

## JUSTICE OF THE SINGULAR SOCRATES' APOLOGY AND DECONSTRUCTION

MATHIEU-PIERRE BUCHLER  
*University College Dublin*

1. Where does justice find its beginning? From what place can we begin to think that which is just? Approaching this question requires a renouncement. A renouncement directed not towards the urge of answering the question, but towards answering the question in the form it is being asked. Finding the right answer, or rather, finding the *just* answer to this question requires renouncing the order of the static opposition of question and answer structuring this very question. It requires hollowing out the ground on which any such order could be founded and sinking into its foundation until one's feet appear beneath the soil, launching the thinking body into the abyss of the *true* question. There is no beginning to justice, if we are to think of this beginning as the fundamental opposition to an end, a calculable, foreseeable conclusion. There is a beginning to justice only if we think this beginning as being caught up in a motion which has already long announced its end, which has already built the cradle for a new beginning. We here have to spin the order of beginning and end in a ceaseless motion, as if tossing a coin into the air, suspending it there, making head in-differentiable from tail, bottom from top, life from death.
  
2. The question of justice in Western philosophy finds one instantiation in precisely this interplay of life and death. I am referring here to Plato's *Apology*. The *Apology* is not only a text tracing the fate of the great philosopher Socrates by recounting his final speech before the judges of Athens, but it is also a text that, *between the lines*, announces the advent of a promising justice that is birthed from death, or, to be more precise, from a specific kind of death. Socrates, as I will argue, evokes a justice that does not surge from the defence of one's determination as a *singular accused*, or from the reconciliation of the criminal *singularity* into the ethical social body through pardon or punishment, but which rather derives from a radical negation, a radical annihilation of the category of *pure* singularity. Socrates does not defend himself as an accused who is determinately and definitively singular, which also means a quantifiable, substantial being, but rather affirms the fact that, in some sense, *there is no such singular to be defended*, that he is *not even one* (οὐδείς), *less than one, nothing*. It is, precisely, in this affirmation of a negative, in this widening of a chasm, that a

radically *other* conception of justice and its relation to the singular is opened up. By pushing the determination of what is or can be considered singular to the margins of its possibility, by challenging, bending, pushing the question of the singular and its defence to its outmost limit, Socrates redeploys justice not as a remedying balance, but as the abysmal economy of the bottomless question, a fall into the void, in which the singular can never be without reference to an outside, *and*, in which the singular is so radically singular, that the only way to treat it justly is to grant it the status of an ungraspable, uncoupled and uncategorizable thing. In gradually shedding off the substantial presuppositions of his singularity as an individual (knowledge, self-relation and relation to others), he unleashes a conception of the singular which, beyond the individual self, takes on ontological weight and becomes conceptually tied to a kind of justice, a wholly other justice, which has shaken the tradition ever since, and, as we shall see, reverberates again in what Jacques Derrida called *deconstruction*. The purpose of this study, to be very clear, will not be to offer a complete account of what the *Apology* represents in relation to the other works of Plato, nor will it pretend to stand as a definitive and historically accurate scholarly interpretation of this text, of Socrates as a person, or of the Athenian justice system. Rather, it will invite to speculate, perhaps in a more experimental manner, on the themes Socrates' speech evokes by reconsidering them with regard to Jacques Derrida's thought. We will thus allow ourselves to suspend certain hermeneutic grounds, and to focus entirely on the textual mechanisms, the interplay of themes and concepts it alludes to and names, in order to see how this text portrays a perhaps unfamiliar, uniquely singular, Socrates, and to bring to light how his defence recalls the deconstructive question of justice.

## Abysmal Singularity

---

3. Let us begin our study of the relation between the singular and justice in the *Apology* by considering how Socrates, as the accused *singular* subject among a larger body of individuals, slowly deconstructs the epistemological notion that one can pin down, determine and neatly categorise a subject *as* a singular entity<sup>1</sup> to be weighed against a universality, such as a claim to justice, and how, in so doing, the notion of singularity begins to shift its meanings. The question of justice with reference to both Socrates and Derrida will be deployed in full effect in the following chapter.

1 Terms such as the singular, the self, and the subject will be used interchangeably since they are intimately tied, in this first part of our study, to the notion of singularity referring to a quantifiable, identifiable, single substance. This, in itself, begs a lot of questions, which, in the confines of this study, cannot all be addressed. Yet, the aporetic difficulties to clearly differentiate these terms also renders explicit the way in which the singular is caught between its multiple determinations, and its unique status as a category beyond categorisation.

4. Socrates is sure of one thing, namely that his appearance before the judges, and his defence against the threefold accusation of worshipping lesser gods, corrupting the youth and reversing the order of truth, stands for a kind of justice: "I am confident in the justice of my cause" (*Apology* 17c).<sup>2</sup> This is no simple acknowledgement of the fact that he is appearing before a court of law, that he has to defend himself as an accused individual who has disturbed the legal order of his city, but rather a very specific introduction to an argumentative speech seeking to subvert the way in which the question of justice is usually understood. The "matter of justice" that is here in question speaks a language, a dialectical, philosophical language, which speaks of justice in a manner which seems ineffable to his accusers. So he says:

If I defend myself in my accustomed manner, [...] I would ask you not to be surprised, and not to interrupt me on this account. For I am more than seventy years of age, and appearing now for the first time before a court of law, I am quite a stranger to the language of the place; and therefore I would have you regard me as if I were really a stranger, whom you would excuse if he spoke in his native tongue, and after the fashion of his country. (17d-18a)

5. What is truly significant about this passage, is that Socrates exposes that his manner of speaking and his way of addressing justice, are, in a certain manner, *lacking*. They do not enter the conventional discursive economy in which a singular accused affirms himself before the law, but rather *misses* this mark entirely. We here don't see the defence of a criminal who assumes his position in the dialectic between accusation and defence; we see, from the start, the admission of a deficiency that, in a way, keeps Socrates from entering this very dialectic. In fact, Socrates' language lacks the epistemological foundation to fully grasp the matter at hand. To put it differently, he makes himself appear not as an *accused*, the role the court expects of him, but as someone who does not know *how* to defend himself against an accusation, or *how* to speak of justice, at least not as it is commonly understood by those who accuse him. He explicitly says that he has to resort to his own language, the language of a *stranger*, of an *outsider* to the domain of the law, in order to present his defence. The topic of justice, the defence of the singular, is, therefore, introduced by passing through the avowal of a gaping non-knowledge at the heart of the speaking subject.<sup>3</sup> This is not a mischievous act seeking to hide or conceal a truth, since Socrates feels obliged to speak "the whole truth" (17b). Yet, it is, at the same time, also not an account that seeks to be truthful by simply offering a list of

2 Subsequent references to the text will follow the Stephanus pagination. Edition used: "Apology". *The Dialogues of Plato Vol. I*. Ed. and Transl. by Benjamin Jowett. London: Oxford University Press, 1953. 341-66.

3 It is to be noted that Socrates, of course, is not entirely ignorant about Athen's justice system, as also becomes clear later in the *Apology* (32b to 32d). However, what is of interest here is that the way he presents himself breaks the cyclical motion of accusation, defense, and delivery of justice. His non-compliance is, in itself, the interruption of this cycle and that which allows him to bring into question the themes we are here seeking to discuss.

factual properties pertaining to the speaker. The expression of truth, the authentic expression of the singular on which all eyes are focused, is achieved by laying bare its limits, by exposing, in a sense, what it lacks. Truth here is not the assertion of a fact or of a knowledge but rather the avowal that it lies in its detour through a negation. To put it differently: through asserting a non-predicate, by affirming what he lacks, Socrates determines himself truly as himself, the revealer of that which he cannot reveal. In this pre-Hegelian example of a “determinate negation”, the negative quality, the lack, becomes the ‘content’ of the thing itself,<sup>4</sup> the defining factor of the subject. In truth, we here bear witness to a questioning of foundations. The singular sees that his presupposed ground, in this case the knowledge of justice and of the self, is lacking, and that it is, precisely, that which is missing, this shortage, that is retroactively posited as the actual ‘ground’ of the subject.<sup>5</sup> A ground that is, in fact, not a ground but rather a gaping abyss, a *nothing* (οὐδείς). Whatever we might believe to be the epistemological certainties grounded in our singular experience are here subtly laid out as phantasmic figurations that ultimately lead to a surprisingly empty void. Knowledge is introduced as something expressible only as a lack; a lack from which the singular nevertheless derives.

6. And is this not the very teaching of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues? It is this Socratic assumption, this knowledge of a non-knowledge, which also leads contemporary thinkers, like Graham Harman, to again stress that philosophy is not about the possession of knowledge at all, but that it should rather aim for a more dynamic “love of wisdom”.<sup>6</sup> This new kind of wisdom becomes clear in Socrates’ defence against the following claim: “Socrates is an evil-doer; and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in heaven, and he makes the worse appear the better cause; and he teaches the aforesaid doctrine to others” (19b-c). What this accusation states, is that Socrates is reversing and perverting the order of question and answer and of attainable knowledge by undermining the assumptions and presuppositions at the heart of the claims to truth of his

4 Although it must be affirmed here that Hegel is critical of the Platonic or Socratic negative, as he writes quite clearly in the *Science of Logic*: “[T]he Platonic dialectic, in the *Parmenides* itself and elsewhere even more directly, on the one hand only has the aim of refuting limited assertions by internally dissolving them and, on the other hand, generally comes only to a negative result. Dialectic is commonly regarded as an external and negative activity which does not belong to the fact itself but is rooted in mere conceit, in a subjective obsession for subverting and bringing to naught everything firm and true, or at least as in resulting in nothing but the vanity of the subject matter subjected to dialectical treatment.” Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 34-35. That the ‘bringing to naught’, the voiding of the content, which Hegel here abhors, could be worth pursuing, is what we are here trying to think and think through.

5 Slavoj Žižek explains this dialectical intricacy in his explanation of ‘reconciliation’, a central moment of the Hegelian speculative dialectic: “...there is no substantial Being to which the subject can return, no encompassing organic Order of Being in which the subject has to find its proper place. ”Reconciliation” between subject and substance means the acceptance of this radical lack of any firm foundational point: the subject is not its own origin, it comes second, it is dependent upon its substantial presuppositions; but these presuppositions also do not have a substantial consistency of their own but are always retroactively posited.” S. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 258-9. I believe this point is radicalised beyond return in the Socratic variation of the dialectic.

6 G. Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 6.

fellow citizens. Such is precisely the Socratic moment in all of Plato's early dialogues: however long the dialectic between Socrates and his interlocutors extends, the outcome remains the same. No determinable, factual answer or definition is ever achieved, only new questions, an aporetic, murky void, remain. However, this does not mean that nothing at all is gained. On the contrary, reversing the order of question and answer, knowledge and truth, is precisely the upshot of Socrates' method of questioning and his self-negation before the jurors. The singular subject is reduced to an impotent void, who is unable to formulate any positive epistemological statement on his own, but, like a phoenix born from sacrifice, *wisdom* takes flight and sets the scene for a new understanding of the singular and its epistemological engagement with the world.

7. To be very clear here, let us look at Socrates' account of the riddle of the Gods of Delphi, which was told to his friend Chaerephon and which states "that there [is] no man wiser" (21a) than Socrates, to which Socrates expresses initial puzzlement, since he "know[s] that [he] ha[s] no wisdom, small or great" (21b). How can wisdom be linked to self-proclaimed ignorance? In a perhaps strange sense, the answer is already formulated in the question. Socrates' first reaction to the riddle, harking back to his general renouncement of the notion that he himself could constitute a firm enough foundation for a divine amount of wisdom, is that there has to be someone wiser than him, and finding someone wiser than him would allow him to "go to the god with a refutation in [his] hand" (21c). However, he finds no one who meets said requirements, since, from politicians to poets, all the people he interrogates only have "pretensions to wisdom"(21d) while still declaring themselves wise. Socrates describes such an encounter:

Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is,—for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. (21d)

8. We can again discern Socrates' clear exposition of his lack of knowledge, which is here reformulated into a positive trait. Yet, Socrates makes it quite clear that this "advantage" is not at all something that could be described as an access to a higher truth that is beyond the reach of his fellow Athenians, or that he was in possession of a knowledge so radically transcendent that the only way to challenge him would be to get rid of him, as is the purpose of his trial. Quite paradoxically, Socrates interprets the riddle of Delphi not as the Gods attributing a certain positive quality to him, but rather as the assertion of a *missing* quality:

[M]y hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others. But the

truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and by his answer he intends to show that the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing; although speaking of Socrates, [the God of Delphi] is only using my name by way of illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. (23a-b)

9. Socrates is not an accumulator of knowledge, but rather the frantic negative incessantly renouncing the *possibility* of any such possession. And this because he *sees* that what others proudly claim to be an ownership of knowledge, a foundation firmly rooted in and growing from the self-identified sphere of the singular and its horizon of experience, is but a comic farce amusing the Gods. A knowledge grasped by a singular subject is worth *nothing*, precisely because it reaches into thin air: philosophical knowledge is dead at birth, it has no ground to call its own, but lingers in a void, an abyss in which no roots can ever grasp the soil, carrying always with it the surplus of a lack. Socrates is not, psychoanalytically speaking, the pervert claiming access to a higher truth, but is rather the example of a mortal man modestly recognising the necessary groundless ground, as well as the defining limits, of his position as a singular subject. It is here, in this recognition, where true wisdom is revealed. This brings us back to the tautological question stated above. Socrates is wise not because he knows everything, but, precisely, because he knows that he, in his enclosed singularity, cannot *know* at all. He is wise *because* he proclaims his own ignorance. He affirms his own negation, determines himself as negative, and thus enters a new sphere of thinking in which the singular, wisdom, knowledge and justice are irredeemably ungrounded, set in motion into a bottomless free-fall.<sup>7</sup>

10. It might be objected at this stage that the *Apology* can hardly be a text that seeks to undermine the substantiality, the continuity, the ground of the singular subject and its epistemological matrix, since the very point of the text is to document an individual's defence of his own innocence precisely as an individual entity appearing before the law. Even more, it is a text exploring concepts such as individual civic duty, the education of the members of society, and the subordination of the singular to divine laws. However, what we are here trying to unravel is that Socrates seeks to situate his *own* defence precisely within a logic in which such a fixed determination of what the singular *is*, what it *knows*, and the differentiation between singular and whole, cease to be straightforwardly as-

7 The metaphor of the fall, and its emancipatory potential, has recently been brilliantly analysed by artist and theorist Hito Steyerl, in her text "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective", *The Wretched of the Screen*, 12-31. There are a number of parallels between this study and her text, most notably the move from the grounded observer, which Steyerl identifies as posited in paintings structured by a vanishing point perspective, to the notion of the falling perspective, which she sees exemplified in birds-eye-perspectives common in the age of GPS and aerial travel. According to Steyerl, this change in perspective allows for a rethinking of the ground as an abysmal free-fall that bears potential for new modes of thought, an idea to which this study is deeply indebted.



sertible. What our reading so far has shown is precisely that there *is*, indeed, a continuous Socratic subject, but that it is defined by an abysmal epistemological uncertainty which, precisely, clouds the possibility of his determination as a singular subject. The domain of the singular in Socrates' thought is *hybrid* and forever *deferred*, both singular and lacking the necessary ground to establish this singularity, caught in a downward spiral from which it nevertheless acts and engages with the world. It needs to ex-*pose* its own lack and dynamise itself in a dialectic with its fellow subjects without ever being able to fully exhaust and replenish this lack. The surplus-lack always remains, pushing it onwards to yet another epistemological or subjective determination, which will also inevitably turn out to be lacking. Socrates, in this manner, becomes the proponent of a thinking that seeks the constant reactualisation of the self, not as a transparent, readily accessible substance, but as an abysmal entity that is incessantly falling, spinning and in need of constant reorientation. And herein lies, perhaps, a first reformulation of the singular from a fixed, identifiable substance to a plastic, moldable and always *uniquely changing* singularity. The 'continuous' subject that is here asserted is one that passes through its own negation, through a radical questioning of its own category and which does so without any hope of bringing this question to its definitive conclusion, hence always remaining in an original state of non-categorisation. Michel Foucault, in one of his interviews, takes Socrates to be a voice of consciousness constantly pushing his fellow citizens towards assuming this very question of the self:

Prenons l'exemple de Socrate: il est précisément celui qui interpelle les gens dans la rue, ou les jeunes au gymnase, en leur disant : «Est-ce que tu t'occupes de toi?». Le dieu l'a chargé de cela, c'est sa mission, et il ne l'abandonnera pas, même au moment où il est menacé de mort. Il est bien l'homme qui se soucie du souci des autres : c'est la position particulière du philosophe.<sup>8</sup>

11. We can thus see here how Socrates assumes the position of the questioning negative who tries to shove his fellow citizens back into the abyss of the 'examined life'. Yet, what Foucault perhaps misses, and this needs to be stressed absolutely, is that this Socratic questioning and caring for his fellow citizens has to start with the auto-questioning of the self's status as a singular substance. The Socratic self, to establish itself as such, to reach the position to question others, always already has to radically question itself, and this, as we shall now see, beyond just epistemological questions about the world, but also by asking questions fundamentally related to the constitution of the singu-

8 [Let us look at the example of Socrates: he is, precisely, the one who calls out to the people in the street, or to the young at the gymnasium, telling them: "Do you take care of yourself?". God put him in charge of this, it is his mission, and he will not abandon it, even when his life is threatened. He is very much the man who cares about the care for the others: it is his particular position as a philosopher.] M. Foucault, *Foucault: Dits et écrits, 1976-1988*, 1534.

lar subject as such. This is not simply a matter of asking questions about knowledge, concepts, intuition or other strictly philosophical categories, but rather an existential challenge, which amounts, precisely, to Socrates' challenge in this trial, a challenge which pushes the possibility of the singular towards that which *singularly* announces the advent of its impossibility. The singular, in order to touch upon the wisdom to understand its own constitution, has to face the most radical annihilation conceivable: death. In fact, in the Apology, Socrates performs a defence of the constitutive force of the act of facing mortality that could serve as a precursor to Hegel's or Heidegger's treatment of this theme.<sup>9</sup> Let us unravel this.

12. After having debunked Meletus' charges of corrupting the youth and of worshipping false gods, Socrates moves on to consider how the likely outcome of his trial, his death sentence, shall affect him. In a certain manner, Socrates is here not *afraid* of what awaits him, since *death* has already come knocking at his door: he is already dead in the eyes of his accusers. He explains that what will ultimately lead to his demise isn't Meletus' or Anytus' decision, but rather the fact that general distrust in him that has led to this trial:

I have said enough in answer to the charge of Meletus: any elaborate defence is unnecessary; but I know only too well how many are the enmities which I have incurred, and this is what will be my destruction if I am destroyed; – not Meletus, nor yet Anytus, but the envy and detraction of the world, which has been the death of many good men, and will probably be the death of many more; there is no danger of my being the last of them. (28a-b)

13. Socrates' teaching is reaching deaf ears, his voice is not being heard and his practice has led the *polis* to consider him a criminal. He is not part of the life of Athens, but rather the illness threatening to disturb its health and harmony. However, just as we have seen in his reversal of the fragility of epistemology into an affirmation of a new type of knowledge, namely wisdom, Socrates again subverts the purely economical logic of public opinion and takes it from its understanding that life ends in death and that death is the ultimate annihilation, to the *wise* expression that death equals a form of life, a new birth. So he continues:

Some one will say: And are you not ashamed, Socrates, of a course of life which is likely to bring you to an untimely end? To him I may fairly answer: There you are mistaken: a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong – acting the part of a good man or of a bad. (28b)

<sup>9</sup> For a reading of Hegel's account on death, and how it precedes Heidegger's, see J. Cohen, *Le Sacrifice de Hegel*, 45. For a seminal reading of Heidegger's being-towards-death see E. Levinas, "Mourir Pour...", *Entre Nous*, 204-14.



14. Leading a good life is here not equated with calculability, with choosing one thing over the other, with safeguarding life from death; as if the sanctity of life could be achieved without a sacrifice. Doing right, the ultimate goal for Socrates, is intimately tied to the challenge of death, the threat of the annihilation of life, and finds its true expression precisely in passing through that which destabilises it completely. It is in *facing* death, in considering the most radical abysmal descent into the void, that Socrates here begins to rethink the practice of the philosopher, doing good, and the expression of justice. And this not because in *facing* death we would somehow hold even dearer onto life, but rather because it opens up the possibility of *rethinking* the modalities of the good and of life, of *rethinking* justice, and of *rethinking* ourselves. In fact, what if death announced an experience so radical that the foundation beneath the logic of the 'either/or', of substantial opposition, was shaken to the point of its dissolution? Socrates explains:

For the fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being a pretence of knowing the unknown; and no one knows whether death, which men in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good. Is not this ignorance of a disgraceful sort, the ignorance which is the conceit that a man knows what he does not know? And in this respect only I believe myself to differ from men in general, and may perhaps claim to be wiser than they are: – that whereas I know but little of the world below, I do not suppose that I know: but I do know that injustice and disobedience to a better, whether God or man, is evil and dishonourable, and I will never fear or avoid a possible good rather than a certain evil. (29a-b)

15. Socrates is here, again, targeting an epistemological claim about an unknown. No one *knows* death, has ever experienced it first hand, and still it is claimed to be the radical opposite of what is desirable. Similarly, life, in opposition to this unknown, is established as the fundamental centripetal positive governing the negative determinations of everything that falls outside of its frame. Again, Socrates shows that a *lack* of knowledge is not to be considered the *ground* for any such substantial claims, but should rather signal something like an *abyss* in which oppositional relationships and the supposed substances making up this opposition need to be reconsidered. Life and death, good and bad, are suspended, lifted from the clutches of the pretensions of knowledge and released into the void of the unknown. In a certain sense, we here see the continuation of Socrates' polemic against the pretension of knowledge, and how this pretension governs the way in which concepts are differentiated into sealed-off ontological considerations: knowledge means to know what things *are*. But what if such reasoning is misled? What if the unknown, what if death, in its radical exclusion from knowledge, began to destabilize the order of substantiality, of epistemology and of the supposed good? What if these categories, in being defined as the opposite of an unknown, were

transformed beyond return into something they never even presumed they could be?<sup>10</sup> How are we to define life within such a logic, if its opposite remains unclear? Instead of trying to solve this problem by determining what death is in opposition to life, Socrates is rather questioning the oppositional logic structuring these questions itself. He shows that in diving into the unknown, in not presupposing death as standing in a definitive opposition to life, a new way of thinking becomes possible, in which the singular is no longer defined as living until its radical end, but rather as an entity suspended within this new matrix, oscillating between life and death, constantly and incessantly falling and swirling up and down, left and right, never planting its roots in any particular ground, defined as undefinable. The experience of death, the act of facing death, is not an experience that should create anxiety, leading one to hold onto life or even pretend to know about death, but which rather radically shocks, alters and reconfigures the entire epistemological framework governing life itself. And Socrates' point here is subtle. It is important to stress that he is not following an Epicurean line in this passage. He is not simply stating that we should not fear death because we cannot know it, but rather that death serves as a reminder that what is unknown cannot serve as a firm ground for definitive determinations. The unknown is not that which follows the known; rather, it is the experience that an unknown is awaiting that completely troubles and shakes what we pretend to know. If all life leads to death, if all life is born as radical finitude, if the unknown awaits those who pretend to know, then the singular, the bearer of the experience of such an order, too, needs to be seen as standing on a ground which will inevitably be ungrounded. Socrates pushes the singular to the threshold of being and non-being and locates it not on one of both sides, but rather *simultaneously* on *neither*. The singular becomes hybrid: living and dying, caught in a constant cycle of death and resuscitation, in a mortifying logic which incessantly un-grounds its position. And, again, this is not a terrible conclusion: it furnishes the unfinished ground which renders the singular as such possible. Facing death is not the act of shivering in horror before the finitude or negation of the singular subject, but rather the affirmation of the infinity of this singular finitude, the affirmation of life not as a finite identity until death, but, precisely, as the freedom to constantly sacrifice and resuscitate oneself into yet another version of the self, to launch oneself yet again into the abyss and reorient oneself in a transformative fall. We here see a similarity with Heidegger's *being-towards-death* and Dasein's resoluteness [*Entschlossenheit*], the assumption of one's ontological obligation

10 The fact that Socrates considers justice, the certainty that injustice is bad and our sense of ethics to be exempt from this deconstructive experience of death as an unknown, as can be read from the passage just cited, will be commented on in the next chapter.

towards finitude, which, as Yuk Hui explains quite well, is precisely the constitution of Dasein's freedom:

Such resoluteness [...] is brought about by the recognition of being-towards-death as finitude and limit of Dasein. In other words, being-towards-death is the necessary condition of any freedom in its 'authentic sense'. Only in being free for death does Dasein understand its finite freedom, which allows it to choose and to decide between accidental situations, and therefore become able to hand down to itself its own fate.<sup>11</sup>

16. This freedom is, however, so radical here, that its logic spans, ontologically speaking, onto the realm of the living *and* that of the dead. It is as if, in conducting his defence under the banner of being caught between life and death, Socrates opened the doors for a devouring modality which would unravel and undo the very frame of thought which allowed him to be singularly accused as a finite mortal being and be threatened to be passed over into the realm of the dead. Bridging the gap between living and dying, he shakes the margin separating the two sides, speaks of the dead, like "Odysseus or Sisyphus" (41c) as if they were alive, and completely shatters the legal frame that here seeks to reestablish the world of the living by transposing Socrates into an other-world, by, quite literally, annihilating him, by making him disappear from the living world. In fact, what Socrates here shows, is that the *nihil* is always already present in the *ens*, that the world is already an *other-world*, an *under-world*, an *abysmal* world.<sup>12</sup> In assuming death, in dislodging the singular from its simple identity with life and in marking the traces of an other *within* itself, he un-grounds the logic in which his sentence has any meaning at all; in a way, he here escapes his sentence by marking its outcome, its punishment, as the already-given.

11 Y. Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, 232-33.

12 Jacques Derrida was attentive to this point. In his seminar "La peine de mort" he emphasises: "L'Apologie le dit expressément (24 b c): la *kategoria*, l'accusation lancée contre Socrate, c'est d'avoir eu le tort, d'avoir été coupable, d'avoir commis l'injustice (*adikein*) de corrompre les jeunes gens et de (ou pour) avoir cessé d'honorer (*nomizein*) les dieux (*theous*) de la cité ou les dieux honorés par la cité – et surtout de leur avoir substitué non pas simplement de nouveaux dieux, comme disent souvent les traductions, mais de nouveaux démons (*etera de daimonia kaina*) ; et *daimonia*, ce sont sans doute des dieux, des divinités, mais aussi parfois, comme chez Homère, des dieux inférieurs ou des revenants, les âmes des morts ; et le texte distingue bien les dieux et les démons : Socrate n'a pas honoré les dieux (*theous*) de la cité, et il a introduit des démons nouveaux (*etera de daimonia kaina*)." [The *Apology* says it expressly (24 b c): the *kategoria*, the accusation launched against Socrates, is to have been wrong, to have been guilty, to have committed the injustice (*adikein*) of corrupting the young and to (or in order to) have stopped honouring (*nomizein*) the gods (*theous*) of the city or the gods honoured by the city – and, especially, to not only have substituted them by new gods, as the translations sometimes say, but by new demons (*etera de daimonia kaina*); and *daimonia* are, without a doubt, gods, divinities, but also sometimes, as in Homer, inferior gods or revenants, the souls of the dead; and the text very much distinguishes between gods and demons: Socrates did not honour the gods (*theous*) of the city, and he introduced new demons (*etera daimonia kaina*).] J. Derrida, *Séminaire La peine de mort*, 27-8. Socrates, during his defence, has introduced the netherworld into the world of the living, has breached the limit between what is alive and what is dead.

17. Yet, and this is important, Socrates is here not simply asserting himself as a form of immortal subject. Earlier on, we have seen how he specifically renounces the possibility of possessing any divine quality, or anything that would make him, factually, superior to his fellow Athenians. Socrates is simply asserting himself as any other man or woman. In fact, he is speaking here of the singular's ontological status, of how every singular entity is caught in this abysmal economy. In fact, and this again highlights the subtle imprecision in Foucault's notion of the primacy of the other in Socrates' practice, it is from this assumption of his mortality, of his position as a mortal singularity nurtured and supplemented by both life and death, that he starts to speak also of his fellow Athenians, to specifically address other singular beings. It is from this exposition of the self, this questioning and liberating of the self in the suspension of the self's identity in life, that the question of the other is opened, that the possibility of questioning the other becomes effective. So, the *primary* question for Socrates is the question of the singular self's life, from which the question of the other necessarily follows. The dissolution of the singular identified as a substance moving from life to death, towards the constitution of the singular as a naught, yet hybrid, suspended, radically ungrounded substance freed from being reducible to any substantial determination, proves so consuming that it affects also the relation the singular has to its others. Paradoxically, the type of relation serving as an example to how intersubjectivity functions within this free-fall is the most substantial relation imaginable: the familiar relation.

18. At the end of his speech, Socrates utters a last request before being sent off to his cell:

Still I have a favour to ask of [my condemners]. When my sons are grown up, I would ask you, O my friends, to punish them; and I would have you trouble them, as I have troubled you, if they seem to care about riches, or anything, more than about virtue; or if they pretend to be something when they are really nothing, –then reprove them, as I have reprovéd you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, both I and my sons will have received justice at your hands. (41e-42a)

19. Now, the themes that are being explored in this passage are of importance for our reading. It here becomes clear that Socrates is moving beyond simply claiming that he *himself*, he as a *singular individual*, is nothing, and that his speech is simply about affirming this, but rather, that others, too, are nothing, and that he wants this to be known. And he is here not talking simply of any others. Of all people, it is his *sons* that are here asked to be reminded of their own nothingness. How is this to be read? There are, I believe, two aspects to this. First of all, Socrates is here redeploing a summary of the main points of his speech in the form of a wisdom to be passed on to his sons. In

line with his position as the philosopher questioning the epistemological and, in this case also material, pretensions of his fellow Athenians through his method of dialectics, Socrates here repeats the notion that the singular subject is a nothing, an empty void, that is incapable of furnishing the ground for any such pretension to hold. This is not a denigration of subjectivity, but rather the assumption of the singular's radical finitude, which then opens up the possibility of a *wise* thinking illuminating "that for which [one] ought to care", namely the finite margins and scope of one's singularity, which, in turn, opens up the freedom of its infinite indeterminacy. In facing this *death*, in facing its *impossibility* as such, the singular is reborn as an ungrounded, suspended, hybrid entity oscillating between its own determinations, between life and death, radically free in the abyss of its own nothingness. But there is something more important in this passage: it marks the nothingness at play in the relationship between the singular and those surrounding it, and, particularly, those deriving from it.

20. The way in which the familiar relation is here portrayed is not as a naturally grounded relation. Socrates is here not trying to live on by requesting the judges to remind his sons of their father, or by determining his sons as only being the descendants of an unjustly accused philosopher. He assumes here his own teaching. Not even the most substantial relation imaginable is safe from the abysmal void governing singularity. Even the parent-child relationship becomes devoid of any ground. His sons cannot definitively claim to be simply Socrates' descendants, and neither can Socrates definitively determine himself as a father, or his sons to be simply his descendants. The 'punishment' here is the annihilation of these identifying markers. But, as we have seen numerous times, this 'punishment' is, in actuality, a blessing. The upshot of reducing his sons to a nothing, of considering them as a nothing, and of having them considered even by the law as a nothing, is that they are, precisely, not *reducible* to this particular determination. If there is a contract between father and son, it is not one that can indefinitely gather the sons under the reign of the father, just as much as the sons cannot indefinitely define themselves as the offspring of their parents. Not only in the sense that sons can become fathers too, or that they can take the role of the parent in their relation to their own parents, as if this were just a matter of reversing positions. Socrates is here making an ontological point about the necessary *ex-stasis* that is required of both constitutive elements of the familiar relation. Both, in a sense, have to become a nothing again, both need to escape the particular manifestation that was determined by the conception of the child, in order to return to their void and mark themselves as authentic singularities, ready to define and determine themselves yet again as other, different, less and therefore more than their natural origin.

21. This is not to say that Socrates is here severing all types of relations, folding the singular back into itself, to let it rest as a solipsistic whole with no ties to an outside. It rather marks a new kind of relation, a relation not grounded in fixed, defining properties, or purely natural traits, but rather a relation announcing a new kind of community, a community of singularities that are, precisely, nothing as singularities and, in this shared *un-ground*, always already *more* than simply singular. It here becomes impossible not to mention Jean-Luc Nancy and his seminal study *Être singulier pluriel*, in which he thinks around this exact *point* in which the singular, as a numerical identity, is met with its innermost impossibility and gives itself over to its deriving from the *cum* of the *être-avec*:

Singulier pluriel: en sorte que la singularité de chacun soit indissociable de son être-avec-plusieurs, et *parce que*, de fait, et en général, une singularité est indissociable d'une pluralité. Ici encore, il ne s'agit pas d'une propriété supplémentaire. Le concept du singulier implique sa singularisation et donc sa distinction d'avec d'autres singularités [...]. Au reste, *singuli* ne se dit en latin qu'au pluriel, parce qu'il désigne l'«un» du «un par un». Le singulier, c'est d'emblée *chaque* un, et donc aussi chacun *avec* et *entre* tous les autres. Le singulier est un pluriel.<sup>13</sup>

22. This new type of relation is one which is *pre-ontological*, a void swallowing all kinds of relations, in the sense that it establishes the bond *before* the being of the singular, or, to put it differently, before the *void* of the singular. The singular is always already *in-relation-to*: being is being-with, falling is falling-with. Not in the sense of a naturally or socially grounded bond, but as a bond that precedes even these particular manifestations of community. Not as a bond that forms a totalised relation, but as a bond that is “toujours indéfiniment à compléter”,<sup>14</sup> an inexhaustible tie in which multiple singularities come into a contactless contact and assume their groundless status as *singulier pluriel*.

23. Socrates describes the familiar relation precisely in such a context, supplementing the *nothing* of the singular by the *more than one* of the singular. It is not a relation determining the family as a fixed communion, as a defining, contractual bond; or rather, it can only be such a relation if this relation is inscribed into a more original ontological relation between abysmal singularities, multiple nothings, which, as a voided relation, is not reducible to the strict familiar relation of parent-child. Both constituents of the relation determine themselves as related, as *more than one*, but also as *less*

13 [Singular plural: in the sense that the singularity of each is indissociable from its being-with-many, and *because*, de facto and in general, a singularity is indissociable from a plurality. Once again, this is not a matter of a supplementary property. The concept of the singular implies its singularisation and thus its distinction from other singularities [...]. Besides, *singuli* can only be said in its plural form in Latin, because it designates the “one” of the “only by one”. The singular is at once *each* one and thus also each one *with* and *between* all the others. The singular is a plural.] J.-L. Nancy, *Être Singulier Pluriel*, 52.

14 [always to complete indefinitely] *Ibid.* 56.



*than one*, as a void, a non-determinable, free-falling entity. They are preceded by a relationality as such, inscribed into an ontology which becomes *diktyo-abussology*, a web or net of lacking singularities, which are incessantly and restlessly related more originally than in birth, through life and beyond death in an abysmal nexus turning *nothing* into *plural nothing*. This is not to say that, for Socrates, we all wallow in the same, primordial abyss, as if it were all just a case of establishing yet another shared ground or ontological origin; rather, each and all singular entity is *singularly less than one*, *singularly* deferred in its own inexhaustible void into which it, so to speak, falls, thus incessantly impossibilising the defining mark of the particular determination of its relation towards the other and the plural, whether it be familiar, social, political, amorous, or other. And it is in this grounding of the natural, substantial relation in an *un-ground*, in this *release, relief* of the singular into the original abysmal nexus and in its constitution as both singularly plural and substantially nothing, that Socrates opens, announces, touches upon the notion of *justice*. Let us quote the text again:

...reprove them, as I have reproved you, for not caring about that for which they ought to care, and thinking that they are something when they are really nothing. And if you do this, both I and my sons will have received justice at your hands. (42a)

Justice involves assuming this abysmal nexus, to situate oneself within it, and to see it also in effect in the other.

24. Within this voided economy, this groundless ground on which every step is, perhaps, a misstep, one has to shiver in the face of turning this thought into a defining statement on the *essence* of justice. However, we are here required to move forward, to try and think such a notion of justice, to approach it with utmost care and to consider how we are to think it in the context of Socrates' heritage.

## **Justice of the Singular**

---

25. Why have I, so far, avoided facing the question of justice head-on in this text? Why have I, every time it was mentioned, hinted at, touched upon by Socrates, sought to divert our reading to other subtleties in the text, most notably to the position and constitution of the singular within the context of the lack of knowledge, the transforming logic of the experience of death, and the desubstantialisation of the relation between multiple singularities? In a text entitled "*Justice of the Singu-*

lar”, it might appear odd that one side of the story is purposefully left unexplored. However, if I were here to defend myself, defend myself as Socrates did, I would follow his steps and proclaim that I have done no wrong. On the contrary, there is nothing to suggest that, in treating the topic of the singular, there was no reference to justice at all. In some sense, it is impossible to introduce justice, with all its ties to, all the while being irreducible to, *ethics, the political, intersubjectivity, decision, judgment*, without *also*, or, *first*, talking about the singular, the particular, the one among the many, perhaps even the one which can never be related to a universal, incessantly escaping universality. And it is here that I would like to mark that there is in the *Apology* a type of anticipation, a type of retroactive echo of another text on the question of justice and its relation to the singular, which has nurtured and haunted my reading of Socrates’ defence: *Force de Loi* by Jacques Derrida.

26. Socrates, as we have seen, launches his defence as an outsider, as the singular within the ethical whole of Athens who speaks in a tongue deemed foreign before the law and seeks, through this position of liminality, to engage the notion of justice precisely at that place where margins become blurred, where the singular stands at the threshold, an impossible, undecidable threshold, between being *less than one*, and *more than one*, not reducible to a singular manifestation, always less and always more than a singular manifestation. There is a clear parallel here to the manner in which Derrida begins his lecture entitled “Du droit à la justice”, which figures in *Force de Loi*: “C’est pour moi un devoir, je dois *m’adresser* à vous en anglais”.<sup>15</sup> The singularity of the speaker, of his or her idiom, of the marginal foreigner being listened to and being asked to speak, is here, as in the *Apology*, inevitably weighed against the many, the universal, the possibility of being heard, understood, assimilated, absorbable by and differentiable from the whole. The singular here meets its own limits, standing at the point where it bows to the universal, the many, in assuming its language, all the while being outside a clear identification with the universal for precisely the reason that the language employed always remains singularly linked to a singular voice. It is this tension, this *aporetic* situation in which the singular is facing the challenge, or the chance, of the universal, in which the singular is never simply reducible to just a particular determination of the universal, all the while having to face the *supplement* pushing it to, as of yet, unknown determinations, determinations that are still *to-come*, that will always engage it in yet another relation to the universal, and in which the universal is never simply reducible to an amalgamation of singularities, all the while being moved towards constantly and incessantly reimagining itself as a universal with ties to the singular, it is *this* tension that concretely touches upon that which one might call the question of *justice*. How is

15 [It is, for me, an obligation, I have to *address you* in English.] J. Derrida, *Force de loi*, 13.

this to be understood? How are we to determine such a justice? How are we to think *justice* and the *singular* together, with reference to both Socrates and Derrida?

27. In fact, the question of justice becomes indistinguishable from the very practice of questioning that Socrates, and, as we will see shortly, also Derrida, engage in their liminal speech. It is almost as if Socrates, in defending himself as a singularity, in reconsidering the singular as such, in reframing the question of singularity and judgment, both of others and of oneself, had already tentatively approached the question of justice. Is there not the desire to portray himself *justly* before the judges, to aim at a *just* portrayal of himself as a singular accused, to be *just* to himself and to give his sons a *just* treatment? Is not all this inextricably tied to his very method of framing his speech, of addressing and undoing, as we have seen, the oppositional logic that finds him accused? Is it not echoed in his desire to resuscitate, from the death of this logic, a *wise* logic wholly conscious of the unsteady ground it treads, of the indeterminate abyss widening under its feet? It is almost as if, for Socrates, the question of justice is not to be rushed towards a fixed answer, but should rather be patiently *ungrounded* itself, *engaged differently* than just as the counter-weight of injustice, *shaken* until its dissolution, turned into an *ungrounding* of *grounds*, a *deconstruction* perhaps. Is there not a parallel between Socrates' ungrounding of pretensions, of his blurring and questioning of clear demarcations between good and evil, the realm of the living and that of the dead, crime and order, and Jacques Derrida's "questionnement sur les fondements"?<sup>16</sup> Would they not, in some sense, share a voice, or perhaps a writing, if one imagined them being asked about their relation to the question of justice? Socrates, who never retaliates, who never admits his guilt and stays loyal to his understanding of the good, examined life, who does not bow to the instantiation of right he is subjected to and rather subverts the order in which any such instantiation could be identified with justice, and who sees justice precisely harboured within a logic that bursts all determinations of it by engaging it in an incessant questioning which aims not at a definite answer, but rather at an endlessly echoing call for a constant re-orientation of the singular and its relation to justice. Derrida, who is adamant about the fact that justice is always already at work, although "de façon oblique",<sup>17</sup> in deconstruction, this "questionnement sur les fondements", which is "ni fondationnaliste ni anti-fondationnaliste",<sup>18</sup> which even entertains the possibility of questioning "la possibilité ou l'ultime nécessité du question-

16 [questioning of foundations] *Ibid.* 22.

17 [in an oblique way] *Ibid.* 26.

18 [neither foundationalist nor anti-foundationalist] *Ibid.*

nement même”,<sup>19</sup> which questions the place from which a question is formulated, in order to suggest the following:

Oblique comme en ce moment même, où je m’apprête à démontrer que l’on ne peut pas parler *directement* de la justice, thématiser ou objectiver la justice, dire «ceci est juste» et encore moins «je suis juste» sans trahir immédiatement la justice, sinon le droit.<sup>20</sup>

And yet, how are we to *think* and *determine* this practice of questioning as justice, if justice can never be *reduced* to any such *determination*?

28. And here we touch upon the very heart of Derrida’s attempt to think around justice, to determine an undeterminable, *impossible* justice that, against all odds, demands to be incessantly faced. There are three *aporias* that Derrida tentatively thinks in his text, and that we should quickly summarise before continuing. The first revolves around the notion that the only *just* decision is a decision which does not simply follow a pre-established, calculated principle, but which *suspends* such a principle or law and singularly treats, or re-treats the matter at hand as an “acte d’interprétation réinstaurateur”,<sup>21</sup> all the while still, in some sense, laying claim to a kind of universality. So:

Bref, pour qu’une décision soit juste et responsable, il faut que dans son moment propre, s’il y en a un, elle soit à la fois réglée et sans règle, conservatrice de la loi et assez destructrice ou suspensive de la loi pour devoir à chaque cas la réinventer, la re-justifier, la réinventer au moins dans la réaffirmation et la confirmation nouvelle et libre de son principe.<sup>22</sup>

29. Undeterminably both principle and non-principle, universal and absolutely singular. The second *aporia* is related to the first, and treats that which links justice to the *undecidable*. What Derrida here marks as the true *aporetic* challenge of justice is not that deciding between two contradictory but imperative options might seem impossible to calculate, but that the *experience* of undecidability nevertheless calls for a decision that is conscious of both options at the same time:

L’indécidable n’est pas seulement l’oscillation ou la tension entre deux décisions. Indécidable est l’expérience de ce qui, étranger, hétérogène à l’ordre du calculable et de la règle, *doit* cependant – c’est de *devoir* qu’il faut parler – se livrer à la décision impossible en tenant compte du droit et de la

19 [the possibility or the ultimate necessity of the questioning itself] *Ibid.*

20 [Oblique, like in this very moment, where I am preparing to demonstrate that one cannot speak *directly* of justice, thematise or objectify justice, say “this is just” and even less “I am just” without immediately betraying justice, if not right.] *Ibid.* 26.

21 [a re-instituting interpretative act] *Ibid.* 50.

22 [In short, for a decision to be just and responsible, it is required that, in its proper moment, if there is one, it is at once regulated and without a rule, that it conserves the law and sufficiently destroys and suspends the law to have to reinvent it each time, to re-justify it, to reinvent it at least in the reaffirmation and the new and free confirmation of its principle.] *Ibid.* 51.

règle. Une décision qui ne ferait pas l'épreuve de l'indécidable ne serait pas une décision libre, elle ne serait que l'application programmable ou le déroulement continu d'un processus calculable. Elle serait peut-être légale, mais elle ne serait pas juste. Mais dans le moment de suspens de l'indécidable, elle n'est pas juste non plus, car seule une décision est juste.<sup>23</sup>

30. The third aporia follows from this. Justice, in all its irreducibility to a particular moment of it, in its indefinite deferral, is not to be compared to an “avènement messianique”,<sup>24</sup> or to an “idée régulatrice kantienne”,<sup>25</sup> that, situated in a rational subject, calls for an infinite approximation in our practical attitude, but rather demands an immediate decision precisely at that moment where it is the most radically undecidable. A decision without calculation, without prior regulation, contextualisation, “agissant dans la nuit du non-savoir et de la non-règle”,<sup>26</sup> all the while acting as if it had the chance of grounding some claim to universality. It is at this precise threshold, between a certain void out of which one acts, an irreducible abyss, *and* the necessity for action, for determination, for the hesitant formulation of a type of ‘principle’ which is stated, among other examples, as “la justice incalculable *commande* de calculer”,<sup>27</sup> “*la déconstruction est la justice*”,<sup>28</sup> or, perhaps, as Socrates said earlier, as an ethical obligation to fight injustice without regard to epistemology or the sweeping oblivion of death, while also calling to “reprove those who think they are something when they are really nothing, and they shall receive justice at your hand”, that we can, although hesitantly, situate justice. A justice that, out of a ‘mad, infinite idea’, pushes and keeps pushing each and all determination, whether it be political, ethical, social, philosophical, conceptual, epistemological, subjective or intersubjective, out of the grave of its particular, singular manifestation into yet another abyss, to suspend it there once more, until the coin stops spinning, waiting to be flicked and put in motion again. If Socrates is condemned for pushing the question of epistemology into an indeterminable abyss, for dislodging the singular from fixed determinations towards the transformative experience of death and its unrooting force, for blurring the margins that are so often considered as definitively marking two sides of a relation of opposites, for engaging the inter-singular relation as an unfinished relation not eternally defined by substantial origins, for raising the singular above and

23 [The undecidable is not only the oscillation or the tension between two decisions. Undecidable is the experience of that which, being strange, heterogenous to the order of the calculable and of the rule, nevertheless *has to* – it is of an *obligation* that one has to speak here – give itself to the impossible decision while taking into account both the right and the rule. A decision which would not take on the challenge of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmatic application or the continuous execution of a calculable process. It would perhaps be legal, but it would not be just. But in the moment of suspense of the undecidable, it is also not just, because only a decision is just.] *Ibid.* 53

24 [messianic advent] *Ibid.* 57.

25 [a Kantian regulatory idea] *Ibid.*

26 [acting in the night of non-knowledge and of the non-rule] *Ibid.* 58.

27 [the incalculable justice *demand*s calculation] *Ibid.* 61.

28 [*deconstruction is justice*] *Ibid.* 35.

beyond its pure self-relation towards an openness, interrelatedness, hybridity and plurality when it comes to the discussion of epistemological questions, the self, and the relation to family, friends, enemies, the state, the law, etc., then, speaking here with both Socrates and Derrida, this condemnation is, perhaps, not *just*. Not *just* in that, in fixing Socrates as the singular *outside* the whole, in repressing the frantic negative constantly questioning the particular conception of right that finds him accused, in simply following and applying their laws, the Athenian court is missing a justice that can never be reducible to this particular manifestation, that does not nurture itself from the logic that finds Socrates accused, that rather goes above and beyond, perhaps even radically and abysmally *below* this logic by constantly putting it under the knife of the question.

31. However, this is not to say that Socrates, in being among the first to walk this abyss of justice, has already *solved* or *absolutised* the question of justice, as if all we had to do now was to repeat his steps, utter his words; as if he were now our ground on which we could stand, or the father to whom we could forever listen. He might have opened the question of justice towards another direction and realm than that of pure right, legality, the “either...or...”, but, as Derrida has quite clearly shown, any singular defence inevitably ends up as a decision that again *fixates* justice as yet another principle, a calculation of the incalculable. We all know that Socrates ends up drinking from the poisoned chalice and that it is *his* decision to do so, as can be read from his refusal to take up Crito’s offer to help him flee Athens and his sentence. Socrates would rather die in concordance with the Athenian divine laws, than to break any laws. His opening of the question of justice, his re-configuration of the singular and formulation of an abysmal thinking, ends with the decision to grant accordance to that conception of right which closes each and all such abysmal definition of justice. His decision is not *just*. Yet, *as* a decision, it nevertheless is. The crucial point here is that, whatever he would have chosen, *the outcome itself could not have been just*. Both Socrates and Derrida, in their thinking about what justice could be, push it towards a kind of radically other, radically open, ungrounded, unfixable, abysmal idea which, as both Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly assert, “one cannot *but* betray”.<sup>25</sup> In fixing the unfixable, grounding the ungroundable, determining the undeterminable, Socrates *of course*, misses his own mark. But, as so often established in this text, this *failure*, is, perhaps, the true *failed success*. In leading the Athenian notion of law as justice towards enacting a sacrifice of the singular accused to reestablish a unity, in bowing to the attempt to silence the idea of a justice, of a thinking, a wisdom that is *other* than that of grounds and found-

25 For a similar reading of the relation between a Derridean justice and the political, in which the political, in its pursuit of justice, incessantly betrays justice, cannot but betray it, see J. Cohen, R. Zagury-Orly, “Standing at the Limits of the Political”, *Derrida-Levinas*, 132-33.



ations, *other* than that of a martial law so certain of its rectitude and justness, Socrates might have momentarily revealed the backside of each landed coin, this *other* logic, which constantly and incessantly attempts to break up the founding of grounds in order to provoke yet another fall. Herein lies his singular justice, his singularly just decision, and his justice *as* a singularity which halts and turns otherwise the economy of crime and punishment, particular and universal, freedom and determination. The echo of this infinite call for justice engulfing each and all singular manifestation and decision in the void of the abyss, in the indeterminacy between *nothing* and *something*, *one* and *many*, *life* and *death*, *knowledge* and *non-knowledge*, *father* and *son*, and which, in escaping all attempts to formulate a principle or universal law, still entertains the always impossible possibility of such a formulation, has been resonating ever since. Socrates' singular defence has launched this practice, this *just* practice of questioning, this unwillingness to settle for simple answers and definite conclusions, this pushing forward towards the *aporia*, this passing through the threshold of the undecidable into yet another undecidable, unlocatable place. His place in the void was unoccupied after his death, it was taken up by Derrida, and now beckons *us* to step forth and jump. Each singular entity, related through this calling to keep the coin in motion, to keep *justice* in motion, is tasked with leaping into the abyss of the aporetic, to become and keep becoming both *less* and *more* than what it could ever settle for. Justice awaits the singular in the expanses of the void, at the margins of its (im)possibility, at the aporetic threshold calling for action; this liminal place, where the question gives itself over to the act of betrayal, where the act of betrayal gives birth to yet another question.

## Works Cited

---

COHEN, JOSEPH. *Le Sacrifice de Hegel*. Paris: Galilée, 2007.

COHEN, JOSEPH, ZAGURY-ORLY, RAPHAEL. "Standing at the Limits of the Political". *Derrida-Levinas: An Alliance Awaiting the Political*. Eds. Orietta Ombrosi, Raphael Zagury-Orly. Mimesis International, year. 117-152.

DERRIDA, JACQUES. *Force de loi*. Paris: Galilée, 2005.

DERRIDA, JACQUES. *Séminaire La peine de mort : Volume 1 (1999-2000)*. Paris: Galilée, 2012.

FOUCAULT, MICHEL. "L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté". *Foucault: Dits et écrits, 1976-1988*. Ed. Daniel Defert, François Ewald. Paris: Gallimard, 2001. 1527-48.

- HARMAN, GRAHAM. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Pelican Books, 2018.
- HEGEL, G.W.F. *The Science of Logic*. Trans. George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- HUI, YUK. *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*. Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016.
- LEVINAS, EMMANUEL. "Mourir Pour...". *Entre Nous*. Paris: Grasset, 1991. 204-14.
- PLATO. "Apology". *The Dialogues of Plato Vol. 1*. Ed. and Transl. by Benjamin Jowett. London: Oxford University Press, 1953. 341-66.
- NANCY, JEAN-LUC. *Être Singulier Pluriel*. Paris: Galilée, 2013.
- STEYERL, HITO. "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective". *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012. 12-31.
- ŽIŽEK, SLAVOJ. *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. London: Verso, 2012.