WHY THE FAMILY IS BEAUTIFUL (LACAN AGAINST BADIOU)

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The theory of ethics that can be distilled from the work of Jacques Lacan and Alain Badiou bears no resemblance to many commonly received notions of the ethical, especially any that would link ethics to a system of morality. In fact, ethics is not necessarily the central concept in their work, even in Lacan’s *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* or Badiou’s recent *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. If anything, it is defined vicariously and in relation to other more central concepts, such as the workings of desire for Lacan and the fidelity to an event—or truth-process—for Badiou. Nonetheless, an examination of the network of concepts held together under the umbrella of the ethical allows for a sharp distinction between the work of Lacan and Badiou, one that Badiou—himself avowedly indebted to Lacan—is hesitant to make. Where Lacan elevates the beautiful over the good in his reading of Sophocles’s *Antigone*, Badiou elevates the truth-process over the evil betrayal of such an event, drawing on examples ranging from National Socialism to the love relation between two people. A truth-process is a situation-specific adherence, or fidelity, to the revolutionary potential of an event that may take place in one of the four realms of politics, art, science, and love. Perhaps Badiou’s best example of a truth-process—what I will also refer to as fidelity to an event—is one not described in the text under consideration here: the apostle Paul’s proclamation of and fierce loyalty to the event of Christ’s resurrection. It is in the particular form in which the ethical fidelity to a truth-process may be hard to distinguish from evil that I will take issue with Badiou, for both his political examples and his evocation of love as one of four conduits to a truth-process reflect a difficult inflexibility in his extraordinarily lucid and provocative system. Lacan, on the other hand, uses Antigone’s strange family values to suggest a more flexible model of ethics, one that is focused on the encounter with the inhuman and the fragile boundary between life and death.

Lacan’s most sustained discussion of ethics occurs in his seminal Seminar Seven from 1959–60, entitled *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Not only does this seminar register a gradual shift from an earlier emphasis on desire to a later focus on the real and the drive, but it is also a crucial articulation of what might seem for some to be an oxymoronic conjunction—psychoanalysis and ethics. Such a conjunction, as opposed to a Sartrean or Levinasian model that would situate ethics in relation to the Other, takes as its

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2. See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, esp. the section “The Look” 340–400; and all of Emmanuel Levinas’s work, esp. Totality and Infinity. While some would situate Derrida in the
touchstone Freud's stinging critique in *Civilization and Its Discontents* of the biblical injunction to love the neighbor as oneself. Here it is not merely a question of understanding why the neighbor may be equally an object of hatred, but of understanding how contradictory sentiments are also to be found at the heart of the self, and hence why a viable system of ethics must take this into consideration.\(^3\) In other words, ethics is not to be thought primarily as a *relation* to the other so much as a *nonrelation* to the self.\(^4\) Thus, when Lacan opposes the good to the beautiful, it is precisely the relational aspect of the good that he denigrates.

Lacan links the good to the dialectic and to the power to deprive others, situating it squarely in the realm of morality. The beautiful, by contrast, marks a space of nonrelation where it is not so much a matter of two distinct selves but rather of a single self whose desire is not its own. In Seminar Six from the previous year, Lacan analyzes *Hamlet* and suggests that the reason Hamlet does not kill Claudius is that he is traversed by his mother’s desire. He emphasizes that Hamlet’s desire is “the desire not for his mother, but of his mother.”\(^5\) Between Seminars Six and Seven, Lacan shifts his focus from desire to ethics, from *Hamlet* to *Antigone*, but retains a central connection. Whether it is termed desire or ethics, at stake is the human coming up against the limit of the human. In Seminar Seven, Lacan will situate this confrontation with an inhuman limit in the realm of the beautiful as opposed to the good, and the ethical as opposed to the moral. By situating Antigone as a more radical version of Hamlet’s incorporation of his mother’s desire, Lacan outlines a theory of ethics that is based on strange kinship. By contrast, Badiou invokes the declaration of love between two people as a model of the ethical relation. While both thinkers espouse notions of ethics that are far afield from moral theories based on a notion of responsibility to the other, Badiou elaborates a four-tiered system with romantic love as one of the hinge points, whereas Lacan champions perversely inhuman family values in order to present ethics as the encounter with the unsurpassable limit.

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3. See Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 62–67; In the ethics seminar, Lacan prefaces his commentary on this passage in Freud with a reference to the apostle Paul: “One must take one’s time to see that Freud is telling us the same thing as Saint Paul, namely, that what governs us on the path of our pleasure is no Sovereign Good, and that moreover, beyond a certain limit, we are in a thoroughly enigmatic position relative to that which lies within das Ding, because there is no ethical rule which acts as a mediator between our pleasure and its real rule. And behind Saint Paul, you find the teaching of Christ. . . .” Lacan goes on to comment on the commandment to love the neighbor, concluding with a characteristically perverse if not Sadistic imperative to the listeners whom he so often berates: “Try to read the words of the man who, it is claimed, never laughed; read them for what they are. From time to time, you will be struck by a form of humor that surpasses all others” [95–96]. If Lacan places Paul in line with Freud and Sade, then Badiou might be more akin to the man who never laughed. Lacan’s discussion of the neighbor is also in direct dialogue with Pierre Klossowski’s *Sade, My Neighbor*, the book that almost singlehandedly ushered in the revival of Sade in twentieth-century French thought. See also Reinhard, “Kant with Sade, Lacan with Levinas” and “Freud, My Neighbor”.

4. This is a point made in stunning fashion in Eric L. Santner’s *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*.

5. Jacques Lacan, Seminar Six, Le désir et ses interprétations, unpublished manuscript, from the session, “Désir du névrosé.” Excerpts from his lengthy discussion of Hamlet in Seminar Six have been published in English as “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet.” In his helpful gloss on Lacan’s reading of Hamlet, Jean-Michel Rabaté characterizes Hamlet as “overwhelmed by his mother’s jouissance” [64]. See also Rabaté’s discussion of Antigone [69–84].
Nowhere is the problem of the family better dramatized in the literary-philosophical realm than in the staggering corpus of commentaries upon and rewritings of Sophocles’s *Antigone*. Without doing justice to the wealth of critical literature devoted to this text, I wish simply to highlight the extreme range of positions that have been taken up with respect to the role of the family in this play. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel famously argues that Antigone represents the divine law while her antagonist, her uncle Creon, represents the state. In defiantly insisting on burying her brother Polynices, who has waged war against the city of Thebes and been condemned by Creon to remain unburied outside the walls of the city, Antigone insists on obeying the divine laws of burial rather than the dictates of the state, and for this faces punishment by death for her unswerving loyalty to her brother. According to Hegel, Creon defends the masculine virtues of the state and Antigone the feminine sphere of religion, the household, and the family. Hegel’s analysis, although it situates Antigone’s brother-loyalty as an ethical act because it is untainted by desire, simultaneously opens up an array of readings that tend to pathologize Antigone and above all her family situation.6

Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone*, written during the occupation of Paris in World War Two, goes to extremes to present Antigone as an inflexible and obstinate child to Creon the sage and pragmatic ruler—Lacan denounces this play as “[Anouilh’s] little fascist Antigone” [250] and comments that “one would have to have a character that was deeply out of touch with the cruelties of our time to attack the subject, if I may say so, by focusing on the tyrant” [240]. Yet even if they do not go as far as Anouilh in vilifying Antigone, many attempts have been made to normalize or rationalize Antigone’s position. In “Antigone and the Feminist Critic,” Page du Bois criticizes feminist attempts to recuperate Antigone as “misread[ing] the extent to which she is bound up in the pollution of her family” [du Bois 376]. Here, Antigone’s failure, including her diseased language (what du Bois, following Jakobson, diagnoses as an aphasic inability to employ metaphor), is a reflection of the pathological family to which she has been condemned. In appealing at another point to the “normal sequence of narrative, familial, historical order,” du Bois implies that a more normal family model might indeed be the corrective for Antigone [378]. In her considerably more sympathetic reading of Antigone, Helene P. Foley contextualizes Antigone’s perseverance in burying her brother at all costs by noting that in certain Mediterranean societies it was accepted for a woman to revenge the death of a blood relation if there were no surviving male family members, which is indeed the case with Antigone [Foley 55–57]. In other words, Antigone may be acting more “rationally” than it would appear, according to a historically specific moral code. While differing considerably in their tone and import, these writings reflect a marked tendency to position Antigone within a certain parameter of normal, reasonable—indeed human—family behavior. Such readings highlight the extremity of Lacan’s explicit move to champion the inhuman aspect of Antigone, and moreover to regard this as of a piece with, rather than an exception to, a certain logic of the family.

Though critical of both Hegel and Lacan for dissociating kinship, in the case of Hegel, and the symbolic, in the case of Lacan, too strictly from the realm of the social, Judith Butler’s redemptive reading of Antigone as a model for rethinking notions of kinship as well as the human is, at least on these counts, closer to Lacan than almost anything else is. Butler’s reading reinforces Lacan’s glorification of Antigone while questioning Lacan’s method and its implications for a theory of kinship. Although Butler expressly uses the term “kinship” with its resonances from Lévi-Strauss and structuralist anthropology, noting early on that kinship is not synonymous with the family, she never expressly delineates how the two are different [Butler 5]. Instead she uses Antigone to

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6. For a helpful discussion of Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit* as it relates to Antigone, see Gerhard.
question the norms (such as the incest taboo) upon which kinship relations are usually based, and from this implies that the family be viewed as less intrinsically rooted in the unit of the heterosexual couple, though without using these specific terms [67]. Insofar as kinship is linked to the Lacanian register of the symbolic, and the symbolic is something that in Butler’s reading of Lacan remains impossible, then Lacan’s theory of the family is found to be similarly lacking. Yet what seems lacking from Butler’s account is Lacan’s dynamic model of the symbolic and the real, the real being that unlocalizable and unarticulable knot that both reinforces and disrupts the symbolic. Without expanding on Lacan’s theory of the three registers (the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real), I would simply suggest that Butler’s criticisms of Lacan might be revised by reinserting the real in its conjunction with the symbolic as a dynamic relation that parallels that between the family and kinship. In other words, the disjunction or impossibility that a notion of the family introduces into the structure of kinship is not unlike the disruption that the Lacanian real brings to the symbolic. 7

Where Butler and Lacan converge more harmoniously is in the way they both view Antigone as posing a radical critique of the category of the human. Butler writes, “If [Antigone] is human, then the human has entered into catachresis: we no longer know its proper usage. . . . If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founders on its own founding laws” [Antigone’s Claim 82]. In suggesting that restructuring kinship allows for a rethinking of the limits of the human, Butler gestures to a paradoxical conjunction of the family and the inhuman, though these are terms that she does not further develop. It follows from this that the disruption posed to kinship by a certain notion of family is not unlike the disruptive space of the real in the register of the symbolic, or the inhuman in the realm of the human. Leaving aside the real and the symbolic, it seems that both Lacan and Butler use Antigone as a means to suggest a connection between the family and the inhuman.

Lacan’s reading of Antigone develops this conjunction of the family and the inhuman further and more explicitly, and provocatively links it to the realm of ethics. This is developed through a consideration of the difference between the good and the beautiful, which I will examine in some detail. As with many of the terms Lacan employs, the good is nowhere explicitly defined but instead its significance emerges gradually, if not belatedly, in the course of his seminar(s). Nonetheless, he does provide a particularly concise formulation in The Ethics of Psychoanalysis at the end of his session on “The Function of the Good”:

The domain of the good is the birth of power. . . . It was Freud, not me, who took upon himself the task of unmasking what this has effectively meant historically. To exercise control over one’s goods, as everyone knows, entails a certain disorder, that reveals its true nature, i.e., to exercise control over one’s goods is to have the right to deprive others of them. . . . For this function of the good engenders, of course, a dialectic. I mean that the power to deprive others is a very solid link from which will emerge the other as such. [229]

7. While Butler points out how Lacan works against the imaginary [49], she nowhere links this to an opposition of the imaginary to the juncture of the symbolic-real. For a more extended critique of Butler’s inadequate theorization of the Lacanian registers, see Dean, esp. 205–14, and Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!” For an extended reading of Butler’s Antigone’s Claim and its relation to Lacanian ethics, see Sjöholm 115–25. Sjöholm’s book was published after the drafting of this essay and has many significant points of intersection [see esp. the analyses of beauty 97, 101, 141–45].
Such a definition—and this anticipates what Lacan will do with ethics—clearly flies in the face of a whole tradition of moral thought that gives the notion of the good a more positive valence. What it affirms, however, is the way in which the good is fundamentally relational, even dialectical, presupposing and in fact determining a relation to a human other. While Lacan emphasizes the antagonistic relation with the other, the more basic point is that the good, and hence the very model of one human in relation to another, falls short of the ethical.

This interrogation of the human is elaborated more clearly in a second definition of the good that follows in the next session of Lacan’s seminar on ethics:

*Last time we defined the good in symbolic creation as the *initium* that is the point of departure of the human subject’s destiny in his coming to terms with the signifier. The true nature of the good, its profound duplicity, has to do with the fact that it isn’t purely and simply a natural good, the response to a need, but possible power, the power to satisfy. As a result, the whole relation of man to the real of goods is organized relative to the power of the other, the imaginary other, to deprive him of it.* [234]

Here, the good—not coincidentally conflated with the sphere of goods—is not only an agonistic medium, but it in fact helps shape and create the very concept of the other as another person who is in a relation of power to me. This link to the realm of the other is certainly a celebrated tenet of Lacanian psychoanalysis, but it is important to emphasize that it is not the same “other” that is generally in question. The other associated with the domain of the good is a clearly defined human other in an explicit relation of power to me, whereas Lacan’s more standard formulation for the Other is an other that I have so thoroughly incorporated that I am unable to distinguish it from my sense of self. In this regard, the good might be said to be a low-level or garden-variety form of the other, while the second and more dizzying notion of the Other has much more in common with Lacan’s notion of the beautiful.

The beautiful is defined most succinctly by Lacan as “deriv[ing] from the relationship of the hero to the limit, which is defined on this occasion by a certain *Atè*” [286]. The notion of *atè*, which is sometimes rendered as ruin, disaster, or, as Lacan glosses it, “the limit that human life can only briefly cross” [262–63], would seem to have more in common with the sublime as it has been outlined in Burke and Kant than with the beautiful. Yet, as with the notion of the good—and in what we shall see with respect to ethics—Lacan turns any standard meaning of the term on its head. For Lacan, beauty is associated with violence, blindness, transgression, and especially death. He links it, via Antigone, to *atè* and also to the Freudian death drive:

*The violent illumination, the glow of beauty, coincides with the moment of transgression or of realization of Antigone’s *Atè*, which is the characteristic that I have chiefly insisted on and which introduced us to the exemplary function of Antigone’s problem in allowing us to determine the function of certain effects. . . . The beauty effect is a blindness effect. Something else is going on on the other side that cannot be observed. In effect, Antigone herself has been declaring from the beginning: ‘I am dead and I desire death.’ When Antigone depicts herself as Niobe becoming petrified, what is she identifying herself with, if it isn’t that inanimate condition in which Freud taught us to recognize the form in which the death instinct is manifested? An illustration of the death instinct is what we find here.* [281]
It should be noted that this “violent illumination” coming from Antigone is attributable to Lacan’s spoken text rather than to Sophocles’s written one. While Lacan’s interpretation of the text of the play may be questionable, of significance is the link he outlines between the beautiful and the death drive. As she persists in her defiant drive to bury her brother, Antigone’s disavowal of her life, of her future role as wife and mother, of her very embodiment, indicates something beyond the relationship to the human other that Lacan identifies as bound up with a notion of the good. Antigone’s inanimate quality, her drive to death or atè, puts her in the realm of the beautiful, something Lacan clearly valorizes over the relational domain of the good.8

If the domain of the good is the space of relation to the other, and a more typical Lacanian notion of the other entails its incorporation into the self, then Antigone is even more extreme, in that her death drive is so pure as to stand apart from the realm of the other, even the other that is incorporated into the self. In this regard, the heroine of the ethics seminar eclipses the hero of the seminar on desire. What is articulated painstakingly throughout the desire seminar is the way in which something phantasmatic appears out of a space that is neither entirely conscious nor unconscious. It appears from material that is present yet not registered as such, often involving a relationship to or prescience of death that is implicitly acknowledged but not explicitly articulated, known yet not recognized.9 Whereas death has a spectral presence in Hamlet, it is far more in the open in Antigone, and far less linked to the desire of the other:

There is nothing Dionysiac about the act and the countenance of Antigone. Yet she pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire. Think about it. What happens to her desire? Shouldn’t it be the desire of the Other and be linked to the desire of the mother? The text alludes to the fact that the desire of the mother is the origin of everything. The desire of the mother is the founding desire of the whole structure, the one that brought into the world the unique offspring that are Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone and Ismene; but it is also a criminal desire. Thus at the origin of tragedy and of humanism we find once again an impasse that is the same as Hamlet’s, except strangely enough it is even more radical. [282–83]

This passage illustrates a certain movement from Seminar Six to Seminar Seven, from Hamlet to Antigone, from desire to ethics. If Hamlet’s desire is both more shifty and more filial, Antigone’s desire—and nondesire—is more steadfast and more perverse. Similarly, whereas desire is the explicit topic of Seminar Six, it is always elliptical, resisting definition and localization. It is not until Seminar Seven, where ethics takes on the elliptical role of desire, that the most precise definition of desire is formulated, and in conjunction with a similar concluding refinement of the definition of ethics. At the end of the seminar, much in the fashion of his earlier discussions of the good and the beautiful, Lacan proposes an unusual definition of ethics: “And it is because we know better than those who went before how to recognize the nature of desire, which is at the

8. Though drawing on a different definition of the good from Lacan’s, Martha Nussbaum nevertheless makes a characterization that both affirms and extends Lacan’s analysis, drawing a parallel between Antigone and Creon as “two oddly inhuman beings” [65]. Indeed, it seems that Lacan’s emphasis on Antigone’s inhuman attributes could easily be extended to Creon.

9. This is comparable to what Slavoj Žižek, expounding on Donald Rumsfeld’s example of “known knowns,” “known unknowns,” and “unknown unknowns,” puts forward as the “unknown known.” See Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences 95; and Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle 9.
heart of this experience, that a reconsideration of ethics is possible, of a kind that gives this question the force of a Last Judgment: Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you? . . . Opposed to this pole of desire is traditional ethics” [314]. And just after, he reformulates it thus: “I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire. Whether it is admissible or not in a given ethics, that proposition expresses quite well something that we observe in our experience” [319]. Ethics, then, means obeying a law of form rather than one of content. It does not specify or prohibit concrete acts other than one—acting in conformity with one’s desire, or, alternatively, not giving way on that desire.10 Although what that desire may be is not always self-evident, the important thing is not to give up on the quest to encounter it. What is interesting in this regard is that Antigone, while on the one hand epitomizing this injunction with her death drive, or atè, is on the other hand traversed by a desire that is also illegible for being strangely absent. As Lacan expresses it in the passage cited above, “what happens to her desire?”

What complicates desire and its relation to ethics is none other than the beautiful. Although what Lacan calls Antigone’s beauty is to a certain degree the mark of her uncompromising desire, it also marks the absence of desire where one would most expect to find it. More specifically, and in the passage that is perhaps most cited and most confounding in Antigone (leading to unlikely speculations that it was a belated insertion in the original text), Antigone attempts at the end of the play to explain herself, avowing that she would only do these deeds for a brother and not for a husband or a child. Yet in the course of this explanation her desire remains oddly indiscernible:

\[F\]or never, had children of whom I was the mother or had my husband perished and been mouldering there, would I have taken on myself this task, in defiance of the citizens. In virtue of what law do I say this? If my husband had died, I could have another, and a child by another man, if I had lost the first, but with my mother and father in Hades below, I could never have another brother.

10. See Lacan’s published essay on Kant and Sade, “Kant with Sade.” For a lucid overview of ethics in Kant, Sade, and to a lesser extent Lacan, see Martyn. Following Lacan, Martyn connects Kant with Sade on the grounds that both share a formalist approach to ethics that involves following a formal maxim, such as the categorical imperative, rather than a specific code of conduct. Martyn further links this with failure: “What is ethical, for Kant as for Sade, appears ultimately as a specific kind of failure, the failure that ensues when the attempt to abstract from all content and to articulate a purely formal totality is pursued to a point of exhaustion that is at once the consequence and the collapse of form” [21]. Martyn concludes with the resounding declaration that for Lacan psychoanalysis itself is tantamount to ethics:

To a large degree, what we learn from The Ethics of Psychoanalysis is that psychoanalysis is ethics. For what Lacan describes as the ideal of ethics closely resembles what he had earlier described as the end of analysis: in both cases, desire is pried loose or liberated from the shackles of an ego fixated by the imaginary. . . . As in analysis, ethics involves cutting one’s ego loose from all those objects the subject imagines to be pleasurable, useful, or beneficial. These “good” objects are all essentially mirrors of the subject: they have a “narcissistic foundation” and are “more or less his image, his reflection.”

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See also Alenka Zupančič’s more Lacanian-inflected discussion of these same problematics in Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan, exp. the last chapter, “Thus” [249–59]. For a sustained reading of Lacan’s concept of desire as it is articulated through the juxtaposition of Kant and Sade, see Baas.
Such was the law for whose sake I did you special honour; but to Creon I seemed to do wrong and to show shocking recklessness, O my own brother. And now he leads me thus by the hands, without marriage, without bridal, having no share in wedlock or in the rearing of children, but thus deserted by my friends I come living, poor creature, to the caverns of the dead. [lines 900–20]

In its privileging of the role of the sister over that of the wife or the mother, Antigone’s speech reflects a hierarchy of family values that by many standards would be strikingly aberrant if not perverse. The brother, because irreplaceable, is valued more highly than the husband or children, who are ultimately substitutable. Antigone’s familial attachment to her sibling is exalted over any attachments brought under the auspices of an extrafamilial love relation, and this is underscored by Antigone’s direct address to the dead brother. (Antigone’s seeming indifference to her loyal fiancé Haemon only reinforces the exclusive focus on the brother.) Yet the final lines of this passage lament the impossibility of the very relations of wife and mother that are placed as secondary to that of the sister. And this dual appeal to both the function of the sister and that of the wife/mother underscores the implacable question of what exactly is Antigone’s desire, on the one hand so readable and on the other so opaque.11

Lacan signals the beautiful as both the marker of desire’s unreadability and as that which abates desire:

11. It is interesting to note a certain affinity between Lacan’s and Hegel’s analyses of Antigone precisely in their respective conjunctions of desire, ethics, and family relation. Although the possibility of a woman enjoying an ethical relation is ambiguous at best for Hegel, the sister as exemplified by Antigone is considerably better positioned than the wife. In the section of The Phenomenology of Spirit on “The Ethical Order,” Hegel distinguishes the wife from the sister and implies that the sisterly relation, as opposed to the spousal one, is more pure precisely in that it is devoid of desire:

Since then, in this relationship of the wife there is an admixture of particularity, her ethical life is not pure; but in so far as it is ethical, the particularity is a matter of indifference, and the wife is without the moment of knowing herself as this particular self in the other partner. The brother, however, is for the sister a passive, similar being in general; the recognition of herself in him is pure and unmixed with any natural desire. In this relationship, therefore, the indifference of the particularity, and the ethical contingency of the latter, are not present; but the moment of the individual self, recognizing and being recognized, can here assert its right, because it is linked to the equilibrium of the blood and is a relation devoid of desire. The loss of the brother is therefore irreparable to the sister and her duty towards him is the highest. [275]

The wife is tainted with particularity, hence not pure, whereas the relation of sister to brother retains this purity. Yet this sister-brother relation is also linked to the individual as opposed to the collective, and this is augmented by the sister’s lack of desire for the brother. Although Lacan uses Antigone to illustrate inhuman desire, her death drive as it were, it seems that for both Lacan and Hegel, Antigone represents a space where desire encounters its limit. Moreover, as Hegel indicates in the first sentence of the section immediately following, “this relationship is at the same time the limit at which the self-contained life of the Family breaks up and goes beyond itself.” Here, it is the sibling relation that exposes the limits of the family structure, that best accesses the realm of the beyond—the realm of the beautiful—to which the family is singularly conducive. For more on Hegel, the family, and the limit constituted by the brother-sister relation in Antigone, see Derrida, Glas, esp. 145-67; Jacobs, “Dusting Antigone”; and Geller, “Hegel’s Self-Conscious Woman.” For more on Hegel and desire and its legacy in French thought, see Butler, Subjects of Desire.
There is a certain relationship between beauty and desire. This relationship is strange and ambiguous. On the one hand, it seems that the horizon of desire may be eliminated from the register of the beautiful. Yet, on the other hand, it has been no less apparent . . . that the beautiful has the effect, I would say, of suspending, lowering, disarming desire. The appearance of beauty intimidates and stops desire. . . . Moreover, it seems that it is in the nature of the beautiful to remain, as they say, insensitive to outrage, and that is by no means one of the least significant elements of its structure. . . . The beautiful in its strange function with relation to desire doesn’t take us in, as opposed to the function of the good. It keeps us awake and perhaps helps us adjust to desire insofar as it is itself linked to the structure of the lure. [237–39]¹²

Lacan repeatedly characterizes the beautiful by the adjective “strange,” both in this passage and in other formulations. The strange would appear to be a function of beauty’s indecipherability. Yet this very strangeness and opacity elevates the beautiful over the deceptive realm of the good. In this respect, beauty, as the marker of Antigone’s “strange” family values, is both more impassable and more straightforward than the good, for its strangeness is immediately perceptible whereas the good is that which takes you in. Beauty is closer all at once to death, evil, and ultimately ethics. In this sense, Lacan’s notion of ethics entails a sort of gritty realism (to be sure, not the way Lacan would put it) where one has no choice but to confront those things that are otherwise too horrifying or painful to address. It is this proximity to the extreme that for Lacan marks the space of the ethical, a perhaps paradoxical and certainly liminal space where the living and the human confront their limits.

What will become crucial in linking Lacan to Badiou is the connection between Lacan’s notions of the “good” and the “beautiful” and Badiou’s continual appeal to “truth.” Clearly, truth and the good are not synonymous terms, yet, as Lacan points out, if beauty disrupts the good, then it also disrupts, in its proximity to radical destruction, the purity of truth. After citing Sade’s Juliette and proceeding from there to a discussion of the death drive in Freud, Lacan concludes his lecture on the death drive with the following remarks:

The true barrier that holds the subject back in front of the unspeakable field of radical desire that is the field of absolute destruction, of destruction beyond putrefaction, is properly speaking the aesthetic phenomenon where it is identified with the experience of beauty—beauty in all its shining radiance, beauty that has been called the splendor of truth. It is obviously because truth is not pretty to look at that beauty is, if not its splendor, then at least its envelope.

¹². For a further development of the structure of the lure as it is played out in the field of vision, see Lacan’s eleventh seminar, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. Ellie Ragland links beauty to the real, to pure desire, and to the boundary between life and death in the following three exquisite formulations, all from “Lacan’s Theory of Sublimation: A New Look at Sophocles’s Antigone.” “Freud did not understand what causes suffering, Lacan says. In Lacan’s teaching, the real returns from behind, in suffering, as terrible and beautiful” [111]; “Antigone is a creature of pure desire, Lacan maintains. One might say that pure desire means the absolute lack or loss of the dialectical power of desire. As such, pure desire would open onto the void, onto death, onto beauty” [113]; “Against Aristotle’s argument that beauty arises from an orderly arrangement of the parts of a whole into a formally beautiful work, Lacan shows another order: that of objects where nothing less than life or death is at stake” [117].
In other words, I will explain next time our forward march resumes that on the scale that separates us from the central field of desire, if the good constitutes the first stopping place, the beautiful forms the second and gets closer. It stops us, but it also points in the direction of the field of destruction.

That in this sense, when one aims for the center of moral experience, the beautiful is closer to evil than to the good, shouldn’t, I hope, surprise you very much. [216–17]

This explanation of the relation between the beautiful, the good, and truth points up both the divergence and the points of proximity between Lacan and Badiou. On the one hand, in its positively coded valence, the experience of beauty is akin to Badiou’s notion of truth, and beauty as the marker of the desire not given up is parallel to what Badiou will describe as fidelity to an event. In this regard, truth for Badiou is identified more by its form than by its content—it is not so much a specific thing or occurrence as it is a declaration of adherence to a person, thing, or occurrence. It is more a process or a procedure than a thing in itself. Furthermore, the notion that beauty, or truth for Badiou, is closer to evil than it is to some middle category such as the good for Lacan—or the contemporary notion of the multicultural other for Badiou—highlights a certain convergence of their respective lexicons. Indeed, such a convergence is what Badiou tends to emphasize, even formulating his concept of fidelity to a truth-process in the terms of Lacan’s ethical maxim of not giving ground on one’s desire: “do not give up on your own seizure by a truth-process” [Badiou, *Ethics* 47].

Badiou’s work, especially his *Ethics*, contains many expressions of indebtedness toward Lacan. Of particular pertinence is the way he situates his notion of ethics as following Lacan’s in that both concern an ethical of something else:

*The only genuine ethics is of truths in the plural—or, more precisely, the only ethics is of processes of truth, of the labour that brings some truths into the world. Ethics must be taken in the sense presumed by Lacan when, against Kant and the notion of a general morality, he discusses the ethics of psychoanalysis. Ethics does not exist. There is only the ethic-of (of politics, of love, of science, of art). . . . There is not, in fact, one single Subject, but as many subjects as there are truths, and as many subjective types as there are procedures of truths. . . . As for me, I identify four fundamental subjective “types”: political, scientific, artistic, and amorous.* [28]

13. Elsewhere Lacan would seem to disrupt Badiou’s crucial linking of truth to the event. In urging his listeners to be wary of the chorus in Antigone, Lacan cautions against juxtaposing these two terms: “The signifier introduces two orders in the world, that of truth and that of the event. But if one wants to retain it at the level of man’s relations to the dimension of truth, one cannot also at the same time make it serve to punctuate the event. In tragedy in general there is no kind of true event. The hero and that which is around him are situated with relation to the goal of desire” [*Ethics* 265]. Badiou’s philosophy does not account for the dialectic of desire when it encounters the tragic or destructive, as it usually does. A certain transferential and countertransferential dialectic is itself taking place between Lacan and the audience in his seminar, and this is often figured in his pejorative comments on the chorus in Antigone. Lacan subsequently refers to the “docile chorus . . . , a collection of yes-men” [266], which parallels the way he frequently addresses his audience. See esp. 251-54, where Lacan berates his listeners for their poor understanding of his lectures and admonishes them for not having the initiative to go out and read Antigone on their own. My thoughts on Lacan’s sadistic relation to his audience have benefited from an unpublished paper on this topic by David Sigler.

14. In an interview with Peter Hallward included as an appendix to Ethics, Badiou comments on his debt to Lacan and on his frequent characterization of Lacan as an “antiphilosopher”: 
To be sure, Lacan speaks of an ethics of psychoanalysis, but nowhere does he outline four fundamental types of truth procedure (he does employ four-part categorizations, though to very different ends). And it seems a stretch to say that ethics does not exist for Lacan, even though it is a term that is hard to pin down. I would counter that ethics does exist for Lacan, at the extreme limit foregrounded by beauty, at the limit of life and death, of the human and the inhuman. Badiou’s project is immensely different from that of Lacan, and that difference resides, among other things, in Lacan’s insistence on the messiness of things, on ethics as the function that witnesses to extreme states, whereas Badiou would seek to delimit forms of experience in a four-part structure, in a perfect system. Although such codification is admirably rigorous, it does not allow for the exception that changes the rule of the truth-process instead of proving it, and it presumes a subject who abides by the rules, who always remains faithful. By contrast, what is at stake for Lacan is the potential for abandoning the system, for confronting one’s desire at its limit and thereby transforming everything, including the system.15

Though it is uncharacteristically understated, Slavoj Žižek makes a similar claim with respect to Badiou and Lacan in his chapter on Badiou in The Ticklish Subject, where he highlights the centrality of the death drive to Lacan, especially as it is formulated with respect to Antigone, and the way this is incompatible with Badiou’s truth-event, which, as Žižek and others have pointed out, adamantly rejects anything related to the negative, finitude, the dialectic between life and death, or for that matter the Lacanian real.16 I quote Žižek at length:

[T]he whole of Lacan’s effort is precisely focused on those limit-experiences in which the subject finds himself confronted with the death drive at its purest, prior to its reversal into sublimation. Is not Lacan’s analysis of Antigone focused on the moment when she finds herself in the state “in between the two deaths,”

Another thing that grabbed my attention: Lacan declared himself to be an “antiphilosopher.” It is partly thanks to him that I began to ask myself, in a fairly systematic way, what might be declared antiphilosophical, what was it that characterized antiphilosophical thought, why certain kinds of thought constitute themselves as hostility to philosophy. In the end, my theory is that philosophy should always think as closely as possible to antiphilosophy. For all these reasons, I owe Lacan a real debt, despite having had no relation to the question of analytic therapy as such. [“Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou” 121–22]

Without addressing Badiou’s intricate notion of antiphilosophy and its relation to philosophy, I think it might be asserted that, to the contrary, Lacan is indeed doing philosophy, but because his foundational text is Freud—and not Hegel, Husserl, or Heidegger as was the case with the French philosophers of his generation—he does philosophy otherwise, and for this is arguably the most original French philosopher of the twentieth century. What is most significant in this context, however, is the way in which Badiou takes Lacan’s declaration that he is an antiphilosopher absolutely at face value. This displays a marked contrast to his breathtaking approach to Deleuze, in which Badiou openly affirms the major fault lines between his thought and that of Deleuze, but in this fashion sheds new light on Deleuze, especially Deleuze’s relation to Platonism, univocity, and the virtual. It is interesting that Badiou does not take a similarly engaged yet critical stance with respect to Lacan, for in many respects Badiou’s thought is more proximate to that of Deleuze. For example, he affirms that “Deleuze’s philosophy, like my own, moreover, is resolutely classical” [see Badiou, Deleuze: The Clamour of Being 45].

15. For a brilliant discussion of the way that desire at its purest confronts and goes beyond the very structure of desire, see Zupančić’s reading of Claudel alongside Sophie’s Choice in “Ethics and Tragedy in Psychoanalysis” in Ethics of the Real 170–248.

16. See especially Copjec, Imagine There’s No Woman [29], for a discussion of Badiou’s critique of finitude.
reduced to a living death, excluded from the symbolic domain? Is this not similar to the uncanny figure of Oedipus at Colonnus who after fulfilling his destiny, is also reduced to “less than nothing,” to a formless stain, the embodiment of some unspeakable horror? All these and other figures (from Shakespeare’s King Lear to Claudel’s Sygne de Coufontaine) are figures who find themselves in this void, trespassing the limit to “humanity” and entering the domain which in ancient Greek was called atê, “inhuman madness.” Here, Badiou pays the price for his proto-Platonic adherence to Truth and the Good: what remains beyond his reach, in his violent (and, on its own level, quite justified) polemics against the contemporary obsession with depoliticized “radical Evil” (the Holocaust, etc.) and his insistence that the different facets of Evil are merely so many consequences of the betrayal of the Good (of the Truth-Event), is this domain “beyond the Good,” in which a human being encounters the death drive as the utmost limit of human experience, and pays the price by undergoing a radical “subjective destitution,” by being reduced to an incremental remainder. Lacan’s point is that this limit-experience is the irreducible/constitutive condition of the (im)possibility of the creative act of embracing a Truth-Event: it opens up and sustains the space for the Truth-Event, yet its excess always threatens to undermine it. [160–61]

What Žižek makes explicit without underscoring is how incompatible a Lacanian and a Badiouian ethics actually are, even though they might easily be collapsed into much the same thing, and this by none other than Badiou himself. As Žižek points out, Antigone is emblematic of a whole set of literary figures, generally from tragedy, that Lacan draws upon; and what unites these figures is the way in which they encounter the inhuman, the limit-experience beyond the good. Badiou’s philosophy leaves no room for such a beyond, for this realm of the “constitutive” limit-experience is what “remains beyond [Badiou’s] reach” and leaves his truth-process, accessible through the four domains of politics, art, science, and love, entirely unequipped to deal with anything that falls outside of its sphere. It is therefore curious that Lacanians such as Žižek, Copjec, and Zupančič (the latter two are cited in the footnotes)—all with nuanced analyses of ethics and its inextricable link to desire—draw so positively on Badiou’s work, not without seemingly pointed critiques, such as this one by Žižek above, yet they never pursue these critiques in a sustained fashion.

Whereas Žižek, Copjec, and Zupančič all consider the question of radical Evil in depth, Badiou dismisses this term out of hand. This is perhaps best illustrated in Badiou’s Ethics by his continual appeal to National Socialism as an illustration of a truth-process gone awry (a low-level evil, if you will) and his concomitant diatribe, mentioned by Žižek, against those who would single out the Holocaust as a sort of pure radical Evil. Among other things, Badiou’s problem with radical Evil is that it appeals to the Holocaust as a type of limit, something, as we have seen, that is not thinkable within his system. Referring to the Nazi genocide, Badiou writes:

But then the whole point is to situate this singularity. Fundamentally, those who uphold the ideology of human rights try to situate it directly in Evil, in keeping with their objectives of pure opinion. We have seen that this attempt at the religious absolutization of Evil is incoherent. Moreover, it is very threatening, like anything that puts thought up against an impassable “limit.” . . . The defenders of ethical ideology are so determined to locate the singularity of the

17. For more on radical Evil, see Radical Evil, ed. Copjec.
extermination directly in Evil that they generally deny, categorically, that Nazism was a political sequence. . . . Nazi politics was not a truth-process, but it was only in so far as it could be represented as such that it “seized” the German situation. [Ethics 64–66]

Nazism, like a truth-process, tried to seize upon an all-inclusive universalism, yet clearly at the expense of those “unfit” for a universal truth. This example certainly underscores Badiou’s assertion that “Evil is the process of a simulacrum of truth” [77], and beyond that implies that an evil such as National Socialism actually comes closer to a process of truth than something like the liberal program of tolerance to every sort of particularity (the paradigm of the multicultural other that Badiou denounces). Although Badiou’s work makes a sustained and rigorous argument for universalism over and against a liberal particularism, the fact that the particularity of multiculturalism falls so far afield from a bona fide Badiouian truth-process makes one, even one sometimes sympathetic to the critiques of multiculturalism, want to say, wait a second, maybe I’ll take the philosophically sloppy multiculturalism over the almost-but-not-quite-sufficiently universal National Socialism after all. For what is so disturbing given the examples Badiou employs is the fact that, by his own account, a truth-process is ultimately very hard to define or even identify, and so presumably such a truth-process, often only recognizable retrospectively, would be just as likely to turn out to be an exclusive rather than an inclusive universalism, assuming one grants that the latter is even possible.

Oddly enough, though Badiou positions the truth-process (or fidelity to an event) in opposition to the logic of radical Evil, the sublime, and the Platonic simulacrum, it seems that this truth-process, in its resistance to definition and potential to stray into evil and falsity, is not that far removed from the very radical Evil Badiou attacks.18 However, the fact that the form of fidelity to a truth may resemble a universalism gone awry (such as National Socialism) is not in itself where I take primary issue with Badiou. It is more nearly that this similarity of form implies that the actors who are seized by such a truth-process would be capable of managing it properly. Rather than acknowledge the sublime and terrifying quality of such a situation and thus be potentially prepared to register its harmful ramifications, Badiou codes the truth-process purely positively, as if to say that in the hands of the right agents the truth-process will just turn out for the best. As a student astutely observed in the class in which we read Badiou’s Ethics, “this book is written for good people.”19 The same objection to Lacan’s maxim not to give ground on one’s desire might certainly be made. The difference, however, is that Lacan acknowledges that extreme desires, death drives, encounters with the inhuman, and all manner of things Badiou would want to discredit are situated at the heart of the question of ethics. Is it not preferable to have a theory of ethics that anticipates extreme states rather than one that holds to the best-case scenario where hopefully they will not be relevant?

18. Badiou himself makes much the same point in Ethics when he writes:

For the well-known existence of simulacra is a powerful stimulus to the crystallization of crises. Opinion tells me (and therefore I tell myself, for I am never outside opinions) that my fidelity may well be terror exerted against myself, and that the fidelity to which I am faithful looks very much like—too much like—this or that certified Evil. It is always a possibility, since the formal characteristics of this Evil (as simulacrum) are exactly those of a truth. . . . What I am then exposed to is the temptation to betray a truth. [79]

19. My thanks to Alex Gil for this perceptive comment and for many other insights.
While Badiou’s most developed examples of what a truth-process would look like are in the realm of politics (such as French Maoism or the events of May ’68) or most recently in the domain of religion (the apostle Paul’s activist fidelity to Christ’s resurrection), a less-developed and more difficult example is to be found in the realm of the love relation. Throughout *Ethics*, Badiou uses the example of two people falling in love as one of the sites for the unfolding of a truth-process. Of his four generic procedures (science, art, politics, love), Badiou dwells least on love, though in his *Manifesto for Philosophy* he does hail Lacan as the greatest theorist of love since Plato, noting that Lacan is more customarily credited as a thinker of desire or of the subject. While this seems a very apt observation, Badiou focuses solely on Lacan’s discussion of the nonrelation of the Two sexes, whose union through love is itself what produces the notion of sexual difference as something that exceeds the law of the One. As Badiou translates it into his lexicon inflected by set theory: “I shall say in my language that love brings about, as a nameless or generic multiplicity, a truth of the difference of the sexes, a truth clearly subtracted from knowledge, especially from the knowledge of those who love each other. Love is the production, with fidelity to the encounter-event, of the truth of the Two.”

Though Badiou is careful to distinguish this love from romantic love tout court, what is striking is that only the love of the (presumably heterosexual) couple is paradigmatic of anything. In other words, where would a love or fidelity that is outside...

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20. The main detailed examples that Badiou gives of truth-processes, or events, are in the domain of politics:

I shall call “truth” (a truth) the real process of a fidelity to an event: that which this fidelity produces in the situation. For example, the politics of the French Maoists between 1966 and 1976, which tried to think and practise a fidelity to two entangled events: the Cultural Revolution in China, and May ’68 in France. . . . Essentially, a truth is the material course traced, within the situation, by the evental supplementation. It is thus an immanent break. “Immanent” because a truth proceeds in the situation, and nowhere else—there is no heaven of truths. “Break” because what enables the truth-process—the event—meant nothing according to the prevailing language and established knowledge of the situation. . . . We might say, then, that a truth-process is heterogeneous to the instituted knowledges of the situation. Or—to use an expression of Lacan’s—that it punches a “hole” in these knowledges. [42–43]

See the appendix, “Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou,” where Badiou comments on the difficulty of labeling the events of May ’68 an event, ultimately referring to them as an “obscure event” [126]. As someone who remains faithful to the event of Christ’s resurrection, founding through this a universal truth-process that shuns the particular, the dialectic, and the law, Saint Paul is the exemplary figure for Badiou that Antigone is for Lacan, but more so [see Badiou, Saint Paul]. It is all the more striking, then, that this theological example falls somewhat outside the four generics of politics, love, art, and science that are detailed in *Ethics* and throughout Badiou’s work. See esp. his L’être et l’événement.

21. Badiou, Manifesto for Philosophy 83, trans. modified. For a useful discussion of love in Badiou, see Hallward, Badiou: A Subject to Truth 185–91. For a diametrically opposite approach to an ethics of sexual difference (as Hallward points out), see Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference.

22. For a more sustained discussion of love, see Badiou’s “What Is Love?” Badiou makes a significant distinction between the love relation and that of the couple per se. The couple relation is for Badiou a two that is counted from the point of view of a three, whereas the superior love relation is a figure of Two subtracted from any count [270–72]. Badiou makes a parallel numerical analysis in Saint Paul, but in this case it is a question of the three (the favored Christian discourse) preventing the four (the mystical discourse) from collapsing onto the two (the Jewish discourse) [53]. The denigration of the Jewish discourse and its equation with a “logic of signs” is one of the most problematic moments in Saint Paul. Badiou’s notion of the couple has been clarified for
of this generic fit in? What would Badiou do with someone like Antigone who chooses to die out of devotion to a sibling rather than love for a husband or a child? And already that sibling, the brother, bears the mark of the (albeit incestuous) sexual difference. What about love for a sister, such as Ismene’s love for her sister Antigone, dismissed as it is from most analyses of the play? Although Lacan is an important thinker of sexual difference, it is not for nothing that he devotes an entire year’s seminar to the question of desire, something, as noted above, inextricably linked to death. In this seminar, Lacan repeatedly invokes a phantasmatic specter or devil that lies behind what might be seen as one unified thing or meaning, in fact showing it to be double, but double in a nondialectical fashion so that the spectral double is not brought into a relation of number but in fact lies ever and illusively outside it. In short, the relation of desire, as opposed to love, does not so much define the Two, as in Badiou’s example, but underscores the difficulty of determining the difference between the One and the Two (as in Lacan’s session in the ethics seminar that details “Antigone between the two deaths” [270–87]). What is exceptional about Antigone is that she cannot be situated readily in the domain of love (or for that matter of politics, art, or science). Instead she encounters a limit-experience by conjoining, as it were, the registers of death, the inhuman, and the family.

Antigone emerges in Lacan’s reading as a figure who, because of her adherence to the perverted family (over and above the prescribed registers of love, marriage, and children), is capable of an extreme political disruption, for with her death, the Theban royal family is effectively decimated. It is interesting in this regard to note that the film Germany in Autumn depicts the controversy over whether to air a televised version of Antigone in the wake of the “suicide” of Baader-Meinhof leader Gudrun Ensslin, whose story—down to the fraught relationship with her sister—has striking parallels to Sophocles’s play. This film dramatizes the subversive political potential of Antigone’s story, something that Lacan’s reading also dramatizes on the level of the psyche. In both, the potential for political disruption (though it is a point of debate among the television producers in the film as to whether or not airing the play at this time will have any measurable effect at all) and the encounter with the limit-experience are fully on the surface. Badiou’s truth-process, by contrast, is not nearly so readable on the surface; rather, it is purely positive yet legible in retrospect. If it turns negative, then it turns out that the universal truth has been betrayed. The Antigone-event does not lay claim to such a universal status—it does not hope to found a church or a universal order—but rather it openly represents an extreme particularity that may effect general change, and in any case, it highlights the fraught nature of ethical action.

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23. My thinking about the function of the figures of the sister and the little girl is much indebted to two unpublished papers by Annie Wagner, in particular “Lacan and the Image of the Little Girl in Sophocles’s Antigone.” For more on how the sister function is traditionally excluded, see Juliet Flower MacCannell’s The Regime of the Brother: After the Patriarchy, esp. 18. She writes that “the girl under patriarchy is faced with an inhuman choice: to do without an identity, or to identify with what she is not” [25, my emphasis]. In Antigone’s Claim, Judith Butler makes the incisive observation that, since Oedipus and Antigone are born of the same mother, Jocasta, Antigone’s father is also her brother, further perverting the function of brother-love [see esp. 61, 67].

24. For a provocative linking of discourses of terrorism and twins (especially sisters) that reads this film alongside Margarethe von Trotta’s Marianne and Juliane, see Beckman.
WORKS CITED


