



Issue Two

Social Media Is Hate Speech: A Platonic Reflection on Contemporary Misology

D. C. SCHINDLER

We are experiencing today, in our “social media” culture, a rather paradoxical phenomenon regarding language. On the one hand, we appear to trivialize speech in a manner that would have astonished earlier ages: not only do we broadcast every thought without discretion, but we do so with a patent disregard for form. On the other hand, we appear to absolutize speech in an equally astonishing way, extracting a person’s words or phrases in complete ignorance of concrete and historical context and loading them with a weight that exceeds their evident carrying capacity. Do we take words too seriously, or not seriously enough? To attempt an answer to this question, it is helpful to go back to one of the first thinkers in the Western tradition to reflect on the nature of language and its place in human existence.

In the middle of the *Phaedo*, the dialogue depicting the final hours of the life of Socrates, Plato interrupts the discussion of the immortality of the soul in order to have his mentor present a reflection on the nature of philosophical argument, which began with the diagnosis and aetiology of what he called the “greatest evil that a human being can suffer,” namely, “misology,” literally, the hatred of logos (*Phaedo*, 89d). Plato describes misology as the worst possible evil without explanation, but it is not difficult to divine the reason behind his judgment. For the classical philosophical tradition of which Plato was a part (and, in some sense, the father), *logos*—“reason” or “speech”—is not just one of the many capacities of the human being, but the power that properly characterizes man, that makes man human. As Aristotle effectively put it, man is most precisely defined as the *zoon logon echōn*, the animal

possessing logos (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1098a3–5, and *Politics* 1253a9). In this case, to show contempt, *misein*, for logos is to show contempt for human nature, and thus for man simply. Misology would thus represent a kind of suicide, a destruction of one's own nature. Although he argues that a philosopher ought to look forward to death without fear, Socrates sharply distinguishes this cheerful willingness to die from suicide, which is an act of the highest impiety (*Phaedo*, 61-c-62c). Drawing on G. K. Chesterton, we might say that martyrdom and suicide, however similar they might seem on the surface, are diametrically opposed to each other: martyrdom occurs in the recognition of a goodness that is greater than the self, a goodness that is at the source of all things, so that one gives up one's self in the ecstasy of affirmation; suicide is the absolute negation of all things through the negation of the self: "A martyr is a man who cares so much for something outside him, that he forgets his own personal life. A suicide is a man who cares so little for anything outside him, that he wants to see the last of everything. One wants something to begin: the other wants everything to end."^[1] There is a twofold connection between Socrates' denunciation of suicide and his denunciation of misology: On the one hand, contempt for logos is a putting to death of one's humanity; on the other hand, the retreat from all good things outside the self coincides with the retreat from logos. This retreat is a taking refuge inside the self *against* the world, a detaching of one's "word" from reality. These denunciations are made especially poignant by the fact that, in making them, Socrates is peacefully awaiting his own death in hope (*elpis*) and spending that time engaged in a leisurely reasoned debate—*dia-logos*—about the goodness and the meaning of life.

In perfect contrast to the misologist, Plato is known to be a "philologist" in the full range of meanings of the Greek etymology: he is a lover of reason, to be sure, but he is also one who demonstrates an exquisite *care* for *words*. This care becomes an explicit theme for Plato in another dialogue, *The Phaedrus*, which is essentially a discussion of the nature of words, or more specifically the relation between eros and logos: it is a loving speech about speeches about love and love for speeches. In the course of his discussion on the nature of "rhetoric," Plato presents what would eventually be recognized as the first serious critique of technology. In this case, the technology was that strange, new invention called "writing." Plato lived in the latter days of what was principally an "oral" culture, in which the literary tradition was passed on through singing, philosophical education occurred through conversation, and the community was governed in a basic way through actual public deliberation. In the volatile time around the Peloponnesian war, a new "culture of writing" was beginning to establish itself, trafficked especially by the itinerant teachers known as "sophists." Plato recognized that this new "technology" was not just an additional tool to add to the general store in pursuit of the various ends of human existence, but in fact was profoundly revolutionary in the sense that it introduced a new *culture*, a medium through which *all* the various ends of human existence were perceived and understood. Human nature, as we have said, is defined by its relation to logos; a change in the way we understand the nature of words and relate to them will have a profound impact on our interpretation of human nature, and therefore on how we live *tout court*. What are we to make of writing on this score?

At its best, Plato says, writing is a "reminder to those that know" (*Phaedrus*, 278a). What he means by this is that writing has its proper place as a kind of extension of a more original relationship between the soul and reality. To know is to have a kind of intimacy with being, something that is real in one way or another; language is an outward expression of that

intimacy, and writing is, so to speak, a kind of detachable, reified token of it. Just as we relate to a person properly if we look, not *at his body* as a separate thing in the world, but *at him* in and through his body, so too do we properly relate to words when we “read into” and “see through” them as expressions of an actual judgment, a grasp of something true, and therefore real. This is in some sense easy to do when we are faced with a speaker “in the flesh,” as it were. We hear the words coming from him as things that *he* is saying, and indeed saying at this particular moment, in these concrete circumstances, addressed specifically to me, or to us, for some actual reason. We are able to take in not only the particular content of the words, but a whole world of surrounding things that give that content significant context: from the tone of voice and particular glint of the eyes and subtle gestures of the body, to the concrete circumstances of the thing said, circumstances in which I, too, am right now present as the listener. I take all of these things in as a whole *in* the words to which I am listening. Language discloses reality, and reality is always concrete: the complex, meaning-laden context in which the speaking takes place contributes to the disclosure and so belongs in an intrinsic way to the language.

When Plato says that writing is a “reminder to those that know,” what he means is that writing has a derivative reality: it is an “image” of the *real* word, which is the “living, breathing discourse of the man who knows” (*Phaedrus*, 276a). When I speak about something I actually know, something that I have experienced myself, not just superficially witnessed but actually suffered through in depth, my speaking will carry with it a kind of authority and authenticity that we all recognize: the words will be “living and breathing,” literally “filled with the soul” (*empsychos*) of the speaker. By contrast, the words of one who speaks merely in imitation of one who knows will tend to ring hollow. Something similar can be said, by extension, about writing. Charles Péguy contrasts those who write with ink and those who write with blood. Writing “in blood” is writing that points so to speak beyond itself to what we might call the original event of disclosure, re-presenting that actual knowing in the sense of allowing the reader to enter again into its presence, its happening (“There is no frigate like a book / To take us worlds away . . .”). If writing is not received as a “reminder to those who know,” that is, as a recollection of the reality it images, the only alternative is for it to be taken as an independent thing in itself, a reality of its own. In this case, it ceases to point beyond itself, to be relative to what is actually real, and to have its roots in a genuine, living soul. A word arises *from* a human soul, or more specifically from a soul in its encounter with reality, and it is destined to arrive by being received by another human soul, which is thus enabled to enter into relation with that reality in community with the first, the word’s “author” or, as Plato puts it here, its “father.”

In articulating a critique of writing, Plato means to raise a cautionary flag regarding the kind of relationship to reality that this new “technology” will tend to foster. While the inventor, in Plato’s myth of its origin, praised writing as a “tool for remembering,” Plato called it instead a “tool for forgetting” (*Phaedrus*, 275a). For Plato, forgetting is a loss of knowledge, an ignorance, and ignorance is the absence of a living relationship with reality. If the relationship with reality is not most basic, we will lose a capacity to differentiate between being and appearance, and this incapacity will become manifest in praxis. Socrates says to the inventor of writing,

you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without

being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing. And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so. (Phaedrus, 275a-b)

The point of Plato's critique, then, is to warn against the sorts of practices that would cultivate a kind of indifference in the soul to being in its most basic sense.

Recall that language, logos, is not one of many human capacities, but the one that defines man, the basic place wherein he encounters all other things, including himself. It is in and through language that man does all that he does, and so a change in the way man communicates will have a profound effect on being, both his own and the being of the world to which he relates.

Keeping this in mind helps us avoid the mistake in a common objection to Plato's critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*: Plato made this critique *in writing*. In response to this objection (which is not in fact an argument, but what is known in logic as a *tu quoque* fallacy), we can point out that Plato did not in fact reject writing *in toto*. Instead, he cautioned against giving writing a central importance and ignoring its form as something deferential to the more primary relationship between speaker and reality. This separation between speaker and reality we could call a form of misology, for the separation realizes a kind of casting out, and casting off, that bears the logic of contempt, regardless of the writer's particular feelings or intentions, however much he may be in love with his own words and arguments. If misology is a retreat from reason through a taking refuge in one's immediate impressions, then to privilege the trafficking of abstractions in a medium that is indifferent to truth and to the reality of time and place is to succumb to the logic of misology. The logic can be redeemed, we might say, if the text is given its proper place, subordinated to a real relation to reality and thus revealed as an image expressive of that relation. In this case, what transcends the words of the text becomes manifest, and so present, *in it*. But if no significant difference is recognized between writing and speaking and recollected in the writing and speaking, which is to say, if a kind of indifference is taken for granted at bottom, then misology becomes the governing paradigm. Logos, the speaking of and listening to that defines the very essence of human being, is in this case "orphaned" and cut adrift. It thus becomes a thing that can confuse as much as communicate, and whether it does one or the other is, ontologically speaking, a matter of indifference. When the technological means of communicating is made primary, the word tends to lose its "place," as the "between" that unites the speaker and listener with reality, and therefore with each other.

What Plato says about the intrinsic ambiguity of writing is especially illuminating with respect to our contemporary experience of the "hyper-writing" of social media:

Writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because

you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse rolls about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support. (Phaedrus, 275d-e)

Abstracted from their original source, written words are naturally “opaque,” and so vulnerable to manipulation. At the same time, the cause of confusion arises from the production end as well: because the author of written words is essentially absent from what he writes, there is a spontaneous temptation in the use of a “faceless” medium to “vent” and be thoughtless in one’s writing, to express things “off the cuff,” which is to say one’s most immediate feelings or thoughts. It is not possible to “pour oneself” into an essentially flat, “surface” medium that has no place for the depths of a real, human self.

Our unrestrained readiness to take every (electronic) utterance as a definitive pronouncement, which does not require a patient attentiveness to its origin, to the nature and history of the person speaking, to the circumstances that bore it, and so forth, in order to grasp what is being said, is a sign that we take the indifference of words to reality as their native and normal condition. It would take us beyond the limits of this essay to explore the notion, but it is worth pointing out that this spirit of abstraction finds expression in other aspects of modern culture: from the peculiar “fetishizing” of commodities that detaches entirely from sources of production, to the exclusive focus on *parts* outside of *real wholes* in our approach to science and medicine, to the outsized financial market dwarfing the market of real goods in economics. Arguably at the root of all of these cultural phenomena is the false separation of the logos from its father.

In response to the question posed at the outset, whether we take words too seriously, or not seriously enough, the answer is clearly “yes.” The particular form of exhibiting thoughts and feelings that the various social media not only presuppose but also cultivate relativizes what is absolute, and absolutizes what is relative. This is the essence of disorder. In their perfect abstraction from the concrete context of a real speaker, a reality spoken about, and a real listener, these pseudo-intelligible bits are on the one hand cheap, empty, and without bearing, constraining purpose, and accountability. On the other hand, the very thing that cheapens them, namely, their isolation from context, absolutizes them. The word “absolute,” in fact, means, “separated from context.” Bits of text, or in some cases images, whether from the present or dug up from the past, are now taken in an immediate way as definitive deeds, and the judgment pronounced on them is by its very nature totalizing and irrevocable. The immediacy is the crucial point: the bits are not interpreted, which is to say they are not received as expressions of something beyond themselves, which require an understanding of that reality in order to be proper bearers of intelligibility. This sort of reception requires an entry of the recipient, not only into the complexity of the particular existential conditions of the original speaker, but in some cases even into what may be a radically different culture in a radically different historical

period. One cannot really *read* casually, and “on the fly.” Reading *costs* something, and so one simply cannot be available to read just anything, at any time, in any circumstances.

In perfect contrast to this distortion of language, Plato insists that words can be properly articulated and received only in a generous expanse of time, according to organic rhythms (*Phaedrus*, 276b). He recommends that we *not* give ultimate weight to written words in that particular form, and *only thus* take them very seriously: when we affirm such words in freedom as nothing but images, and so as pointing to a reality greater than themselves, when we in other words receive them as relative to something more fundamental than they are meant to convey, they acquire by that token an extraordinary depth and fullness. Paradoxically, by being less than reality, they turn out to possess more reality themselves than they would as separable things in themselves.

The evident chaos of the contemporary “cancel culture”—which is coming to resemble something like a cyber version of The Terror in late 18th-century France during which the revolutionaries began cutting off even their own heads—is certainly due to an abuse of language. But in responding to this it is important that we go to the roots of the problem: the abuse that is occurring here is not most basically the occasional instance of hate speech, however increasingly frequent it may have become, or the wildly indiscriminate denunciation of hate speech that both reacts to it and provokes it even more. The deepest abuse of language is the general contempt for logos that is being institutionalized in the social media culture that surrounds us, not just in its content, but already in its form. In other words, there is a misology already in the form of social media, to the extent that it is used, not just for an occasional passing on of information when other means are lacking, but as a basic “place” of social interaction, a fundamental point of reference in communal life. There is a profound sort of cultural suicide occurring in this phenomenon. A proper response requires a recovery of our capacity to read and write, which itself depends on the capacity to speak—and, above all, genuinely *to listen*. It is in some sense a very easy thing to recover, since this is just who we are, but in another sense it is quite difficult, because the denial of this reality is becoming increasingly normalized. But the energy for resistance can be found when we consider what is at stake. If man is the animal with logos, a hatred of logos is a hatred of man.

[1]G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Nashville, Tenn.: Sam Torode Book Arts, 2009), 68–69. Chesterton thus provides the profound response to Nietzsche, who claimed that the spirit of ultimate life-denial entered into the West through Socrates: *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982), 473–79.

D. C. Schindler is Associate Professor of Metaphysics and Anthropology at the John Paul II Institute, an editor of Communio: International Catholic Review, and the author of The Catholicity of Reason (Eerdmans, 2013) and The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel Between the Ancients and the Moderns (Cascade Books, 2012), among others.