

## **Ethics and the Splendor of Antigone**

An Encounter with:

Charles Freeland, *Antigone, in Her Unbearable Splendor: New Essays on Jacques Lacan's The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*,  
Albany: SUNY Press, 2013, 315 pages.

MARC DE KESEL

“A curious little book”: this is how Charles Freeland characterizes Jacques Lacan’s seventh seminar, published as *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. The size, however, does not prevent Freeland from fully recognizing its tremendous richness and importance for modern ethical theory. Each of the collected essays in his *Antigone, in her Unbearable Splendor* brings out that significance. This is the latest of many commentaries on the seminar since its appearance in 1986. Nevertheless, this is not to say that we should allow Freeland the last, definitive word about what is at stake in Lacan’s seminar. On the contrary, Freeland’s volume shows how the seminar is still far from being well understood. More generally, Freeland’s volume turns out to be one of the many commentaries that reveal the deplorable state of the reception of the Lacanian oeuvre. Freeland rarely avoids an interpretive trap many have fallen into before him.

In what follows, I will briefly analyze the first pages of the first essay in order to show where Freeland’s interpretation misses the point or goes wrong, letting this stand as exemplary for the book as a whole. Then I will add a few comments on Freeland’s central essay about Antigone’s splendor. There, I permit myself to briefly summarize what I think is at stake in Lacan’s thesis on “the ethics of psychoanalysis.”<sup>1</sup>

### **I. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis**

Although Freeland’s volume introduces itself as a comment on Lacan’s seminar on ethics, the first chapter, “Towards an ethics of psychoanalysis”, refers only rarely to the text of that seminar. “What is the

---

<sup>1</sup> I presented an extensive interpretation and close reading of this seminar in De Kesel, *Eros & Ethics*.

beginning point, that point where the question of an ethics arises, for an ethics of psychoanalysis?" (Freeland 16), the author asks. Apparently, this point is not to be found in the ethics seminar, for the author continues:

Let us begin with Lacan's late seminars of the early 1970s, *Seminar XIX*, entitled ... *Ou pire*, and *seminar XX, Encore*. Here, Lacan is discussing what by all appearances seems to be a strikingly classical philosophical proposition: Ya D'LUN ("There is something of the one"). Being is *L'UN* (16).

This "UN", then, is connected to another of Lacan's late concepts: "Lalangue". I skip the series of other references Freeland makes in the following lines (all from the late Lacan) and quote only the sentence that takes up again the question of the "beginning point of ethics": "Ethics arises only in relation to something other, some other source, something other than the pregiven desire for the Good or the *a priori* reign of moral law" (17). The least one can say is that the author's line of argument is not an example of clearness nor is his conceptual apparatus transparent. He refuses to explain his concepts, while this clarification is needed in order to understand the argument. This point of critique can be applied to the entire book. So, if, as a reader, you cannot really follow the line of reasoning, do not worry. Only if you *can* follow, should you worry.

Let me briefly go into this passage. Where does ethics have its starting point? In "Ya D'LUN"? In "There is something of the one"? At least, this is Freeland's translation. "Ya D'LUN" is a typically Lacanian contraction of "Il y a de l'un," which, more correctly, can be translated as: "there is (a) one." "Ya D'LUN" is an expression Lacan introduces not until twelve years later, in his nineteenth seminar (Lacan, *Séminaire XIX* 127-128), and not in a context of ethics, but in a context dealing with the question how to think "identity" or "unity." Since everything is to be considered a signifier (Lacan's basic Lévi-Straussian assumption), there is nothing to unite signifiers, except signifiers. So the possibility of unity arises from one of its own elements functioning at the same time as being located beyond all other ones, naming the totality of them. It is, as Freeland writes on the same page, a "master signifier."

And is this—"Ya D'LUN"—a "classical philosophical proposition," as Freeland writes? Precisely not! Against the traditional philosophical consensus, it says that there *is* no unity, that unity is not a characteristic of *being*, of the *real*. Contrary to Freeland's interpretation of that expression, being "*is*" exactly not "l'UN." The "One," the unity is but one of the elements of the set that forms that unity. When we consider things as unity, it is so thanks to the fact that, among the signifiers, one

element functions in such a way that it makes us believe that we consider a unity.<sup>2</sup>

But how then is “Ya D’LUN” the starting point for the way in which Lacan treats the ethical question? The reader will be hardly able to learn it from Freeland’s book. On the next pages, a variety of concepts are presented—“*trait unaire*,” “*jouissance*,” “*lalangue*”—without one of them clearly explained. And neither will it be explained where then the “beginning point” is, from which ethics arises. Or is it explained in what the author writes in the earlier mentioned quote? “Ethics arises only in relation to something other, some other source, something other than the pre-given desire for the Good or the *a priori* reign of moral law” (Freeland 17).

Does ethics not arise in relation to desire for the Good? And what if this is precisely the thesis Lacan defends in his seventh seminar? Is this seminar not the follow-up to the sixth, the one on “desire and its interpretation”? At least for Lacan, it is clear that the two seminars form one entity and that ethics *does* rise in relation to desire, including the desire for the Good.<sup>3</sup> It is everywhere in his seminar. This, however, does not mean that ethics arises *from* the Good. It only arises from *desire* (for the Good, or for whatever).

This is the crucial point, a point which is somewhat buried under Freeland’s conceptual avalanche. Since Plato and Aristotle, ethics has been based on desire, with desire itself being based on its object, which is supposed to be the Good. I desire the Good because it feels good, and this is so because both my desire and my feeling are based on that which satisfies them, and actualizes me as the being I am. This is the classical, *ontological* theory of desire and ethics. Since modernity, so Lacan argues, we are no longer able to have knowledge of being as it is based on being *as such*, as based in the *real*. We have to give up the idea that we can relate to the world from any *ontological* foundation. We certainly keep longing for such foundation, but that longing—that desire—can never be satisfied.

---

<sup>2</sup> In the expression “*ya D’LUN*,” Lacan replaces the verb being by having: Being *is* not one; being *has* an element (a signifier) that can function as naming being of a set of elements as a unity, as “one.” The expression “*Ya D’LUN*”—or “*Il y a de l’un*”—is from the same kind as, for instance, “*Il y a du pain*,” “there is bread”: the “un,” the unity, is there in the same way the elements of that unity exists. Unlike its signification suggests the unity does not *really* totalizes the elements; it does it only *imaginarily*.

<sup>3</sup> It is astonishing to read in Freeland’s book such sentences as: “Lacan is not attempting in his ethics of psychoanalysis to produce a discourse *on* or *about* desire.” Notice that this is supported, not by reference to the seminar of that name, but by the title of the eighteenth seminar; the sentence continues as follows: “his shall not be ‘a discourse *on* semblance’ as he says in the title of his eighteenth seminar” (Freeland 25).

This goes for the ethical Good as well. The Good we long for no longer provides the foundation for our longing, for our desire. This is why ethics is based on desire, and *only* on desire. Contrary to what Freeland writes, it must arise from desire. Desire is the only given; it is even “pregiven.” As libidinal being we are the subject/bearer of the desire for the other, a desire that originates in the other and in that sense is “pregiven.” And this is also the reason why desire, to the libidinal beings we are, manifests itself as a law. We *have to* desire, and shall always have to desire, because we will never be satisfied in that desire. This is why, according to Lacan, the “ethics of psychoanalysis”—and modern ethics in general—has to approve the Kantian view that ethics cannot but have the form of a law.

However, according to Lacan, Kant’s moral law has not the last word with respect to ethics. It is one thing that man will never be satisfied in his desire for the good and that he will never really have the good he desires; it is another thing, however, that being a subject of desire, he is not capable of full satisfaction. To be more precise, the subject does experience moments of total satisfaction (Lacan’s word here is “*jouissance*,” enjoyment); only, that *jouissance* is never a *real* one. It is so to say a “fake” one; it is only *as if* the libidinal being has taken possession (for this is what “*jouissance*” literally means) of its ultimate object of desire. In reality, however, the subject has lost himself in that moment of *jouissance*: his libidinal economy at that moment is only supported by a series of signifiers (which Lacan conceptualizes as the “phantasm”).

*Jouissance* is the concept for the central thesis in Lacan’s ethics seminar. Human desire, including the ethical desire for the Good, is in reality a desire for what is located beyond the Good, i.e. beyond that which contributes to the self-realization of the moral being. Consciously man wants the Good and that which realizes him as full subject, but in fact—i.e. unconsciously—he longs to stop being a subject and to disappear in the object of his desire. This is what he experiences in his moments of *jouissance*: a loss of himself, a loss of the subject (of desire) he is. And thanks to the fact that he is nothing but signifiers, or, more precisely, thanks to that signifier formation which is the phantasm, this loss of “self” is not real, but “symbolic,” a loss that the libidinal being survives, a loss only noticed in the impossibility to be present in the very moment of *jouissance*—as the French erotic trope of “*la petite mort*” perfectly illustrates.

The aim that guides ethical desire is not to be thought of as fulfillment or realization of the desiring subject, but as the loss of it. This is why, for Lacan, the aim of ethics is not the Good. It is not even that which is beyond Good and Evil (as Nietzsche stated). The aim of ethics, what ethics is striving for, is ultimate evil, radical evil.

That is why “law” profoundly marks the ethical, for ethics has to protect us from the evil toward which it unconsciously leads us. But ethics cannot stick only to this. It has to acknowledge as well its ultimate, impossible aim. It has to provide some space to the transgression of the law, to the *jouissance* in which the ethical loses itself at the moments all ethical aspirations are fulfilled.

Here, we meet the “something other” mentioned in Freeland’s sentence quoted twice above. Ethics has to be thought “in relation to something other, some other source, something other than the pre-given desire for the Good or the *a priori* reign of moral law”. Ethics has to be thought in relation to *jouissance*, in relation to the object which is beyond all that guarantees to the libidinal being the “stuff” of its life (i.e. signifiers) and which, for that very reason, is radical evil. Ethics’ ultimate source is evil. However, contrary to what Freeland says, it is not the “only” thing in relation to which ethics arises. Ethics arises from desire as well, from unquenchable desire, which therefore manifests itself as a law. That law protects us from desire’s unconscious aim, which is the destruction of ourselves as the subject of the desire for the Good.

Yet—and here lies the crux of what Lacan calls the “ethics of psychoanalysis”—this moral protection must at the same time respect ethics’ ultimate, unethical aim. Though beyond the realm of the ethical law, “evil” *jouissance* must be given “*droit de cité*,” to use Lacan’s expression (Lacan, *L’éthique de la psychanalyse* 229; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 194). The beyond of the ethical must be given a certain right to exist *in the very name of ethics*. Man must be given room to be in trouble with the law he cannot but live by. He is the subject of the ethical law in the sense that he is subjected to it, but not only in that sense. His position is that of “the subversion of the subject”, as Lacan entitles one of his major essays: although unable to live by something other than the law, he keeps his distance towards it, a distance which is shown by both his mental symptoms and by the *jouissance* he lives while transgressing (symbolically) all laws. In a psychoanalytical cure, man is seeking the Good and fights his fight with the law, leading his desire in that direction. But the aim of the cure is not the Good, but to lead the *analysant* to face his own desire and leave him at the point where he must be left alone in order to confront himself with the radical non-conformity in relation to the ethical law he is subjected to—or, which amounts to the same thing, in relation to the ultimate object of his desire, to his *jouissance*.

This is what mental therapy is about. When someone is in trouble with himself, when he has lost that “self,” he ultimately will have to find himself back as the subject/bearer of desire—a desire which originates in the Other and which ultimately is the desire to lose his “self” and fade away into *jouissance*.

Is the “ethics of psychoanalysis” as Lacan conceives it an “ethics of resistance,” as Freeland states (10)? That kind of ethics certainly has a dimension that resists the ethical law, but it cannot be reduced to that. If this were the case, it should become itself a law. “An ethics that is the transgression of interdiction itself,” as we read on p. 159, is as much a law as the law transgressed. This is another trap in which Freeland gets caught. Again and again he explains how the ethics Lacan defends goes beyond the law; how it is an “ethics of infinity” (25), “an ethics of transgression and expenditures, an ethics of *jouissance*” (33). But each time he seems unaware that he presents this “beyond” as a new norm, a new “law” to be universally followed. Defending an “ethics of transgression” is to imply that transgression has become a new ethical law. This is certainly not the point Lacan makes. On the contrary, Lacan explicitly says that we “perhaps should give up the hope of any genuine innovation in the field of ethics” (Lacan, *Séminaire VII* 24; *Seminar VII* 14). The only—but far from insignificant—thing psychoanalysis does is to confront ethics with its limits and elaborate the consequences of a genuine ethical attitude, i.e. an attitude taking these limits into account.

This certainly goes for mental health care. Mental health care ethics must be based on the acknowledgment of its limits, if not to say its impossibility. The analyst (or doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist, etc.) is asked to give his patient the “good,” and has to take into account that there is one thing he or she cannot give the patient, which is precisely the “good” asked for. The object of desire—*jouissance*—cannot be the content of a universal ethical rule. From a Lacanian perspective, expressions such as “ethics of *jouissance*” or “ethics of the real” (Freeland 160) are, strictly speaking, nonsense. If “*jouissance* is the most insistent ethical question and conundrum for psychoanalysis” (32), it is precisely because it *escapes* ethics and, in that very quality, has to be recognized as ethics’ center—its “extimate” center, as Lacan puts it with a neologism (Lacan, *Séminaire VII* 167; *Seminar VII* 139).

## II. Antigone, in Her Unbearable Splendor

How, then, does Freeland read Lacan’s interpretation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*? Certainly, the reader can find sentences that adequately express what Lacan puts forward about the Greek tragedy. Such sentences, however, are islands in a sea testifying to a lack of exact comprehension.

Let us take one of these sentences. “Antigone marks within the symbolic domain an image of the transgression of the symbolic” (Freeland 152). This is indeed what, according to Lacan, Antigone does. But is this the “ethico-aesthetic of transgression, of *jouissance* and ‘the real’”, as the author mentions early on (146)? What is this mixture of ethics and aesthetics about? Or, to put it in a different way: since Antigone (the

protagonist as well as the play itself) clearly belongs to the aesthetic, how then does the aesthetic function within the ethical? How can beauty be something ethical?

First of all, what does “beauty” mean here? Is it “the physical beauty of a pretty face” (148)? Freeland’s negative answer gets it wrong. Beauty, more especially Antigone’s beauty, is neither her desire (148) nor a “pulsion” (150)<sup>4</sup>; it is, as mentioned in the quote above (152), an “image”, an aesthetic appearance, an imaginary spectacle. Not a “frightening, monstrous spectacle” (146), but a beautiful one, built around a beautiful young girl. Freeland correctly stresses Lacan’s emphasis regarding her “*éclat*,” her “splendor,” her “radiance,” but he is unclear about what precisely is “radiant.” Contrary to what he writes, it is not her tragic “doom,” her fate—what in the Greek of Sophocles is rendered as “*atè*” (147). Neither does “her splendor belong to the empty darkness of the tomb” (153). Her splendor is simply her beauty, the beauty of the young female protagonist as well as the beauty of the play, both by the same name.

So, it is not the splendor of beauty itself that is “unbearable,” as put forward in the title of Freeland’s book. Unbearable is what is behind that radiant beauty. Beauty is a veil, an imaginary ruse that hides a beyond, and it is that beyond that is “unbearable.” The beauty itself is attractive, i.e. she leads our desire in the direction of its ultimate object. In function, Antigone’s beauty “misleads” us in the sense that, fascinated as we are, our attention dwells on her beauty, and so hides what lies behind it. Nonetheless, it is due to that seductive and misleading beauty that we can catch a glimpse of what is beyond and what is the ultimate object of our desire, including our ethical desire. That ultimate object—which traditionally is supposed to be the Supreme Good—is in fact the beyond of any Good. In principle, it is radical evil: taking possession of his ultimate object, man—being the subject of desire—does not realize, but destroys himself.

The splendor of Antigone’s beauty stops our desire just before it is on the verge of meeting with its ultimate object, which, as subject of desire, we cannot stand. The radiance of her beauty stops our gaze *before* the unbearable, and only under that condition are we given the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the latter—a glimpse of what is beyond the “goods” by which man lives—beyond what Lacan defines as “signifiers” or, with a more general term borrowed from Lévi-Strauss, the “symbolic.”

Now Freeland’s sentence becomes a little bit clearer: “Antigone marks within the symbolic domain an image of the transgression of the symbolic” (152). In her radiant beauty, she takes a position at the precise

---

<sup>4</sup> “Pulsion” is Lacan’s term for what Freud calls “Triebe,” “drive.”

locus where our desire, if not retained, would cross the boundary of the symbolic. Does she, then, function as an “image of this transgression”? Here, some nuance is needed. If she is shown to have entered the zone beyond the boundary (the zone of the Sophoclean “*atè*” or the Lacanian “Thing” or “Real”), then, it is rather to prevent us, spectators, from making that transgression ourselves. Precisely her beauty prevents that, while at the same time it drives our desire in the “right” direction, toward the *jouissance* we are after—and, by doing so, it even allows us a glimpse of *jouissance*’s unbearable “Real.”

It is not solely her beauty that reveals the limit beyond which desire loses all the goods by which it lives. The act for which she is condemned does the same.

Why, according to Lacan, has Antigone buried her brother? Or, more exactly, what does her act show with respect to Creon’s prohibition of burying Polynices? Creon was the new leader after the war Polynices waged against the city of Thebes. That war ended when his brother Eteocles, the city’s “tyranos,” and Polynices himself, both killed. Each killed the other in the same fight. As head of the state, Eteocles was given an official burial; as enemy of the state, Polynices was not allowed to have any burial at all. Such was the decree of Creon.

Antigone transgresses this order consciously. How does Lacan interpret her act? To Lacan, the act of burying her brother is a way to draw attention to the limits of Creon’s law. With that law, Creon intended to strike Polynices with what Lacan calls a “second death”: he wanted to take away even his existence as signifier, he intended to prevent any memory of him, to delete him from the symbolic order (Lacan, *Séminaire VII* 291, 297; *Seminar VII* 248, 251). It is against this that Antigone protests. Whatever crimes her brother committed, he existed and remains inscribed in the book of language, the symbolic order. A signifier represents him, and as such he must remain recognized. In quality of name or signifier, no law can delete Polynices. No law can make it as if he had not existed.

The law is restricted to the signifier: this is what, according to Lacan, Sophocles’ *Antigone* shows. The law can intervene *within* the realm of signifiers, but it cannot delete a signifier *as such*. Polynices—just as any human being—lives thanks to the fact that he is “represented by a signifier to another signifier” (to quote one of Lacan’s formulas, saying that, as a libidinal being, man does not live on the level of the Real, but on a merely representational level: the symbolic order; see Lacan, *Identification I* 27, end of the session of December 6<sup>th</sup>). If Antigone transgressed the law, it was in full consciousness that by doing so she signed her own death sentence. But it is from her transgressive, “dead” position that she shows the truth of the transgression of which Creon’s law is not aware.



It is clear now that Antigone's transgression does not intend to put forward a *new* law. In his comments on that tragedy, Lacan does introduce a "law of transgression," an "ethics of *jouissance*" or "of the real," as Freeland states. The ethical aspect of *Antigone* is not that she inaugurates a radically new ethic. She only unmasks the transgression of the official law, a transgression denied by that law. The ethical correction she puts forward is that the ethical law should acknowledge its tendency to transgress a boundary it nonetheless has to respect. Lacan's emphasis is that this "beyond" of the law, revealed in *Antigone*, is at the same time the aim of any ethical desire binding us to that law. The ultimate aim of ethics lies beyond its limits, but ethics must keep this unethical goal as its core, be it an "extimate" core.

What then is the "ethics of psychoanalysis"? In what *new* sense is psychoanalytic practice ethical? According to Lacan, it is the first "ethical" practice to take into account the "extimate" core of the ethical desire, i.e. of the desire for the Good. This is to say that the analyst is aware of the fact that the Good the patient asks for (doctor, I feel bad, please give me the "good" I am missing) is precisely something he is unable to provide, since the "good" the patient desires is *jouissance*, which is situated beyond any good. The only thing the analyst can provide to the patient is the patient's own *desire* for the Good. For he knows that the demand the patient addresses to him is a tricky way to pretend that his desire may be satisfied, for his mere demand implies that the analyst possesses the satisfaction his patient lacks. It is the patient's way to deny his desire, i.e. to deny he *is* desire, unquenchable desire. In the strange dialectics of the cure, the analyst must lead the patient back to his desire, i.e. back to his fight with the unsatisfiability of his desire, the impossibility to appropriate the moment of *jouissance* in which he loses himself in the ultimate object of desire.

This is why the ethical concern in the cure is not to be situated in the moral values by which the Good is realized. This is not to say that these values are not important, but psychoanalysis focuses on the way the patient's desire *relates* to them, and it acknowledges that the relation is inherently *dubious*: the patient at the same time desires what is at stake in these values *and* desires to go beyond them and to get rid of them (and of himself) in the "evil" of *jouissance*.

In this context Lacan mentions the only ethical question that must lead the patient's analytical process: "Have you acted in conformity to your desire?" (Lacan, *Séminaire VII* 362; *Seminar VII* 314). We find that quote in Freeland, but as with so many others, he reads it as imperative: "thou shalt not give way on your desire" (Freeland 172, see also 156). And this is precisely what it is not. It is nothing but a piece of practical advice: in the analytical cure, one has to focus on desire, whatever it is that one desires. Lacan's statement is certainly not a commandment with "a

Kantian strain” in it, as Freeland writes (172). For, according to Lacan, desire cannot be reduced to the “form” in which it operates. In the end, desire is oriented to leave all form and all conformity behind and to lose even its subject (in the moments of *jouissance*). If we were to be obedient to the imperative of desire in the way Freeland puts it, we would end up in a situation where any law was constantly transgressed, a situation most accurately described in the works of Marquis de Sade. No wonder Sade is a main point of reference in Lacan’s seventh seminar, but precisely not as the one who provides the ethics of psychoanalysis.

Like many publications in the Lacanian field, Freeland’s book does not devote itself to the patient reading of Lacan’s text in order to reconstruct the arguments. Instead, the author explains single statements from the seventh seminar by referring to a variety of passages preferably harvested from the later seminars—passages that are themselves never given close reading. As usual, the result is a somewhat inconsistent amalgam of concepts of which the precise signification is never entirely clear. Someone who is not familiar with Lacan easily drops out, as does the one truly familiar with the Lacanian text.

The worst of the book is that the lack of conceptual consistency is kept hidden behind a representation of Lacan as an “anti-philosopher,” of his work as an “anti-philosophy” (Freeland 15 and *passim*), as if Lacan rejects the entire philosophical tradition or is to be approached as a “‘demythologization’ of the European philosophical ethical tradition” (145). Of course, Lacan criticizes many philosophers, both past and present, but so do other philosophers and his point is precisely that what has happened in Freud cannot be understood without referring to the entire philosophical tradition. Referring to “anti-philosophy” or the “demythologization” of philosophy, Freeland spares himself the task of working through the detailed philosophical implications of Lacan’s lines of argument. Of course, the term “anti-philosophy” is Lacan’s (he uses it in his seventeenth seminar, 1968-1969), and of course Badiou’s use of the term concerning Lacan seems to support Freeland’s thesis, but these arguments do not warrant neglecting an accurate and patient reading of the Lacanian text.

As with many publications in this field, Freeland’s book illustrates the lack of rigor in the reception of the Lacanian oeuvre. That lack is a real pity, for the oeuvre is truly a goldmine for, precisely, profoundly philosophical reflection about what Modernity means and what it implies for our condition—and certainly our ethical condition—as modern subjects.

### Works Cited

DE KESEL, Marc. *Eros & Ethics: A Reading of Jacques Lacan's Seventh Seminar*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009.

LACAN, Jacques. *Identification*, not published;  
<http://staferla.free.fr/S9/S9%20L%27IDENTIFICATION.pdf>.

—, *Le séminaire. Livre VII : L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959-1960*, éd. J.-A. Miller. Paris: Seuil, 1986.

—. *The Seminar, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. Trans. D. Potter. London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992.

—. *Le séminaire. Livre XIX : Ou pire ...*, éd. J.-A. Miller. Paris: Seuil, 2011.