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PHAEDRUS' EXAM

A PEDAGOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF OPPOSITES IN PLATO'S THEUTH AND THAMUS ANECDOTE

ABSTRACT: Explored through a pedagogical lens, Plato's Theuth and Thamus anecdote reveals an educational intervention designed to examine and apply the teachings of Socrates through a 'real-world' philosophical conundrum: how to wisely contend with the introduction of new technology. This work suggests that Theuth and Thamus can be viewed as the black and white horses of Plato's chariot metaphor, and that this chariot driving lesson helps student-philosophers understand the role of wisdom in governing both their personal lives and the state. Serving as an examination, the anecdote draws together the ideas student philosophers have explored throughout the earlier portions of the dialogue.

KEYWORDS: Phaedrus, chariot metaphor, Theuth and Thamus, Plato

The Theuth and Thamus anecdote in Plato's *Phaedrus* employs an array of literary devices that accentuate opposing ideas and concepts placed in apparent juxtaposition.¹ Exploring the presentation of these apparent

¹ While this paper restricts its exploration of this apparent juxtaposition to the Theuth and Thamus narrative, in order to consider the composite nature of these pairings and the value they may reveal regarding balancing wisdom in education, it should be noted that Plato's use of fundamental dichotomies across dialogues have long been of interest to scholars – for instance, from Allen's (1961) discussions of Plato's use of opposites and their fundamental irreconcilability, to Justin's (2020) discussions of opposites in the *Phaedo*. Helpfully, Staheler's (2013) work on the ambiguity of writing focuses specifically upon the *Phaedrus*, considering the composite nature of apparent

opposites through a pedagogical lens, with deference to the potential of educational utility of Plato's work,² new insights can emerge about the anecdote. While the story is often treated as a commentary on Plato's endorsement or censure of writing through its 'critique' of the technology, this paper contends that rather, the anecdote might be viewed as an educational intervention: that its purpose is to act as a learning exercise in the form of examination, put before student-philosophers to test their knowledge of decision-making and wisdom. As such, this paper suggests that the Theuth and Thamus anecdote might have been presented with the intention of acting as a type of pedagogical assessment dealing with a 'real world' conundrum: the introduction of new technology. To philosophically progress, Phaedrus (and student-philosophers like him) must harness knowledge that has been learned earlier in the dialogue, particularly with references to Plato's chariot metaphor. Just as the wise charioteer balancing opposites through his two horses, the student facing the challenge of Theuth and Thamus must formulate a perspective for action, founded in the dispassionate assessment of situations, in which the potential benefits, as well as consequences, of decisions can be fully encompassed and appreciated.

Plato's provision and deployment of terms, concepts, and perspectives, as well as an overall narrative structure in which the audience are drawn to consider apparent opposites are discussed in turn. It is suggested that Theuth and Thamus evoke the chariot metaphor, prompting us to consider the necessary skills for facing innovation, and the potential 'real-world' consequences on ourselves, our souls, and those for whom we are responsible. The paper advances as follows:

1. The opposing natures of Theuth and Thamus as they discuss the positive and negative impact of technology, and their presentation as juxtaposed forces of impassioned movement and restraint, representing the white and black horses respectively, of Plato's chariot metaphor.

opposites, highlighting the interest of the topic in this dialogue. I would also like to express my thanks to the reviewers of this work for their helpful insights.

² The educational utility of Plato's work is well discussed. Of specific value to the forthcoming discussion, Rabbås (2010: 35) identifies a "curriculum for ethical citizenship" in Socrates discussions, this has been further forwarded as useful to digital age educational pursuits (Clements 2022).

2. The diametrically opposing strengths and weaknesses that the technology of writing simultaneously offers, prompting consideration of the ambiguous nature of such invention as a problem to be balanced;
3. The counter-balancing of remembering and forgetting explored with reference to life, death, and the nature of the soul;
4. And finally, this work will comment on the isomorphic relationship between governing ones' self, and governing a community through Theuth and Thamus' positions on the Egyptian solar barque as evocative of the Platonic "ship of state."

I begin by introducing Plato's two alliterative characters.

1.1 THEUTH AND THAMUS AS OPPOSITE AND COMPOSITE

Socrates begins his anecdote by introducing its two characters, Theuth and Thamus (*Phaedr.* 274c–d). Theuth, a god who lives in Naucratis, invents mathematics, sciences, games and writing; and Thamus, the King of Egypt, lives in Thebes. The story progresses with Theuth presenting his inventions to Thamus, arguing for their use by the Egyptian people, as Thamus appraises them accordingly. When they reach writing, Theuth acts as a strong proponent for the technology while Thamus is quick to point out its inadequacies and problems. “καὶ νῦν σὺ, πατήρ ὄν γραμμάτων, δι’ εὐνοίαν τοῦναντίον εἶπες ἢ δύναται... οὐκ οὖν μνήμης ἀλλὰ ὑπομνήσεως φάρμακον ἦῤυρες” (*Phaedr.* 275a).³

Thus, the characters' opposing stances, with one strongly in favor and one firmly against writing, seem, at first glance, to serve a role of narrative juxtaposition, from the outset. During the discussion Socrates witnesses for us, Thamus does not deviate from his concerns, and Theuth does not reconsider his position, the two act cleanly in contrast as two parts of an argument that we ourselves must navigate, having heard each

³ “And now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess... You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding.” I have employed the Fowler (1925) translation throughout. References made to alternate translations will be specifically identified for the reader.

character's view. Here in the opening, Plato presents to us the very nature of an argument as opposite and composite at the same time. Theuth and Thamus share a theme of discourse, but apparently, from two very different sides.

If we consider the description of these two characters further, they possess other aspects of their being that can serve to demonstrate their contrasting natures. For instance, the two characters' homes seem to highlight this contention: Egypt was comprised of two kingdoms, Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt, and known as "the two lands," a single land yet simultaneously divided.⁴ Theuth makes his home at Naucratis in Lower Egypt, while Thamus lives in Thebes, in Upper Egypt. While Socrates may have offered Naucratis as Theuth's home given its familiarity to Greek audiences, and to writing,⁵ it also marks a clear delineation between the characters: each calling home to one greater Egypt but inhabiting two distinct arenas of it. Socrates could easily have chosen Hermopolis as Theuth's home, on the border of Upper and Lower Egypt, given that Theuth's chief temple and his seat as head of the Ogdoad were located there,⁶ not to mention its connection to Hermes.⁷ But Naucratis does seem to better serve a concept of oppositions represented through the characters. By contrast, at Thebes, Thamus is clearly established in Upper Egypt. The characters' opposing natures, representing both halves of Egypt's "two lands," seem evident.

It is worth additionally noting that the flower of Lower Egypt, where Theuth resides, is the papyrus, a plant well known for its role in providing both paper and stylus, the requisite tools for writing. The flower of Upper Egypt was the lotus, representative of the sun, and an appropriate representation for Thamus in his affiliation with Ammon (or, more commonly, Ammon-Ra, the sun god), as Socrates presents him. Together,

⁴ Wilson 2013: 45.

⁵ Indeed, a theory discussed as early as Gardner (1886) posits Greek writing's origins there.

⁶ Kraemer 2012.

⁷ Theuth's Greek counterpart. The extent to which these two characters (the Greek, Hermes, and the Egyptian, Thoth) are potentially fused to create Theuth, is somewhat unclear. Leary (2010), in an inter-disciplinary discussion of the discourse, offers some useful thoughts, though Obryk's (2017) careful identifications are helpful and perhaps more grounded in classical theory.

these separate plants are entwined to make the Sematawy: a symbol representative of the unity of the two distinct lands of Egypt. Once again, this symbolism seems, perhaps, too coincidental, given the conversation that unfolds concerns itself with the entwined consequences of writing and divine wisdom.

The gods' opposing natures are also present in their planetary attributions. Thamus, known as Ammon, was the god of the Sun,⁸ while Theuth was the god of the Moon.⁹ However, while apparently characterizing opposites, it is together that they encompass the day and night, or heavenly routine, requisite for existence. (This routine is further symbolized in the sailing of the solar barque in Egyptian myth, in which these two characters sail together through day and night and is a point to which I will return in the final section of this work).

Thus, from the outset, Plato establishes the concept of two separate arenas, which are actually part of one entity, yet which simultaneously possess an irreconcilable pairing of conceptual opposites: Theuth and Thamus' opinions are two halves of a single argument; their homes across Egypt two lands of a single country; and their associated planetary attributes two halves of a single day. These are not opposites, rather, they are composites at conflict with themselves.

Consequently, from the very opening of his story, Plato raises within us a query as to how we ought best navigate the difficulty represented through conflicts that are two parts of one composite.¹⁰ We witness the story's two characters, Theuth and Thamus, act in apparent opposition: one, in Lower Egypt, an accomplished inventor, seeking to improve the lives of people and drive their development forward through new creations; the other, in Upper Egypt, a great ruler with a sense of duty to his people, considers the pragmatic implementation of this gift through constructive criticism and conservative restraint. The philosopher is left to decide how best to manage the two sides of the argument.

⁸ Obryk 2017: 82.

⁹ Assmann 2001: 80.

¹⁰ That Plato would use writing to exemplify this should not come as a surprise if we consider that *Philebus*, which also discusses the theme of wisdom and pleasure, sees Theuth appear again, and provides an explanation for how Theuth created writing, understanding the composite nature of the three different types of sounds: vowels, sonants, and mutes (*Phileb.* 18).

In solving this conundrum, insight can be taken from what both characters have in common: their interest in wisdom, and their concern for others. Theuth attempts to improve wisdom, Thamus seeks to preserve it. And both characters are seeking to ensure the best interests of the people of Egypt are served. Individually, each character also has an affiliation with wisdom and balance. While little is known about Thamus historically,¹¹ Ammon, to whom Socrates relates him, can be identified with Zeus, “a dispenser of wisdom and knowledge.”¹² Meanwhile, Theuth is a known god of wisdom¹³ with strong associations with balance.¹⁴ Thus, perhaps exploring the nature of writing through the opposing perspectives of these two characters, wise balance can be created: through Theuth’s drive to the future, and Thamus’ responsible skepticism. Each god comes from their own perspective of wisdom to explore a way forward for mankind, and the reader must bring these two halves together into balance in order for mankind to fully develop and move forward appropriately.

1.2 PHAEDRUS RIDING THE PLATONIC CHARIOT

There is a parallel to be drawn here, to the Platonic chariot (*Phaedr.* 246a–254e), an allegory which appears earlier in the dialogue, through which Socrates suggests how challenges might be faced through developing our sense of wisdom (*Sophia*). There are multiple interpretations of this allegory, but simply put, a charioteer contends with two winged horses to pull his chariot. One horse (a white horse) is noble (and well behaved), the other (a black horse) characteristically opposite (rebellious) (*Phaedr.* 246a–b). Unsurprisingly, this causes the driver difficulty in steering his chariot to enlightenment.¹⁵ The two horses represent (de-

¹¹ Theissen 2002.

¹² Partington 1995: 54.

¹³ Bull 2018; Stadler 2012.

¹⁴ For instance, in his relationship to Ma’at, goddess of balance, as Cline & O’Connor (2006: 127) observe; in his adjudicating godly disputes; and as Budge’s (1969: 403) early work identifies, in Theuth’s role at the weighing assessment of truth in a human heart.

¹⁵ Lebeck 1972.

pending on your exact translation) “Desire”, and “Drive”, the sort of passions or motivations, apparently, good (white horse) and bad (black horse), that can move us to action in life. The charioteer that attempts to discipline and steer them is the mind or true self¹⁶: that is, they represent “Reason.” When the charioteer attempts to steer these winged horses “either the mind brindles the two into balance, or they drag it with the charioteer into the abyss.”¹⁷

However, the relationships between these entities can be considered as more complex than a good horse, a bad horse, and a struggling charioteer. It is true that much traditional scholarship has presented the metaphor as the mind’s (charioteer) struggle to navigate between our divine (white horse) and baser (black horse) instincts.¹⁸ But, more recent interpretations have explored the interrelationship of the horses and the potentially positive or useful impacts that the black horse might provide.¹⁹ For instance, even in cases where the horses are characterized as needing guidance (to differing degrees) in the form of order and an organizing principle, such as that argued in Zaborowski,²⁰ the conclusion is drawn that the fall can actually be the result of the charioteer’s own weakness, and not the fault of the horses.²¹

The scholar Ferrari argues, “The essential point of contrast between the charioteer and rebellious horse is ... between that in us which aims

¹⁶ Friedlander 2015: 193.

¹⁷ Friedlander 2015: 193. Although there are significant differences between these models, in a modern context, some scholars have suggested it can be helpful to think of these agents in terms of the more familiar Freudian concepts of ‘id’ (as the dark horse), ‘ego’ (charioteer), and ‘superego’ (as the white horse). For example, Simon (1974) provides a comparison for these ideas, and further points to Georgiade’s (1934) research exploring the nature of the relationship between Plato’s and Freud’s works.

¹⁸ In Fowler’s (1925) translation, the black horse is translated as ‘evil,’ and Lebeck’s (1972) work on the *Phaedrus* also seems to take this perspective that the black horse is the problematic entity in the composite.

¹⁹ For instance, Nussbaum (1986) and Ferrari (1987) both suggest the black horse plays a useful role. Belfiore (2006), not only observes the black horses utility to the chariot, but seems to suggest Socrates would have an affinity with the black horse.

²⁰ Zaborowski 2016. The important observation of the white horse’s own autonomy in the composite plays a significant role in this argument, and leads to a greater appreciation for the charioteer’s role and responsibility.

²¹ Zaborowski 2016: 196.

at how best the life of the whole person should go and that which looks only to as immediate a satisfaction as possible.”²² That is, as both horses supply movement to the chariot (and perhaps the white horse does not fight against the charioteer’s focus on more long-term benefits), the black horse seems primarily interested in short term gains and thus requires more disciplining from the charioteer.²³ Though, perhaps it is reasonable to go one step further, and suggest that part of the value of the rebellious horse’s nature is that it steers us away from conformity and forces us to pay attention to what is happening around us in the moment: the valuable offering of the black horse, with all its capacity to push us in new directions should not be underestimated or simply dismissed as the sole creator of difficulty. If we characterize the well-behaved horse as well-behaved because it is compliant to the charioteer we can see immediately the challenge of viewing the white horse as solely a positive influence, and the black horse as solely a negative influence, on our direction. Compliance can lead to significant challenges, just as too much rebellious nature can. And acting with only a long-term vision without appreciation and responsiveness to our immediate environment is equally problematic.²⁴ It is further worth observing that “it is always the black horse who initiates movement... The white horse holds itself back... and only moves forward when compelled by the black horse.”²⁵ The energy and drive of the black horse is as vital to the chariots’ success as the noble behavior of the white horse. Thus, the relationship between the charioteer and the horses can be viewed from an entangled perspective in which both of the horses and the charioteer play important and interconnected roles: the more reckless and desirous aspects of the self, driving us forward, and tamed by the charioteer of reason while restrained by the white horse, in combination with the restrained noble aspects of the self, coaxed forward by the black horse and guided by the

²² Ferrari 1987: 201. Ferrari and Zaborowski disagree on some elements of the relationship, but are certainly in accord over the necessity of recognising its complexity.

²³ Hall 2013: 59.

²⁴ Even if we take Zaborowski’s (2016) point that the white horse chooses this obedient behaviour, we are still left with the potential dearth of imperfection that might serve us in an imperfect world.

²⁵ Belfiore 2006: 186–190.

charioteer, become the wisdom which presides over decision-making in life. Balance becomes key. As Belfiore describes:

the charioteer produces in the soul an equilibrium between the opposing tendencies of restraint, represented by the white horse, and bold movement, represented by the black horse. Each of these tendencies is harmful when excessive and lacking proper guidance but necessary and useful to the soul when properly trained and balanced by the opposing extreme.²⁶

Through this lens, the two characters of Plato's story share important attributes of movement and restraint with these winged equines that must be tempered: Theuth like the black horse, and Thamus, like the white. Theuth offers impassioned drive, recklessly charging in new directions with new ideas and innovations. It is Theuth who, like the black horse, initiates movement. Indeed, it is possible that Theuth may be further likened to the black horse, given that Belfiore observes that "Socrates describes the black horse as having a number of satyr-like characteristics... [and] resembles as satyr in being a mixture of the bestial and the divine."²⁷ Theuth, half god, half bird, is a character aligned with the Greek Hermes²⁸: a god well-known throughout Greece for his association with satyrs, and with the god Pan.²⁹

Thamus Ammon, meanwhile offers a restrained approach that cautiously seeks to mitigate any damage that might come about and must be cajoled by the black horse of Theuth, to move beyond his conservative approach.³⁰ We may further associate Thamus with the white horse through the use of an apparent pun: Thamus (Θαμοῦς) sounds distinctly like Thymos (Θυμός), the notion of spirit that is the white horse, suggesting, perhaps, a semantic link between them. Tangential evidence

²⁶ Belfiore 2006: 187. Hall (2018: 78) provides a useful discussion on Belfiore's extension of Ferrari's correspondence between the three classes from the Republic with the three parts of the soul in the *Phaedrus*.

²⁷ Belfiore 2006: 187.

²⁸ Leary 2010: 101 identifies the association with Hermes Trismegistus.

²⁹ Mallory & Adams 2006.

³⁰ Though probably a coincidental red herring, Thamus position in Upper Egypt suggests he may have worn the White crown (although as lord of the two lands he would have been entitled to the double crown), while Theuth lived in the black lands – the Nile's fertile delta.

may also suggest a temporal relationship: while Theuth's visionary path suggests his orientation toward the future moving in any potential direction that takes his innovating interest, Thamus' focus on slow conservatism and unwillingness to move forward represents the past – an element further identifiable if we consider that Thamus may have been named for one of Rameses the Great's sons, who was an ancient archaeologist figure known for his relationship to history and memory;³¹ and Theuth, known to the Egyptians as having a relationship with time,³² invents a gift whose utility lies in accessing memory at some future point.³³

In any event, it is wisdom that must prevail over both horses. Theuth must be calmed and reasoned with, Thamus must be coaxed forward: the two horses must be made a team. But if Theuth and Thamus are the black and white horse, who is their charioteer? Ostensibly, given that the narrative is directed at him, it is Phaedrus who must now practice his chariot driving, though, like Phaedrus, we are certainly taken along for the ride. Like a good charioteer, Phaedrus must empathize with, and appreciate, both his horses, and manage them effectively, if a successful future is to be assured. Socrates has effectually taken his charioteering lesson, taught earlier in the dialogue, and now offered it in a pedagogical experiment for Phaedrus: an applied learning exercise where Phaedrus can practice bringing his horses into balance in a real-world situation. Belfiore observes that "Socrates suggests that the task of the charioteer is to guide both horses in the orderly movement of a dance inspired by the gods."³⁴ And here are two gods inspiring such a dance, from Phaedrus.

1.3 PEDAGOGY OVER CRITIQUE

It seems reasonable, then, that the story is constructed not necessarily as a censure of writing and technology,³⁵ but rather uses its dual nature,

³¹ Theissen 2002: 59.

³² Hornung 1982: 155.

³³ Such temporal notions are not entirely removed from the daily motion of the heavenly bodies, Egyptian solar barques, or indeed, daily path of the Sun chariot across the sky.

³⁴ Belfiore 2006: 187

³⁵ Indeed, there are balancing insights against this interpretation that should be considered. In addition to Stachler's (2013) compelling argument on the ambiguity of writ-

to explore the potential benefits and challenges that might be visited on mankind as a result of such innovation, and to foster a discussion of the mechanisms necessary to ensure mankind implements the invention responsibly and appropriately: that is, with wisdom (Sophia).³⁶ As Øyvind Rabbås observes, “it is conspicuous how often he [Socrates] talks about instruction, from the perspective either of the teacher... or of the learner.”³⁷ In this regard, it seems appropriate to view the anecdote as a pedagogical intervention, an assessment of wisdom, appearing toward the end of the dialogue, that allows Phaedrus to test his understanding of the conceptual teachings Socrates has earlier imparted. Phaedrus must appreciate both halves of the argument weighing their merits carefully: he must wisely bring both horses into alignment.

That the theme of oppositions moderated by wisdom is presented in the very opening of the Theuth and Thamus anecdote should set the tone for appreciating further oppositions, and their inter-related nature, in the story. Further, we are presented with the critical importance of employing educational exercises that reflect real world conundrums – not simply the value of discussing theoretical ideas – as vital to developing and honing wisdom. Indeed, Rabbås uses the helpful term “curriculum for ethical citizenship”³⁸ in reference to Socrates’ discussions. Socrates intends wisdom as a tool for daily life, not merely a conceptual entity that one occasions to think about when engaged in intellectual pursuits. To co-opt a term from the educationalist Dewey³⁹, in this instance, for Plato, philosophy is life. A philosopher must drive their chariot along its

ing explored through the differing approaches of the German Tübingen School and American Straussians, Searle (2003: 1181) puts forth an alternative interpretation on Thamus’ own failings. But, in even simpler terms, perhaps it is useful to observe that the criticism offered up in Plato’s text about the negatives of writing is a presentation offered by one character to another, and merely serves a narrative purpose to spur the argument – a technique of which Socrates is notoriously fond – so does not automatically reflect a view on behalf of Plato or Socrates for the censuring of writing. Indeed, somewhat ironically, the dialogue is, itself, written down.

³⁶ Clements 2022. That discussion also specifically outlines the narrative’s potential for civics and ethics education.

³⁷ Rabbås 2010: 29.

³⁸ Rabbås 2010: 35.

³⁹ Dewey’s quote “Education is Life,” appears in his 1893, “Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal.”

daily course, not simply when navigating obvious challenges, but taking care in each moment to incarnate an ethics, inspired divinely beyond the everyday, into everyday experience.

2. AMBIGUITY: STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS, INVENTION

The ability to consider and value opposing perspectives is thus recognized as integral to the exercise of good decision-making. But we must also consider another feature of oppositions, that is, their ambiguity. Plato employs specific words and phrases that can be interpreted in more than one way—often in direct opposition. The scholar, Tanja Staehler, observes that Plato intended to explore writing’s ambiguity.⁴⁰ But through exploring the ambiguity of writing, Plato is able to serve another purpose, he is also able to present the challenges of everyday decision-making: of living the practice of wisdom, that is, the practical wisdom of *Phronesis* (φρόνησις). This is important because it draws attention not simply to the theoretical components of wisdom (*Sophia*), but to the challenging pragmatics arising from the ethical imperative required of *Phronesis*: an implicit theme of intellectual and ethical responsibility in decision-making.⁴¹

It is worth considering how Socrates frames the ambiguity of writing as he opens the anecdote. Introducing his characters, he lists the many accomplishments of Theuth: numbers, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, dice games, and eventually arriving at writing (*Phaedr.* 274d), which is especially singled out for further discussion. In the Benjamin Jowett (1892) translation – later revised by Hayden Pelliccia (2000) – writing is helpfully identified as Theuth’s “great discovery,”⁴² while in the Fowler translation, “most important of all, letters.”⁴³ It is difficult to imagine that Socrates intends at once to uphold writing as an important discovery

⁴⁰ Staehler 2013.

⁴¹ See Clements 2022: 773. It is worth observing that the expression of such a moral imperative in decision-making has also be noted throughout the dialogue in terms of moral psychology, see Waterfield’s (2002) translation.

⁴² Pelliccia 2000: 189.

⁴³ Fowler 1925.

among all these other discoveries of utility, and valuable enough for such a significant conversation to follow, and simultaneously suggest through Thamus' criticisms that Theuth is mistaken in even having offered up written characters at all. Indeed, akin to more recent interpretations arguing the complexity of relationship between the black and white horse, recent scholarship into Theuth and Thamus suggests the anecdote may represent dichotomous ideas and a dismissal of, as Staehler puts it, "simple solutions" that do not account for the elaborate multiplicity requisite for utility in life, as opposed to a straightforward critique of writing.⁴⁴ Alternatively, perhaps Socrates is suggesting that because letters are a great discovery they simultaneously have great power to cause difficulties, and thus must be approached with the necessary care and respect for their power. The challenge is in seeing writing as great and, at the same time, weakening: its capacity to render the user (writer or reader) as both at once spectacularly powerful, and tremendously vulnerable. As Staehler puts it, "Ascribing ambiguity to the phenomenon of writing does not just mean that writing can be good or bad, helpful or harmful. It means that the very materiality which sustains and strengthens the written text, at the same time, makes it vulnerable."⁴⁵

Socrates suggestion that we must be so careful with writing suggests his appreciation of its immense power and goes some way to explaining the ferocity of his character Thamus, that such power must be regarded with extreme care:⁴⁶ serious moral implications are indicated. But ambiguity also, in the sense described by Staehler, "allows taking the objections against the written text seriously while still acknowledging

⁴⁴ Staehler 2013: 65.

⁴⁵ Staehler 2013: 89.

⁴⁶ Indeed, Thamus is afforded a significantly longer opportunity for argument: Thamus' lengthy, wordy, and impassioned response might make a Shakespearean actor salivate, next to the bit part of Theuth's straightforward 'walk on.' But, while Thamus is granted greater breadth to illustrate his point, it is also possible this is because the benefits of writing – such as ease of information transfer, or memory aid – already seemed obvious and required far less elaboration. Staehler (2013: 89) notes that even philosophy itself may be indebted to writing. Meanwhile the challenges that must be approached as a result of its introduction (such as de-contextualization) require careful consideration to recognize. As I have previously discussed (2022), even after thousands of years of experience with communications technologies, humanity still struggles to take account of the risks it presents.

Theuth's excitement about his invention."⁴⁷ The value of both viewpoints is acknowledged as potentially correct, despite their irreconcilability. As Staehler observes "the challenge of ambiguity is that the conflicting elements cannot be brought to a synthesis."⁴⁸ This is the struggle of the charioteer, even though he can appreciate both perspectives, balancing them will prove a strenuous task.

Staehler's term to explain the relationship of these opposites is also useful because it incorporates a further element. The term "ambiguous" also characterizes the unknown, and unknowable, nature of what occurs next in the dichotomies with which we are presented. Staehler observes how writing is introduced as an invention, and certainly this immediately draws attention to its dichotomous nature – inventions have the potential to be helpful or harmful.⁴⁹ But perhaps more importantly to this current discussion is Staehler's point that, "An invention opens up a realm of possibilities that had not existed beforehand."⁵⁰ When we approach the ambiguous, we must take the unknown into account, and be prepared for the potential that we have missed or misunderstood something. We must acknowledge our fallibility, but further, we must develop alertness and preparedness for the potential undiscovered or novel challenges that may also suddenly arise on our path: the aforementioned temporal relationship postulated between Theuth and Thamus in which both past and potential future must be reconciled for the present.

When we approach the chariot metaphor of Phaedrus' examination with these concerns, wisdom becomes the guide to clarify confusion, and to formulate readiness for the unknown. Ambiguity is an inherent part of the chariot metaphor. Depending upon how we view the opposing horses, their natures hold the potential to be either good or bad. As previously discussed, the restraint of the white horse is helpful at reigning in the black horse, but problematic for prompting movement. The black horse's movement is helpful to promote momentum, but challenging because it must be fiercely reined in. But additionally, this team possesses the potential to go in any direction. Their path is unknown, because while their aim is clear, the trip to arrive there, and the subsequent events and

⁴⁷ Staehler 2013: 92.

⁴⁸ Staehler 2013: 90.

⁴⁹ Staehler 2013: 85.

⁵⁰ Staehler 2013: 85.

occurrences they will face, are all matters that could unfold in a myriad of ways. When Socrates discusses what happens as the chariot drivers attempt their journey, he describes numerous issues, not least of which are the dangers of being trampled by other, struggling or competitive, charioteers (*Phaedr.* 248b). Wisdom must take on an appreciation of the unknown and unknowable events that will come into one's path. It is not enough to know how to manage the chariot, we must also be prepared to drive the chariot into the face of the unknown, aware that there will be obstacles or challenges for which we may not have planned or which are unfamiliar, including the unexpected behaviors of others. Charioteers must cultivate an awareness of their surroundings, and sustained alertness in the face of the unknown.

Phaedrus must take all these factors into account and prove careful and consistent in his driving. He must maintain his interest and respect for arguments posed both by Theuth and by Thamus. As he cannot know how writing will be received, or how it may be applied in all situations, he must also account for this "unknown-ness." Thus, he must continue his movement forward as Theuth suggests, but equally, he must be alert to the potential dangers that Thamus observes, including those drivers who are not yet capable of seeing the divine: that is, those who will use writing in surprisingly injurious or devastatingly thoughtless ways. Phaedrus must take care that his own chariot is able to avoid the pitfalls created by others in addition to the challenge of managing his own horses. If he fails, Socrates has already warned that the charioteer runs the risk of crashing and succumbing to forgetfulness (*Phaedr.* 248c). Indeed, a concern that the consequence of failing to manage the situation accordingly will result in forgetfulness is precisely what Thamus also warns about in the later anecdote (*Phaedr.* 275a). Bearing this concern in mind, it is to forgetfulness that we turn next. First, by examining the elixir (pharmakon) of memory and forgetfulness in medicine, and subsequently, by considering forgetfulness' impact on our life and soul.

3.1 REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING IN THE PHARMAKON

Plato uses another ambiguous word to describe writing, “pharmakon”: a drug with the potential to cure and restore life, or to poison and cause death. In the anecdote, it is proposed as an elixir for memory, or, dangerously, a draught that can cause forgetfulness (*Phaedr.* 275b). The ambiguity of pharmakon is well-established in the literature,⁵¹ and it is beyond the bounds of this paper to expound fully on that here. Suffice to say that pharmakon’s dual nature makes it equally capable of giving life or spurring death, and in the Theuth and Thamus anecdote, the pharmakon of writing is characterized specifically as an elixir for memory or forgetfulness, which equally evokes a notion of life and death. Thus, we have yet more sets of ambiguities to add to the anecdote’s account: remembering and forgetting, and life and death.

Drawing a parallel between writing, and a form of medicine with opposing outcomes, Socrates is able to draw focus toward the critical nature of the decision-making problem he has put to Phaedrus using medicine as an exemplar. In order for a pharmakon to have the desired effect, a physician must use their skill to correctly choose their course of action, weighing up potential opposing results. It is the wisdom of a physician in administering the drug that is the director of outcomes that sit in opposition to one another: helpful or harmful. This ambiguity also plays to the unknown. “Then, as today, physicians often had to face uncertainty in their practice when choosing the right treatment for their patients.”⁵² Decisions were made based on personal circumstances (case by case) but using previous experience to assist. Physicians had to make their decisions with care, appreciating that while helpful, previous experience could also be misleading. Indeed, an interesting discussion with sympathy to this view occurs in Plato’s dialogue, *The Statesman*, and is explored in this context by political philosopher Paul Stern: the physician

⁵¹ See, for instance the well-known work of Derrida (1966), or Rinella (2012). I have previously remarked (2022) that Derrida’s interpretation of Socrates’ argument on the pharmakon can also be seen in modern social phenomena, such as those described by Pinker (2007).

⁵² Tsiompanou, Marketos 2013: 290.

must account for the potential of change and unknown outcomes.⁵³ Stern draws particular attention to discussion of “those things from Zeus that are somehow other than the usual,”⁵⁴ that is, those instances where prior experience cannot assist. Stern further observes arguments made regarding the necessity of a physician to adjust their practice as necessary, unfettered by previous instructions they may have committed to writing, referring specifically to a Platonic notion of Phronesis (φρόνησις) in order to discern an appropriate course of action.⁵⁵ The complicated decision-making expected of the physician with all its ambiguity, and the decision-making expected of the philosophical student, certainly appear to be linked for Plato. This link we might also consider from the perspective of the chariot metaphor. For Plato himself suggests in the *Gorgias* that the medical art, in attending the needs of the patient, uses action and reason (*Gorgias* 501a), and we might appreciate that a similar dynamic is at play in viewing the ambiguous nature of drugs administered by a professional, employing this balanced approach: that is, like the student-philosopher, the physician is driving his own chariot of action and reason.

Indeed, Socrates has, only moments before his Theuth and Thamus anecdote, observed the similarities between healing and rhetoric (at 370b): discussing the parallel uses of medicine and diet, with belief and virtue. Our attention is drawn toward the parallel between medicine and writing just before we arrive at the Theuth and Thamus anecdote as a type of last-minute exam review in advance of Phaedrus' test; offering him a pedagogical hint at where he may look to recognize the ambiguous and irreconcilable composite put before him in the examination anecdote to come. That Socrates should follow this by employing a discussion that involves Theuth, widely known as god of both letters and medicine,⁵⁶ suggests that Plato intends this relationship between letters and medicine.

The parallel between the role of wisdom in *techne* and memory in *Gorgias*, and the role of wisdom in *techne* and memory in the Theuth and

⁵³ Stern refers here to *Stat.* 295d.

⁵⁴ Stern 1997: 269.

⁵⁵ Stern 1997: 269.

⁵⁶ Shampo, Kyle 1991.

Thamus anecdote is also apparent. Theuth's medicinal prescription, his *techne*, for memory is deemed inadequate as Thamus laments its likelihood of causing false memory, or worse, forgetfulness (*Phaedr.* 275a).⁵⁷ This interplay between the capacity to remember and to forget becomes a central theme of the Theuth and Thamus anecdote, as the two characters consider what constitutes "true" memory, and what amounts to merely the appearance of it. A similar distinction is made in *Gorgias* between *techne* and memory. In *Gorgias*, a *techne* requires a certain amount of intellectual engagement with wisdom, while memory is merely experience of what has gone before.⁵⁸ This seems largely the concern that Thamus has in mind when he suggests that the memory Theuth seeks to capture is not true memory, but merely a record of what has occurred that requires a further piece of context to be understood. Thamus reminds us that true memory is "written in the heart" with wisdom, while the memory Theuth pursues through his letters, which are external characters, is merely memory as a record. Something is required to properly activate these external characters in order for them to be considered *techne*: the application of wisdom.

It is worth pointing out that "an aspect of Hippocratic Medicine that was innovative at the time relates to the practice of collecting detailed records of the patients Hippocrates cared for. This practice marked a significant shift from the then traditional oral transmission of knowledge."⁵⁹ Such record keeping allowed valuable new opportunities in the preservation of medical knowledge and Plato was certainly well aware of the

⁵⁷ Socrates goes on to suggest that writing may simply be wholly ineffectual in the absence of one with the knowledge to interpret it, but such inability at an important juncture is equally problematic. He subsequently concerns himself with writing's inability to protect itself, though again, equally, this can lead to its own set of dangers. See, for instance, Clements (2022) on how such issues persist in digital age life.

⁵⁸ This joining together of the concepts of memory, wisdom and *techne* may predate Socrates. James Allen observes that "Plutarch credits Anaxagoras, who was an older contemporary of Socrates, with the idea that, though inferior to the animals in other respects, we are able to make them serve us by experience (*empeiria*), memory (*mneme*), wisdom (*sophia*), and art (*techne*) (*De fortuna* 3.98=DK21b) ... [but] we cannot be sure what words Anaxagoras used, let alone what he meant by them" (Allen, 2020: 53). Regardless, there is clearly a long running inter-relationship between these concepts.

⁵⁹ Tsiompanou, Marketos 2013: 290.

potential benefits of writing in this context.⁶⁰ Again, it would seem odd for Plato to acknowledge the unfolding usefulness of writing in medicine while simultaneously making an argument for its censure. Rather, it seems likely that Plato is suggesting that it must be carefully considered, and properly implemented with the appropriate wisdom, to be of value. Just like a well-driven chariot, these internal (written on the heart) and external (writing) characters can also work together, if harnessed and disciplined correctly.⁶¹ Even in their apparent opposition, the potential of a reciprocal relationship is apparent: they can feed into each other in a loop that keeps both active and alive.⁶² External written characters can prolong our record and preserve events encouraging us to reflect on what has gone before, but what is written on our hearts must properly re-contextualize our experience, and bring truth to our understanding and knowledge, encouraging us to hone our writing and communication techniques so they are more precise and nuanced.⁶³

By identifying writing with *Pharmakon* then, we can see not only the connection between writing being both good and bad, but also a distinct grouping together of the concepts of writing, invention, and drug – all of which are employed in a way that suggest a shared conceptual identity: that is, all of these things are ambiguous in their nature, and it is the task of the one doing the administering (the chariot driver) to behave with wisdom and knowledge to ensure the desired outcome. The invention, writing, or drug rely on our good judgement to bring about the positive desired results. And we must aspire to this level of good decision-making if we are to succeed. Far from dismissing writing, Socrates leaves precious hints through his associating writing with invention, and then *pharmakon*, that writing must be considered through the offerings of both horses, both *Theuth* and *Thamus*, and wisely implemented accordingly.

⁶⁰ For instance, his aforementioned discussion in the *Statesman* (295c) draws attention to a physician leaving behind written notes for his patients.

⁶¹ It is useful to point out that Socrates has informed us very specifically in the chariot metaphor of the value of using memory correctly, and its value to the philosopher at (249c). “Now a man who employs such memories rightly is always being initiated into perfect mysteries and he alone becomes truly perfect.”

⁶² Staehler 2013: 90.

⁶³ Clements 2022.

Notably, the medical art, and the Mythology of Egypt are tailored specifically to Phaedrus' interests, making them useful pedagogical tools. Phaedrus is friends with the physician Eryximachus and interested in Greek mythology and astronomy.⁶⁴ The exam is personal, just like the lesson has been, designed to reach out to Phaedrus' interests, prior knowledge and experiences, and motivations.⁶⁵ The trail of breadcrumbs through Phaedrus' personal knowledge and interests now serves as a beacon of reminder for all that he has learned throughout the dialogue: perhaps not true memory, but "an elixir of reminding" that might help him approach the problem, as long as he remembers that true memory must come from his heart.

3.2 REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING AS HUMAN MORTALITY

This medical approach also draws our attention to the significance and finality of consequences in such decision-making. In medicine, as in life, decisions can literally lead to life or death circumstances. Thus, the use of the medical art also tacitly suggests the severity of life or death consequences should Phaedrus fail to develop his course of thought and action wisely. The *pharmakon* can hurt or heal; inventions can be good to the point of improving our lives, or bad to the point of destroying them; and writing may help to remember or forget. To appreciate this last, we must be aware that, like medicine, remembering and forgetting also have important links to life and death: for the ancient Greeks, memory had a special relationship to legacy, life, and immortality.⁶⁶

Here again, both gods have an important, and diametrically opposing, part to play within the composite of existence. The scholar Obryk points out that Theuth and Thamus have divine roles regarding life and death. Theuth has responsibility over "the domain of death... On the other hand, Thamus-Ammon, the god of the sun, Theuth's counterpart, and – following his fusion with Ra – the creator god" represents

⁶⁴ Sallis 1997.

⁶⁵ The education scholar Switzer (2004) would likely equate this pedagogy to "individualized instruction."

⁶⁶ Obryk 2017: 81.

life.⁶⁷ Indeed, “Socrates himself brings the dichotomy of life and death within his discourse on writing. He speaks in terms of lifeless and living speech.”⁶⁸ True memory suggests a divine and life-giving quality, forgetfulness leads to the dangers of death and a loss of legacy.

To return to our discussion of the chariot metaphor and forgetfulness with a brief summation of our discussion at the end of the section on ambiguity and where it has taken us: Socrates has earlier in the dialogue related the mortal and immortal purposes of the chariot (*Phaedr.* 246b) and the deleterious effects of forgetting on the chariot. Then, he has brought us to a discussion of the mortal and immortal qualities of words, and how those words may impact our remembering and forgetting. Will words preserve our lives, or bring about death? Phaedrus must consider, not merely the words themselves, but the deeply significant, life or death consequences that his exam answer may bring about. If he fails to manage his decision-making effectively, his chariot will falter, and he will fall into the abyss.

And Socrates does not leave us without some insight into these consequences. Socrates alludes to an even greater impact that forgetfulness may have: the impact of our decisions on the soul. In his discussion of the chariot, Socrates makes us aware that forgetfulness has a dangerous property that causes destruction of the soul and leads the charioteer into chaos. Socrates has earlier informed us (*Phaedr.* 248c) that when the soul is weighed down with forgetfulness, it loses its wings and falls to earth.⁶⁹ When we apply this in the context of the gift of writing discussed in the Theuth and Thamus anecdote, Socrates is here warning of the dire consequences that can impact even the soul if Theuth’s invention of letters is not used wisely.

This becomes even more apparent when the forgetfulness and remembering opposition turns to a discussion of the internal and external qualities of writing: that is, what is “written on the heart” and the characters that students will write “outside themselves” (*Phaedr.* 275a). This expression of opposites would seem to have particular relevance to Theuth, who holds an important role in examining the human heart

⁶⁷ Obryk 2017: 83.

⁶⁸ Obryk 2017: 83.

⁶⁹ Belfiore 2006: 188.

at the moment of judgement and recording its measure against that of a feather⁷⁰ – the lightness of a feather being requisite for access to the divine afterlife. That it is Thamus who warns Theuth of the damage that might be caused, should such care that what is written on the heart not be thought through properly, suggests a certain irony, or perhaps comedic intent.⁷¹ Interestingly, one of the many ironies Leroy Searle observes in the dialogue is that “Thamus, like the pretenders Socrates destroys in early dialogues, presumes without reflection that he already has all the wisdom he needs.”⁷²

There is a clear relationship in both stories (the anecdote, and in Egyptian myth), between what is in the heart, and the lightness of a feather: while Theuth measures the heart for truth against a feather to give access to the divine, so too are feathers requisite in order for Socrates’ chariot to fly to divine heights.⁷³ If forgetfulness takes hold, the chariot falls from the sky, and must re-grow its feathers in order to fly again. Similarly, if a feather is not light enough in Egyptian mythology as Theuth weighs it, the individual’s access to the divine is lost. Here too, Socrates has previously informed us, during his chariot metaphor, that it is love that regrows the horses feathers over vast periods of time (*Phaedr.* 249a). Thamus’ concern that writing will cause forgetfulness is a direct warning that the misapplication of writing (poor decision-making lacking in wisdom) has the capacity to damage the soul in ways that only love (ἔρῶν) and time (χρόνος) can repair.

As Phaedrus approaches his exam question, he must consider the long ranging impact of his decision, not only on daily lives, but also on the soul, bringing together a complete response that encompasses the entire being in a holistic way. But Phaedrus’ exam question has bearing on

⁷⁰ Differing interpretations suggest Thoth (Theuth) or Anubis could weigh the heart. Hurowitz (2000: 539) suggests the *Book of the Dead* (30B) states that Thoth provides a judgement. Interestingly, his argument identifies an alphabetic acrostic in Prov. 24:1–22 allowing conceptual connections between Thoth’s weighing of the heart and Biblical scripture, both of which pertain to wisdom.

⁷¹ Rabbås (2010) notes a playful tone in the dialogue.

⁷² Searle, 2003: 1181.

⁷³ For instance, Plato refers to the horses at 246c as ἐπτερωμένη (furnished with feathers) and at 248c refers to the loss of wings as πτερορρυήση (a process of moulting feathers). Further discussion of the feather’s development occurs at 251b.

more than the individual level. The charioteer of Thamus and Theuth is charged with making a decision that will impact all the people of Egypt. Indeed, as Theuth insists that letters be distributed, and Thamus is concerned as to their impact, we must reflect that these horses are concerned with the community: the good governance of Egypt, and its future, are at stake. Phaedrus' exam answer needs to consider not simply the individual, but must be applied to the community as well. If Phaedrus falters and his chariot falls into the abyss, all those for whom he is responsible, will also suffer, and it is toward this concern of governance that we finally turn our chariot's investigation.

4. MICRO AND MACRO GOVERNANCE: THE ISOMORPHIC RELATIONSHIP

The introduction of writing is a further matter of concern between the micro and macro levels of governance, that Theuth and Thamus are able to help identify and explore, for student philosophers. That is, as part of his exam, Phaedrus is expected not merely to think about the ways in which decisions impact individuals, all the way down to their souls, but he must also consider how decisions taken, all the way up to the macro level, impact communities. That is, the full spectrum of these opposite arenas in composite: the self, and the community. The question of whether to accept writing and distribute it amongst the population, the very question Theuth and Thamus are debating, is one of governance.

Plato's exploration of the isomorphic relationship between micro and macro systems is expounded upon at length in the *Republic*, and indeed well-discussed in the literature.⁷⁴ And in Phaedrus' test, we can also see the micro and macro levels wrapped up together as Socrates points us toward another important character: that of the helmsman, or pilot (κυβερνήτη).

Socrates has used the helmsman concept in his other contemporary works, such as the *Republic* (488–489d), to discuss governance and the role of good decision making. The helmsman steers the ship to benefit

⁷⁴ See for instance: Pleshkov (2017) or Harrington (2016), for a sceptical interpretation see Huard (2007).

the group, despite the attempted interference and ignorance of those around him who are less educated, or less competent, decision-makers. As the virtue ethicist Charles Ess observes, “Plato uses the cybernetes as a primary model of ethical judgment – specifically, our ability to discern and aim towards the ethically-justified path in the face of a wide range of possible choices.”⁷⁵ Ess intends here a depiction of *phronesis*.⁷⁶ The cybernetes, then, must contend with the same ambiguity as the chariot driver, and equally, must employ the same level of wisdom, skill, and ethical concern. The Kubernetes appears in the *Phaedrus* (at 247c) as a part of the chariot metaphor, suggesting an intended inter-relationship between individual decision-making and decision-making at the level of governance, and an acknowledgement of their inter-connected isomorphic relationship.

Both Theuth and Thamus can play roles that assist in understanding the helmsman metaphor. Thamus, we have just been informed, governs all Egypt. He is tasked with making the decision as to what tools to use to successfully govern: a decision with vast impact on his people. In Egyptian mythology, practically speaking, Thamus is a boatman (through the association Socrates has informed us exists between Thamus and Ammon). That is, Ammon rides the Solar Barques: the ships that Ammon travelled on by day and night on his journey across the sky and through the underworld.⁷⁷

If Thamus is to be likened to the shipowner, then the aforementioned, apparently ironic, suggestion that Thamus has unintentionally alluded to – that he already has enough wisdom without having to contend with what the written word might offer – suggests that Thamus could equally be the uneducated public, who dismiss new ideas without reflection, and who lack the tools to know what is good for their ship. Theuth,

⁷⁵ Ess (2007: 15) provides a discussion of the relevance of this interpretation to Plato’s model of ethical judgement, as well as its modern digital relevance to facing such ethical problems through the use of Plato in the digital age.

⁷⁶ Ess 2007: 15.

⁷⁷ Spence 1915. Indeed, perhaps there is some similarity alluded to here between the Greeks, whose mythos described the sun being drawn by chariot (described in *Homeric Hymn* 31), and the Egyptian mythos in which the sun moved by boat: whether micro or macro, individual or community, both the boat and the chariot move us through our daily course.

meanwhile, rides beside Ammon in the barques offering tools to assist, such as his knowledge of the heavens. Indeed, Socrates informs us from the outset of his anecdote that Theuth is the inventor of astronomy: it is Thamus, the ship's owner, who defines a broad aim for the ship, and Theuth who provides the tools to steer. The two must work together for the good of their people.

It is perhaps further interesting that Socrates should chose to indicate Theuth's position as an astronomer, or stargazer, in the first instance, given that the stargazer, when employed in the ship of state metaphor, is intended as a philosopher. Belfiore informs us that Socrates himself is sometimes associated with the black horse of the chariot metaphor.⁷⁸ If Theuth is the black horse, it should perhaps come as no surprise that Plato may also choose to identify Theuth as a philosopher, perhaps in tacit recognition of the role that philosophers play in driving forward new ideas: they are inventors of thoughts, and the fruits of their labors can be equally dangerous in the wrong hands. Indeed, the pitfalls of the sailors in the ship of state metaphor that Plato sets out, who ignore the importance of stargazing, suggest we should not be so quick to dismiss Theuth's insights, or his gift of writing.

We are led toward concluding that this statesman Thamus, and this philosopher Theuth, must combine their offerings, just as Plato suggests is necessary for the Philosopher King in the *Republic* (5.473), as well as in the *Statesman* (311c) that “the direct interweaving of the characters of restrained and courageous men”⁷⁹ is requisite for successful governance – just as the restrained and courageous horses of the chariot must also be brindled together. The political and civic nature of these discussions harkens back to the very issues of governance with which Plato concerns himself in approaching Phaedrus' interests in politics from the beginning of the dialogue.⁸⁰ The written speeches are political, as are the codified laws; they have their place and their role. Speechmaking and writing are integral to the process of ruling, but their content must be

⁷⁸ Belfiore 2006: 199.

⁷⁹ Fowler 1921.

⁸⁰ For conceptual analysis of the anecdote's enduring utility for civics, and its potential for civic deployment in the digital age see: Clements 2022. For discussion of the enduring utility of these concepts as discussed in the *Statesman* for modern civic purposes see: Stern 1997.

wise and true, they must be accessed and interpreted with wisdom and truth, for their implications are so significant that they impact the communal citizenry, and each citizen, on every level; a significant political burden to recognize indeed, and one that invokes the aforementioned moral obligations of the chariot driver.

If the exam seems overwhelming, multi-faceted, and virtually impossible to complete, then perhaps we might consider one final thought in regards to the identity of Thamus Ammon. It is worth noting the insights of William Smith, one of the early researchers (1837) on Ammon who observed that he “was originally the leader and protector of flocks.” Ammon is a shepherd: a figure that Plato uses in the *Republic* (1.345d–e) to comment on both public and private leadership, and the true ruler’s distaste for being in authority:

τῆ δὲ ποιμενικῆ οὐ δῆπου ἄλλου του μέλει ἢ ἐφ’ ᾧ τέτακται, ὅπως τούτω τὸ βέλτιστον ἐκποριεῖ—ἐπεὶ τά γε αὐτῆς ὅστ’ εἶναι βελτίστη ἰκανῶς δῆπου ἐκπεπόρισται, ἕως γ’ ἂν μηδὲν ἐνδέρη τοῦ ποιμενικῆ εἶναι—οὕτω δὲ ὤμην ἔγωγε νυνδὴ ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι ἡμῖν ὁμολογεῖν πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν, καθ’ ὅσον ἀρχή, μηδενὶ ἄλλω τὸ βέλτιστον σκοπεῖσθαι ἢ ἐκείνῳ, τῷ [345ε] ἀρχομένῳ τε καὶ θεραπευμένῳ, ἐν τε πολιτικῆ καὶ ιδιωτικῆ ἀρχῆ. σὺ δὲ τοὺς ἀρχοντας ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν, τοὺς ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀρχοντας, ἐκόντας οἶει ἄρχειν.

Yet surely the art of the shepherd is concerned only with the good of his subjects; he has only to provide the best for them, since the perfection of the art is already ensured whenever all the requirements of it are satisfied. And that was what I was saying just now about the ruler. I conceived that the art of the ruler, considered as ruler, whether in a state or in private life, could only regard the good of his flock or subjects; whereas you seem to think that the rulers in states, that is to say, the true rulers, like being in authority.⁸¹

If they must constantly exist in a pressured state of steering, if they must contend at once with the responsibilities of the ship of state, whilst equally burdened with the demands of steering the Platonic chariot in every matter before them, and the weight of the moral imperative of their responsibility to office, it is no surprise that true rulers would have

⁸¹ Transl. Jowett 1888.

no taste for the exhausting requirements of authority. It would take the godly strength of our characters Theuth and Thamus to manage such an enterprise, and even they run the risk of falling short in an eternal quest for the best and truest responses. How can a mere mortal like Phaedrus ever muster the resilience to but peek at a glimpse of such truth? Perhaps, in approaching this exam question, for Plato, it is enough to merely make the attempt.

5. IN SUMMARY

In exploring Theuth and Thamus' differing perspectives on the subject of writing, this paper has considered the wisdom that each character might offer, and the way in which these offerings might be drawn together, with ethical regard, to serve the people of Egypt. The two characters' behaviors, evocative of the horses from the dialogue's earlier chariot metaphor, suggest the anecdote can serve as a form of examination in which it is possible for Phaedrus to consider, through a real-world conundrum, the challenge of decision-making: bringing his own chariot into balance. He must consider the composite nature of the argument before him, seeing value through balancing both perspectives and understanding their composite nature. He can take insight from what both characters have in common: their interest in wisdom, and their concern for others. Appreciating the diametrically opposing viewpoints necessary to make a decision on this matter also prompts consideration of a quality of ambiguity, in which, not only must the two sides be brought into an impossible synthesis, but the unknown potentials of such a circumstance must further be considered. The consequential significance of this challenging decision-making process is explored through conceptual pairings such as remembering and forgetting, life and death, and the soul's rising and falling. These concepts are further related to medicine and its practice, which we can understand as requiring similar decision-making prowess.

Finally, we are drawn back to what these lessons mean, not simply to the individual, but to the community as well. As the theme of governance, central to the dialogue, is broached, Phaedrus must consider the role of Theuth and Thamus on the ship of state and explore the impact of writing on governance, as well as the overwhelming complexity of

contending with the various and deeply significant consequences of his decision to those under his care. The anecdote can test Phaedrus on the choices faced in life, and the responsibilities of office, but only if he is prepared to write truth in his heart.

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