

Education as *Pharmakon*:  
Plato and Derrida's Dialectic on Learning

Patrick McCarthy-Nielsen

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

The blues is not a passing emotion, much less an intellectual position; it's an existential disposition.<sup>1</sup> While the blues is most easily characterized by melancholy, it's more than that. The blues is redemptive; it is "the sound of a sinner on revival day."<sup>2</sup> It has the power to transmute one's troubles — not to remove them but to distill a sort of tonic from them. It does this through a keen sensitivity toward the ambivalence<sup>3</sup> of life. Where there's love, there's hurt; where there's trouble, there's a sense of life; where there's triumph, there's foolishness; and where there's disgrace, there's redemption. This magic of the blues depends on the nuanced disposition of the artist. If the artist loses her sense for either the tragic or the sublime, she will cease to sing the true blues. What's more, she must hold this disposition toward ambivalence vis-à-vis herself as much as the vicissitudes of outer life. As Etta James said, "Most of the songs I sing have that blues feeling in it. They have that sorry feeling. And I don't know what I'm sorry about. I don't."<sup>4</sup>

This existential disposition toward ambivalence is not unique to the blues, though the blues artist is the master of it. The educator should have it too, which is partly why he needs philosophy so dearly. Philosophy, properly practiced, should disabuse us of our one-sided notions, our rosy-hued hubris, and our self-congratulation. The philosopher has the blues disposition because he sees the pain of life as well as his own implication in it, but like the blues musician, the philosopher is content because he can transmute that anguish into something healing to others. The educator also desires to bring healing, and this desire can blind him to the harm he does inadvertently, but some harm is unavoidable; everything has a shadow. To mitigate the harm, we need to face our shadow squarely. Such reflexivity has an intellectual component, but it is also dependent on a disposition toward ambivalence.

In this essay, I will discuss what in the tradition of educational philosophy serves as a perennial metaphor for ambivalence: the Greek concept of *pharmakon*. This concept was used by Plato, and this use was later explicated by Jacques Derrida. Like blues music, this concept has a power to work on one's disposition, making it more attentive to ambivalence, which can in turn have a qualitative effect on an educator's practice, and in turn affect her students.

*PHARMAKON*

The Greek word *pharmakon* is the root of the English word "pharmaceutical" and can be aptly translated as "drug."<sup>5</sup> Just as synthetic drugs have many properties, yielding a complex blend of beneficial and harmful effects, so the concept of *pharmakon* signifies a complex interweaving of benefit and harm through a power that is not quite understood. In addition to "drug," it can be translated as "medicine," "remedy," "tonic," "poison," "charm," "spell," "recipe," "substance,"

“anti-substance,” “substitute”; or as “paint,” “makeup,” or “perfume” — especially to cover up ugliness or putrefaction as that of a corpse (*PDW*, 80). A *pharmakeus* is one who administers the *pharmakon*, possibly as a “pharmacist” but often more like a “wizard.” (*PDW*, 80). A *pharmakos* can also be a “wizard” but particularly of the malevolent sort. Its more central meaning is “evil influence,” “sacrifice,” or “scapegoat.” (*PDW*, 80).

If there was trouble in the ancient *polis*, the one determined to be responsible — or a symbolic stand-in that the community kept in reserve for such occasions — would sometimes be sacrificed to purify the ill effect. In such a moment, the malevolent “wizard” (*pharmakeus*) whose “influence” (*pharmakon*) could be identified as the “poison” (*pharmakos*) afflicting the *polis*, must be made a “sacrifice” (*pharmakos*) to be transmuted into a “remedy” (*pharmakon*).<sup>6</sup> In this way, the *pharma* words connote a sort of alchemy in which the cure for a poison is not a different substance, but the same substance transmuted. This transmutation can only be achieved under special conditions. Otherwise, the *pharmakon* remains inherently ambivalent — that is, potent both ways, positively and negatively.

This alchemical process happens in six steps. Initially, the *pharmakon* is an unknown substance, not yet ambivalent, merely ambiguous. Second, the alchemist-*pharmakeus* presents the substance as what it is not (*PDW*, 38). Third, he adjudicates on what he is feigning.<sup>7</sup> Fourth, he scapegoats what has been covered up, the *pharmakos*.<sup>8</sup> Fifth, he (re)presents the original as if it could exist in its pristine form.<sup>9</sup> The disposition toward ambivalence calls for a sixth step: an artistic nod to that which has been excised. Without this final step, the transmutation of the *pharmakon* remains unstable, leaving the potential to poison where one would heal. Let’s look how that pattern plays out.

#### THEUTH AND THAMUS

Late in the *Phaedrus*, Plato gives an example of a failed transmutation in the form of a myth. In Plato’s myth, Theuth, the Egyptian scholar god, creator and symbol of all the arts, presents his works to Thamus, the sovereign god, for judgment. Initially, since the judgment has not yet been made, the worth of each art appears ambiguous. Theuth disrupts that state, however, through promoting his *pharmakon*’s tonic effects: “This discipline (*to mathema*), my King, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories (*sophoterous kai mnemonikoterous*): my invention is a recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom.”<sup>10</sup> Theuth acts out the second, third, and fourth steps in a bundle. He preemptively judges his own work as a good. In doing so, he passes off — or replaces — an unknown for a known. In a moment, Thamus will add that Theuth is passing off a reminder for memory, and a semblance for truth. Theuth then praises the memory he offers while ignoring the memory’s subsequent dependence. In order to do this, Theuth has to pretend that writing itself is only auxiliary, a means to an end. If it were foregrounded, it would be apparent that it actually displaces memory and wisdom as Thamus says. Theuth does not offer anything new, only to improve on capacities already present. The promise of writing is not that it will solve an existing problem, but that it will bring a benefit unlooked-for — not a cure for a sickness, but a technology for a power that

is superhuman, closer to the gods. For this reason, it can only be called a remedy if it's a remedy for limitation, for mortality. Instead, Theuth pretends that the original is preserved, that what he offers is the same in kind as what the people have already.

It is not, however, for the purveyor of the art to judge that art's merit. That role falls to the judge god, Thamus, who realizes that something important has been left out of the account and that what was sacrificed through omission will turn out to be the most important thing:

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 (*lethen men en psuchais parexei mnemes ameletesiai*), being able to rely on what is written, using the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves (*dia pistin graphēs exōthen hup' allotriōn tupōn*) rather than, from within, their own unaided powers to call things to mind (*ouk endothen autous hup' hautōn anamimnēskomenous*). So it's not a remedy for memory, but for reminding, that you have discovered (*oukoun mnēmēs, alla hupomnēseōs, pharmakon hēures*). And as for wisdom (*sophias de*), you're equipping your pupils with only a semblance (*doxon*) of it, not with truth (*alētheian*). Thanks to you and your invention, your pupils will be widely read without benefit of a teacher's instructions, in consequence, they'll entertain the delusion that they have wide knowledge, while they are, in fact, for the most part incapable of real judgment.<sup>11</sup>

Theuth was too invested in his own invention to acknowledge its downside. Where he offered memory, there was forgetfulness. Where he offered wisdom, there was foolishness. He lacked the disposition toward ambivalence necessary to distill the true tonic from his *pharmakon*. In contrast, a good blues song is a tonic for the soul. This *pharmakon* presents sorrow that can bring joy, an ill that can bring health, and it does so by playing creatively with ambivalence.

I'd like to use a classic blues song to illustrate, B.B. King's "3'O'clock Blues."<sup>12</sup> This song follows the classic AAB blues format in which the six-step process described above can be read. The first line is characteristically simple and ambiguous. "Now here it is three o' clock in the mornin'[,] / And I can't even close my eyes." While we have no reason to think this sleeplessness is a happy state, in principle, it could be. Sometimes we're kept up by joy or excitement, like a child before Christmas. It's the second, repeating line that puts things in context. "It's three o' clock in the mornin', baby[;] / I can't even close my eyes." It's the repetition that tells us unequivocally that this is a blues song. The repeated statement is not a passing remark; it's a condition, and that condition is the blues. This representation of a living state, one with which it is easy to empathize, effectively substitutes — or passes off — the formalism of the song for a present reality. The next step is to put forward what is imitated at the expense of what imitates. "Well, you know I can't find my baby[,] / and I can't be satisfied." The appearance of present experience is reiterated and strengthened by first giving the cause, "can't find my baby," then, extending the effect, "I can't be satisfied." The implicit message, reinforced with deep pathos is, "This is not a performance! This is really my experience!" This is where Theuth left off and where Thamus found him wanting. If left at this stage, the transmutation risks appearing shallow — at worst, a self-serving affectation. In "3 O'Clock Blues," B.B. King dissipates the spell he's woven through a masterful guitar riff. This is the final step which Theuth neglects, that of reaffirming the medium, the

*pharmakon*, and the ambivalence implicit in it. It's this affirmation of ambivalence that separates art from artifice.

#### PHARMAKOS

Educators should find this transmutation process familiar. After all, we too are in the *pharmakon* business. The education we offer is meant as a tonic — for individuation, for liberation, for empowerment — but if we fail to transmute it fully, it can be a subtle poison — for indoctrination, for subjection, for stratification. The educator herself can be seen as a *pharmakeus*, a wizard who can play the physician or the poisoner and is always at least a little arcane. This can lend educators a mystique, even celebrity. It can also make them likely scapegoats, or *pharmakeons*. Educators are regularly blamed for many things. More than a few are sacrificed in the court of public opinion. I've noticed that the best educators I've met feel at least a little ambivalent about their profession and their own roles in it.

Let me take as an example a workaday *pharmakon* in the education world: a lesson plan. This one, from *The Blues Teacher's Guide*, "examines both the content and form of lyrics in blues songs."<sup>13</sup> At the outset, the plan is unknown. I didn't write it; I took it from PBS, so I don't know anything about its merits. However, if I were to bring it into my classroom, I would have to stand behind it. Even if I didn't pretend that it was my own lesson, even if I owned up that it was the requirement of some authority, I would still have to embody that authority while presenting the lesson. In other words, I would have to pass off a prefabricated lesson, or a requirement, as my own true impulse. Even if I had written it, I would have to pass off my past work as something present.

If my lesson is engaging, the students should be completely blind to all the processes that went into writing it: those that establish certain information as truth, those that preference certain values over others, and those that push to mold students in particular ways. They should not wonder why I'm presenting this particular lesson at this particular time. If I'm successful, they should be totally absorbed in the experience as if it belongs entirely to the present. If I've done this, I might be considered successful according to any number of standards. But there would be a small ethical problem; there's a deception in the lesson. My well thought-out lesson can't help but exclude some facets of the topic. If all I do is wrap it up with an assessment, I'll leave the students with the impression that they "understand the content and the form of lyrics in blues songs."<sup>14</sup> My peccadillo might be forgiven on the grounds that comprehensive treatment of any subject is simply impossible, that we always have to select, but it's this "always" that's the real problem. Small sins compound, and a peccadillo of omission normalized across a profession can add up to an institutional guilt.

Let's return to the blues. If one musician in one set isn't really feeling the blues, it's just a bad night. If it wasn't considered important for a musician to "be bluesy" in general, the art form itself would lose its integrity. It would become a facsimile of itself. Now, reflexivity is not as explicit a criterion for education as bluesiness is for the blues, but it is important. It is a factor in the professional respect given to

fine educators, and it is largely associated with the profession as a whole. I take it for granted that reflexivity is valued in education. What the *pharmakon* concept can offer is a hint about how to cultivate it and how to use it.

#### PHARMAKEUS

I have said that reflexivity depends on a dispositional sensitivity toward ambivalence. This disposition can be cultivated in more than one way. One way is through the blues. Another is through philosophy. The concept of *pharmakon* is such a rich metaphor for ambivalence that contemplating it can affect one on a dispositional level, and there are no better guides in this contemplation than Plato and Jacques Derrida.

At first glance, Plato appears to have committed the same error as Theuth. Even as Thamus chastises Theuth for his hasty praise of his *pharmakon*, writing, the judge god lays down his own one-sided judgment. A strong condemnation of writing appears no more reflexive than a strong endorsement, and this appears to be the final word. Of course, it's not the final word because where the myth comes to a close; the dialogue goes on, and, in it, Socrates softens the judgment considerably. It's as if Plato blatantly overstates the case in the myth to prepare us for what's to come. In the myth, writing is judged as a poison, but afterwards, Socrates allows that it can be a pleasant, though trivial diversion.<sup>15</sup> More strikingly, in the myth, writing and *logos* are opposed, personified in Theuth and Thamus. In the dialogue, they are of a kind, only writing is an inferior form. As Socrates remarks to Phaedrus, "Writing is unfortunately like painting.... Is there not another kind of word or speech far better than this, and having far greater power — a son of the same family, but lawfully begotten?"<sup>16</sup> In this softening, Socrates is a step more reflexive than Thamus, who is a step more reflexive than Theuth. One might stop one's reading of *Phaedrus* at that, believing that the preference of discourse over writing was Plato's point. As Derrida observes, however, "Only a blind or grossly insensitive reading could indeed have spread the rumor that Plato was simply condemning the writer's activity."<sup>17</sup> As Derrida goes on to show, with his own preeminently reflexive style, there's much more at play. Through his deconstruction, Derrida explicates and enriches many of Plato's themes, often revealing deeper ambivalences within them. The most obvious and the most telling observation is almost facile: that Plato has to use writing to condemn writing. This cuts more deeply than simple irony. It is, in fact, the performance of the same transmutation demonstrated by Theuth Plato replaces, or passes off, writing for a dialogue. He then praises dialogue while condemning, dismissing, and ignoring writing. He then puts his brand on dialogue itself, which has never even been available. Thus far, he does just what Theuth does with writing, only in reverse. Plato goes on to conspicuously use a number of devices characteristic of writing and commit a number of infractions against the ethics of dialogue: he manipulates sequence and time (*PDW*, 6–14); he one-sidedly dominates the "conversation" from the background (*PDW*, 14–19); he replaces one thing for another in a literary sleight-of-hand (*PDW*, 24–29); he violates his own principles of composition (*PDW*, 39–44).

Plato's motivations for writing so ambivalently — much like Derrida's — are hard to pin down. It's been said that the writing of *Phaedrus* was simply bungled, due either to Plato's extreme youth or extreme age.<sup>18</sup> Another view is that Phaedrus

is Plato's cynical attempt to steal writing for himself (*PDW*, 6)! I believe that Plato nods to this ambivalence as he tries to transmute it. In *Phaedrus*, we can read Plato's self-undoing. To attack rhetorical persuasion, he uses every rhetorical trick he can. To attack "sophistry," Plato shows himself a consummate sophist. Every argument that comes through Socrates against writing, rhetoric, and sophistry stands as an accusation of Plato. I see this as reflexivity because, at every stage, Plato hints at what he's doing. For instance, the myth of Theuth and Thamus which invokes the concept of *pharmakon* can be seen as a key to Plato's own exposure. In his own writing, Plato is much more like Lysias than he is like Socrates, more like Theuth than Thamus. The myth of those two gods can be read as Plato's judgment of himself. Socrates's often bewildering antics can be read as a wink and a nod to those who look for it. Derrida and others have done brilliant jobs unlocking Plato's self-contradiction, but everything Derrida reveals is already written *in Plato by Plato*. In short, Plato performs Derrida's deconstruction of Plato. Similarly, Derrida performs Plato. By playing the gadfly to Plato, picking at his threads, breaking his concepts down, questioning his claims about what is good, and pointing toward some greater understanding — while never really allowing himself to be pinned down — Derrida resembles Socrates!

It's clear that Derrida is responding to Plato, but we can also say that Plato is responding to Derrida. Plato critiques the rhetoricians of his day for their tricks and supposed self-serving relativism. Derrida, too, relativizes language, and he disrupts power structures, largely to his benefit. We can see a kinship between Derrida and the sophists, and we can see Plato's kinship with them too. He emerges from their field of play, using their topics and their tools. For some, such as Jasper Neel, Plato's the consummate sophist, distinguished only by his status as victor. If so, perhaps Plato's and Derrida's motivations are aligned. Perhaps they are both writers, working in a field of discourse characterized by clever, but unreflexive, thinking — like Theuth's — who want to demonstrate a kind of discourse informed by a disposition toward ambivalence. Whether or not this truly was their intention, I submit that this is the effect. We can read Plato and Derrida in tandem to exercise our sense for ambivalence, which can make us in turn more reflexive.

These two authors can also suggest the way to use our reflexivity. Both Plato and Derrida are wizard-*pharmakeons* who can be read in all kinds of ways. Often, they are taken as nemeses, but set side-by-side, *Phaedrus* and *Dissemination* suggest a vigorous play, a true dialectic. It is in that play that both Socrates and Derrida demonstrate their wizardry. Not everything they say or do is transparent, but it's potent; and the nature of that potency is more than a little ambiguous, a *pharmakon*.

I'd like to end by returning to the educator and the blues. The blues artist, like Plato and Derrida, is a wizard-*pharmakeon*. His magic comes from his skill, but his healing comes from a disposition toward ambivalence expressed through art. He offers a facsimile of a present anguish, but subtly exposes it as such, through irony, innuendo, and play. The educator, too, can structure her lesson-*pharmakon* in a way that lets her students in on the joke, with a wink and a nod.

1. Paul Oliver writes, for example, “But though the blues may frequently be associated with a state of depression, of lethargy or despair, it is not solely a physical or a mental state. It is not solely the endurance of suffering or a declaration of hopelessness; nor is it solely a means of ridding oneself of a mood. It is all these and it is more: it is a part of the Negro’s being, living with him and within him.” *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*. London: Cassell, 1960), 304. Also, “Blues is a natural fact, is something that a fellow lives. If you don’t live it you don’t have it. Young people have forgotten to cry the blues. Now they talk and get lawyers and things.” Attributed to Big Bill Broonzy. “Blues Quotations,” *Saturday Blues*, <http://www.saturdayblues.com/bluesquotations>.
2. William Christopher Handy, “Blues Quotations,” *Saturday Blues*, <http://www.saturdayblues.com/bluesquotations>.
3. While the word “ambivalence” is usually strongly bound to a particular object (that is, to be ambivalent *about something or someone*), my intention is to point to a disposition that is particularly inclined to the ambivalent state. While that state will always be associated with some particular object — often many objects — I will, for my present purposes, foreground the state rather than the object.
4. Etta James, “Blues Quotations,” *Saturday Blues*, <http://www.saturdayblues.com/bluesquotations>.
5. Gregory R. Crane, ed. “Greek Dictionary,” *Perseus Digital Library*, October, 2013, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>; Jasper Neel, *Plato, Derrida, and Writing* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 80. Neel’s work will be cited as *PDW* in the text for all subsequent references.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 130–133.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274e, quoted in Derrida, *Dissemination*, 75.
11. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274e–275b, quoted in Derrida, *Dissemination*, 102.
12. Jules Bihari and Riley B. King, “3 O’Clock Blues,” *King of the Blues* (Santa Monica, CA: Universal Music Publishing Group), <http://www.metrolyrics.com/three-oclock-blues-lyrics-bb-king.html>, accessed March 17, 2015.
13. Daniel Cavicchi, Margaret Reidy, Art Tipaldi, and T.J. Wheeleres, “Blues Lyrics,” *The Blues Teacher’s Guide*, Seattle: Vulcan Productions, 2003), 39, [https://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/downloads/teacher\\_guide.pdf](https://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/downloads/teacher_guide.pdf), accessed March 17, 2015.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 2, 3d. ed, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1920), 279–280.
16. *Ibid.*, 278–279.
17. Derrida, *Dissemination*, 67.
18. *Ibid.*, 66–67.