12 The "Undecidable" *Pharmakon*: Derrida's Reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*

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This article challenges Derrida's approach to Plato's *Phaedrus* by placing into question the attribution of an essential "undecidability" to the word "*pharmakon*." The process of questioning is articulated at two levels. At the first level, it places into question Derrida's claim that the unity of a word "'precedes' the opposition between [its] different effects," that is, it precedes the multiplicity of its linguistic uses, thereby undermining any effort to make a word mean only one thing in actual discourse. Part of the aim of this presentation is to render obvious the effect of Saussurean linguistics upon Derrida's position, in particular, with the primacy that Saussure attributes to *langue* (the formal system of language) in relation to *parole* (the individual linguistic utterance). This is then complemented, and deepened, by a placing into question of the philosophical status which Derrida accords to this "undecidability" through the presentation of an alternative philosophical perspective (the "undecidability" of *pharmakon* is not of a linguistic nature but, rather, stems from the multiple perspectives from which its effects can be approached).
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Derrida's Reading of the *Phaedrus* and of *Pharmakon*

Derrida's reading of the *Phaedrus* seeks that indiscernible, yet ineluctable, logic through which the text deconstructs its most rooted metaphysical assumptions. The "blind spot" through which Derrida attempts to make visible this disguised textual logic in Plato's text is the word *pharmakon*. This word, from the two predominant meanings ascribed to it of "remedy" and "poison," is revealed to contain two contradictory meanings which are unable to exist within the same utterance or context of usage. However, this is exactly Derrida's point: that these two opposite meanings of the word *pharmakon* are everywhere present together in the text of Plato, surmounting every effort (by commentators or translators) to choose one or the other according to context.

Derrida's analysis of the Platonic text takes the *double* form of deconstructive reading. The first reading follows Plato's repression of writing, and traces the results of this decision, which produces the Platonic system of the metaphysical oppositions in Plato's text. Commencing from the subversive function of the inherent ambiguity of the *pharmakon*, the second reading discovers another text in Plato. This has been repressed by the history of Platonic interpretations, marked by a procedure of translation of the term *pharmakon*, which covered over the contradictory force of the term, combined with metaphysical assumptions concerning the character of the language through which philosophy functions (for example, the "principle of identity" and the "principle of non-contradiction").

As Walter Brogan remarks, Derrida's concentration, in his reading of Plato, on this rarely considered and variously translated word reveals it to have an operational force that both sustains the Platonic discourse within the closure of metaphysical oppositions and hierarchical values, and, in instituting these oppositions, differs from the systematic structures it produces. In Plato, the word *pharmakon* has, analogously to the word *supplement* in Rousseau, a supplementary power and an ambiguous meaning which interrupt the ostensible purity and uncontaminated presence that Plato views as the aim and the guarantee of philosophical discourse.[2]

The condemnation of writing, by Plato, is inseparable from its presentation in the form of a myth. It is a myth according to which, Theuth, the inventor of writing, offers his invention as a useful tool to the God-King of Egypt. The King, however, rejects writing as dangerous and superfluous. For Derrida, this condemnation of writing represents a conceptual misdirection which has held Western thinking captive ever since.

The word *pharmakon* appears in the myth when Theuth praises writing as a *pharmakon* (i.e. a remedy). Theuth presents writing to the God-King as follows:

> This discipline *(to mathima)*, my King, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories *(sophoterous kai mnimonikoterous)*: my invention is a recipe [*reméde*] *(pharmakon)* for both memory and wisdom *(mnimis te gar kai sophias pharmakon eurethi)*.
>
> (274e)[3]

However, the sense of "remedy" is only one aspect of the word's full meaning. The word *pharmakon* also means: "poison," "drug," "philter," etc. (*DIS*, 71/89). For Derrida, in order to emphasize the value of his invention, Theuth "*turns* the word on its strange and invisible pivot, presenting it from a single one, the most reassuring, of its *poles*. This medicine is beneficial; it repairs and produces, accumulates and remedies, increases knowledge and reduces forgetfulness" (*DIS*, 97/120). In this way, "Theuth has no doubt played on the word, interrupting, for his own purposes, the communication between the two opposing values" (*DIS*, 98/121).

The King responds to Theuth as follows:

> Theuth, my master of arts *(oh technikotate Theuth)*, to one man it is given to create the elements of an art, to another to judge the extent of harm and usefulness it will have for those who are going to employ it. And now, since you are the father of written letters, your paternal goodwill has led you to pronounce the very opposite *(tounantion)* of what is their real power. The fact is that this invention will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it because they will not need to exercise their memories *(lithin men en psyches parexei mnimis ameletisis)*, being able to rely on what is written, using the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves *(dia pistin grafis exothen yp' allotrion tipon)* rather than, from within, their own unaided powers to call things to mind *(ouk endothen autous if' ayton anamniskomenous)*. So it's not a remedy for memory, but for reminding, that you have discovered *(oukoun mnimis all' ypomniseon pharmakon eures)*. Thanks to you and your invention, your pupils will be widely read without benefit of a teacher's instruction; in consequence, they'll entertain the delusion that they have wide knowledge, while they are, in fact, for the most part incapable of real judgement.

> They will also be difficult to get on with since they will be men filled with the conceit of wisdom, not men of wisdom.
>
> (274e–275b) (*DIS*, 102/126–7)

For Derrida, Theuth, according to the King,

> has exhibited the reverse of the true effects of writing. In order to vaunt the worth of his invention, Theuth would thus have denatured the *pharmakon*, said the opposite *(tounantion)* of what writing is capable of. He has passed a poison off as remedy.
>
> (*DIS*, 97–8/121)

The King obviously views writing from exactly the opposite pole, not as remedy but as poison, as an insidious, destructive drug. From the King's point of view, that which is supplementary to nature—as with the *pharmakon* and writing—appears suspect and dangerous for life.

So, while Theuth presented writing as a "remedy," the King regards it as a "poison." Yet this clash of views between Theuth and the King reveals something significant about the nature of the effects of the *pharmakon*. Thus, according to Derrida,

> In order for writing to produce, as he says, the "opposite" effect from what one might expect, in order for this *pharmakon* to show itself, with use, to be injurious, its effectiveness, its power, its *dunamis* must, of course, be ambiguous. ... It is precisely this ambiguity that Plato, through the mouth of the king, attempts to master, to dominate by inserting its definition into simple, clear-cut oppositions: good and evil, inside and outside, true and false, essence and appearance. ... But while, in the *Philebus* and the *Protagoras*, the *pharmakon*, because it is painful, seems bad whereas it is beneficial, here, in the *Phaedrus* as in the *Timaeus*, it is passed off as a helpful remedy whereas it is in truth harmful. Bad ambiguity is thus opposed to good ambiguity, a deceitful intention to a mere appearance. Writing's case is grave.
>
> (*DIS*, 103/127–8)

Derrida advocates neither the King's rejection of writing nor Theuth's assertion of its merits. For each of the participants in the myth emphasizes only one of the opposed signifieds of the signifier *pharmakon*. The text, which is constituted by both attitudes, defers the making of a choice between *either* the one *or* the other. The text effectively blurs the border between the opposites and their constitution on the basis of the logic of *either/or*. This blurring is the effect of the supplementary logic of the *both/and*. The *pharmakon* is, *à la fois*, *both* remedy *and* poison, *both* good *and* bad, *both* useful *and* noxious. The text ought to be interpreted through this mutual coexistence of its opposites. To enact a choice between different signifieds of the *pharmakon* constitutes, *ipso facto*, a neutralization of the unique textual property of the object under discussion.

From Derrida's textual analysis, the two poles of the *pharmakon* are inextricably linked: the *pharmakon* is a dangerous benefit and a beneficial danger. One cannot, ultimately, distinguish "the medicine from the poison, the good from the evil, the true from the false, the inside from the outside, the vital from the mortal, the first from the second, etc." (*DIS*, 169/211) The *pharmakon*, together with *writing* or the *supplement*, *both* heals *and* threatens, *both* gains *and* loses, *both* produces *and* takes away.

Therefore, Derrida's critique of Plato is not merely aimed at his condemnation of writing through the figure of the King, but at his attempt, through the combination of the figures of Theuth and the King, "to master [it], by inserting its definition into simple, clear-cut oppositions: good and evil, inside and outside, true and false, essence and appearance" (*DIS*, 103/127). Hence, the negative sense of the word comes to the fore in the case of *pharmakeia* in the *Phaedrus* (*DIS*, 69–70/86–7) and in the *Timaeus*, in which the *pharmakon* appears as something to be avoided (*DIS*, 100–102/124–6). In the case of the *Critias*, of the *Charmides*, or of the *Republic*, the *pharmakon* is presented as a remedy; and it is presented as having an essentially beneficial effect in the *Protagoras* and the *Philibus* (*DIS*, 99/123, 103/127, 124–5/154–5, 136–7/171–2). According to Derrida, this variability is governed by a system in which "Plato decides in favour of a logic that does not tolerate ... passages between opposing senses of the same word" (*DIS*, 98–9/122).

However, for Derrida, language effectively defies such a repression where, despite "the intentions of an author who goes by the name of Plato" (*DIS*, 95/119), "the ambiguity keeps creeping in, the meaning keeps crossing over."[4] Thus, even when Plato contextualizes this word in such a way as to lead its meaning towards one of the two possibilities, the polyvalence of the word still remains in force in the Platonic text.

Derrida does not deny the intensity of the opposition; nor is he interested in "mediating" between opposing poles, or bringing them (temporarily) closer together. For Derrida, difference is as inescapable as identity. Hence, the peculiarly elusive meaning of the word *pharmakon*: "We will watch it infinitely promise itself and endlessly vanish through concealed doorways that shine like mirrors and open onto the labyrinth" (*DIS*, 128/158–9). As Richard Harland notes: "This is meaning in a state of paradox, meaning oscillating perpetually between poles, impossible to pin down as any kind of fixed entity or substance."[5]

For Derrida, the *pharmakon* is the "medium in which differentiation in general is produced" (*DIS*, 126/156). It is the common element shared by the different signifieds of the signifier *pharmakon*. It is that which renders the "remedy," the "poison," or the "philtre" a *pharmakon*. It is the point of convergence of all these different senses of the word. It is the medium through which they are all defined as *pharmakon*. The *pharmakon* is their common *topos* prior to their division into different or opposite possibilities. It is the point of departure for its different meanings. At their point of intersection, the different or even opposite senses of the word remain inextricably linked. All of them are *pharmakon*.

> If the *pharmakon* is "ambivalent," it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.). It is on the basis of this play or movement that the opposites or differences are stopped by Plato. The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the différance of difference. It holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the differends that the process of discrimination will come to carve out. Contradictions and pairs of opposites are lifted from the bottom of this diacritical, differing, deferring, reserve. Already inhabited by différance, this reserve, even though it "precedes" the opposition between different effects, even though it preexists differences as effects, does not have the punctual simplicity of a *coincidentia oppositorum*.
>
> (*DIS*, 127/158)

For Derrida, this ambiguity of the *pharmakon en general*, of the "un-decidable" *pharmakon*, controls any decision about its meaning in discourse. Its ambiguity persists even after its realization in discourse. The play between the different or opposite possibilities of its meaning continues even after its appearance within a certain context. This is due to their "prior" common ground, the medium, which renders possible both the communication between them and their mutual supplementation. Hence, while, on the one hand, the *pharmakon* can be divided into different senses (i.e. "remedy," "poison," "philtre," etc.), in accordance with the context in which it appears, on the other hand, it cannot be used in one of its senses without, at the same time, carrying all the others along with it.

Yet, is it possible, according to Derrida's claim, for someone to speak about a certain case of a *pharmakon* that is only healing and not poisonous at all? In Derrida's approach, the general play between the different or opposite possibilities of a word is inescapable, and the choice or demarcation of a sense of a word always brings with it other possibilities. Deconstructive reading treats the text as an "undecidable" phenomenon. Whatever the intentions of its author, the text refuses to decide in favor of the identification of the word with one of its two opposite meanings. The text does not refuse to *determine* different meanings for the word *pharmakon*; it refuses to *decide* in favor of the one or the other.

Translating *Pharmakon*

While the critical examination here concerns the moves involved in the deconstructive procedure, and the relation of these moves to a certain view of language, one cannot avoid touching upon the question of translation of the word *pharmakon* as either remedy or poison.

The Liddell–Scott–Jones *Greek–English Lexicon*, which explicitly refers to these particular usages of the word *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus*, does not translate it as either "remedy" or "poison," but as "a means of producing something."[6] Hence, while, for Theuth, writing is the *pharmakon* for memory and wisdom, that is, it "produces" memory and wisdom, for the King, writing is not the *pharmakon* for memory and wisdom, but the *pharmakon* for remembrance, that is, it "produces" remembrance. Thus, in both cases, the effect of the *pharmakon* is the "production" of something, that is, either memory and wisdom or remembrance.

The origin of this "production" is not to be sought in the *pharmakon* itself, but is to be attributed to the effects of writing. It is the effects of writing that can be characterized as "beneficial" or "maleficent." It is not the effects of the *pharmakon*. The effects of the *pharmakon* are the "production" of memory and wisdom or remembrance, respectively. Derrida bases the ambiguity of the *pharmakon*, its ability to produce opposite effects, on the King's response to Theuth that "since you are the father of written letters, your paternal goodwill has led you to pronounce *the very opposite (tounantion) of what is their real power*" (275a). Yet, here, the King does not refer to the *pharmakon*, but to written letters. The King does not reply to Theuth that, while the latter presented the *pharmakon* of writing to him as "remedy," it is actually the very opposite, a poison. The King does not disagree with Theuth about the effects of the *pharmakon*, that is, whether these are beneficial or maleficent. He disagrees with him about whether writing is a *pharmakon* of memory or of remembrance. The invention of writing, according to the King, will be proved a *pharmakon* of remembrance and not a *pharmakon* of memory, that is, it will be proved "a means of producing" remembrance and not "a means of

producing" memory. In contrast, Derrida presents the translation of *pharmakon* as either "remedy" or "poison," because this provides him with a binary opposition to deconstruct.

The translation of *pharmakon* as "a means of producing something" is also to be asserted in the only other case in the *Phaedrus* in which Plato connects writing to the *pharmakon*:

> *Phaedrus*: Anyone would take you, as you say, for a foreigner being shown the country by a guide, and not a native—you never leave town to cross the frontier nor even, I believe, so much as set foot outside the walls.
>
> *Socrates*: You must forgive me, dear friend; I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do. Yet you seem to have discovered a drug *(pharmakon)* for getting me out (*dokeis mi tis emis exodou to pharmakon eurikenai*). ... A hungry animal can be driven by dangling a carrot or a bit of greenstuff in front of it; similarly if you proffer me speeches bound in books (*logois ... en vivliois*), I don't doubt you can cart me all round Attica, and anywhere else you please.
>
> (230d–e) (*DIS*, 70–71/87–8)

Derrida comments on this passage from the *Phaedrus* as follows:

> Only a little further on, Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug *(pharmakon)*. This *pharmakon*, this "medicine," this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison already introduces itself into the body of discourse with all ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be—alternately or simultaneously—beneficent or maleficent. ... Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws. Here, it takes Socrates out of his proper place and off his customary track. The latter had always kept him inside the city. The leaves of writing act as *pharmakon* to push or attract out of the city the one who never wanted to get out, even at the end, to escape the hemlock. They take him out of himself and draw him onto a path that is properly an *exodus*.
>
> (*DIS*, 70/87)

Yet, what is the ambiguity of the *pharmakon* in the above-quoted passage? According to Derrida, "[t]his charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be—alternately or simultaneously—beneficent or maleficent." However, if we follow the Liddell–Scott–Jones *Lexicon*, the *pharmakon* does not name the power of the "speeches bound in books" to fascinate. Magic and fascination do not constitute a property of *pharmakon*. It is the "speeches bound in books" which have the power to fascinate. Through their power to fascinate, they can function as *pharmakon*, that is, they can provoke the exit of Socrates from the city of Athens. Therefore, in the passage under discussion, the *pharmakon* names the ability of writing, through its power to fascinate, to "produce" a certain effect, that is, to make Socrates leave the city.

Thus, it is necessary to stress that the strategy of making the inversion of a text's claims dependent upon isolated words confronts the challenge of competing translations. It is these which have the potential to interrupt the deployment of the double reading of deconstruction.

Derrida's Substitution of the Effects of a Concept for its Meaning

However, there is more to Derrida's selection of "remedy" and "poison" as translations of the word *pharmakon*. These two senses have to be also conceived in a special way. When one thinks of remedies and poisons as actual *pharmaka*, it is their similarity as *substances* that is implied. Between a *pharmakon* that is a "remedy," and a *pharmakon* that is a "poison," there is difference but hardly any opposition. In order to bring their opposition to the fore, as Richard Harland suggests[7], the *substances* have to be displaced in favor of their *effects*. From a *pharmakon* which has a remedial effect, we need to draw off "the general principle of remedial-ness," and from a *pharmakon* which has a poisonous effect, we need to draw off "the general principle of poisonousness." But, of course, "poisonousness" is no longer limited to *pharmakon* as such—snakes too can be said to possess poisonousness. And the principle of "remedial-ness" can be invoked for anything which has a remedial effect. So, one should not confuse the *meaning* of a word with its *effects*. In terms of its ultimate effects, the *pharmakon* can indeed be categorized under both "remedial-ness" and "poisonousness." This does not lead one to situate the *meaning* of the *pharmakon* as a type of paradox, oscillating interminably between opposing senses. For the opposition is located at the level of the *effects* of the *pharmakon*, and not at the level of its *meaning*. The *pharmakon* as a "remedy" can have both poisonous and remedial effects. The hemlock given to Socrates, for example, does not *cease* to be a poison because it can also have "remedial" effects (i.e. the immortality of Socrates' soul).

Hence, in order for Derrida to support the unresolved ambiguity of the word *pharmakon*, he must substitute the effects of the use of *pharmakon* for its meaning. Yet, in such a case, *anything* can be judged as ambiguous from the aspect of its effects. This is possible because effects can always be approached from more than one perspective. For example, the effects of the use of cars are also ambiguous. The use of a car can be judged as having "beneficial" effects, if it is approached from the *perspective* (*le point de vue*) of the possible convenience it offers in transportation, while it has "poisonous" effects if it is approached from the perspective of certain environmental issues. Under such a general aspect, *everything* can be considered undecidable, namely, a "both ... and ..." phenomenon. But this is not due to an ambiguity at the level of its meaning, but to the various perspectives from which it can be approached. Thus, the capacity of *pharmakon* to mean *both* remedy *and* poison in the Platonic text is not due to an impossibility to distinguish the different or opposite meanings of the word *pharmakon*, an impossibility arising from Derrida's "quasi-transcendental" theory of the institution of meaning, but to *the multiple perspectives from which its effects can be approached*.

Linguistic Meaning versus Contextual Meaning

What is made visible by Derrida's analysis is that the abstract, "undecidable" word (in our case, the word *pharmakon*) (1) "precedes" its different effects, that is, it "precedes" its realization in discourse, and, thereby, (2) it controls the context within which it appears. The abstract both precedes the concrete and determines it. Derrida's concentration on the word *pharmakon*, an isolated term of minor significance in the text of the *Phaedrus*, is indicative of the theoretical background of the deconstructive operation: the word *over* and *against* the context. So, the "message" of a single word outweighs Plato's argument in its totality. For Derrida, the potential "play" of an isolated word is immanently more important than the "syntagmatically" created argument in the totality of

Plato's text. What we will seek to make apparent next is the link that this position maintains with Saussurean linguistics; and that it is the character of this link which renders this position problematic.

From the standpoint of a position which asserts the essential "arbitrariness of the sign," the linguist is engaged, not with the relation between the sign and the reality it reflects, or the subject who utilizes it, but with the *relationship of one sign with another sign within a closed system*. The linguist is concerned with elaborating the *internal logic of the system of signs in itself* which is held to exist independently of any context which may purport to give the signs their content.

The point of departure for Ferdinand de Saussure is the distinction between three different aspects of language: *language-speech* (*langage*), language as a system of forms (*langue*), and the individual speech act—that is, the utterance (*parole*).[8] Language (*langue*) and the utterance (*parole*) are components of language-speech (*langage*), while the latter is understood as meaning the sum total of the phenomena—physical, physiological, and psychological—which participate in the realization of a verbal act.

Linguistics, as Saussure conceives it, cannot have the language-speech (*langage*) or the utterance (*parole*) as its object of study. What constitute the linguistic element in the utterance are the normatively identical forms of language present in it. Everything else is "accessory and more or less accidental" (*CGL*, 14).

Saussure's contention is that language (*langue*), as a system of normatively identical forms, must be taken as the point of departure for linguistic analysis, and that all the manifestations of language-speech (*langage*) *must be illuminated from the angle of these stable and autonomous forms*.

The system of language is, therefore, completely independent of individual creative acts, intentions or motives. Language stands in front of the individual as an uncontested, inviolable norm which the individual cannot but accept. The individual act of the articulation of sounds becomes a linguistic act through its conformity to the stable (for each particular moment in time) and indisputable (for the individual) system of language.

Nevertheless, even "if language is necessary if speaking is to be intelligible and produce all its effects," Saussure recognizes, at the same time, that

> speaking is necessary for the establishment of language, and historically its actuality always comes first. How would a speaker take it upon himself to associate an idea with a word-image if he had not first come across the association in an act of speaking?
>
> (*CGL*, 18)

Contrary to the linguistic system, the individual speech acts can explain both the historical possibility of change of linguistic forms and—something important for our present analysis—the path of the development of the linguistic system and the linguistic forms that compose it:

> speaking is what causes language to evolve: impressions gathered from listening to others modify our linguistic habits. Language and speaking are then interdependent; the former is both the instrument and the product of the latter. But their interdependence does not prevent their being two absolutely distinct things.
>
> (*CGL*, 19)

Hence, linguistic form is *produced* through abstraction. A linguistic form consists of elements obtained through abstraction from the real units of the current of speech, that is, utterances. A word is not merely a simple element of vocabulary, but an entity that has been used in a wide variety of contexts. So, in the same way, if the word *pharmakon* proves to be insubstantial, this is because Derrida himself has effected its desubstantialization. If Derridian deconstruction opens words up to their most general possibilities of meaning, this is by posing the abstract system of language as prior to and irrespective of the concrete appearance of words in *parole*.

Yet, this already presupposes the operation of abstraction—*langue* results from an abstraction in which elements are isolated and detached from the units of discourse (i.e. the linguistic utterances). From this linguistic reductionism, Saussure will attempt to draw the meaning of signs exclusively from the linguistic system itself. Signs receive their meaning *differentially*: "language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system" (*CGL*, 120). Moreover, these differences are not differences among positive terms, that is, among preexisting identities, because in language there are only differences *without positive terms* (*CGL*, 120).

Derrida accepts and adopts both Saussure's position regarding the autonomous existence of the linguistic system (*langue*) and the differential nature of meaning while, at the same time, he radicalizes it: if a signified concept has meaning only to the extent that it is inscribed in a chain or in a system, within which it refers to other concepts by means of the systematic play of differences, then it is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself.[9] Hence, no concept can be thought rigidly without the "trace" of the other, which is inscribed in it since it constitutes it.

Yet, because these "differences ... are *results*," that is, they have "not fallen from the sky," they must have been produced in some way. "Difference, then, will be the playing movement that produces these differences, these effects of difference. ... Difference is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name 'origin' no longer suits it."[10] Similarly, as Derrida informs us, the *pharmakon*, by "preceding the opposition between different effects," is

> the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the différance of difference. It holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the differends that the process of discrimination will come to carve out. Contradictions and pairs of opposites are lifted from the bottom of this diacritical, differing, deferring, reserve.
>
> (*DIS*, 127/158)

Therefore, in Derrida's analysis, before its differentiation into different meanings (e.g remedy, poison, philtre, pain, etc.), the *pharmakon* signifies an undifferentiating *topos*, within which, and by which, meaning becomes possible. As such, it is neither a word nor a concept, nor a substance, nor a thing, nor a subject, nor "a being that is somewhere present."[11] In this sense, the *pharmakon*, as *différance*, is a "quasi-origin."

Derrida insists that, since it "constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed," the *pharmakon* has the effect that "reverses" the opposites "or makes one side cross over into the other" (*DIS*, 127/158). So, the remedy is reversed into poison and vice versa, the outside in the inside, etc. This constant interchange of properties between the opposites explains the "ambiguity" that the *pharmakon* entertains in the Platonic text. Yet, this

involves Derrida connecting the ambiguity that a word entertains, within discourse, with the way in which this meaning is produced within the linguistic system. Hence, the "ambiguity" that *pharmakon* may entertain within discourse does not stem, as we may think, from the inability of context to control its polysemy, but from the fact that before it is inserted into discourse it "constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed" (*DIS*, 127/158).

The differential play of language prevents, according to Derrida, the description of ambiguous terms (as the *pharmakon* in Plato or the *supplement* in Rousseau), or binary oppositions (as inside–outside or good–bad), as the exclusive preserve of the one of their signified poles. Hence, on each occasion that a metaphysical philosopher attempts to use an ambiguous term or a binary opposition determined by one of its meanings, eventually, because of the "differential" constitution of opposites, the other meanings will appear, in a paradoxical way, in the foreground, despite the contrary intentions of the writer. The principle of *différance* is presented as working inexhaustibly by itself in the texts of the philosophical tradition against the explicitly expressed intentions of their writers. Consequently, a philosopher's claims do not need to be refuted by another philosopher; they are always already undermined by language itself.

Hence, for Derrida, the "undecidability" of Plato's text in relation to the *pharmakon* is least of all *coincidental* or *accidental*, but it is rendered absolutely necessary, as such, by the way in which signified opposites are constituted in the language (*langue*). On this view, the structural ambiguity that *pharmakon* entertains in *langue* influences also its appearance in *parole*. The silent hypothesis is that a word must carry in discourse the same plurality of meaning that it possesses in *langue*. When Derrida encounters the limited meaning of *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus*, he imagines that Plato has, in some way, provisionally imposed his will on the word by forcing it to submit to a reduced and rigid framework of meaning. However, its provisional character becomes apparent when the text reverses the violence that was exercised on the word, and restores its ambiguity. According to Derrida, language itself will deny such an imposition, something that will render Plato's intentions deconstructible.

However, the "disseminating" effect of *pharmakon*, its power to unfix and unsettle any fixed meaning-identity, seems to create absolutely no problem for the clarification or the determination of a writer's intentions in relation to which pole of the meaning of *pharmakon* (that of remedy or that of poison) he wanted to confirm. Here, the *ambiguity* of the word does not appear to be a source of difficulty. It is always possible to recognize the intentional meaning of an ambiguous word in an unambiguous way. This is indicative of the paradoxical character of deconstructive reading, which needs to invoke simultaneously both the ability of language to allow someone to determine, in a *categorical* manner, which of the two opposed senses of the word the writer wished to confirm in a certain passage, as well as the unresolved ambiguity or the undecidability of the word when it is to deconstruct these authorial or textual intentions.

Hence, Derrida does not question the attribution of "relatively stable" meanings to words, as he explains in "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion."[12] So, it is always possible to *determine*, whenever Plato uses the equivocal word *pharmakon*, whether he means *either* remedy *or* poison. As Derrida states: "Différance is not indeterminacy. It renders determinacy both possible and necessary."[13] If such determination were not possible, then there would be nothing to deconstruct. Deconstruction is installed between a text's intended meaning (its *declarative* layer) and the text itself (its *descriptive* layer). If a text's authorial intention was not fixed and univocal, then it would be difficult for

deconstruction to juxtapose, against it, contradictory elements found in the same text. Thus, contrary to the meaning of *pharmakon* at the level of the text as a whole, which Derrida treats as equivocal (as a "both ... and ..." phenomenon), the meaning of *pharmakon*, at the level of textual or authorial intention it is presented as being characterized by lack of ambiguity (an "either ... or ..." phenomenon).

Hence, what should we really think of Derrida's presentation of the play of *pharmakon*—the constant slipping of entities and their passage into their opposites as a perpetual reversal of properties—as limited only to "a *determinate* oscillation between ... highly *determined* possibilities" of meaning[14] without having any prior effect on the process of the determination of these possibilities?

Derrida interprets the effects of the differential constitution of meaning *at will*. To the extent that deconstruction needs a number of well-"determined possibilities" of meaning within the text in order to deconstruct them, the constitution of a sign's meaning or its identity through its differences from other signs does not prevent signs or concepts from carrying with them, at the level of their use, certain "relatively stable" parameters of meaning. On the other hand, when Derrida needs to explain and justify how the deconstruction of a text's metaphysical determinations are made possible, he invokes a certain "play" or "relative indetermination" that is able to open the space of a non-metaphysical interpretation of the text.

Conclusion

The central concern of this chapter was to place into question Derrida's attribution of an essential "undecidability" to the word *pharmakon*. This placing into question centers upon Derrida's claim that the unity of a word "'precedes' the opposition between [its] different effects" (*DIS*, 127/158); that is, it precedes the multiplicity of its linguistic uses, thereby undermining any effort to make a word mean only one thing in actual discourse.

This placing into question was undertaken at two complementary levels. Derrida's attribution of this essential "undecidability" is initially shown to be the obvious effect of Saussurean linguistics, in particular, that of the primacy that Saussure attributes to *langue* (the formal system of language) in relation to *parole* (the individual linguistic utterance).

The determinate effects of this dependence upon Saussurean linguistics are then shown to be further complicated when it is shown that, even if someone accepts the translation of the *pharmakon* as remedy or/and poison in the text of *Phaedrus*, the fundamental ambiguity of the *pharmakon* in the Platonic text is not located at the level of the meaning of the word, as Derrida claims, but at the level of the effects that it produces as a certain substance. In this case, ambiguity is not connected to the word *pharmakon* itself, but it stems from the possibility of multiple effects arising from the use of the thing to which it refers.

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Notes

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2 Walter Brogan, "Plato's *Pharmakon*: Between two Repetitions," in *Derrida and Deconstruction*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (London: Routledge, 1989), 7.

3 Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination*, Collection "Essais" (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1972), 75; English translation: *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 93. Henceforth cited as *DIS*, with English page numbers followed by French page numbers.

4 Richard Harland, *Beyond Superstructuralism* (London: Routledge, 1993), 213.

5 Harland, *Beyond Superstructuralism*, 213.

6 Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, with a revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1917.

7 Harland, *Beyond Superstructuralism*, 217.

8 Saussure does, it is true, allow for the possibility of a special linguistics of utterance ("linguistique de la parole"), but he remains silent on just what sort of linguistics that would be. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959, 1974), 39. Henceforth cited as *CGL*.

9 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 26; Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), 11.

10 Derrida, "Différance," 11

11 Derrida, "Différance," 11.

12 Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

13 Derrida, "Afterword," 148–9.

14 Derrida, "Afterword," 144.

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