s middle-period dialogues, particularly the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, both of which place considerable emphasis upon the central role of recollection (*anamnesis*) in philosophy, spurning the external world of the senses and recovering the knowledge that resides within one’s soul.

- ¹⁵ *Maiensis* literally means ‘midwifery’: Socrates famously describes himself as a midwife who attends to men’s souls, helping them deliver truths (see *Theaetetus* 150b).
- ¹⁶ ‘Socrates’ critique of writing,’ observes Peters, ‘is part of a larger deliberation on the varying tightness of the coupling between person and person, soul and soul, body and body’ (1999: 37).
- ¹⁷ Derrida is quite warranted in commenting that ‘[o]nly a blind or grossly insensitive reading could indeed have spread the rumor that Plato was simply condemning the writer’s activity’ (1981: 72).
- ¹⁸ ‘Not that logos *is* the father, either. But the origin of logos is *its father*. One could say anachronously that the “speaking subject” is the *father* of his speech. And one would quickly realize that this is no metaphor, at least not in the sense of any common, conventional effect of rhetoric. *Logos* is a son, then, a son that would be destroyed in his very *presence* without the present *being* of his father. His father who answers. His father who speaks for him and answers for him. Without his father, he would be nothing but, in fact, writing’ (Derrida 1981: 82).
- ¹⁹ ‘The lack of a stable and well determined attribute,’ Isabelle Stengers expounds, ‘is the problem posed by any *pharmakon*, by any drug whose effect can mutate into its opposite, depending on the dose, the circumstances, or the context, any drug whose action provides no guarantee, defines no fixed point of reference that would allow us to recognize and understand its effects with some assurance’ (2010: 29)
- ²⁰ Famously, Derrida posits that the characteristics usually attributed to written communication are in fact ‘also to be found in all language, for example in spoken language, and ultimately in the totality of “experience”’ (1982: 318), calling into question any attempt to locate a clear-cut rupture between orality and literacy.
- ²¹ ‘We are not to forget,’ contends Kathryn Morgan, ‘that each dialogue is a literary construction, a game that Plato plays, albeit a serious one [...] It may be that a written dis- course is less serious than the living discourse in the soul, but this does not entail that it may not awake serious reflection through its play’ (2004: 175).
- ²² ‘[I]n fact,’ Foucault asserts, ‘*hypomnemata* has a very precise meaning. It is a copybook, a notebook. Precisely this type of notebook was coming into vogue in Plato’s time for personal and administrative use. This new technology was as disrupting as the introduction of the computer into private life today’ (1984: 363).
- ²³ In this dialogue, argues Eric Havelock, Plato ‘shows keen awareness that a growing body of written work by his contemporaries now exists, that it is recent, that it is not limited to the texts of speeches orally delivered, and that he has to come to terms with it himself’ (1978: 326).
- ²⁴ More specifically, the *hypomnemata* in this case would seem to principally be boys whose beauty helps the philosopher maintain a certain presence *vis-à-vis* divinity. To wit, ‘each soul only returns to the place from which it has come after ten thousand years; it does not become winged before then, except in the case of the soul of the man who has lived the philosophical life without guile or who has united his love of boys with philosophy’ (248e). As odd as this may sound to contemporary ears, this conjunction of love and wisdom is a key part of Plato’s philosophy, most prominently in *The Symposium*, in which the philosopher is exhorted ‘to go from one to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, and from beautiful bodies to beautiful practices, and from practices to beautiful forms of learning’, ending up at the form of beauty itself (*Symp.* 211c). In fact, the voluntary servitude (*therapeuein*) alluded to earlier in this article is specifically of an erotic nature, between a boy and his lover. As Peters writes, Socrates sees bodily beauty ‘not as a hindrance to recollecting the truth, but as a reminder that transports the forgotten glory to presence’ (1999: 43).
- ²⁵ Writing, as Rosalind Thomas notes, ‘enables successors – as well as distant contemporaries – to examine, criticize, and build upon someone’s work more easily, as did the Presocratic philosophers’ (34).
- ²⁶ “‘Written communication” must, if you will, remain legible,’ argues Derrida, ‘despite the absolute disappearance of every determined addressee in general for it to function as writing, that is, for it to be legible. It must be repeatable – iterable – in the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addressee’ (1982: 315). An ‘essential drifting, due to writing as an iterative structure cut off from all absolute responsibility, from *consciousness* as the authority of the last analysis, writing orphaned, and separated at birth from the assistance of its father, is indeed what Plato condemned in the *Phaedrus*’ (1982: 316). Of course, Derrida does not actually view this iterability as being an attribute peculiar to writing, but instead as marking the condition of (im)possibility for communication itself.

- ²⁷ ‘Socrates,’ Phaedrus exclaims, ‘how easily you make up stories, from Egypt or from anywhere else you like!’ (275b).
- ²⁸ ‘Paradoxes,’ writes Mary Margaret Mackenzie, who provides a very clear account of this antinomy, ‘take on a life of their own, and simply by standing still, are capable of adapting to change in the reader. They do so when the reader falls in love with them, maddened and enthusiastic, follows their tracks’ (1982: 72).
- ²⁹ ‘Socrates’ critique of writing thus is [...] a logical outgrowth of the argument that good and just relations among people require a knowledge of and care for souls’ (Peters, 1999: 47). See also *Protagoras* 329a.
- ³⁰ Kierkegaard explicitly frames his approach to philosophy as a reintroduction of the Socratic maieutic method, based upon a form of ‘indirect communication’ that forces the reader to confront not only their own relationship to the text, but their own subjectivity.
- ³¹ For instance, Nicholas Rombes proposes that ‘[c]inema in the digital age – which no longer simply uses self-reference as a narrative device but which in fact depends upon an audience which expects it – has a sort of built-in mode of deconstruction, which is also evident in other art forms from the era’ (2009: 62); likewise, taking a more pessimistic standpoint, Mark Andrejevic points to ‘a savvy critique of representation associated with a reflexive culture of information abundance’ (2013: 139) that has brought scepticism and denialism into the mainstream.
- ³² Whilst she does not work within the ambit of media theory, Michelle Boulous Walker makes tentative steps toward such questions with her ethics of philosophical reading, premised upon ‘the judgement that comes from suspending certainty, from hesitating, deliberating and taking time’ (2017: 8). But further reflection is needed upon the conditions that would make this kind of suspended judgement more possible.

Thomas Sutherland is Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at the University of Lincoln.

Email: tsutherland@lincoln.ac.uk