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Plato on the Internet

I begin with a series of conversations I've either overheard or participated in. Usually they take place between parents and children, or between parents about their children.

- (1) "You should read, not just stare into that damn computer. Books force you to concentrate, to quietly imagine what it is you're reading, to think. Books slow you down and bring you into yourself. These web-sites and video-games of yours, they're all glitz and glitter. They do all your imagining for you, and they rush by at the speed of light. No wonder they're addictive. Pull the plug, pick up a book, and exercise your imagination."

- (2) "I heard you typing late last night. Facebooking again, are you? Don't you ever talk to anybody real? Do you really think you can communicate with someone who's no more than a name on the screen? It's not the same, you know, as standing face to face with someone, looking them in the eye, and really talking to them. Besides, there's all kind of crap on the computer. You don't know what kind of madman you're actually 'talking' to. It's totally unregulated, you know. So turn it off and go find a real person for yourself."

- (3) “You’re buying your books from Amazon.com? What about the bookstore downtown? It’s about to go out of business, you know, and it’s because of people like you. Yes, I realize it’s cheaper when you shop on-line for your books. But the owner of the bookstore actually knows something about her books, and she’d be glad to talk to you. When you buy from her your little act of commerce is also a social one. Buying things can be humanizing, you know, but not the way you do it.”
- (4) “Please, please don’t use the calculator on your computer when you do your math homework. It does all the work for you. Instead of exercising your mind, you’re letting it go soft. Instead of actually experiencing the relationships between number, or the points and lines of a graph, you’re only seeing the final product. Yes, it’s incredibly fast, but you’re missing out. Oh yeah, delete the spell-check as well. Pick up a dictionary once in a while. You might stumble on something unexpectedly beautiful, like an etymology.”
- (5) “What do you mean you’re not going to a real college? You’re just going to take courses on the Internet? And get credit for them? I don’t care how interactive it is, there’s no substitute for a flesh-and-blood teacher, who can get to know you, care about you, and then teach you. A machine can’t do that, can it? Besides, you haven’t left your room in years. Why don’t you give the outside world a try.”

I actually share some of the views expressed by the imaginary speaker. But arguing on behalf of them is not my intention here. Instead, two things strike me about these sorts of conversations. First, they each revolve around a central and similar complaint, which I will discuss shortly. Second, these sorts of conversations are strangely familiar to me. I've heard them before. But when? But where?

Déjà vu #1.

I remember my mother's voice of some 40 years ago. She would exhort me not to watch so much TV, and instead to pick up a book. She warned me that TV would weaken my mind, ruin my imagination, waste my potential.

I also remember when I first learned to use a typewriter, some 35 years ago. I never liked writing with a pen or pencil, and so as soon as I could, I escaped to the mechanical comfort and speed of a keyboard. My penmanship deteriorated almost totally and at this stage of my life I can barely write legibly. While I welcomed and was grateful for this transition, I have also felt strong pangs of regret when, for example, I had to write a personal letter-- a thank-you letter or a love letter or one of condolence-- to someone. I had to type it. It was disconcerting to see my personal feelings frozen in mechanically reproduced, thoroughly impersonal print.

I remember my grandfather's stories about growing up on a farm in Connecticut. The only way he and his family could get into town was by horse; a wagon in the summer, and a sled in the winter. I remember visiting that area of Connecticut, and thinking how great a loss was represented by the automobile. No longer did we slowly

work our way through the beautifully wooded hills. No longer did we have time to breathe the fresh air and appreciate the subtle changes in the colors of the foliage. Instead, we flew by it all on a highway in a car.

This is déjà vu #1 and, like the conversations with which I began, is probably familiar to many. The old often lament those modern technologies which cause the disappearance of what they knew in their youth. A technological innovation is an external device that expands our powers over the environment. At the same, however, it threatens to diminish precisely those internal powers that were used prior to the innovation.

Déjà vu #2.

Déjà vu #2 is more idiosyncratic. Hearing the endlessly repeated conversations and condemnations of the Internet, I'm reminded of old Plato, who lived some 2,400 years ago in Athens. He wrote a dialogue titled the *Phaedrus* in which, through his character of Socrates, he offered a criticism of what was then a relatively new technology: WRITING.

Here's the Platonic complaint. When writing was invented, it was advertised as being a fabulous new technology. Its inventor boasted that it would make people wiser by improving their memories. No longer would people have to rely on their own, highly fallible mental powers to store and then retrieve their data. Instead, they could write it all down, and then call it back up whenever they needed it. The far more reliable mechanism of writing would replace the precarious workings of the human mind.

In response, Plato had four basic criticisms:

1. Writing does not strengthen, it actually weakens our memories. It habituates its user to rely on a system of external symbols, and therefore the internal power of memory begins to atrophy. This point seems clearly substantiated by the experience of pre-literate cultures, where, for example, the minstrel or bard is capable of memorizing enormously long epic poems, and even by the experience of children who, before they can read and write, are capable of learning by heart any number of stories and songs. Indeed, this phrase, “learn by heart,” captures quite well what Plato was getting at, and what is the central theme of the conversations with which I opened. When we use our memories we activate what is inside of us. When we enlist the services of the technology of writing, we subordinate ourselves to something external, and thereby irrevocably weaken what is in us, what really belongs to us, what keeps us alive.
2. Writing makes us dumber. It does not offers real wisdom, but only what Plato calls “the appearance of wisdom.” Anything can be written down: notes on a lecture, a reminder that it’s Susie’s birthday tomorrow, the Gettysburg Address, or the date of the Spanish Armada. Because anything can be written down, there’s no way to discriminate between what is really worth writing down and remembering, and what is not. Because it is so powerful writing is also highly indiscriminate. By contrast, because it is so limited, memory is necessarily selective. You can’t remember everything. You can only remember things that really matter. Now, I realize full well that the notion of things “really mattering” is very complicated and

I'm not here going to say anything about it. Still, the point holds: writing is incapable of distinguishing between what is worth saving, and what is not. It is the wholesale, and therefore thoughtless, preservation of every bit of information that comes down the road.

3. Once something is written, it takes on a life of its own. Plato uses a metaphor here. The writer is the parent, and the writing is a child. Once written, the writing is like an orphan. It circulates among readers without being able to protect itself. It is “bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it.” If, for example, this particular essay gets into the wrong hands, someone might end up claiming (falsely) that Roochnik is a mindless Luddite who hates technology. I, the author, the father, won't be there to correct this reading of my work. Writing, in other words, is necessarily and inevitably subject to misinterpretation.

4. Writing can't refuse itself to anyone. As Plato puts it, writing says “only one and the same thing” to any and all. He uses a simile to clarify this point. Writing, he says, is like a painting. A painting stands still and “preserves a solemn silence” when someone looks at it. It is unable to answer any questions the viewer might have, and it has nothing to say about who will view it and who not. As a result, just as the third complaint had it, it is often terribly misunderstood. In fact, some people shouldn't read certain writings. But writing itself can do nothing to stop them. It's there for all to be inspected.

Plato summarizes these lines of attack by comparing writing, quite unfavorably, with speaking. Speaking is “the legitimate brother of the bastard” form of language, namely writing. Speaking is more basic, more original, and better than writing on all the four counts listed above.

- 1) When we speak we use words written “with intelligence *in* the mind of the learner, which is able to defend itself and knows to whom it should speak and before whom to be silent.” The preposition “in” is crucial. Speaking is the “living and breathing” dimension of language. When we speak to another human being we do not rely on an external symbolic system, and therefore we do not weaken what is “in” us.
- 2) Speaking, unlike writing, is able to be choosy. For example, any lecture whatsoever and in its entirety can easily be transcribed. By contrast, only a very few lectures, and only a few portions of any given lecture, are going to be counted as worth talking about.
- 3) Speaking can protect itself from being misinterpreted. If I’m talking to you, and it seems that you’re misunderstanding what I’m getting at, I can correct you before it’s too late. I can ask you, “does what I’m saying make sense?” and then check to see if it really does. Furthermore, in speaking I can always size up my audience and adjust the speech accordingly. If I am talking with a group of high-school students, I may well speak differently than I would when addressing a group of Plato scholars. If I

am talking to junior-high school students, I may choose another topic altogether, for they'd have no interest in this one. Writing can't make these sorts of decisions. As such it is, according to Plato, but a faint imitation of what a truer, more real, more authentic form of human communication: speaking to one another.

- 4) Speaking can refuse itself. If I decide that you're an inappropriate audience for what I have to say, I can just clam up and move on.

It should be clear now why I feel a twin sense of *déjà vu* when I hear people bad-mouthing the Internet. They are rehashing the oldest of complaints against any form of technology, namely Plato's criticisms of writing. The first criticism, that writing weakens our memories, recapitulates the basic pattern noted in the introductory conversations I described. A form of technology strengthens our abilities to control our environment in some ways (in the case of writing, by allowing us to record data to be preserved and then retrieved), but weakens our capacities in other ways. Precisely because it is so astonishingly powerful, surely this applies to the Internet to an extraordinarily high degree. Images fly by at blinding speed, calculations are made instantly, information retrieved effortlessly, graphs drawn perfectly, communication effected easily, spelling mistakes discovered automatically, and so on. As a consequence the internal powers of the human mind-- reading, thinking, adding, talking, spelling—are gradually weakened and will eventually just fade away. These days no one actually learns anything “by heart.” When the complainers complain this is what they are targeting: the heartlessness of the information age.

More strikingly applicable to the Internet, however, are the final three criticisms of writing. Indeed, they need only to be multiplied by a billion and they'll fit perfectly.

The Internet is amazingly indiscriminate. Anything-- your autobiography, an advertisement for kitty-litter, a recipe for making bombs from fertilizer-- can be posted on a web-site. Mountains, galaxies of worthless information are lurking there.

The Internet is the ultimate orphanage. Web-sites are little babies, circulating the globe at warp speed, unprotected by their missing parents. All that information out there, and anyone can find any of it simply by stumbling on the right string of characters to search, and then use it for any purpose whatsoever.

It is at the very essence of the Internet not to refuse access to anyone. It's a gigantic barrel of information which "says only one and the same thing" to all who want check it out.



There is, of course, one strange feature of Plato's critique of writing: it itself is written. As such, either he was a really bad writer who entirely forgot what he was thinking while he was writing it down, or he thought that somehow his own writing was able to circumvent the very problems with writing he himself had diagnosed. I happen to believe that Plato was, if nothing else, a wonderfully crafty writer, and so I certainly don't think he was simply careless in the *Phaedrus*. I thus favor the second option.

It would be extremely interesting to investigate this thesis and investigate how Plato's dialogues are able (1) to enhance rather than diminish the reader's internal faculties; (2) to discriminate, to make value judgments about what they write; (3) to protect themselves; (4) to discriminate among its readers, and even to refuse to address some readers. Again, I think Plato was an ingenious writer, and perhaps he did manage to accomplish these tasks. (If he did, it was by writing works which were essentially multi-layered.) But I'm not here to discuss the details and literary character of Plato's dialogues. Instead, I want to extract only one point from the fact that Plato writes a criticism of writing: he cannot simply and unequivocally be saying that writing is all bad. Instead, his message has to be more complicated.

The complexities of Plato's attitude towards writing are captured in his use of a wonderfully ambiguous Greek word: *pharmakon*, which is the root of our word "pharmacy," but means either "medicinal drug" or "poison." Writing, Plato says twice in the *Phaedrus*, is a *pharmakon*. This means that writing is not simply good or bad, neither simply a medicinal drug nor a poison. It can be either. If used properly, as Plato must believe he himself used it in his own dialogues, is the former. If used improperly, as say Aristotle used it, then it is the latter.

Realizing this about Plato's critique of writing, and combining it with the understanding that this critique is perfectly applicable to the Internet today, we arrive at a somewhat different understanding of the situation, which I would generalize as follows: every technological innovation, from writing to the Internet, is a *pharmakon*. Technology itself is double-edged. Every time we invent something new, we begin to rely on something outside of ourselves and therefore run the risk of some internal

capacity atrophying. Every time we devise a nifty machine, we face the possibility that we will lose control of it.

The kinds of conversations I reported at the beginning of this essay are, in their basic pattern, the same as ones that have no doubt been held throughout history. We lament the way the Internet leads to the demise of reading. But Plato lamented that writing leads to the demise of speaking. And my mother lamented the extent to which I watched TV. We decry the way the cell phone has led to the proliferation of mindless conversation and the diminution of quiet reflection. But no doubt there were plenty of people who said the same thing about the land-line phone. We object to the excessive use of the automobile, and the nearly total demise of a pedestrian culture in our suburbs. But my great-grandfather might have lamented the loss of the horse-drawn wagon to the railroad.

In each and every case, human beings reflect on the problematic status of a new technology. At the moment of invention, there is a surge of fear and worry, and we ask, “In becoming dependent on a form of technology, are we losing something of ourselves? Even as we, with the aid of our new machines, become more powerful, are we also being diminished?”

It is extremely difficult to answer this question, to figure out if, in fact, a form of technology is ultimately beneficial or harmful. Take the car. It is immensely useful, and we have a passionate love for it. But are the benefits it brings ultimately positive or negative? It’s arguable that the culture of the car will help bring about global warming, which in turn will lead to massive destruction. Certainly, the culture of the car has

already led to the destruction of basic forms of urban life. Is the car, then, positive or negative, a medicinal drug or a poison? To use an old metaphor, the book is still out.

The book may still be out on much older forms of transportation as well. Was the railroad really an advance over the horse drawn wagon? It allowed 19th century Americans to cross the entire continent with relative ease. It also brought about the destruction of cultures and natural habitats that were centuries, even millenia, old.

Or think of nuclear technology. It may well contain the greatest hope for the future production of electricity. After all, the nuclear power plant spews no carbon into the atmosphere. On the other hand, we and the Russians still have a vast arsenal of nuclear missiles capable of annihilating western civilization at the push of a few buttons. If they're used, then there will be little doubt that nuclear technology was a curse. But we don't yet know.

I propose that this not-knowing is our most fundamental stance towards technology. A technological device, like the Internet and like writing itself, is a *pharmakon*. Its use can be poisonous, it can be medicinal. For this reason, we are always poised on an edge, somewhere in-between hope and fear, in our relationship to technology. The most reasonable response in such a situation is to assume the stance of questioning. Because it is a *pharmakon*, every form of technology is inherently questionable.

If this is the least bit plausible, then what I propose is only a version of the old saw: there is nothing new under the sun. Despite the fever-pitch warnings about the Internet-- it will destroy the possibility of privacy, it will end intellectual property as we

have always known it, it will render governments obsolete-- it does not, in fact, alter the basic structural relationship human beings have always had to technology.

To conclude: I often hear old people like me bad-mouthing the Internet, and cell phones, and Facebook, and graphing calculators, and spell-checkers, and MP3 players. Even though the complaints are often familiar, repetitive, and therefore not very interesting, they are nonetheless crucial. They reflect, even if quite inarticulately, what I take to be our most basic and essential relationship to technology-- our ability to question it. Indeed, my greatest fear about the next generation or two is that the chorus of complainers will be gradually silenced. We're living in the midst of a global infatuation with technology. Computers are increasingly powerful. If Moore's law proves to be accurate, their power will continue to increase exponentially. As a result, computers will become faster, smaller, and cheaper, and soon will be everywhere.

We are daily confronted with a whole world of fabulous, clever little machines. And these we celebrate with an orgy of technological prowess. But this orgy is profoundly risky, for it may well prove to become an addiction. Exuberantly welcoming yet the next generation of micro-processor, we run the risk of being blinded by our own successes, of rushing into the next stage of technological evolution without hesitation or doubt or worry or fear or question.

The greatest threat we face in the next century, I believe, is not from any specific form of technology. (Although like a lot of people I have real fears about many of them.) Instead, it is from our losing the sense of being-on-the-edge, in-between hope and fear, poised to ask questions.

Aristotle famously described human being as the rational animal. I'd amend this slightly (and more Platonically): we are the animals who question. This is what makes us who we are. The great challenge of the next few years is not to lose ourselves completely.