

The 9th Technology of Otherness:

A certain kind of debt¹

And the man who gave Socrates the poison now and then looked at his feet and legs and after a while he pressed his foot hard, and asked him if he could feel; and he said, No; and then his leg, and so upwards and upwards, and showed us that he was cold and stiff. And Socrates felt them himself, and said: When the poison reaches the heart that will be the end. He was beginning to grow cold about the groin, when he uncovered his face, for he had covered himself up, and said – they were his last words – he said: Crito, I owe a cock [ἐὐναν κόκορα] to Asclepius; will you remember to pay the debt?

Plato, *Phaedo*.²

Strange Debt

The question of debt, especially as the last words Socrates was purported to have whispered moments before he succumbed to the hemlock, remains a vexed and oddly intractable one; perhaps even more so when encountered initially amongst writings in a book on queer sensibilities. But it may not be as strange as it might at first appear and, indeed, as we shall see after dispatching with two of the more well-known interpretations, it may at least begin to provide an initial glimpse into a heterogeneous ‘post-’ postmodern ethics, one fuelled by a particular kind of debt, generated by a certain curiosity (ζῆτισις), and propelled by a queer, strange, sexual-carnal /ethical-political-aesthetic truth (*parrhēsia*).³ It is a

¹ The 9th *Technology of Otherness* was commissioned by Henry Rogers for his edited collection, *Queer Textualities*, (London/Birmingham: ARTicle Press/ OSB Publishing, 2013). It is gratefully reprinted here with the Editor’s permission.

² Plato, *Phaedo: The Last Hours of Socrates*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, (The Project Gutenberg Ebook: 2008). Updated Jan 15, 2013 at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1658/1658-h/1658-h.htm>. Translations vary as to whether Socrates is purported to have used “I” or “we” with respect to the owing of the cock to Asclepius. We will keep the Gutenberg translation but later in the argument will draw upon Foucault’s use of ‘we’ to develop a more general point about the care of the self especially in relation to the true.

³ A point to which we will return momentarily, but see: Michel Foucault, “15 February, The First Hour,” in his *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II, Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984*, translated by Graham Burchell,

blood-debt poetics, this oddly lubricated economy, with ethical difference at its core, courage as its trope and a communal ‘care of the self’ as its technology – what we will name as the 9th technology of otherness.

Before developing that intricate claim, let us turn briefly to Nietzsche and then to Derrida.

In one of the most famous interpretations of Socrates’ dying words, Nietzsche concludes, along with many others, that because Asclepius was the God of Healing and because the very last words on the mind of Socrates was to ask Crito not to forget to pay off, as Nietzsche would phrase it, a “ridiculous debt” to this (and no other) god, Socrates seemed to have undergone a deathbed conversion – one born out of a *fear* of dying, belying, thought Nietzsche, a grave and deeply secretive pessimism. For Nietzsche, this was the complete reversal of all Socrates stood for during the whole of his life.

This ridiculous and terrible ‘last word’ means for those who have ears: “O Crito, *life is a disease*.” Is it possible that a man like him, who had lived cheerfully and like a soldier in the sight of everyone, should have been a pessimist? He had merely kept a cheerful mien whilst concealing all his life long his ultimate judgment, his inmost feeling. Socrates, Socrates *suffered life!* And then he still revenged himself – with this veiled, gruesome, pious, and blasphemous saying. Did a Socrates need such revenge? Did his overrich virtue lack an ounce of magnanimity? -- Alas, my friends, we must overcome even the Greeks!⁴

On a rather different note, Derrida’s interpretation(s) announce a multiple doubling of an inheritance/debt, an inscription of a last will and testament by a dying man (Socrates) whose words are recorded by someone (Plato) who, despite not even being present at the moment of utterance – apparently he was sick on the day – must nevertheless suppose a memory (or, in any case, a ‘not

(New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011), pp. 86-89. Note: the Socratic form of *parrhēsia* (ēthos) carefully sidesteps the carnal-knowledge practice of body, sex, sweat – but as we will see, this is not just an ‘interesting’ aspect of queer *parrhēsia*, it is its verification.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Dying Socrates,” in his *The Gay Science (with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs)*, translated with commentary by W. Kaufman, (New York: Vintage, 1974), section 340, p. 272. The earlier part of the aphorism gives the full sense of his disappointment: “I admire the courage and wisdom of Socrates in everything he did, said – and did not say. This mocking and enamored monster and pied piper of Athens, who made the most overweening youths tremble and sob, was not only the wisest chatterer of all time: he was equally great in silence. I wish he had remained taciturn also at the last moment of his life; in that case he might belong to a still higher order of spirits. Whether it was death or the poison or piety or malice—something loosened his tongue at that moment and he said; “O Crito, I owe Asclepius a rooster.” This ridiculous and terrible ‘last word’ means for those who have ears: “O Crito, *life is a disease*.”

forgetting') of an event which may or may not have taken place, by someone whose authority he wishes to break but, by writing those last words, instead immortalizes that very authority. Plato, caught as both receiver & sender, is now also con-joined to Socrates "from behind" by virtue of the reciprocating journeying inheritance of inscription.⁵ Here the end-game becomes a *double entendre* mid-game and in so doing, entirely changes the rules of the game. As Derrida so vividly (and oddly homo-cidally) enframes it: Socrates could be said to be eternally fucked by a Plato who may or may not be aware of what he is doing and indeed must do. Plato: the devoted pupil-inheritor on the one hand, the knowledge-transfer disseminator on the other; receiver and sender, Plato enacts the double-bind which looks a lot like an innocent placebo but generates the pleasure/pain sadomasochism of the pharmakon. And all the while, the debt-cock just keeps on growing.

Over to Derrida:

5 June 1977. [...] I have not yet recovered from this revelatory catastrophe. Plato behind Socrates. Behind he has always been, as it is thought, but not like that. Me, I always knew it, and they did too, those two I mean. What a couple. Socrates turns his *back* to Plato who has made him write what he wanted while pretending to receive it from him. [...] And since Plato writes, without writing, without wanting that a trace be preserved, since he writes, without writing, that Socrates, who passes for someone who has never written, in truth will have written, whether this is known (or not) and will have written just that which he will have written (but who, he?), you can try to forward the inheritance...

5 September 1977. [...] P.S. I have again overloaded them with colors, look, I made up our couple, do you like it? Doubtless you will not be able to decipher the tattoo on *plato's* prosthesis, the wooden third leg, the phantom-member that he is warming up under *Socrates'* ass.⁶

⁵ See for example 4 September 1977 where Derrida explains: "When Being is thought *on the basis of* the gift of the *es gibt* (sorry for the simplifying stenography, this is only a letter), the gift itself is not something; it would be, hmmm, like an "envoi", destination, the destinality, sorry, of an *envoi*, which of course does not send this or that, which sends nothing that is, nothing that is a "being," a "present." [...] in Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, translated by Alan Bass, (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 61. But for the multiplicity/doubling of inscription and its circulation see also *Of Grammatology*, translated by G. Spivak, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974/1997), especially Part I "Writing Before the Letter," pp. 3-94; *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Wills (London/Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1996), especially Chapters 2 and 3 ("Beyond: Giving for the Taking, Teaching and Learning to Give, Death," and "Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know), pp. 35-52 and 53-81, respectively. Also see *The Politics of Friendship*, translated by George Collins, (London: Verso, 2005), especially Chapter 4, "The Phantom Friend Returning (in the name of Democracy), pp. 75-112. Last but not least, his seminal *Dissemination* (New York: Continuum, 1981), especially regarding the pharmakon developed in "Plato's Pharmacy," pp. 67-122; and "The Double Session," pp. 187ff.

⁶ *The Postcard*, pp. 12 and 65, respectively. Italicization in the original.

Of course there are other interpretations to the last words of Socrates, though most of which, over the past two millennium+ of discussion thus far, tend to fall under the two broad headings as singled out above. That is, of a less than benign, suspicious or secretive ‘final thought confession’ or ‘deathbed conversion’; or, as expressing however enigmatically, a pharmakon-esque inscription of Being, woven into the very fabric of time, circulation, inheritance and debt, and therewith crucial to the (quasi-) transcendental movement of a trace, any trace – be it identity, sexuality, democracy, or indeed, life itself.

Changing the value of currency (a certain kind of courage)

Foucault proposes a wholly distinct approach from the broad outlines sketched above. It is one that, as we will see, not only introduces a methodological game-changer, but opens onto a completely different environ, quite distinct from the one encountered by Adam & Eve and their deeply troubled progeny.

In the immediate months preceding his death in 1984, Foucault delivered a series of 18 lectures at the Collège de France, published posthumously (in French, 2008 and in English, 2011) as *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others, II*.⁷ These lectures were a continuation of the previous two years lectures (from 1982 and 1983) and were situated around four practice-knowledge hubs or modalities of truth: (1) the modality of prophecy/ religiosity; (2) the modality of the order of things; that is, of *being (phusis)*; (3) the modality of demonstrative technique or *tekhnē* in the narrow sense of ‘expertise’ and finally, (4) the modality that polemicized the human condition (*ēthos*).⁸ It was to this last economy of truth, itself a particular knowledge-practice form of *parrhēsia*, that Foucault begins to tease out what is at stake in the elliptical demand of Socrates to Crito: that Crito ‘must remember not to forget’ to repay the debt owed to Asclepius in the manner of gifting the cock.⁹ As we shall see shortly,

⁷ Op. cite. *The Courage of Truth*.

⁸ See the whole of “1 February 1984: First Hour” and “1 February 1984: Second Hour,” *The Courage of Truth*, but particularly pp. 15-19 and pp. 25-27, respectively.

⁹ The general outlines of the concept *parrhēsia* are developed throughout the series of lectures on *The Courage of Truth*, but for this point see in particular, “Lecture One: 1 February 1984: First Hour,” pp. 1-22, and especially 10ff, as well as the afterword “The Course Context,” *The Courage of Truth*, pp. 343-358.

it is from the ‘certain kind of debt’ this fourth modality exposes, reiterates and promotes that the 9th technology of otherness is created and sustained.

Invoking the motto of Diogenes to re-situate the entire polemic of debt and the multitude interpretations of its meaning via Socrates, Crito, Asclepius and the cock, Foucault steps away from the iterative fact of exchange, circulation and debt – let’s just call it ‘the market community’ – and, instead demands, as did Diogenes, that if you (read: we) cannot alter the fact of exchange itself, then at least, to quote Diogenes, “change the value of the currency” [Ἀλλάξει την αξία του νομίσματος].¹⁰ The currency in question could be said to be the general economy of truth; its value: the polemical condition of being human (*ēthos*). Its *parrhēsia*, Foucault argues, is a truth forged from the complex and yet completely obvious mix of curiosity, sensate, invention, experimentation, practice, bodily knowledge, power, movement and risk. It is *this* truth that could (and did) change the currency; it is this truth that could (and did) emit a different kind of ethics; it is this truth that could (and did) draw a certain kind of debt; it is this truth that could (and did) shift the terrain of aesthetics from ‘the Beautiful and Sublime’ to that of an unquantifiable strange/estranged ethos. And it is this truth that required – and still requires – *courage*, because it is this truth that could rock (and did rock and still does rock) the status quo.

“We can say then, very schematically, that the parrhesiast is not the prophet who speaks the truth when she reveals fate enigmatically in the name of someone else. The parrhesiast is not a sage who, when she wants to and, against the background of her silence, tells of being and nature (*phusis*) in the name of wisdom. The parrhesiast is not the professor or teacher, the expert who speaks of *tekhnē* in the name of a tradition. So she does not speak of fate, being or *tekhnē*. Rather, inasmuch as she takes the risk of provoking war with others [...] the parrhesiast brings into play the true discourse of what the Greeks called *ēthos*.”¹¹

¹⁰ “7 March 1984, The Second Hour,” in *The Courage of Truth*, pp. 226-228.

¹¹ “1 February 1984, The Second Hour,” *The Courage of Truth*, p. 25. The word ‘she’ has been used instead of the traditional translation of ‘he’ when the genitalia really should not matter to the argument; and, not to put too fine a point on it, in order to provoke ‘a war with others.’ (JG).

For *parrhēsia* to exist in the sense Foucault is developing means first that there must be some kind of bond between the statement's sender and the receiver. Second, there must be some kind of risk to the exposing of truth on the part of the speaking subject, ranging from the breaking up of a relationship to the violent retaliation of the State. Hence, the *parrhesiast* and the ethos 'to tell it as it is' requires a certain kind of courage and risk. It is the courage to speak out, to provoke, to incite into action without taking oneself out of the relationship; to invent anew by supposing 'it could be otherwise' and then figuring out what and how this 'otherwise' might become real, alive, take root and flourish, without preventing the 'telling it as it is' from being heard even if it might wound or destroy the 'messenger'. Not shock for shock's sake; not offence just because it could be done; not a sterile rationality backing any decision; but rather, a certain kind of connection, a certain kind of care and attention to detail; a certain kind of courage, curiosity, stylistics of existence, generosity, intellect, humour – call it what you will – a complex/heterogeneous logic of sense to *make* 'it' known; to *make* 'it' happen, to *make* manifest a 'certain kind of practice-knowledge' of that which may not 'fit in' exactly or precisely (or even at all), but in spite of that (or even because of it), may put one's body and soul at risk to make that polemical condition of life itself accessible, hearable, readable, graspable, right here, right now.¹²

The Queering of Difference

Now this *parrhēsia*, this ethical commitment 'to tell it as it is' was not, and could not, be made in isolation. In the example cited above, clearly the courage to speak was immersed in / born of a profound commitment, connectedness, a friendship of the self to (another/an-other) self. It required a courage buoyed or infused with the political, aesthetic, possibly dirty and unimaginable right 'to know' (thymself) in relation to this self-other. In so knowing, telling, making, doing, a radical, slightly more subtle heterogeneous form of the ethical was now being advanced by Foucault, one where the veridiction

¹² See "1 February 1984: The First Hour," in *The Courage of Truth*, p. 11, where Foucault details it this way: "The parrhesiast gives his opinion, he says what he thinks, he personally signs, as it were, the truth he states, he binds himself to this truth, and he is consequently bound to it and by it. But this is not enough. For after all, a teacher, a grammarian or a geometer, may say something true about the grammar or geometry they teach, a truth which they believe, which they think. And yet we will not call this *parrhēsia*. We will not say that the geometer and grammarian are parrhesiasts when they teach truths which they believe. For there to be *parrhēsia*, you recall – I stressed this last year – the subject must be taking some kind of risk [in speaking] this truth which he signs as his opinion, his thought, his belief, a risk which concerns his relation with the person to whom he is speaking. For there to be *parrhēsia* in speaking the truth one must open up, establish and confront the risk of offending the other person, of irritating him, of making him angry and provoking him to conduct which may even be extremely violent. [...] In short, the act of truth, requires: first, the manifestation of a fundamental bond between the truth spoken and the thought of the person who spoke it; second, a challenge to the bond between interlocutors... Hence this new feature of *parrhēsia*: it involves some form of courage."

of the *parrhesiastic* ethos, would be (and must be) maintained as an ‘always-already’ plurality of self-to-self collective connectedness.

This heterogenic plurality of ‘self’ exposed yet another set of multiplicities. For *parrhēsia* of the fourth modality encounter, requires in the founding/finding of this ethical multiplicity – this economy of living – a recognition on both ‘sides’ of the self-to-self relation that a particular governance or care must take place. This governance not only concerned the quality of life itself: that in order for the (heterogenic/pluralised) self to survive and, indeed, thrive, a radical governance or care of the self, brought to bear by ‘telling it as it is’, must always remain critically embedded into one’s relational being in the world. But it also meant that this embeddedness, this ethical ‘currency’ must somehow be repeated; must somehow be ‘circulated’ time after time. And as it was premised on, indeed required a public ‘other’ – neither priest, nor teacher nor technician, nor police – but rather the *parrhesiac* ‘other’, to tend to and to nourish, this generative and pluralised ‘self-to-self’ care, it was *this* recognition and insistence of *this* kind of care of self, that forms the context to Socrates’ elliptical remark ‘not to forget’ what most people tended to forget or did not even know it should be remembered: the pluralised ethical demand to care for the pluralised self. “No longer political bravery,” writes Foucault, “but ... the introducing [of] a certain form of truth into a knowledge that men do not know they know, a form of truth which will lead them to take care of themselves.” Thus, he continues:

“I tried to show you how, in his *Apology*, Socrates defined his *parrhēsia*, his courageous truth-telling, as a truth-telling whose final objective and constant concern was to teach men to take care of themselves. Socrates took care of men, but not in the political form: he wants to take care of them so that they will learn to take care of themselves.”¹³

Returning, then to the curious debt owed to Asclepius, to be paid in terms of the bird-cock. As is well known, a debt of this nature is charged when and only when a specific body is known to be gravely ill, then healed (by Asclepius) and the resultant ‘thank you’ is manifested precisely as cited above. But in the last moments of Socrates’ life, there is no (apparent) diseased body; and thus there is no (apparent)

¹³ “15 February 1984: The Second Hour,” in *The Courage of Truth*, pp. 110.

healing; so why the payback, why the insistence to ‘remember not to forget’ and why link it to courage, the ‘courage to tell the truth (*parrhēsia*)? It is because Socrates, as a living parrhesiast becomes in death, both parrhesiast and payback, the embodied ana-materiality of a polemicized ethics.

To put this slightly differently, it is because, this ‘certain kind of truth’ is nothing more nor less than the Socratic prick that both lances the boil of a forgetting/concealing (with minor apologies to Heidegger), whilst simultaneously goading into action a pluralized ‘care of the self’, and with it, a profoundly heterogeneous economy of being, what could be called a ‘magic garden’ which must be tended to, cultivated, over and again. For magic gardens do not happen on their own; they require a profound willingness (courage) to engage in the dangerous game of ‘telling it as it is’, and remembering not to forget to pay the debt in the currency of a multi-dimensional, multi-relational 9th technology of otherness.

Abstract

Classical metaphysics requires a concept of the ethical that belies or erases certain forms of truth-telling, often pulling the ethical in the direction of more sterilized forms of reason and rationality in order to invoke its universal applicability as a kind of ‘one-size-fits-all’ for any person, place, time, or thing. In so doing, not only does this tend to diminish or expunge the sensuous, carnal encounters of body and spirit, it pre-figures certain forms of courage, care and imagination so that the very core of what it means to make a community alive, responsive, and creative remains stuck in the old classical canons of thought and practice. In this way, the beliefs and ‘truths’ that tend to be reproduced serve only to strengthen the status quo’s status – somewhat of a problem if that status quo’s status is also mired in misogynist, homophobic, ethnic and/or racially divisive traditions. *The 9th Technology of Otherness*, building upon Foucault’s **Courage of Truth**, the last lecture series before his untimely death, seeks to show how an ethics drawn along the sensuous modalities (as Foucault positions them) of courage (*parrhēsia*) and curiosity (*zētēsis*), creates a certain form of community, a certain kind of self, and with it, a certain kind of debt. It is precisely this debt that Socrates reminds Crito ‘not to forget to remember to pay’ to Asclepius, and to do so with the now quite infamous gift of the bird-cock.

Keywords: ethics, economy of debt; courage; *parrhēsia*; curiosity; *zētēsis*; truth; queer difference; magic garden; bird-cock.

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