The Review of Politics 83 (2021), 153–173.
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doi:10.1017/S0034670520000984

On Politics, Irony, and Plato's Socrates as Derrida's *Pharmakon*

Matthew Sharpe

Abstract: This paper challenges the reading of Derridean deconstruction as a necessarily antiauthoritarian version of "hermeneutics as politics." It does so by critically rereading Derrida's 1968 essay "Plato's Pharmacy." Part 1 reconstructs Derrida's key claims in "Plato's Pharmacy," turning on the ambiguous signifier "pharmakon" and the treatment of writing in the *Phaedrus*. Part 2 examines Derrida's three claims in "Plato's Pharmacy" concerning the political, putatively antiauthoritarian significance of his deconstruction of "platonism." Part 3 contests these claims, arguing that Derrida cannot comprehend Socratic irony since he is blind to the political shaping of Plato's dialogic writing, as the artful attempt to present and inspire philosophical inquiry within the city, while avoiding the condemnation directed against Socrates by the men of Athens in 399 BCE. Finally, I argue that Derrida's indebtedness to Heidegger underlies these shortcomings in his reading of Plato.

> Always with irony. But what can be said of irony here?
> —Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of Western philosophy has exerted a wide influence in the anglophone humanities since the 1970s, including within strands of liberal, feminist, and radical political theory. The deconstruction of philosophical texts which would reveal their disavowed exceptions, exclusions, or supplements ("the Other of philosophy")[1] is widely considered to embody, vindicate, or motivate a radically democratic political orientation, pointing to what Derrida calls a democracy "à venir" (to come).[2] This

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[1]See Martin McQuillan, *The Politics of Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Other of Philosophy* (London: Pluto, 2007).

[2]Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2005); Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 2010). For texts which support Derrida's claims about the prodemocratic

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article reconsiders the "politics of deconstruction" in the light of a different understanding of what Stanley Rosen calls "hermeneutics as politics" from that which shapes Derrida's deconstructive writings.[3]

Unlike leading criticisms of the political credentials of Derrida's work by figures such as Thomas McCarthy and Mark Lilla,[4] I focus here on Derrida's 1968 text "Plato's Pharmacy."[5] The article critiques this Derridean essay through a perspective shaped by recent work on Plato by William H. F. Altman and Catherine Zuckert,[6] as well as criticisms of Derrida's deconstruction of Plato by Stanley Rosen, Seth Benardete, and Charles Griswold.[7] "Plato's Pharmacy" is paradigmatic within Derrida's corpus, despite the essay's characteristic claim that deconstruction undermines the logic of paradigms (71). Following Martin Heidegger, Derrida here attributes to Plato or

significance of deconstruction, see Alex Thomson, *Deconstruction and Democracy* (London: Continuum, 2005), esp. 9–54; Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996), esp. 46–97; Susanne Lüdemann, *The Politics of Deconstruction: A New Introduction to Jacques Derrida* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), esp. 82–110.

[3]Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

[4]Thomas McCarthy, "The Politics of the Ineffable: Derrida's Deconstructionism," *Philosophical Forum* 21, nos. 1–2 (1989): 146–68; Mark Lilla, "The Politics of Jacques Derrida," *New York Review of Books*, June 25, 1998. See also Catherine Zuckert, "The Politics of Derridean Deconstruction," *Polity* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 335–56; Jürgen Habermas, "Beyond a Temporalized Philosophy of Origins: Jacques Derrida's Critique of Phonocentrism," in *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 161–84.

[5]Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Parenthetical page references in the text should be understood to be to this work unless otherwise indicated. Where Johnson's translation involves any arguably contentious renderings into English of important terms or phrases, cross-referencing to the pagination of the original (Jacques Derrida, "La pharmacie de platon," *Tel Quel*, nos. 32–33 [1968]: 256–403) will be indicated by (Fr. [page number]), and the French provided. Standardized references to classical works will be given parenthetically in the text.

[6]Catherine Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); William H. F. Altman, *The Guardians of Action: Plato the Teacher and the Post-"Republic" Dialogues from "Timaeus" to "Theaetetus"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016) and *The Guardians on Trial: The Reading Order of Plato's Dialogues from "Euthyphro" to "Phaedo"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

[7]Stanley Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," in *Hermeneutics as Politics*; Seth Benardete, "Derrida and Plato," in *Archaeology of the Soul: Platonic Readings of Ancient Poetry and Philosophy* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 2012); Charles Griswold Jr., "Epilogue: In Defense of Dialogue," in *Self-Knowledge in Plato's "Phaedrus"* (State Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 230–42.

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"platonism" a founding role in shaping or "dominating" all of Western philosophy and culture, including political life and thought (149).[8] Plato's dialogues "set up the whole of Western metaphysics in its conceptuality" (82), the abiding object of Derrida's deconstructive labors.[9] Likewise, Derrida reads what he takes to be Plato's treatment of writing in the *Phaedrus* as a pharmakon (both cure and poison) as a definitive moment in shaping this "logocentric" legacy:[10] one that he suggests underwrites even the political divisions between conservative and radical, democratic and authoritarian political orientations.

Part 1 of this article hence reconstructs Derrida's key claims in "Plato's Pharmacy," turning on the ambiguous signifier "pharmakon" and the treatment of writing in the *Phaedrus*. In part 2, I examine Derrida's three claims in "Plato's Pharmacy" concerning the political, putatively prodemocratic significance of his deconstruction of "platonism," and deconstruction more widely. Part 3 contests these claims, and Derrida's reading of Plato, by critiquing Derrida's remarkable claims concerning the irony evidenced in the Platonic dialogues. In contrast to Rosen's, Benardete's, and Griswold's critiques of Derrida's Plato,[11] I attend primarily to the political dimension of Plato's dialogic writing, conceived as the artful attempt to present and inspire philosophical inquiry within the city, while avoiding the condemnation directed against Socrates by the men of Athens in 399 BCE. Far from being deeply "political," I contend that Derrida's reading of Plato is singularly blind to this political dimension of Plato's writing in ways that lead him into telling interpretive errors and elisions.

The largest claim of this article hence triangulates existing critiques of Derrida's politics and of his reading of Plato. It is that Derrida's attempt to present his deconstruction of platonism in "Plato's Pharmacy" as meaningfully prodemocratic is deeply contestable.[12] I claim instead that "Plato's Pharmacy" shows very clearly how Derrida elides the differences (first) between political authority and "Western metaphysics," despite the long history of the persecution of philosophers (one thinks for instance of Spinoza or Voltaire) by different Western states. It demonstrates (second) how Derrida artificially forces ironic philosophical writers like Plato into the preset mould of what he calls

[8]See Martin Heidegger, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155–82; Johannes Fritsche, "With Plato into the *Kairos* before the *Kehre*: On Heidegger's Different Interpretations of Plato," in *Heidegger and Plato: Toward Dialogue*, ed. Catalin Partenie and Tom Rockmore (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 140–77.

[9]Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 57, 64; Benardete, "Derrida and Plato," 354.

[10]See Simon Morgan Wortham, "Logocentrism," in *The Derrida Dictionary* (London: Continuum, 2010), 89.

[11]Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction"; Benardete, "Derrida and Plato"; Griswold, "Epilogue"; and Catherine Zuckert, "Derrida's Deconstruction of Plato," in *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 206–30.

[12]Cf. Zuckert, "Politics of Derridean Deconstruction," 354–55.

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"platonism," in order to motivate deconstruction's hermeneutic subversions and thus its putatively political "interventions."[13] The smoking gun here, as it were, is that Derrida has no coherent account of the significance of Plato's choosing to write in dialogue form, using multiple spokespeople, including several mysterious "strangers," to express what Derrida takes to be his "platonism." In reading Plato or his Socrates as the father of "platonism," I contend, Derrida not only profoundly misunderstands or denatures Plato's irony, a point Griswold noted some time ago.[14] As Altman's reading of Plato in particular allows us to see,[15] Derrida also misses completely the demotic dimensions to Socrates's injunction to philosophers to "go back down" into the city (*Rep.* 520c), having ascended through philosophical inquiry out of the cave of conventional *doxa*.

I close by contending that Derrida's elisions in "Plato's Pharmacy" (of Plato and his dialogic spokesmen, of the dialogues and "platonism," and of platonism and closed political authority) reflect his own filial debts to Heidegger's thought. But while Heidegger's own deconstruction of Western metaphysics, looking back to the Presocratics, also laid claim to what Heidegger termed a "metapolitical" significance,[16] it was tied to a profoundly antiliberal and antidemocratic political orientation.[17] The politics of deconstruction is far more undecidable than its prodemocratic proponents claim, pushing us, if anywhere, towards forms of political decisionism.

1. Of Derrida's Pharmakon and the Egyptian Origins of "Platonism"

The dazzling brilliance of Derrida's deconstruction of Plato in "Plato's Pharmacy" has left many critics unsure how to respond. Some have moved

[13]See Jacques Derrida, "Critical Response," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Aug. 1986): 16.

[14]Griswold, "Epilogue," 235.

[15]See William H. F. Altman, *Plato the Teacher: The Crisis of the "Republic"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).

[16]I use the technical term "metapolitical" in this paper, first since Heidegger uses it in the *Black Notebooks* to describe what he calls his "metaphysics of dasein" (see Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings, II–VI*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016], 85–86 with 91), but second and more importantly, insofar as in both his and Derrida's thought the term reflects a collapsing of the differences between philosophical and political concerns which we will track in parts 2 and 3. As a result, as we will see in "Plato's Pharmacy," "deconstructing" a text is presented by Derrida as itself "political."

[17]Cf. Zuckert, "Politics of Derridean Deconstruction," 352–54; on Heidegger's politics, the fullest documentation is found in Emmanuel Faye, *Martin Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy*, trans. Michael Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

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to dismiss Derrida, Platonically, as a gifted sophist: an imitator of the real philosopher whose ends are questionable at best (*Soph.* 235a–b).[18] Certainly, any deconstructive reading must inhabit the texts that it then unravels, Derrida teaches. Just so, Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" weaves its copious, written threads from the *Phaedrus* and the *Statesman*, but also the *Republic*, *Philebus*, *Parmenides*, *Symposium*, *Charmides*, *Theaetetus*, *Laws*, *Protagoras*, *Lysias*, the *Hippias Minor*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *The Apology of Socrates*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. But Derrida's *polemos* with Plato or with platonism—he does not consistently distinguish these things—focuses principally on the *Phaedrus*, to use a Greek term reflecting how Derrida locates his deconstructive intervention in this text in the "combat zone between philosophy and its other" (139).

In contrast to other readings of the text as an artful whole,[19] Derrida focuses on a sometimes overlooked part of the dialogue.[20] The *Phaedrus* ironically begins with Socrates declaring the need to "have done with" (*khairein*) all myths (73–74; *Phdr.* 229c–230a). Yet Socrates himself recounts a myth from *Phaedrus* 274b onwards, after the principal work of the dialogue seems to have been done. Derrida homes in on this "supplementary" myth (71). Socrates's myth is Egyptian, or at least we can say that it deploys Egyptian characters, since Socrates flags that some uncertainty surrounds it (*Phdr.* 274c).[21] In the *muthos*, the God Theuth, "father of written letters" (274e), presents writing to the king Thamus as a great gift or pharmakon to human beings. This gift will "improve their memories . . . [being] a recipe for both memory and wisdom" (80–81; *Phdr.* 274e). The king responds that this divine invention is indeed a pharmakon. But this time, the signifier "pharmakon" is used by the king to designate something verging into a charm or poison: "this invention will produce forgetfulness . . . with only a semblance of [wisdom], not with truth" (*Phdr.* 274e, 275b).

Derrida argues that this myth represents a "necessary supplement" to the text, wherein its deepest unwitting meaning is intimated or revealed. In a Platonic dialogue whose central lines (*Phdr.* 257c) concern the art of speechwriting (*logographia*),[22] Derrida argues that we cannot dismiss the myth as a

[18]See Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 50–51, 56, 61, 65–66, 73; Christopher Mortensen, "Plato's Pharmacy and Derrida's Drugstore," *Language & Communication* 20, no. 4 (2000): 329–46, esp. 338–43; Eric Maljaic, "Derrida's Pharmacy: A Note on Derrida and *Phaedrus*," *The Explicator* 68, no. 2 (2010): 136–39; Michael A. Rinella, "Revisiting the Pharmacy: Plato, Derrida, and the Morality of Political Deceit," *Polis* 24, no. 1 (2007): 134–53; Yoav Rinon, "The Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida I: Plato's Pharmacy," *Review of Metaphysics* 46, no. 2 (1992): 369–86.

[19]See Griswold, "Epilogue," 235.

[20]Rinon, "Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida I," 369.

[21]See Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 56–57 on the strangeness that Derrida sees in the founding operation of Western metaphysics having been delivered through the mouth of an Egyptian monarch and reported second- or third-hand by Plato's Socrates. See also part 3 below.

[22]You can count the lines to verify this quantitative centrality, Derrida notes (73).

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reflection of any authorial failing (85–86; see *Phdr.* 264b–c).[23] Indeed, Derrida seems to agree with both the Straussian and Tübingen schools of twentieth-century Platonic interpretation that readers should always pay close attention to the literary setting of the dialogue: "the *topoi* of the dialogue are never indifferent" (74). Derrida thus points out that both subjects of the closing myth in the *Phaedrus*, those of writing and of the pharmakon, are present within the dialogue from its beginning, if only as "stitches" on the back of Plato's written canvas (75). It is the written speech Phaedrus hides beneath his cloak that has lured Socrates away from his usual haunts within the walls of Athens (75–76). Phaedrus, Socrates comments playfully, seems to have invented a drug (pharmakon) by promising Socrates speeches bound in books. He could be led by Phaedrus anywhere around Attica (*Phdr.* 230d–e).

As just indicated, Derrida also sees poetic significance in the setting of the interchange that takes place between Socrates and Phaedrus outside of Athens, on the banks of the river Illisus. This is the extramural place where a fountain is supposed to have been devoted to Pharmakia. As Socrates tells us in a first myth in the *Phaedrus*, it was this Pharmakia who facilitated the carrying off of the virginal Orithyia by the Boreal wind, just as Derrida suggests that the play of signifiers, *différance* or *arché-écriture* always eludes political or metaphysical closure (75).

It would be too much to suggest that this is all accidental, Derrida contends (75). "We are no longer at that point. The hypothesis of a rigorous, sure, and subtle form is naturally more fertile [*naturellement plus féconde*]" (72; Fr. 260). Indeed, one task of "Plato's Pharmacy" is to stress the "undecidability" of the metaphorical walls between philosophy and literary writing, as well as the necessary failure of "platonism's" attempts to corral written signifiers into the logocentric enclosure (139). The question is how to interpret this undecidability, and whether what we will see is Derrida's post-Heideggerian reading of it in terms of the weave of "arch-writing" does not lead him into telling elisions and unsustainable "ors," like those he multiplies between Plato "or" Socrates "or" platonism.[24]

Derrida's interpretation of the *Phaedrus* then is centrally concerned with the question of writing. And from the beginning, he stresses that writing is wittingly or unwittingly associated by Plato or by his Socrates with the pharmakon. This Greek signifier, as everyone knows after Derrida, can mean both poison and cure, also recipe, remedy, spell, and charm (77, 101–2).[25] The mythological cues of the *Phaedrus* also position the pharmakon as something which leads one astray, whether one is an Orithya or a Socrates, a Greek or an

[23]See Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 216–17.

[24]See Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 67–68.

[25]See Rinella, "Revisiting the Pharmacy"; Gerasimos Kakoliris, "The 'Undecidable' *Pharmakon*: Derrida's Reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*," in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 13, ed. Burt Hopkins and John Drummond (London: Routledge, 2014); Griswold, "Epilogue," 234.

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Egyptian: "one and the same suspicion envelops the book and the drug, writing and whatever works in an occult, ambiguous manner . . . governed by the laws of magic and not the laws of necessity" (78).

Derrida claims that the epochal significance of the Egyptian myth of Theuth and Thamos, as recorded in the *Phaedrus*, comes from its intention to systematically devalue writing beneath living speech. Speech in the platonic lineage is the medium of dialectics and of philosophic *anamnēsis* (recollection). It involves a *logos* which can answer for itself or with the sanction of its "father," the speaking I, present to his own discourse (77; *Phdr.* 275e). Writing, by contrast, is a pharmakon or poison which dulls or hypnotizes living memory by externalizing, doubling, or copying it, just as the sophist imitates the philosopher (*Soph.* 235a–b). Written texts cannot answer for themselves except by repeating the same things, without sensitivity to who questions them, why, or how (*Phdr.* 275d–e). Written signifiers are after all just marks or *tupoi* which copy spoken language. Meanwhile, even spoken signifiers are the representations or copies of ideas in subjects' living psyches. Writing is in this way comparable to the painting which Socrates excludes from the *kallipolis* in the *Republic*, a copy of a copy (*Rep.* 597a–d; *Phdr.* 275d–e; *Tim.* 19b). Yet writing's deceptive *mimēsis* of living speech is the more serious case. For its silence also "denatures" the medium of the voice which "it claims to imitate," or so Derrida claims (137–38).[26]

However, Derrida's central deconstructive contention is that this platonist devaluation of writing by Plato, Socrates, or Socrates's mythical Thamus cannot stand. For writing is also a pharmakon as a cure, medicine, and necessary support for philosophy which platonism and its founder(s) cannot do without. A good part of Derrida's essay is thus given over to showing how the "inside" of the pure, natural, spoken, living, philosophical, veridical, and distinctly *patrilineal* edifice of platonist logocentrism relies upon what it would expel to the "outside" to establish its authority. The "inside" of platonism is founded on systematically excluding the unclean (*pharmakos*), the written or grammatical, the artificial, the mythical, the mimetic, the magical, the literary or merely persuasive, at the same time as it cannot do without it (111).

Derrida hence shows how the philosophic discourses of Plato (or of Socrates or Timaeus or Diotima or the Eleatic or Athenian Strangers, or indeed the Egyptians his Socrates adduces) do not omit, but always turn upon, literary tropes, or on seemingly incidental examples and digressions. The putatively philosophical or dialectic arguments of the *Phaedrus* and the other dialogues thus play upon metaphors of paternity, inheritance, parricide, and filial relations (chaps. 2, 3, and 8), alongside those of phantasms, festivals, dissemblance, makeups, and paints (chap. 7), and of magic, charming, and

[26]There is a long-standing argument that ancient philosophical writing was written to be read aloud. See Pierre Hadot, "The Oral Teaching of Plato," in *Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew Sharpe and Federica Testa (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 81–90.

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intoxication (chap. 5). Then there are those irreducibly ambivalent words on "which Plato does not place much emphasis" (132), led by *pharmakon* itself. Derrida's own numerically central fourth and fifth chapters focus on the multiple, multiply ambiguous uses of the signifier "pharmakon" in the Platonic oeuvre (esp. 97–98), as well as its cognate *pharmakeus* (magician, sorcerer, or poisoner [119ff.]) and *pharmakos* (sacrifice, scapegoat), subjects to which we will return.[27]

On the one hand, Derrida notes that there are many places in the Platonic oeuvre wherein writing, the bad pharmakon, is assigned positive valences, just as if it were a remedy as well as a poison. The very fact of Plato having written, and written works of "rigorous, sure, and subtle form" (67), Derrida seems to think too vulgar an observation to mention in this connection. Then there is in the *Laws* the advice of the "good judge" to try to "possess the writings of the legislator within his own soul" (124–25). We think also of the political value of regimes having written laws or law codes. This value rests exactly on their unchanging sameness, as Cleinias tells us, no matter when or by whom they are consulted (*Laws* 891a). But this is exactly what Socrates's Thamos in the *Phaedrus* had denounced (115–16). The *Phaedrus* itself ends by holding up writing as the highest form of play (156–58; *Phdr.* 276d). It is also praised by the eponymous Phaedrus as a *hupomnēmata* (memory aid) that the philosopher should collect, "at the service of dialectics and in order to leave a trace [*ikhnos*] for whoever might want to follow in his footsteps on the pathways to truth" (153).

If writing were solely a bad pharmakon, Derrida asks, why would Plato moreover use "scriptural" tropes (158) at several decisive points in the *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Philebus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*, as the means to clarify or illustrate key philosophical claims? Plato for instance seems to contradict himself by talking of ideas in the mind as a "writing" on the tablet of the soul (*Phdr.* 276a–b).[28] When he describes the workings of philosophic *diairesis* (roughly, division according to kind), the *sumplokē* (weaving) which constitutes the royal art of the statesman (163), and even the structure of the *kosmos* itself in the*Timaeus* (157–58), using figures and analogies from writing, this Other to philosophy's proper concerns, he again seems to be skirting inconsistency with his devaluation of writing as pharmakon.

On the other hand, if philosophy's "inside" were as secure from contamination as platonism supposedly desired, why are there so many places within the Platonic dialogues wherein dialectic, speech, and knowledge (*epistēmē*)

[27]Derrida reads or effectively writes this term into the Platonic texts (69), despite his avowed failure to find it in the dialogues directly, except via what Derrida calls "the hidden forces of attraction linking a present word with an absent word in the text of Plato" (133). We return to the pharmakos below, and this remarkable appeal to hidden forces of attraction operating despite authorial intention and the very letters of a text. See Benardete, "Derrida and Plato," 355–56.

[28]Cf. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 223.

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are each described as just such pharmaka? Just as the sophists already described persuasive *speech* as a powerful pharmakon, so Meno and Alcibiades each attest to the almost magic force (*pharmattein*) Socrates's speeches exert upon them (128, 130–31). In the *Charmides*, Socrates presents himself as having the cure for Charmides's headache, in order to direct the beautiful youth towards philosophy and *sōphrosunē* (moderation), which he presents as pharmaka for the whole of his being (128; *Chrm.* 155d–156a). In the *Phaedo*, again, philosophy is presented as a pharmakon against the fear of death: what Derrida will call "the inverted *pharmakon*" of dialectics to trump all other pharmaka which play upon human beings' fear of dying (126; see below).

With this effective Derridean collapsing of any lasting difference between Socrates and the sophists in place, we can now appreciate the radicality and charm of Derrida's claims concerning Plato or platonism. What, however, does Derrida say concerning the putative politics of this hermeneutic operation?

2. Derrida on the Putative Politics of "Plato's Pharmacy"

Derrida maintains that to deconstruct Plato or "platonism" is not simply to have returned to and uncovered the "major decision through which philosophy constitutes itself" (111), the decision in favor of logocentrism and its characteristic set of values. This apparently theoretical operation, he maintains, is also *in itself* putatively political.[29] "Over and above that which links the problem of writing to the problem of power, to the problem of democracy and democratization," Derrida claims, "'Plato's Pharmacy' is through and through—and this is evident on each page and with each move—a political text, a text on Greek politics and institutions as well as on the political in general."[30]

Derrida echoes this claim in different places concerning his wider project of deconstruction. Responding to the scandal surrounding the disclosure of Paul de Man's anti-Semitic wartime writings, for example, Derrida went as far as to claim that deconstruction is principally motivated by the desire "to free oneself of totalitarianism as far as possible."[31] "Deconstructive readings and writings," Derrida affirmed elsewhere, "are . . . not simply analyses of discourse. . . . They are also effective or active . . . interventions, in particular political and institutional interventions that transform contexts without

[29]See Jacques de Ville, "Derrida, Semiotics, and Justice," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law / Revue internationale de sémiotique juridique* 23, no. 3 (2010): 239–42.

[30]Quoted in Miriam Leonard, *Athens in Paris: Ancient Greece and the Political in Post-War French Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 204.

[31]Jacques Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988): 648.

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limiting themselves to theoretical or constative utterances even though they must also produce such utterances."[32]

Certainly Derrida's work has been invested with broadly left-liberal political hopes by many of his readers.[33] This is particularly the case after 1990, when Derrida's own texts began to concern more evidently political topics (justice, forgiveness, giving, cosmopolitanism, sovereignty, etc.).[34] I do not wish to equate Derrida with his reception or legacy, as if someone might speak of "Derrida or deconstructionism" in the way Derrida speaks throughout "Plato's Pharmacy" as if Plato and platonism were synonyms, putting the latter term in inverted commas only once (101).[35] What I want to question is whether Derrida's way of linking the problem of writing to political life in "Plato's Pharmacy" leads him to the best way of understanding Plato's dialogues, or represents a significant misunderstanding of the relationship between politics and philosophy.

Three claims are presented within "Plato's Pharmacy" to justify Derrida's claim to the "de part en part" political character of his deconstruction of platonism. The first is that, as Derrida rightly identifies, "Plato's" critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* is related to his *polemos* with the sophists. The struggle, connected to the "ancient quarrel" of philosophy with the poets (*Rep.* 607b), concerned who could be the best educators of the young men of Athens and Greece. This pedagogical question was a decidedly political matter, as its central consideration in Plato's and Aristotle's most directly political texts reflects (108; cf. *Rep.* III–IV, VI–VII; Aristotle, *Pol.* VII–VIII).[36]

The second reason Derrida reads his text as meaningfully "political" is his association of writing, disparaged by the Platonic Socrates, with the *politeia* of democracy, similarly reviled by the latter (*Rep.* 557c–558c, 561c–d). "One could compare the trial of writing [in the *Phaedrus*] with the trial of democracy outlined in the *Republic*," Derrida asserts (144). The written signifier, Derrida suggests, is comparable to the ideal democratic citizen disparaged by Plato or by Socrates (*Rep.* 557a–561d). Neither has any proper place, paternity or patronym, and each is listlessly capable of simulating anything, even philosophy

[32]Derrida, "Critical Response," 16.

[33]See note 1 above.

[34]See, for example, Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political*; Suzanne Guerlac and Pheng Cheah, eds., *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

[35]"It could no doubt be shown, and I will try to do so when the time comes, that this blockage between the passage among opposing values is already an effect of 'Platonism'" (at 101). The context is discussing the opposing significations condensed in the single signifier "pharmakon."

[36]Derrida's conscious aim is not to side with the sophists: "this reading of Plato is at no time spurred on by some slogan or password of a 'back-to-the-sophists' nature," but deconstruction alerts us to the inability of authors to fully master the logics of their own texts (111). Cf. Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 50–51, 56; Mortensen, "Plato's Pharmacy," 336.

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itself (144–45). On the strength of this analogy between underdetermined signifiers and democratic citizens, Derrida positions deconstruction as not simply political, but politically on the side of the democrats.

The third claim Derrida makes about the text's putative political significance concerns Derrida's association of writing as pharmakon with the cognate term *pharmakos*. As Benardete notes, Derrida *brings* this association to Plato.[37] For the term *pharmakos* is absent from the " 'platonic text' " itself, as Derrida here apostrophizes (129). Nevertheless, Derrida justifies his consideration of the pharmakos in "Plato's Pharmacy" by appealing to what he calls "the hidden forces of attraction linking a present word with an absent word in the text of Plato" (133).[38] And what are such "hidden forces" that would seemingly license the interpreter to attribute absent words and significations to Plato? In this connection, Derrida directly shows his post-Heideggerian hand:

> If there were any sense in asking such a question, which we don't believe, it would be impossible to say to what extent he [Plato] manipulates it consciously or unconsciously, and at what point he is subject to constraints weighing upon his discourse from "language." . . . It is 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, that these textual "operations" occur. (131–32; cf. 96, 168)[39]

It is a matter here of what Derrida calls the *arché-écriture*[40] which he believes at once makes possible and impossible all discrete texts. The hidden forces of attraction here also characterize, in Derrida's thought, the same transcendental conditions that generate and undermine the oppositions that characterize all of the Western "metaphysics of presence" or logocentrism (168). And it is only by dissolving the Platonic texts into this transcendental condition of (im) possibility of textuality and philosophy that Derrida feels licensed to introduce the pharmakos into the dialogues, despite Plato's own failure to use it. Derrida is clear: "In a word, we do not believe that there exists, in all rigor, a Platonic text, complete with its inside and its outside" (133):[41] "Certain forces of association [*des forces d'association*] unite at diverse distances, with different strengths and according to disparate paths, the words 'actually

[37]Benardete, "Derrida and Plato," 355–56.

[38]Cf. Rinon, "Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida," 372–73. To be fair, Derrida hesitates before the evidence concerning how much of the literary material he finds woven into the Platonic dialogues can plausibly be held to be involuntary. He does not reconsider his basic commitments in this light (e.g., 78).

[39]Rinon, "Rhetoric of Jacques Derrida," 370–71.

[40]Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) on the notion of arch-writing, the ultratranscendental condition of possibility and impossibility of stable sense.

[41]See Zuckert, "Politics of Derridean Deconstruction," 353–54.

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present' in a discourse with all the other words in the lexical system, whether or not they appear as 'words,' that is, as relative verbal units in such discourse" (129–30).

Leaving the arch-writing aside for the moment, who or what then were the pharmakoi, and what might be the political relevance of their Derridean introduction into Plato (133)? "At Athens they led out two men to be purifications of the city: it was at the Thargelia: one was for the men and one was for the women" (Harpocration, cited by Derrida at 130; cf. 133). The pharmakos was a sacred victim. S/he was housed within the city to be ceremonially killed as a scapegoat to purify the polity. As Derrida comments, in the passage that answers most closely to his claim that "Plato's Pharmacy" is a text which directly intersects with concerns about Greek politics and institutions:

> The ceremonial of the *pharmakos* is thus played out on the boundary line between inside and outside. . . . The origin of difference and division, the *pharmakos* represents evil both introjected and projected. Beneficial insofar as he cures—and for that, venerated and cared for—harmful insofar as he incarnates the powers of evil—and for that, feared and treated with caution. Alarming and calming. Sacred and accursed. (134)

The pharmakos hence names an exclusion that is nevertheless internal to the concrete body politic. The sacrifice of the pharmakos was enacted in times of war or other perceived existential threat, as Derrida notes (133). Hence we can see why Derrida might want to bring the pharmakos into Plato, without needing to hypothesize concerning the putative efficacy of the arch-writing. At the level of putative theoretical texts, deconstruction aims to unconceal the usually devalued, excluded, or exceptional moments of founding "violence" in theoretical systems, or of Western metaphysics, *the* system to embrace all systems. These founding violences Derrida tellingly already calls "decisions" in "Plato's Pharmacy," a redolent term which he will develop in the later works on more directly political subjects (132).[42] But the pharmakos represents just such an excluded Other, drawn directly from the political realm, vindicating Derrida's claims about the political significance of deconstruction.

Derrida takes the preceding three claims to license his claims that the deconstruction of Plato just *is* political, if it is not yet "justice" itself, as Derrida will later tendentiously claim.[43] Derrida's essay weaves together into one invisible thread Plato's pharmakon, the intimate Other of philosophy-as-logocentrism, and the pharmakoi of closed, political communities.

[42]See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Bases of Authority," in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (London: Routledge, 1992), 4, 7, 10, 14–15, with Lilla, "Politics of Jacques Derrida."

[43]See references in preceding note.

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At this point, the deconstruction which would show the dependence of logocentric metaphysics on its pharmaka and pharmakoi emerges as directly, completely political, without need for anyone to go down into the cave, the city, or the agora.

3. Irony, Dialogue, Socrates, and Derrida

My own proposed pharmakon, in the sense of remedy or medicine, against Derrida's claims about the politics of his deconstruction of Plato is based on a challenging of what I will call Derrida's vertiginous collapse of the difference between philosophy and politics. It is the parameters and consequences of this vertiginous collapse that I bring out now. Derrida is right to observe that Plato criticizes sophistry, rhetoric, and *logographia* for corrupting the best young men in Athens such as Phaedrus, the enthusiast of Lysias. But then we should also never forget that it was for corrupting the youth of Athens that Socrates himself was condemned by the city. That is, just as Socrates "tries" writing and sophistry and democracy before the court of his *logoi* in the Platonic dialogues, so was Socrates himself tried by the city of Athens before a political court, which also condemned him. Socratic philosophy, far from being on the side of the fathers of Athens, we see, was considered to be a political threat that turns sons against their fathers (*Ap.* 17a). As Socrates recalls in the *Apology* (18a–d, 19c), this parricidal charge was comically made in Aristophanes's *Clouds* before it became the legal charge of Anytus and Meletus, Socrates's "younger accusers" (*Ap.* 19a–d).

It is absolutely pivotal that Derrida's reading of Plato just does not register these directly political conditions shaping Plato's philosophical writings (see 152). Derrida does recognize that Plato's writing represents a response to the execution of Socrates (156). But Derrida reads this execution as giving empirico-mythical form to a putatively deeper, ontological necessity: that the father, Socrates, must die, if the son, writing and hence Plato, is to become possible "from out of Socrates' death" (156).[44] For this quasi-ontological reading of Plato's response to Socrates's death to pass muster, moreover, Derrida finds himself committed to the profoundly tendentious supposition that Socrates was a figure of paternal authority in Western philosophy's primal "family scene." "The time has come to recall that Socrates in the dialogues plays the role of father, *represents* the father," he announces (146).[45] Significantly, Derrida can cite only one Platonic passage, from the *Apology*, to support this claim—and this with an interesting slip, saying that the statement comes "from his prison cell," which would mean the *Crito* or *Phaedo*, not

[44]Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 84.

[45]See, for a contrasting Derridean interpretation of the "structural laws" of paternity that would *ex hypothesi* govern the demotion of writing against speech in philosophy and myth, Meljac, "Derrida's Pharmacy." The arguments I make against Derrida on this point also apply to Meljac's intervention.

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the *Apology* (146). The passage from the *Apology* is that wherein Socrates argues, in the law court, that he has only sought to take care of the Athenians' souls "like a father or an elder brother" (*hōsper patera ē adelphon presbuteron*) (*Ap.* 31b). But an elder brother is not a father figure, and to be on trial for corrupting the youth is not a charge we would usually associate with a paternal authority.[46]

To Derrida's credit, he does qualify his ambiguous concession that Socrates only "*represents*" (146) the father in the dialogues. "Socrates is not really the father, either; only the surrogate father," he writes. "Socrates is the supplementary relation between the father and the son" (152). But this last claim, by making of the individual Socrates a transindividual "relation," is itself opaque. Derrida also notes that Socrates is famously described in other settings within the Platonic dialogues not as a father, but as a midwife, and "for the essential, Socrates shares the fate of the midwife: sterility" (153).[47] Sterility contradicting paternity, this insight by itself should again have called Socrates's paternal bona fides into doubt. Socrates's self-presentation as a gadfly intent on stinging the somnolent horse of the Athenian citizenry also underlies his *atopia*, and again undermines Derrida's positioning him as in any way a father figure (*Ap.* 30e–31a).

"Plato's Pharmacy" even goes so far on this subject as to register how Socrates, this father "who is not really the father," becomes after his condemnation a pharmakos for the city of Athens. This is perhaps the most interesting point in Socrates's confuting of Derrida's attempts to situate him as a lawgiving father. Diogenes Laertius tells us that Socrates was born on the sixth day of the Thargelia, "the day when the Athenians purify the city" (at 135). His death was clearly intended by Meletus et al. as a purification of the city of Athens, staggering after the loss of the Peloponnesian War.

Finally, Derrida recognizes despite himself the pointed resemblance Plato sets up in the *Symposium* between Socrates and the daimon Eros, another decidedly nonpaternal figure (119; *Symp.* 198c).[48] Eros, Plato tells us, spends all of his life philosophizing (*philosophon dia pantos tou biou*). But he is also a fearsome sorcerer (*deinos arēs*), magician (*pharmakeus*), and sophist (*sophistēs*) (*Symp.* 203c–e).[49] "And in that way," Derrida asks, "isn't [Socrates] the spitting image of a sophist [*ne ressemble-t-il pas à s'y méprendre*

[46]This is another "or" that Derrida does not stop at. We note several other literary indications that philosophy is a challenge to paternal authority, as Plato understands it. For the philosophical discussion of justice to proceed in the *Republic*, the father, Cephalus (whose very name means "head"), leaves (*Rep.* 331d); just as the long peripatetic journey of the *Laws* ends before the group ever arrives at the cave of Zeus, father of the gods (*Laws* 968e–969d).

[47]Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 60, 82–83.

[48]Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. M. Chase (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), 147–78; Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 220.

[49]Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 220.

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à un sophist]? A *pharmakeus*? A magician? A sorcerer? Even a poisoner?" (119; Fr. 69). Yes, but the question is, In what sense can such a *pharmakeus* and poisoner be situated as the normative *pater* of something so presumptively normative as Western metaphysics?[50] Something decisive is missing here.

Derrida responds to this implied question in a way which comes close to making undecidability work like a charm. "The threads of these complicities are almost impossible to disentangle," he shrugs (119). And so they are, almost. Derrida acknowledges that the subject of Socratic irony is at play in the doublings and complicities surrounding pharmakon as poison and cure, writing and speech, paternity and sophistry which are also his own deconstructive concern (72, 120). But then it is deeply contentious whether the terms and suppositions of Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy" equip us to adequately grasp the subject of Socratic irony.

Derrida's conception of this irony reflects his post-Heideggerian postulations cited earlier from the most directly political chapter of "Plato's Pharmacy," on the pharmakos. Given the transcendental role Derrida assigns to the generative arch-writing or "arche-truth" (166; see 70, 125–26, 131–32, 166–68)[51], any questions of authorial and therefore political agency, in Plato or any other writer, become finally nugatory (131–32). Indeed, Derrida wonders:

> If one got to thinking that something like the *pharmakon*—or writing—far from being governed by these oppositions, opens up their very possibility without letting itself be comprehended by them; if one got to thinking that it can only be out of something like writing—or the *pharmakon*—that the strange difference between inside and outside can spring; if, consequently, one got to thinking that writing as a *pharmakon* cannot simply be assigned a site within what it situates, cannot be subsumed under concepts whose concepts it draws . . . , one would then have to bend [*plier*] into strange contortions what could no longer simply be called a logic of discourse. (106)

Derrida's conditional anaphora "if one got to thinking" gracefully softens what is the central doctrinal claim underlying his position. Derrida believes on these post-Heideggerian grounds that no author can control their text and stabilize meaning, even an author as adept as Plato. Accordingly, as Griswold notes, to the extent that irony presupposes authorial control of both stated and unstated meanings, Derrida's position in fact undermines the possibility of any distinction between irony and (dis)honest mistakes.[52] More widely, Socrates's, Plato's, or the platonic devaluation of writing, rhetoric, and sophistry, as part of the intentional meaning of the Platonic texts, can only be false or inauthentic. In Derrida's telling phrase at the end of

[50]Cf. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 225.

[51]See, on arch-writing, Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 6–94; Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 72; Mortensen, "Plato's Pharmacy," 338.

[52]Griswold, "Epilogue," 235.

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chapter 4 of "Plato's Pharmacy," philosophical comprehension involves a groundless "decision," "an act of both domination and decision" (118). The pursuit of philosophical dialectic, more widely, can only for Derrida be one more such decision in the endless game of *arché-écriture* with no more intrinsic legitimacy than what it opposed. Indeed, such a *polemos* of force and counter-force, pharmaka against pharmaka, would be at once the meaning of what we, following Carl Schmitt, might call "the political"[53] in Derrida, and the principle of its seamless decisionist extension from the intramundane, deliberative, and institutional world of politics to the theoretical, textual world of philosophy or deconstruction.[54] In such a Derridean world, what remains to be said of Socratic or Platonic irony certainly denudes it of anything like its traditional meanings:

> Irony does not consist in the dissolution of a sophistic charm or in the dissolution of an occult substance or power through analysis and questioning. It does not consist in undoing the charlatanesque confidence of a *pharmakeus* from the vantage point of some obstinate instance of transparent reason or innocent *logos*. Socratic irony precipitates out one *pharmakon* by bringing it in contact with another *pharmakon*. Or rather, it reverses the *pharmakon*'s powers and turns its surface over. (121)

It can indeed be questioned, with Griswold, whether what Derrida describes here can any longer be called "irony".[55] But one thing is clear. Derrida wholly forecloses any possibility that Socrates and then Plato might have consciously deployed irony, double meanings, myths, and the other rhetorical devices we read in the dialogues in their considered attempts to disarm hostile critics and favorably present philosophical inquiry, and as a means to stimulate interlocutors and readers to philosophize for themselves. He likewise forecloses any possibility that "analysis and questioning" might lead the philosopher to ascend out of conventional opinions towards a larger truth, per the famous Platonic cave *eikōn* (*Rep.* 515c–516d; see 82–83). The distance between the philosopher's ways of thinking and speaking and those of ordinary men and women is clear in those passages from *Symposium* in which Alcibiades famously describes Socrates's *atopia*, strangeness or out-of-placedness (*Symp.* 215a, 221d). Such *atopia* with respect to Attic norms meant that Socrates scarcely needed to physically absent himself from the city's walls, as in the *Phaedrus*, to become a pharmakos. But then, in what is politically decisive, we are told in the *Republic* that the philosopher whose theoretical pursuits have allowed him to ascend out of the cave of ordinary *doxa*

[53]See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, expanded ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); for Derrida on Schmitt, see Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2005), 112–37; cf. Karl Löwith, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, ed. Richard Wolin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

[54]Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 67–68.

[55]Griswold, "Epilogue," 235.

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should be compelled to return to the polis (*Rep.* 519c–520d, 540a–b).[56] The philosopher must be prudent at this moment, as Plato's Socrates advises, prophetically (*Rep.* 516e–517a). For if he is not, his *atopia* will see him end up before the courts of the city, unable to defend himself and his philosophical way of life, and subject to exile or death (*Rep.* 517d–e; cf. *Tht.* 173d–177a).

In the cave *eikōn* of *Republic* VII, that is, Plato explicitly thematizes a difference between the *bios politikos* and *bios theōrētikos*. This ancient opposition, central to a great deal of Western thought, is completely invisible in Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy," and its vision of competing pharmaka with no outside or transcendence. The opposition distinguishes between the convention-, institution-, and law-based life of citizens within the polis and the skeptical, analytical, reflective, and erotic pursuits of the theoretical life. Philosophy, as philosophy, must exercise the right to call into question the prevailing *doxa* and *nomoi* of the city and its fathers. Derrida himself exemplifies this, even as deconstruction emerged in a modern polity, France, wherein by the mid-twentieth century philosophy had become almost uniquely integrated into democratic public culture. By contrast, Plato's Athens was not nearly so culturally liberal as Derrida's France or the United States of America, in which deconstruction has been so academically popular.[57] In a word, Plato could not so openly challenge the *nomoi* and *doxa* of his day as Derrida does, without risking exile or worse.

It is Stanley Rosen who commented that, if Plato had been interested in founding a systematic logocentric "metaphysics," "he would have written not dialogues but metaphysical treatises."[58] Contra Derrida, to read Plato's writings consistently *as* dialogues, in the light of what we might call the politico-philosophic difference, involves reading them *as the political presentations of Platonic philosophy to the polis*. It is to remain sensitive above all to how the philosopher, far from being a paternal figure, stands under political suspicion of corrupting the youth and turning them against their fathers' ways. Political prudence hence dictates that the philosopher moderate his speech, responsive to the different preoccupations, abilities, and desires of different audiences, as well as the changing occasions and purposes of his different *logoi*.[59] A way of reading the dialogues that is sensitive to their political determination is hence not surprised about the ways that Plato makes an ironic art of committing almost every sin he charges the poets with in the *Republic* (*Rep.* 361d–398b, 595a–607d). Principal among these is writing only through other characters, excepting the thirteen letters (*Rep.* 392d–394c), as William Altman and Catherine Zuckert in particular have recently examined.[60] As "Plato's

[56]See Altman, *Plato the Teacher*.

[57]See Robert C. Holub, *Crossing Borders: Reception Theory, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

[58]Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 73, with 58–60; see Griswold, "Epilogue," 235.

[59]Cf. Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 72–73, 84.

[60]See Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*; Altman, *Plato the Teacher* and *Guardians on Trial*.

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Pharmacy" astutely notes, Plato's antiplatonist sins also include frequent self-conscious recourse to myths, comedy, elevated rhetoric, metaphorical conceits, and seeming sophistries. The result is that, as Socrates complains of the tragedians in *Republic* III, but as Plato writes in his own name in the *Second Letter*: "there is not and will not be any written work of Plato's own. What are now called his are the work of a Socrates made young and beautiful" (314c; *Rep.* 394b–395e).[61]

So let me put things more Platonically and poetically. We may well agree with Derrida that writing is excluded by Plato because "it does not come from around here," as Derrida colloquially puts it (107). But then we should also not miss that Derrida finds himself in the embarrassing position of arguing against Socrates's or Plato's or platonism's devaluation of this foreign invention by citing as platonism's representatives the characters Timaeus from Locri, the Athenian stranger in Plato's *Laws* (which is set in Crete), the Eleatic stranger in the *Statesman* and *Sophist*, and not least, the Egyptian king Thamus in the *Phaedrus*.[62] There is no need to postulate deconstructively concerning the "structural laws" or "forces of attraction" governing the arch-writing to explain this Derridean irony.

Concluding Remarks, on the Politics of Deconstruction

For all of his hermeneutic virtuosity, Derrida fails to understand the political dimension underlying Plato's dialogic writing. He is blind to the political reasons shaping Socratic irony, as well as Plato's choice to write poetic, dramatic, sometimes enigmatic and aporetic dialogues. The atopic philosopher who, following Socrates, goes back down into the city has reason to speak

[61]See Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 217, 224–25, 227–28.

[62]See here also William H. F. Altman, "Why Derrida Is Right about Timaeus and Wrong about Plato," *Academia*, online at https://www.academia.edu/5221814/Why_Derrida_is_Right_about_Timaeus_and_Wrong_about_Plato. In his defense, Derrida momentarily confronts this problem when he reflects on the striking fact that it is Egyptian characters in Socrates's myth who explain the provenance of writing, and its logocentric devaluation as a bad pharmakon. However, at this moment, we see how the postulate of arch-writing, like Derrida's notion of undecidability (as above), can work every bit like a post facto charm. "We are . . . bracketing off the problem of factual genealogy and of the empirical, effective communication among cultures and mythologies," Derrida writes, as if these were incidental things in explaining the origins of writing. For what is at stake are "structural laws" which would allegedly "govern and articulate the oppositions of speech/writing, life/death, father/son." These structural laws, far beneath anyone's intentionality and operating across the differences between entire cultures, "also govern, and according to the same configurations, Egyptian, Babylonian, and Assyrian mythology," as well as, via Plato's *Phaedrus*, platonism and the entire history of Western logocentrism (85). Again, see the texts by Altman and Zuckert listed in note 6 on the need to register the difference between Plato and his characters.

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and write both with care and, if he is able, with playful artistry. Such a philosopher, contra Derrida, is not a law-giving father. He is the object of paternal suspicion, when he is not a pharmakos like the condemned Socrates.

Derrida's claims that his reading of Plato and deconstruction per se are political, antiauthoritarian interventions also need to be read with the greatest critical caution. In order to motivate these claims, Derrida has not only to tendentiously identify Plato's dialogues with platonism and, as such, "the whole of Western metaphysics in its conceptuality" (82). He also asks us to effectively identify Western metaphysics with political authority per se, presumptively since both (truly) involve more or less systematic, linguistically mediated structures exercising forms of normativity, control, and exclusion, and since any political authority must have recourse to metaphysically inflected categories to frame and justify its exactions. Only with these elisions in place can Derrida claim that his deconstructive demonstration that platonism depends on the pharmaka of writing, rhetoric, magic, and sophistry it devalues represent a political action in solidarity with the excluded or subaltern.

But these elisions are each contestable. The relationship between philosophy and political authority in the Western tradition has remained fraught, even in the period of what Derrida calls logocentrism. Socrates is not philosophy's only martyr or exile in this epoch of "Western metaphysics." So, the implicit deconstructive identification of political authority with logocentrism, metaphysics, or platonism is unsupportable. At the same time, this means that deconstruction itself is in no way a necessarily politically antiauthoritarian pursuit, however genteel its proponents' own intentions may be. As Miriam Leonard has noted, there is also the paradox that "whenever Derrida seems to court democracy, it is his anti-democratic friends [Heidegger, Nietzsche, Schmitt] who take centre stage."[63] By the time we read in "Plato's Pharmacy" that Socratic dialectic can only be one pharmakon in combat with other pharmaka, a rationally ungroundable decision opposed to other such decisions, we see that this patrilineal paradox has deep bases in Derrida's foundational works.

So, it is with Derrida's own philosophical paternity, as against that of Plato, that I want to close. As I have indicated, it seems to be Derrida's own debts to his philosophical father, Heidegger, that makes the French deconstructionist so constitutively blind to the "politico-philosophical difference" which shaped Plato's art of writing.[64] To echo Derrida, this is a debt which effectively means that it is as if Heidegger were behind Derrida unnamed, dictating to him as he wrote "Plato's Pharmacy."[65] Looked at through a lens shaped by Plato's dialogues, Heidegger's attempt to reread Western philosophy as the

[63]Leonard, *Athens in Paris*, 210; cf. McCarthy, "Politics of the Ineffable," 146–68.

[64]Cf. Rosen, "Platonic Reconstruction," 68.

[65]Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Postcards*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 9–10, 16, 25, 35, 59; cf. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 227–28.

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unfolding of a series of systematic answers to the one ontological question (the *Seinsfrage*) represents a deeply "pre-Socratic" conception of philosophy. To say this is not only to remark Heidegger's own preoccupation with Parmenides, Anaximander, and Heraclitus, including at the very period of his political engagement, starting from *The Beginning of Western Philosophy: Interpretation of Anaximander and Parmenides* in 1932.[66] It is to note that the Presocratics were also the *phusikoi*, whose inquiries into the apolitical things in the heavens and beneath the earth Socrates's "second sailing" (*deuteron ploun*) turned him away from, when he became Socrates as we know him through the Platonic texts (*Phd.* 99b; see 87).

Heidegger's own profoundly antiliberal politics, as Hannah Arendt might have seen,[67] is a politics predicated on a philosophical denigration of the messy pluralistic complexity of political life in democratic polities. (Heidegger's view of democracy is thus ironically far closer to Plato's Socrates's depiction of democracy in the *Republic* than to Derrida's democratic gestures.)[68] The philosopher who feels no need to go back down from outside of the cave and his inquiries concerning Being cannot communicate with his contemporaries on anything like an equal footing. He will be inclined to scorn their reliance on *doxa* or "idle chatter," leaving his recondite writings on temple porches as dedications to the few with ears to hear, or to the gods. We should not be surprised if such a Presocratic philosopher shows himself drawn to top-down modes of political power which treat governing as making, a process which requires closed hierarchies of command and may demand violence, as well as an onerous duty beneath the proper dignity of philosophy. To read Heidegger after Plato, especially in his most politically active period, is to hear echoes of the enigmatic Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*, and of the Eleatic Stranger who endorses absolute rule in the *Statesman* (291c–295b) whose geographical cognomen itself suggests his kinship with the Presocratics.

By contrast with Heidegger and the Presocratic *phusikoi*, though, Socrates "went back down" into the city. He even sat in his prison cell as a pharmakos, arguing to his friends against the justice of evading a questionable sentence

[66]Heidegger returned to Parmenides during the fateful winter of 1942–43, then lectured on Heraclitus (B 16) in summer 1943; he wrote on B 50 in 1944, before turning to Anaximander in the immediate postwar (1946). See Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985), and Glenn W. Most, "Heidegger's Greeks," *Arion* 10 (2002): 83–89. Heidegger's conception of the history of Being looking back to Plato and the Presocratics dates from the same period.

[67]Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 108–13; "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 73–103.

[68]Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), secs. 26–27, 34–38; cf. Johann Chapoutot, *Le nazisme et l'antiquité* (Paris: Broché, 2012), 284–300.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670520000984 Published online by Cambridge University Press

passed by the democracy of Athens.[69] Plato also, unlike many later middle Platonists and Neoplatonists (to evoke another distinction Derrida's moniker "platonism" renders invisible),[70] remained a *political* philosopher, concerned to present philosophy favorably to nonphilosophers in the polis and to entice others to turn their souls around, without turning their backs on the civic virtues, led by justice. For these reasons, we can do no better than finally quoting that Roman philosopher and orator-politician, Marcus Tullius Cicero, who famously observed in his *Tusculan Disputations* (5.4) that "Socrates was the first who brought down philosophy from the heavens, placed it in cities, introduced it into families, and obliged it to examine into life and morals, and good and evil."

Socrates's philosophical vocation of bringing philosophy into the polis, not the arch-writing discovered or posited by deconstruction, explain why Socrates became for the Athenians a pharmakos. It also explains why Plato's dialogues in which Socrates is made young and beautiful remain an inscrutable pharmakon, no less for Jacques Derrida than for the men of Athens.

[69]See Altman, *Guardians on Trial*, 207–28, with *Plato the Teacher*, where this "going back down," from the dialogue's first words, is read as the key to Plato's larger conception of justice, at least for the philosopher.

[70]See John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). The proliferation of competing Platonisms after Plato's death is itself powerful testimony, if not to Derridean dissemination, then to the deliberate or ironic underdetermination of Plato's dialogues.

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