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Alenka Zupancic, The Empty Ethics of Drive: Review of The Ethics of the Real

The ethics of desire Lacan is developed in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in relation to the practice of psychoanalysis, even while it has been extended beyond the analytic situation to provide an account of an ethics of the subject of politics and social action. Slavoj Žižek and Yannis Stavrakakis, for example, have drawn on Seminar VII for political analysis, and more recently Alenka Zupancic rereads the seminar to elaborate an ethics generally. The ambition of Alenka Zupancic's *Ethics of the Real*(1) is to go beyond an ethics of desire to develop an ethics of the drive, acknowledging the register of the Real that increasingly infiltrates the social and political order. Rethinking Kant by way of Lacan and Lacan by way of Kant, Zupancic claims fidelity to Lacanian theory at the same time it undermines what Lacan describes as an ethics.

Lacan approaches ethics in Seminar VII through Freud's rejection of the injunction at the basis of Christian morality, "Love thy neighbor." What if my neighbor is not lovable? Freud wonders, and if the neighbor does not love me? Is my love so ordinary that I should love everyone? Lacan shows that ultimately the neighbor is the lethal Thing, a jouissance inhabiting the subject the might override his or her good, the "good" here referring to the well-being or even the preservation of the life of the subject. Fidelity to a national Thing, for example, can become the basis for a nationalist, totalitarian, or fascist allegiance leading to the subject's obliteration. The Supreme Good, according to the Lacan, is the Thing, the empty place taken up by the objet a, the lacking object that is the cause and unattainable goal of the subject's desire. The object is good because it is desired, but it is always lacking, an object only ever of representation.

Lacan in his seminars consistently criticizes utilitarian ethics, which he defines as the good of the market place. In Seminar XI he argues that the pleasure principle cannot be made the basis of an ethics—"by situating itself purely and simply in the register of pleasure, ethics fails"—and that because utilitarian ethics posits the pathological object as such a basis, it fails: "the sovereign good can in no way be conceived as some small good carried to infinity" (XI,

242). In contrast, the object of desire, while it is a contingent object, is not pathological, and although pathological objects may be taken for it, any such object "is not it," is experienced as something other than what is desired. The demand addressed to "some small good," just because it is articulated in speech, can never be fulfilled, leaving unsatisfied desire as the support of the speaking subject.

Because the object cause of desire is the subject's good, it opens on to an ethics. So desire is itself ethical, and Lacan can assert that "the moral law, looked at more closely, is simply desire in its pure state" (XI, 275). If desire gives the moral law, it follows that "the only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one's desire" (VII, 321). Not to give up on one's desire becomes an ethical injunction. But since the object can never be reached, desire "in its pure state" has to be conceived from the impossible position of death, the perspective religion traditionally assigned to the immortality of the soul or to eternity: "the realization of desire is necessarily formulated from the point of view of a Last Judgment" (VII, 294). If the psychoanalytic subject is refused an immortal soul that would encounter God in an afterlife, that subject must live in nonbeing, "only in the lack of being" (VII, 294), without the object that would give being. It is to cover over such a lack that the subject gives itself in relation to the object, structuring reality and pleasure in the

fantasm. Fidelity to the object is for the subject fidelity to his or her lack of being, to finitude and limitation. The paradox of an ethics of desire is that the Supreme Good must be off limits. The ethical good is made possible by sacrificing the good that is *jouissance*: “There is no other good than that which may serve to pay the price for access to desire” (VII, 321). The human subject is the subject of language and social exchange. Social exchange and distribution entails the operation of power over the control of goods, so that the reality that others may deprive me and I may deprive others of goods engages an imaginary competition for *jouissance*, and therefore it requires an ethics to regulate social rivalry. But Lacan shows at length in Seminar VII that the possibility of any exchange at all, that is, of the Symbolic, derives from the incest prohibition, from the prohibition of the mother as the object of *jouissance* in the place of the Thing, the Supreme Good. The ethics of desire rests on a sacrifice of the Good. It is not only that *jouissance* is a retroactive effect of the prohibition of Law, so that *jouissance* derives from prohibition, strengthening obstacles to pleasure and causing suffering. The institution of language, social being as such, entails the barrier to the Thing: “as soon as we have to deal with anything in the world appearing in the form of the signifying chain, there is somewhere-though clearly outside of the natural world-which is the beyond of the chain, the *ex nihilo* on which it is founded and articulated as such” (VII, 212). The law of language gives social law, so for Lacan the ten commandments “prove to be the very laws of speech” (VII, 174). Desire is in speech; the subject takes form in language, castrated, “paying the price” of a prohibited *jouissance*. Language as the symbolic Other inhabits the subject, operating as the processes of the unconscious and making the subject a social being from the start. If the Other did not exist, there would be no language, society, or unconscious. The social law is a transposition of the law of language. So an ethics of desire is political, and they result from, or are even no different from, the functioning of the Other: Moustafa Safouan, for example, identifies the prohibition of murder and of lying and the obligation incurred with the gift together with the incest prohibition as the fundamental social regulations (Safouan, 94). The mother, the object of the incest prohibition, is the Other as Thing; the subject and object of desire originate in the process of separation from the lack of the mother, introducing the phallus as what the mother wants and what the subject cannot be. It is therefore hard to understand how Slavoj Žižek can claim that “in the [ethical] act, I directly am the Other-Thing” (*Totalitarianism*, 160). Certainly the psychotic subject is immersed in the Thing. But Antigone, to whom Žižek refers as an illustration of the act, exemplifies for Lacan an ethics of desire and a relation to language: Antigone is “the pure and simple desire of death as such” because she appears as a “relationship of the human being to that of which he miraculously happens to be the bearer, namely the signifying cut that confers on him the indomitable power of being what he is in the face of everything that may oppose him (VII, 282). Antigone therefore exemplifies for Lacan a relation to the signifier, a relation determined in a radical separation from the Thing. Her commitment to her brother’s unique being is a relation to castration, to “the signifying cut” that installs the barrier to the Thing. The “radically destructive character” that for Lacan characterizes the desire of the mother who violated the prohibition of incest is at the origin of the family fate which dooms Antigone, and her tragedy results because the tyranny of Creon’s community will not allow the funeral rites that would resolve her fate, her determination in the history of Oedipus.

The “theoretical premise” of Alenka Zupancic’s *Ethics of the Real* “is that it will actually be possible to found an ethics on the concept of drive” (16). Her ambition to bring an ethics of desire to fulfillment in an ethics of drive is supported by the claim that the logic of pure desire issues in drive: Desire attains its purity at the moment of the ethical act when it passes over into drive:

Pure desire is the moment when desire, in its metonymy, comes across itself, encounters its cause among other objects. At the same time, pure desire coincides with an act. This act is accomplished in the frame of the subject’s fundamental fantasy; but because what is at stake is nothing other than this very frame, it ends up ‘outside’ the fantasy, in another field: that of drive. (244-5)

This transition or torsion of desire into drive is described as a radical act of subjectification which is then identified as ethical. In the moment of the ethical act, according to Zupancic there is no divided subject but, rather, the subject who becomes the object:

the subject passes over to the side of the object. The ethical subject is not a subject who wants this object but, rather, this object itself. In an act, there is no ‘divided subject’: there is the ‘it’ (the Lacanian *ça*) and the subjective figure that arises from it.

We may thus conclude that the act in the proper sense of the word follows the logic of what Lacan calls a 'headless subjectification' or a 'subjectification without subject.' (104)

The ethical act then is understood as the pure form of the determination of the subject of drive, a subjectification without a subject that is an identification with the object.

Zupancic correlates this description of the form of subjectification in the drive as an ethical act with Kant's description of the subject of freedom. In a skillful analysis she explains the structure of the Kantian subject of freedom through Lacan's logic of the forced choice and so through the schema of separation. As the subject of the unconscious chooses his or her unconscious in a fundamental unknowable decision, the Kantian transcendental I is a blind spot, "nothing but the empty place, from which the subject 'chooses'" a disposition, and the function of freedom is "to delineate and preserve the empty place that shows that behind this fundamental choice there is nothing" (37). The ethical subject therefore can not escape responsibility by claiming that his or her act is compelled or determined, since the subject is its own determination.

For Kant, the form of ethical action gives the content of ethics. The coincidence of the will with the moral law, the categorical imperative to act in such a way that one's act will give a universal rule, describes what is ethical. Lacan shows in Seminar VII and in "Kant with Sade" that Kantian ethics is, like the praxis of Sade, a practice of jouissance, that the superego is precisely the form without content urging "you must because you must" and thereby generating an insatiable demand, and that the superego, the pure form of the Law, cannot provide an ethics because it is an injunction to jouissance.

Zupancic, on the other hand, allies Lacan with Kant's conception that "the formal structure of the ethical act does not presuppose any (notion of) the good, but, rather, defines it" (92). The form of the act is the act's motive and content. Following Kant, then, Zupancic

argues that the act of the ethical subject constitutes the law: "The subject is not the agent of the universal, but its agens. . . . it means that the subject is nothing other than this moment of universalization, of the constitution or determination of the Law" (61). Žižek follows the same logic: The ethical act "designates an intervention that changes the very co-ordinates of the 'reality principle'"; it is "not only a gesture that 'does the impossible', but an intervention in social reality which changes the very co-ordinates of what is perceived as 'possible': it is not simply 'beyond the Good', it redefines what counts as 'Good'" (*Totalitarianism*, 167). The ethical subject then makes the Law, determines what is good, through its own act. It is the case that Lacan describes the end of psychoanalysis as the act of crossing through the fantasm, leading the subject to recognize the object that has determined his or her desire and, therefore, his or her history, and issuing thereby in a new symbolic configuration. Zupancic and Žižek apparently take this act of crossing the fantasm as the model for the ethical act but stoop and short circuit the process, so that identification with the object, outside of self-division, is made the end, which would give in inhuman subject, beyond castration, precisely ascephalous. When Zupancic does acknowledge the relation of the subject to the Symbolic, the claim that the subject redefines what counts as "Good" (understood presumably as "ethical") is hyperbolic: The subject of a completed analysis will indeed change his or her symbolic coordinates, and the ethical subject may offer or represent a new ethical position, but by itself, on its own, the autonomous subject doesn't change anything "in reality," outside itself. Only in a relation to a given political system, social organization, or symbolic configuration does the subject affect anything. That is why the civil disobedient, what Antigone is traditionally taken to represent, accepts punishment: to take up a position within the social symbolic in order to change it by engaging with language and the law. Only the subject of the Symbolic can be ethical, and political action has an effect on the Real because it takes place in the Symbolic. The ethics and politics or the Real is in warfare or terrorism. It is telling that Zupancic gives no examples of ethical action in the political or social field outside of literature. It is equally telling that Žižek concludes a recent discussion of the contemporary political field by awaiting "a new form of Terror" and dismissing traditional forms of political action: "The only 'realistic' prospect is to ground a new political universality by opting for the impossible . . . with no taboos, no a priori norms ('human rights', 'democracy') . . . if this radical choice is decried by some bleeding-heart liberals as Linksfaschismus, so be it!" (CHU, 326). Neither Zupancic nor Žižek delineates any particular course of political action or explains what specific social practices would exemplify an *ethics of the Real*.

Zupancic's "translations" between Kant and Lacan are illuminating. They are especially successful in comparing the transcendental idea to the ego ideal, the virtual position from which the subject sees the self as it is seen by others, and in explaining the retroactive determination of the subject and the division between

statement and enunciation. The extensive and rich analyses of literature are likewise fascinating, particularly the treatment of the relation of will and jouissance in Laclos and Molière: Zupancic elegantly shows how *Les Liaisons dangereuses* dramatizes unsatisfied desire, the enjoyment of a seduction to be attained, while *Don Juan* exemplifies the drive of enjoyment that has been accomplished and aims at a repeated return to circulation. It is the analysis of Claudel's *The Hostage*, however, that most fully develops the implications of an ethics of drive.

Lacan's analysis of Claudel's trilogy in Seminar VIII, *Le transfert*, comes in the context of his development of the position of the Father in modern tragedy. If Sophocles's *Oedipus* gives the father who does not have knowledge and Hamlet the father who knows, Claudel shows the contemporary father to be the humiliated father. It is just because the contemporary Symbolic has no transparent, secure foundation that Lacan has to rethink ethics beyond Kant and develop the position of the symbolic father through the Name-of-the-Father and the phallus. Sygne in Seminar VIII reveals the impasse of the contemporary situation—the weakness of the symbolic function—where not to give up on desire means to have to sacrifice everything, so that as a woman she comes to occupy the position of the phallus. Zupancic's treatment of *The Hostage* draws on Alain Badiou to show that Sygne demonstrates that “the only way the subject can stay true to her Cause is by betraying it, by sacrificing to it the very thing which drives her to make this sacrifice” (216). Sygne thereby ends by becoming “herself the signifier of the desire which runs through her, she incarnates this desire” (259). However, to become the signifier of desire is to incarnate the phallus; this is not to take up an ethical position but, rather, one of narcissism, since it is the function of the dead father to occupy the place that will assure a foundation to and acceptance of law and thereby allow the subject to get out of narcissism.

Zupancic's analysis leads to the very peculiar conclusion “that Sygne, throughout the final act of the play, reveals and displays before us nothing other than the Real of desire, the Real of the penis . . . the ‘piece of meat’ . . . as the real residue of castration . . . the small ‘palpitating corpse’ which is the Real of the Cause of desire” (259). In what sense could the penis be the cause of desire, or the “Real of the Cause of desire” when Lacan gives the phallus, not the penis, as one of the possible objects? and how can identification with the phallus or the revelation of the penis be an ethical position? The woman in the position of the phallus is the real father or, as Catherine Millot explains, the Woman.

Antigone and Sygne in *Ethics of the Real* are meant to exemplify the ethics of drive. It is becoming something of a familiar operation among Lacanian theorists to pose an uncompromising woman as a model of an unlimited desire that is supposed ethical. For example, Jacques-Alain Miller defines Medea as “a figure who could serve as a model of a true woman, even if the example is somewhat extreme and not one with which to identify” (18). Miller here hedges suggestively: Medea is a model, but she should not be identified with, but, of course, for Miller an authentic, that is, an ethical, act cannot be based on any identification. Medea, we know, killed her two children in order to take revenge on her husband, Jason, for his hypocritical repudiation of her. Miller explains at length:

This is where the woman takes precedence over the mother. . . . Through this act she emerges from her depression. Her whole self is in the act. After this moment, all words are useless, and she exits once and for all from the register, or the reign, of the signifier. . . . For Lacan, the act of a true woman is not necessarily as extreme as Medea's, but it has the same structure, in that she sacrifices what is most precious to her in order to pierce man with a hole that can never be filled. This is certainly something that surpasses all laws and all human affections . . . A true woman explores an unfamiliar zone, oversteps all boundaries, and if Medea offers us an example of what is bewildering about a true woman, it is because she is exploring uncharted territory, beyond all limits. (19)

We have here a man explaining what a true woman is, so that “woman” can only be a male fantasy. Whom does she bewilder? herself? men? do men want to be bewildered? Miller places such a woman in what can only be a psychotic position, completely outside the Symbolic, “beyond all limits,” so that the jouissance of the Other becomes identical to the Other jouissance. Now it would seem to be a condition of any ethics of a woman, who may also be a mother, that it has to refuse using children as a means in her non-relation to man or as a mere extension of her desire, as Medea uses her children as the phallus with which to destroy Jason's phallic pretensions. The ethics of a woman may conflict with the ethics of a woman as a mother, but this is a conflict that needs to be encountered, and Euripides's *The Medea* could be read to show that Medea voices such a conflict, or alternately, that Medea is a representation of the fears of a gynophobic culture, embodying the overwhelming mother whose power over life and death leaves the child helpless in complete dependency

and the adult male in terror of women.

_i_ek too is fascinated by the uncompromising woman as model of ethical action and identifies the (true) feminine subject with the ethical: for _i_ek “the ethical act ‘as such’ has the structure of feminine subjectivity” (FA, 154). In *Enjoy Your Symptom* (chapter II) Ingrid Bergman’s attachment to Roberto Rossellini illuminates what is supposed to be an “authentic ethical act” that refuses any symbolic determination. More recently, in *The Ticklish Subject*, _i_ek offers the case of Mary Kay Latourneau, a thirty-four year old high school teacher in the United States who had an affair with her thirteen year old student. _i_ek describes this as “a unique passionate love affair,” explaining “the ethical dignity of her act” (TS, 385) and her “authentic subjective stance” (TS, 386) and characterizing Latourneau’s suspension of “her capacity of rational judgment which tells her what is right and good for her” as “one of the constituents of the notion of the authentic act of being truly in love” (TS, 386). Ethics, it would seem, suspends rational judgment. Yet even while he heroizes Latourneau, his writing condescends in calling her “Mary Kay” and thereby refusing her adult status:

Crucial here was Mary Kay’s unconditional compulsion to accomplish something she knew very well was against her own Good; her passion was simply too strong; she was fully aware that, beyond all social obligations, the very core of her being was at stake in it. (TS, 386)

The unconditional form of the act suspends any judgment of the particular content of the act, which in this case may be understood to be the illegitimate exercise of power of a person in authority over someone who is a child and a student. However, _i_ek, like Zupancic, claims that the ethical act is sufficient in itself to establish what is ethical:

One should insist on the uniqueness, the absolute idiosyncrasy, of the ethical act proper—such an act involves its own inherent normativity which ‘makes it right’; there is no neutral external standard that would enable us to decide in advance, by a simple application to a single case, on its ethical status. (TS, 386)

To claim that an extreme act, an uncompromised desire, “involves its own inherent normativity” is a tautological refusal of any possible ethical action. An ethical act cannot be based on “its own inherent normativity” precisely because the structure of the act involves no normativity, that is, it cannot give an ethics.

Ethics of the Real is in line with Miller’s and _i_ek’s formulations, even while it avoids their celebrations of fascinating feminine subjectivity, but it explicitly develops the argument to reach the troubling impasse that ethics cannot give an ethics: “we thus propose to assert explicitly that *diabolical evil, the highest evil, is indistinguishable from the highest good, that they are nothing other than the definitions of an accomplished (ethical) act*” (92). Zupancic’s analysis is so honest and thorough that it has to admit that the structure of the act—Kant’s form as its own content—cannot provide an ethics; it can only tell what subjectification is. But the effort to move beyond that concession leads to contradiction. She concedes that “the Real and the Event are not in themselves ethical categories” (236) but at the same time asserts that “the Real, or the Even, is the heart of all ethics” (237-8). What then is specifically ethical in drive or in subjectification in the drive? If, as _i_ek argues, “the moral law does not follow the Good—it generates a new shape of what counts as ‘Good’” . . . so that “there are no antecedent

universal rational criteria that one ‘applies’ when one accomplishes an act” (*Totalitarianism*, 170), nothing can count as good beside the act of establishing good, which is just the point here. But there is no reason that such an act should be good; it may be no more than an expression of power. The description of the act of subjectification in drive as ethical substitutes description for norm. The act in itself is not ethical, and there is no reason its description should be anything more than self-referential.

The rigor of her development leads Zupancic to the paradox that there is no ethical basis of ethics: “The heart of all ethics is something which is not in itself ‘ethical’ (nor is it ‘non-ethical’)—that is to say, it has nothing to do with the register of ethics” (235)—this heart is the Real for Lacan, the event for Badiou. It is, precisely, not ethical. For Lacan, the Real is what is prohibited in an ethics of desire. Ethics derive from an exclusion of the Real. What *Ethics of the Real* finally demonstrates is that the Real cannot give an ethics and that a politics of jouissance is not politics.

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Notes:

1) Zupancic's title echoes the title of Maire Jaanus's article, "The Ethics of the Real in Lacan's Seminar VII." Jaanus provides a thorough discussion of the Real in the Seminar; Zupancic's book includes no reference to the article.