Chapter 5

The real of ethics

On a widespread misconception

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Psychology and the Other.[1] Can a title be more Lacanian? Where exactly is the *logos* of the psyche to be located? For Lacan it is clear: in the Other. What ages ago was called psyche, what we still sometimes call with that name (though in fact we don't know what we say then) is to be located, neither in the body, nor in the mind, nor even with us, but with the Other, i.e. with what we share among us: *logos*, language—language on its most material level: signifiers. Our psyche is to be found somewhere else than in the 'self' we think we are. Its location is the autonomously functioning language system or, with the term Lacan borrows from Lévi-Strauss, the symbolic order. The 'self,' 'soul,' and '*psyche*' we suppose we are, is a supposition indeed: It is what, in an imaginary and phantasmatic way, is supposed to be the owner and the ground of the signifiers we live by, by sharing them with others. Our 'self' is the supposed 'subject' ('*subjectum*,' '*hypokeimenon*,' 'bearer') of the Other, of the symbolic order we live by. It is the core of Lacanian theory. Signifiers are the stuff we are made of.

That this core insight of Lacanian theory is profoundly subversive might find evidence in the fact that not language, but its opposite is nowadays the central term in Lacanian theory. There, as well as in many psychoanalytically inspired critical discourses, it is the notion of 'the real' that has become the most important concept. It is generally one of the central notions and, in some cases, even the one on which the entire argument depends.

However, didn't Lacan precisely warn us that we should be suspicious about notions—or other signifiers—placed in the center of a discourse? Is their central position not often due to the fact they, if not meaningless in themselves, are able to say the opposite of what they apparently seem to say? And is this not the case with the concept of *the real* in current Lacanian

discourse and critical theories? Or, to put it into Lacan's proper terms: Is this concept not frequently used as a '*point de capiton*' (quilting point),[2] that is, the point where an entire discourse is hung on an empty signifier that, precisely in this quality, is able to give sense to the totality of that discourse? With respect to the importance of what Lacan tries to say with the concept of the real (note that, for myself as well, the 'real' is one the most important concepts in Lacanian theory), one ought to be aware of the risks of using this term as a central '*point de capiton*.'

In many cases, this concept runs the risk of re-covering—rather than discovering—the crucial point at stake in Lacanian theory. It frequently re-covers the kernel of psychoanalysis, its '*cause freudienne*' (as Lacan puts it). This is, for example, the case when the real is linked to ethics. For the readers of Slavoj Žižek and Alenka Zupančič, the "ethics of the Real" is supposed to be a comprehensible expression, intended to be able to clarify other, less comprehensible concepts and issues.[3] Yet, this chapter will cast doubts on the clarity of the expression "ethics of the real." My argument is that anyone who does not consider it a contradiction in terms simply misses the point and will never understand what 'the real' implies for the question of ethics.

Let us, at once, serve up one of the most symptomatic quotes that plays a major role in so many Lacanian analyses: "*ne pas céder sur son désir*" ("do not give way on your desire" or, as Zupančič translates it,[4] "do not give up on your desire"). To regard this well-known sentence as the core of Lacanian ethics (as well as the core of the "the ethics of psychoanalysis," the title of the seminar it is quoted from),[5] simply gives evidence of having read Lacan all too quickly and of having been caught by the imaginary force of concepts such as the real. For the core of Lacanian ethics (i.e. what, according to Lacan, ethics really is about) is not: "*ne pas céder sur son désir*." The concept—and even the idea—of an "ethics of the real" is simply absent in Lacan's seminar on ethics as well as in the other seminars. It seems to be the mere effect of an imaginary, symptomatic misreading of the Lacanian text.

Before directly arguing these claims, it is worth revisiting the basic principles of Lacanian theory. Redundant as it might seem, a correct understanding of Lacan's basic insights is indispensable in order to discover what is really at stake when he, at a certain moment in his *oeuvre*, introduces the notion of the real. For, indeed, this is what happens precisely in his seminar on ethics, although this certainly does not legitimate talking of an "ethics of the real."

Primacy of the signifier

When, in 1972, during an interview for the Belgian Television in Brussels, Lacan was asked what, in a nutshell, is the very core of his entire theory (note we are in 1972, the notion of '*objet petit a*' as the persistence of the real in the symbolic is already a main topic in his seminar for years), he replied seriously and with his usual pathos that Freud's discovery is the importance of language.[6] We, analysts as well as analysands, can solely rely on language: This is the core of psychoanalytic praxis as well as of its theory. Its basic insight into the human being is that it is made of language: We '*are*' language, our very being is *speakbeing*, *parlêtre*. Yet in 1977, Lacan writes, concerning the Freudian unconscious: "[W]hat we should propose as being its structure, is language. This is the very core of what I teach."[7]

The primacy of language: This is the heart of his theory; this is what he has seen; or, more exactly, what he has seen that Freud has seen, and to which he, Lacan, in fact was not able to add anything new. To this axiom psychoanalysis again and again has to come back in order not to forget its *raison d'être*. What we face in a psychoanalytic cure, what we face when we encounter the unconscious, what we face when we run into trouble with ourselves is language. It is the only material we work with, the only reality we deal with. This is to say: We never deal with *real* reality, with 'the real.' Listening to the analysand, the analyst has to listen, not to *what* is said, neither to the supposed real behind, but to the mere materiality of this speaking—a materiality defined as a signifier. When, in therapy or any other kind of mental health care, you wish to understand someone and approach his case scientifically, the domain you must operate in is a radically superficial one, just as the problems you have to deal with are to be approached in a strictly material way. "We are living in a material world, and I am a material girl" is what—with Madonna—the troubled girl sings on the couch. Except that the material in question is language—language in its aspect of pure materiality, pure externality, taken not for its content or meaning but for the materiality of its signifiers.

In one sense, the modern therapist must do something which—at least formally—is similar to what Isaac Newton did the first time he scientifically (in the modern sense of the word) observed an apple falling from a tree. At that moment, Newton's question was no longer *what* was falling down, i.e. he no longer presumed a connection between the *essence* of this apple and

the move it made or the distance it covered. For, in his time, this was precisely how science (i.e. Aristotelian based science) commonly proceeded. 'Pre-modern' science presumed every movement to be reducible to the essence of the moving thing. An apple felt its essence (i.e. its potentiality of being) attracting it down to the earth. Composed of the four elements (i.e. earth, water, air, and fire), at a certain moment the earth in the apple predominates and makes the apple move toward the earth. And it is also at this precise moment that the life animating the apple's being needs to fall to the earth so that the apple, after rotting there, can germinate and let the apple be what it always had been: the potentiality—the (living) essence—of being an apple tree.

With Newton, the question of being and essence, until then the condition *sine qua non* of science, lost all importance. The external protocol of the way a thing—not an essence but a quantum of mass—falls down: This is now what a scientific observation takes into account. Scientific research is now limited to outlining the mathematical laws deducible from that phenomenon. It leaves all essentialist questions behind.

The move away from an inner essence to mere superficiality is, in a sense, a move Lacan proposes too: not concerning physics, i.e. concerning the object-site of science (as it is called since Descartes), but concerning the domain of the subject, i.e. the domain which, since the emergence of 'modern science,' could never found a proper logic and which had been erroneously ascribed the logic of the object. This is the solution proposed (but never proved) by La Mettrie and eighteenth-century materialism, and it is still—and perhaps more than ever—the unquestioned paradigm of the contemporary social sciences.

According to Lacan, Freud's psychoanalysis is to be seen as an attempt to outline a really new, proper logic of the subject. It is a *libidinal* and (therefore) somewhat cunning kind of logic: the logic of the pleasure-principle in which negation loses its validity, and where repression and denial are the norm rather than the exception. It is a logic of lies, however, which do not disappear once the truth is discovered—thus a logic where the truth re-affirms and sometimes even re-establishes the lies it unmasks.

This kind of libidinal logic is at work in the way a libidinal being expresses itself in language—note: in language understood as a *surface* phenomenon, as a realm of signifiers disconnected from their meaning (*signifié*) and held together only by referring, superficially, to one another.

Here, we face Lacan's most basic intuition: This surface phenomenon called language—which is the sole element in which the libidinal being can live, i.e. gain pleasure—lies by definition about one thing, i.e. that, in language, there is simply no place for the one about whom all its signifiers are talking. In the discourse by which the libidinal being lives, there is no space for the subject of which its signifiers pretend to speak. This is the basic trauma inherent to our libidinal condition. We only live in—and thanks to—the symbolic order (i.e. the signifiers) that represents us, which implies we are never *really* present, not even in that symbolic universe of signifiers. And if this trauma is repressed (which is necessarily the case), it is not kept hidden in some mysterious depth; it is kept at the surface itself. It coincides with the operative impossibility language lives by. It coincides with language's constitutive lack, with the radical incapacity of the signifier to definitively say its *signifié* (meaning).

Hence, the satisfaction of the pleasure principle, being impossible at the level of 'the real,' becomes possible at the symbolic level, at the level of the signifier and language. For the signifier's inability to *really* say what it has to say is nothing less than its operative principle. The impossibility of *really* saying and of expressing things (i.e. to replace their real presence) is language's most proper condition. This is why language as such, in its merely formal quality, is the most adequate environment for the libidinal being to repress its impossibility of obtaining pleasure at the level of the real. Because we live by the pleasure-principle which is incompatible with the real, we are forced to rely on language. In a sense, signifiers are the air we breathe, the food we live by.

For the one in psychological trouble searching for his true self (his 'subject') as well as for the one who spends his professional life treating and curing such a person, there is no other material to rely on than language. Yet, precisely within language, that self or subject can only be absent. When someone talks about himself, the one about whom he is talking is never the same as the one who is talking. The speaking subject—or, as Lacan puts it, the "subject of the enunciation"—only exists insofar as it is represented by the signifiers being used. These signifiers talk solely about "the subject of the enunciated," which never coincides—and never will coincide—with "the subject of the enunciation." The subject we 'are' is never really present nor is it ever really 'real.' In the final analysis, it is nothing but a radically dead point of reference in the discourse, which nevertheless constantly talks about it. Anyone who looks for his true 'self'

(and nobody can escape this: It is the very definition of the human insofar as we are—in the Cartesian sense—not simply objects but also subjects) must depend on the superficiality of the signifier with which he talks about himself in order to find out, at the end, that he has been nothing more than a dead point of reference in the language in which he (as *real* reality) always has been alienated.

In other words, man is desire dancing on the wings of language; he is radically unfulfilled and radically unfulfillable desire. Although he supposes himself a fixed identity, he is continuously de-centered by his own symbolic subject position. In the case of an individual neurosis, he has become stuck in the demand about who he is and what he wants, a demand Lacan characterizes as imaginary. It is, then, as Lacanian theory teaches, a matter of rigorously elaborating this demand on the level of its material surface-structure (i.e. at the level of the signifier). For the aim of the treatment is not to answer the patient's demand, but to liberate the desire locked up (repressed) in it. For desire—unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire—is man's truth; it is the most basic thing humans live by.

Although lived as satisfaction of desire, enjoyment nonetheless leaves desire unfulfilled. For, as Lacan has pointed out, enjoyment only feels *as if* desire has left all lack and void behind. In fact, however, in enjoyment, the subject of desire only fades away for a while. In the moment of enjoyment, the entire libidinal economy no longer rests in its subject (in its bearer, its *hypokeimenon*, its *subjectum*), but in its fantasy, i.e. in a little scenario of imaginarily fixed signifiers circling around the ultimate object of desire.[8] In the very instant the subject finally enjoys usufruct of the desired object (which is the etymological meaning of the French word *jouissance*), in the instant his desire becomes entirely satisfied, it has already lost itself, which is to say it has lost its subject, i.e. the point from where it rules its entire libidinal economy. At the very moment of enjoyment, the libidinal system is no longer able to say 'I enjoy.' At this moment, it has been lost in its desired object or, more precisely, in its fantasy, i.e. a set of signifiers gathered around the ultimate object of desire.

Desire's object as real

Reflecting in the late fifties on the status of this object, Lacan becomes more and more sensitive to one of its dimensions he had neglected until then. The object of desire is not only to be considered as symbolic and

imaginary, it is real as well. It was Lacan's self-criticism that brought him to this. Until then, Lacan located the central ruse of libidinal life in the coincidence of desire's ultimate object with the lack or void by which the signifier operates. That is why human desire makes full circle and can become man's essence: since desire's ultimate object was a lack, even satisfaction and enjoyment keeps people desiring—which, in this case, means: living. That man was full of lack and discontent, that he never gets what he wanted, that he is not even present in his moments of enjoyment: These are all the hallmarks of man's tragic condition. It is the libidinal condition of what makes him live, i.e. of the desire he 'is.' Human desire, coming full circle—this is the core of Lacan's teaching until the first half of 1958.

Yet desire might make a bit too full a circle, Lacan must have thought in his sixth seminar (*Le désir et son interpretation*, 1958/59).[9] For what would be the difference between his theory of desire and the one implied in the work of a Jewish-born Christian author, social militant, and mystic, Simone Weil? As we know from the way he quotes her in his seminar, Lacan was particularly impressed by some passages from her book *La pesenteur et la grâce*. According to Weil, too, the weight (*la pesenteur*) that makes life hard is at the same time the key to seeing life as light and full of grace—if only we regard the weight of the lack of being in a different way.[10] Lack should not be considered as what limits and torments life; it is at the same time its condition of possibility.[11] Weil develops the idea in the line of Christian mysticism. What else is God than the nothing or *nada* that John of the Cross locates at top of the Mount Carmel and which keeps his desire burning at the very moment it enjoys its final satisfaction? What else is God than the name of the void or the death that supports us and in which not even our dying finds an end, as Teresa of Avila[12] puts it, in order to stress the infinity of the life God gives us?

So, if Lacan's insights can so easily be illustrated by passages from Christian mysticism, where is the difference distinguishing *his* theory from Christianity's theory of desire? Is his own theory really more than a Freudian rewriting of insights already accurately developed in Christian tradition? And, second question: If desire finds its ultimate answer in its own lack, does this not lead Lacan to the conclusion that man is able to harmonize his desire, to be reconciled to it? Should we in that case no longer consider Oedipus' performance in Colonos as a radically *tragic* confrontation with desire? On the verge of death, the chorus understands

the incestuous tyrant as wishing not to be born at all ("*mè phunai*").[13] In his second seminar, Lacan referred to this passage as man's ultimate confrontation with himself as with the irreconcilable desire he is.[14] Now, the same ultimate confrontation seems to be much more reconcilable. It seems to be the moment in which desire comes full circle and, so, becomes reconciled.

Reflecting on these issues in his sixth seminar, Lacan's *oeuvre* takes a turn in a very different direction from the path upon which Simone Weil seems to have led him for a moment. He rediscovers desire as *never* reaching full circle, not even in its very lack. Hence, a conciliatory confrontation with desire will become impossible. Only now, Lacan will rediscover the truly tragic structure inherent to this confrontation.

Here, in the late lessons of his sixth seminar, the emphasis of the real emerges that is so typical of Lacan's later work. Again and again, Lacan will stress that the ultimate object of desire has a *real* dimension which can neither be neglected nor fully acknowledged. Although he considers this object the lack the symbolic order (the signifier) operates with, the object is *not only* that. It has also a radically non-symbolic, *real* dimension. What the libidinal being longs for in the last resort is the real *beyond* the symbolic and its signifiers. In spite of the signifier's infinite ruses, it is not able to completely fool the libidinal being and to bury the real (i.e. the lack on the level of being) once and for all beneath the operative lack of the symbolic.

In other words: The symbolic universe in which the libidinal being performs his desire, does not protect it once and for all from the death drive. Desire is driven by what, at long last, can turn against the self-preservation of the desiring organism. This is to say that desire is inherently excessive. Although it seems to make full circle by appropriating its own lack, desire cannot avoid our libidinal life being characterized by an inherently *excessive* tendency. In addition to the lack of the signifier, another lack should be acknowledged, i.e. the *Thing*, whose topological place is in the domain of the real and which, on a destructive—and even self-destructive—way, is the point of attraction for the entire libidinal system.[15] The entire symbolic life of the libidinal being turns around an excessive point to which it is attracted and towards which, at the same time, it keeps its distance.

Henceforth enjoyment, too, will be defined in a modified way. It no longer loses itself exclusively in the lack with which the symbolic order operates. Now it loses itself in the real as well—a loss that is only

prevented from being lethal because of the fading of the subject. The goal to which desire is driven is no longer only a lack that, once enjoyed, reanimates desire. Desire and its satisfaction are now defined as inherently transgressive.[16] The aim of libidinal life now lies *beyond* the order of the symbolic lack, i.e. in the real, which, once reaching that aim, would imply the death of the libidinal being, were it not that its subject was capable of fading away on the very moment it reaches this goal.

The real of ethics

It is not by accident Lacan develops these ideas during his seminar on "the ethics of psychoanalysis." His new definition of enjoyment (enjoyment as transgressing the limits of the symbolic order) implies that the way we deal with the good—the 'good' in the moral as well as in the material, economic sense of the word (the goods)—ultimately coincides with the destruction of all good(s). With Aristotle, the entire tradition considers the goal of ethics to be the Supreme Good. For Lacan, however, this so-called Supreme Good is to be analyzed as enjoyment, i.e. as what lies beyond all goods (in the ethical and economic sense of the word), or, what amounts to the same thing, as what lies beyond the signifier. In the moment of *jouissance*—entering the domain where traditional ethics situates the Supreme Good (the realization of our desires)—we in fact leave all goods behind, so Lacan argues. What was supposed to be the Supreme Good, then, is unmasked as lying *beyond* any good, i.e. as lying beyond the element in which—and by which—we live. The Supreme Good turns out to be radical evil.

Acknowledging the human being as desire implies acknowledging that what he finally desires is indeed a radical, self-destroying evil; in other words, that the truth of Kantian ethics is to be read in the horrifying fantasies of Marquis de Sade. There we face the real we long for. There we find a representation of what happens when our final object of desire becomes realized at the level of the real (and no longer at the level of the symbolic).

Is this what we should do, then? Is it our ethical duty to realize our desire right up to the level of the real? Is this "the ethics of the real?" Certainly not. This would be a mere promotion of sadism. For, indeed, the truth of desire is to long for the real, i.e. for a transgression of the symbolic, a transgression that ends in the (self)destruction of the subject. Ethics should first of all protect us against this truth. According to Lacan, ethics is essentially an ethics of desire, an ethics that promotes desire and, therefore,

protects us against satisfaction, i.e. against the self-destructive ultimate object to which, unconsciously, it is attracted. In this sense, Lacan is more Kantian than we often admit.

But does Lacan not claim "we should not give way to our desire" ("*Ne pas céder sur son désir*"): Does this famous Lacanian maxim not constrain us to remain faithful to our desire, even to the bitter end? Is it not our ethical duty to remain as faithful to our desire as Antigone did, even when we run the risk of being destroyed? Is this not the ultimate ethical lesson to be drawn from Lacan's seminar on 'the ethics of psychoanalysis?'

There is really a persistent misreading of the passages in Lacan's ethics seminar in which he develops his ideas about "*ne pas céder sur son désir*." It has, for instance, become commonplace to promote Antigone as a moral *example*, illustrating the ethical imperative developed in Lacan's seminar on "the ethics of psychoanalysis." This imperative, however, is simply nowhere to be found in the Lacanian text. There, Antigone is precisely said *not* to illustrate the order of ethical imperatives or, as Lacan defines it, the "function of the good" ("*la function du bien*").[17] So, Antigone does not stand for a good we, in the name of ethics, should aim at. She does not exemplify a good we should have or be. Instead, she illustrates what Lacan calls "the function of the beautiful" ("*la function du beau*"):[18] She shows us beauty as "the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear"—to quote a famous passage from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*[19]—to which Lacan, strikingly, never refers, neither in his seminar on ethics nor in his other seminars. Antigone shows where, in the final analysis, human desire leads: i.e. *beyond* the good, *beyond* the realm of the livable goods (signifiers). She illustrates desire's ultimate goal, which is no longer compatible with the self-preservation of the desiring subject. Anyone who promotes this goal as an ethical imperative, promotes in fact the transgression of the law as the law itself, which inevitably ends up in a universe described in the work of Marquis de Sade.

This is the precise reason why Lacan, in his seventh seminar, introduces a conceptual distinction between *sublimation* and *perversion*. In sublimation, the subject acknowledges the primacy of desire by "elevating its object to the dignity of *the Thing*"—as Lacan defines sublimation there.[20] It is a way of affirming that one is unable to occupy the position of the ultimate object of desire. For, as Lacan discovers in his seminar on ethics, that object cannot be subjectivized at all. That is why it is no longer to be defined as simply symbolic, as the lack in which the chain of signifiers

rests, i.e. as the point where that chain gets subjectivized. It is true that this point is the locus of the subject of desire, *but precisely as what does not coincide with its ultimate object*. Sublimation—such as courtly love for instance[21]—celebrates the distance between the subject and the object, i.e. the subject's impossibility of occupying the object's position.

The opposite of sublimation, Lacan argues in the same seminar, is perversion.[22] There, too, the subject acknowledges that the ultimate object of desire is *the Thing* (i.e. the 'beyond' of the signifier). But the perverse kind of acknowledgment operates from the very position of *the Thing*. The subject knows *the Thing* is real and untouchable, but this act of knowledge already secretly proceeds from that position and, thus, coincides with a denial of the very impossibility of reaching *the Thing*.

This typically perverse denial can be found in the fantasies described in Sade's *oeuvre*. They illustrate the radical freedom of desire, for there, indeed, the Sadian hero does not give up on any possible desire. But the place he occupies as subject of desire is the place of its object: He fully and consciously enjoys desire's ultimate object. Pretending to real enjoyment, he shows desire freed from any lack, any void, any restricting law. On second glance, however, these Sadian fantasies clearly show that desire's lack is not at all filled in but only denied. It is precisely this denial that causes sadism's inhuman cruelty. For the Sadian hero literally transfers the lack of his own desire (i.e. the hallmarks of his own finitude) onto the body of his victim, in order there to deny on this tortured body the lack of his own desire, the hallmarks of his own finitude. The sadist's full acknowledgment of desire and enjoyment coincide with the denial of what is the indispensable base of both desire and enjoyment: the lack or the void, affirming man's finitude, man's impossibility of being anything else than (unfulfillable) desire.

This is precisely not how Antigone acts. It is certainly not the position she takes when she decides to bury her 'bad' brother, i.e. the brother condemned by Creon, the representative of the law. Her decision to strew sand over the corpse of Polyneices is not so much a "jump into the real" (a jump out of the symbolic order) as a genuinely symbolic act. She realizes that her brother is on the verge of being evacuated from the symbolic order by Creon. Protesting against this, her intent to bury him affirms her brother as a signifier, i.e. a being once and for all marked by the *Logos* (i.e. the signifier). It is Creon who, in a perverse way, is clearly intent on denying the very existence of Polyneices. He wishes—not to destroy Polyneices' life (for he is already dead)—but to destroy that which was the

very support of that life, i.e. the *signifier* 'Polyneices.' Forbidding his burial, he wants to deny the basic ground of his existence; he wishes Polyneices never to have existed. He wants to erase his name from the book of the world (i.e. the symbolic order). He doesn't simply want him to be dead, he wants a 'second death' for him, the death of the signifier he 'is.'

For the latter is what is acknowledged in a funeral par excellence. It is the celebration of the human being surviving, as signifier, in the symbolic order. 'Surviving'not in some kind of afterlife but in this life; 'surviving,' in the way that, from birth as a subject he *always already* is surviving. For this is the proper situation of the libidinal being. It always already 'survives' in the symbolic order, or, as Lacan puts in his formula, in a "signifier representing the subject for a signifier."[23]

It is in his quality of signifier that Polyneices is elevated to the level of *the Thing*. So, from Lacan's perspective, Antigone's act is an act of sublimation. She does not 'jump into the real,' it is only her brother she puts in this position, in order to recognize him for what, on his most basic level, he 'really' is, i.e. a signifier. It is only in this way she performs the radical nature of her own desire. This is also why she considers herself as already dead.[24] Hence her indifference to the threat of Creon's death sentence. In fact, she takes the position, which, according to Lacanian theory, the subject of desire always takes, i.e. the position of a dead point existing solely thanks to the signifiers referring to it.

In this perspective, it is clear that her act is really an act of sublimation: Putting her brother on the level of *the Thing*, she promotes him in his quality of signifier, and she acknowledges herself as the subject of desire, circling around the privileged signifier—a privileged one in the sense it indicates the final object of desire.

Creon, on the contrary, illustrates the opposite of sublimation. He is the one who wishes to destroy Polyneices as signifier, i.e. as marked by the lack his existence rests upon. Although not with the same 'consciousness' as the Sadian hero, Creon, too, transfers the lack to another—in this case Antigone as well as her lover, his own son Haemon—in order to deny in them the lack he himself (as well as the law he represents) rests upon. It should now be clear that *Antigone* (the play) is not meant to deliver some moral example. It is only meant to give us a view of the tragic shape of our desire.

Is a figure like Antigone ethically irrelevant, then? Is she solely an aesthetic image, incapable not only of being a moral example, but also lacking any ethical value in general? On the contrary, as Lacan emphasizes

in his seventh seminar. It is precisely in her *aesthetic* quality that the protagonist of Sophocles's *Antigone* is of moral value. She offers an insight into what we suppose to be the supreme good but in fact is radical evil. She deconstructs our 'normal' faith in the supreme good, and analyses it as evil. It is this deconstructive gesture performed in the play that is of ethical value. It warns us against the possibility of evil at work even in the heart of our most ethical intentions. In other words, it warns us against the death drive which is operative in ethics—in our desire for the good—too.

Yet this is not to say that we should give free rein to that kind of death drive or (which amounts to the same thing) to desire "*à l'état pur*." But it is a dimension of our desire which we will meet when we go in search of 'ourself.' We will indeed then have to check where we have or have not "given way to our desire." Although almost every author cites it as an actual quote, in Lacan, the imperative "*ne pas céder sur son désir*" is nowhere literally to be found. The only thing we find there is that, if during the cure the patient faces feelings of guilt, he has only one norm in reference to which this guilt can be measured; this norm is desire. Confronted with the feelings of guilt in this way, anyone who wants to get in touch with his desire has only one criterion: Did I or did I not give way to my desire? And, of course, I *have* given way to my desire. Nobody escapes this. Yet it makes no sense to accuse the analysand for having done so. This criterion is only a way to 'de-center' the question of guilt, to turn the patient's imaginary questions in such a way that they make the truth of his desire come to surface. The fantasies at work in his demands must be elaborated in order to discover the true object of desire. It is here the analysand faces his fantasy as a last defense mechanism against the real, unreachable object of his desire, a defense mechanism which is at the same time desire's final support. This fantasy supports the analysand's desire, even when—for instance, in 'enjoyment'—the analysand is no longer able to be the subject of his libidinal economy and, for a moment, fades away. So, fantasy is a last 'screen' keeping the subject in touch with *and* at distance from its last, *real* truth (in Lacanese: his *object a* as *real*).

However, once this truth has been discovered, it is not a matter of appropriating it in order to make it a new foundation for moral behavior. The fact is that, by definition, we cannot appropriate that truth, i.e. that ultimate object of desire. Nonetheless, it is a fact as well that we are the subjects—the bearer—of the desire for that object. We are so, not in an ontological way, but in a performative way: We *are* that subject only

insofar as we are *to be* that subject.[25] For the analysand, only one thing matters in the "ethics of psychoanalysis:" to recover a way of becoming the *subject* of his desire again. The ethics of psychoanalysis is an ethics of desire, and even if the real is a main point of reference for desire, from a psychoanalytic perspective, ethics can never be defined as an ethics of the real. Our desire is oriented towards the real, but ethics can only be characterized as an ethics of desire.

Locked up in the imaginary ruses of my demand, I must discover the desire repressed in it, and, therefore, I must discover myself as the subject of that desire: not the subject my demand speaks of (i.e. the "subject of the enunciated," the 'ego' I necessarily suppose is speaking when I perform my demand), but the subject denied by this very demand: the "subject of the enunciation." In other words: The subject of my desire, which can only be found in—and as—what remains absent in the signifiers used in my demand.

This is why the ethics of psychoanalysis must be connected above all to the signifier. Certainly, confronted with his fantasy, the analysand faces the real, but this confrontation only emphasizes all the more that he only has signifiers in order to give his desire (for the real or for whatever) a chance. In the signifiers, human desire—i.e. human life—finds its support. Only as supported by the signifier can human desire be oriented towards the real and at the same time protected from it.

This is why the good that psychoanalysis can give to the analysand is by definition never the good the latter asks for. The 'good' the analysand finally asks for lies beyond the goods that people can share. In other words, it lies beyond the signifier. So, in its cure, psychoanalysis can only offer a experimental space where the analysand can fight, not with the content, but with the materiality—i.e. the signifier—he uses in his demand, in order to recover himself as the 'dead' point in his discourse, as the one who is forever absent from the signifiers he lives by. Only such kind of 'mourning' can bring him in touch with his truth as being the subject of desire.

The ethics of psychoanalysis must be linked to the signifier for yet another reason, which is 'the desire of the analyst'—a topic of ever-increasing importance in the course of Lacan's teaching.[26] During an analytic session, the analysand unconsciously puts the analyst in the position where the answer to his demand is supposed to be found. In this way, the analyst is constantly tempted to indulge that demand. And since this demand hides a desire, the analyst is in fact put in the position of the ultimate object of the analysand's desire, a position which is impossible to occupy. This is why

the main task of the analyst is to keep that position empty. This is a difficult job, since he, too, is inclined to satisfy his desire—in this case his desire to help the analysand—and, thus, to give him what he demands. Constantly put in the position where his desire is to find satisfaction (enjoyment), he must precisely do everything in order to avoid this. This is why, not unlike his analysand, he has to remain the absentee of his own discourse as well as that of the other, the patient. Therefore, he must stick to the signifiers—the signifiers of his own discourse and, more visibly in the cure, the signifiers of the patient's discourse. Certainly, within the discourse of his analysand, he is put in the locus of the real, but he has only the signifiers of that discourse at his disposal in order to find his position in it and to keep that position empty (to remain absent of it). In order to help his analysand (and this is what the ethics of psychoanalysis is about), he must operate at the surface of his discourse and has only signifiers to rely on.

The ethics of psychoanalysis is not an "ethics of the real." If it were so, this would perhaps make psychoanalysis more popular, more accepted by current psychology and other social sciences. For, as the title of "ethics of the real" suggests, psychoanalysis could then be perceived as being founded in the *real* state of things, in a state modern science claims to deal with.[27] Contrary to this, the approach of psychoanalysis is thoroughly 'superficial.' The analyst cannot ground any of his claims in the real in the way that science does (or, at least, as science is perceived to). He cannot give the certainty the sciences are supposed to offer. Instead, he operates on the superficial surface of the signifier in an attempt to confront his patient with 'himself,' as with something that, even on that surface, is absent without being elsewhere—really—present. But precisely in this lack of 'real ground' and persevering in this superficiality, psychoanalysis finds its ethical *raison d'être*. Its ethics, being an "ethics of desire," must remain superficial. It is the only way of giving space to modern man's 'essence,' i.e. to his absence of any essence. In other words, it's the only way to give space to his desire. And giving space to desire is what, according to Lacan, ethics is about.

Notes

1 Editors' note: This is the title of the conference where many of the chapters in this volume were originally presented.
2 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre III: les psychoses, 1955–1956*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris : Les Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 303; Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 93–94.

3 Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 4, 5; Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 213–239, appendix III: "The Unconscious Law." See also the "Conclusion" in Jan Jagodzinski, *Music in Youth Culture: A Lacanian Approach* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
4 Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 238.
5 Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre VII: l'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959–1960*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 368; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Potter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 319.
6 This is what Lacan emphasizes in the beginning of the interview: "I have always insisted on what is evident . . . The analysis is a practice of language. . . . there is no other apprehension of the unconscious in Freud than an apprehension via language [appréhension langagière]" (Jacques Lacan, "Entretien à la télévision belge avec Françoise Wolff portant sur 'Les grandes questions de la psychanalyse,'" October 14, 1972, retrieved from http://aejcpp.free.fr/lacan/1972-10-14a.htm; my translation). And it is the same when, in July 1973, he gives a radio talk in *France-Culture*. The difference between a good and a false psychoanalysis depends on the following, he says: "Does the analyst, yes or no, recognize (as I teach) that the unconscious is structured as a language? . . . what Freud has discovered is that the speaking being does not know his thoughts, he has used that word, the thoughts that guide him: he insists that is thoughts, and when one reads him, one notices that these thoughts, like any other, are characterized by the fact that there is no thinking that does not function as speech, that does not belong to the field of language" (*Le Coq-héron*, 46/47 (1974), 4).
7 See www.lutecium.org/Jacques_Lacan/transcriptions/1977-00-00.doc.
8 Lacan introduces his concept of 'fantasy' (*phantasme*) in *Le séminaire, Livre VI: le désir et son interprétation, 1958–1959*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Les Éditions de La Martinière, 2013); Jacques Lacan *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75.
9 Lacan, *Séminaire VI*.
10 *Ibid.*, 108, 442.
11 Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948); Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge, 2002).
12 "Dying from not dying": this is one of Teresa's descriptions of the mystical enjoyment, when the soul gets unified with God.
13 See Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. David Greene. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
14 Jacques Lacan *Le séminaire, Livre II, Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique psychanalytique*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1978), 269, 272, 277; For Lacan's reference to this passage in *Oedipus at Colonos*, see Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre VII: l'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959–1960*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 292, 357, 361–362; 1992: 250, 320, 313–314.

15 Lacan introduces "*das Ding*" (a concept from Freud's *Entwurf einer Psychologie*, 1895) in his seminar on ethics; Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 55–86.
16 See the chapter in Lacan's seminar on ethics: "La jouissance de la transgression"; *ibid.*, 225–239; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Potter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 191–204.
17 See the chapter in Lacan's seminar on ethics: "*La fonction du bien*": Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 257–270; Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 218–230.
18 See the chapter in Lacan's seminar on ethics: "*La fonction du beau*": Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 271–281; Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 231–240. In the three following lessons, Lacan comments Sophocles' *Antigone*. Already the composition of the seminar makes clear that *Antigone* illustrates Lacan's notion of the "function of the beautiful."
19 Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*, trans. A. S. Kline, retrieved on August 11, 2017 from www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Rilke.htm.
20 Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 133; Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 112.
21 In his seminar on ethics, this is Lacan's favorite example of sublimation. See: Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 150–152, 167–184; *Seminar VII*, 125–127, 139–154.
22 In this seminar, Lacan only introduces this distinction, as "two forms of transgression" (Lacan, *Séminaire VII*, 131; Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 109). It is only in the early sixties, with *Kant avec Sade*, he really affirms this conceptual distinction. See the chapter on sublimation in my *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*, trans. Sigi Jöttkandt (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009), 163–203.
23 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Les Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 819; Lacan, *Écrits: Complete Edition*, 694.
24 In the beginning of the play, she voluntarily accepts the death sentence she expects. To Ismene, she says: "but I / will bury him. For me it's noble to do / This thing, then die. With loving ties to him, / I'll lie with him who is tied by love to me" (Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Reginald Gibbons and Charles Segal, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 56, vv. 71–74). And later, in another dispute with Ismene, she is even more clear: "you chose to live, and I to die," so Antigone says to Ismene (v. 555; *ibid.*, 78).
25 This is Lacan's interpretation of what, in Freud, sounds: "*Wo Es war soll Ich werden*" (Lacan, *Écrits*, 801; Lacan, *Écrits: Complete Edition*, 678).
26 See for instance Lacan, *Écrits: Complete Edition*, 514: "An ethics must be formulated that integrates Freud's conquests concerning desire: one that would place at the forefront the question of the analyst's desire" (Lacan, *Écrits*, 615).
27 At least, this is how nowadays science is perceived. Although it is itself the result of a 'superficial' view on the world (see what is said above about Newton), science is often still perceived to delivered an ontologically based truth.

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