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Toward Unethical Insurgency

Roland Boer

This article is an exercise in the hermeneutics of suspicion—against ethics as propounded by some on the Left. It focuses on the deployment of ethics as a means for relating responsibly to the other, dealing initially with the problematic proposals of Terry Eagleton and Judith Butler. More promising are Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, who question this concern with the other. I go further, exploring how the other is constructed and arguing that ethics produces the other through its own discourse, concealing both its relations with alternative discursive productions of alterity and its socioeconomic connections. Moreover, ethics has good reason to conceal its socioeconomic connections, which are persistently of the ruling class. These connections emerge by investigating the etymological minefield of ethikos, ethos and mos, via Aristotle. With the senses of custom, habit, and accepted social norms, ethics emerges as a ruling class ideology, which leads to the final question: can ethics as a ruling class term be appropriated and filled with different content, or are other terms needed, such as unethical and unmoral?

Key Words: Ethics, Class, The Other, Eagleton, Butler, Badiou, Žižek

Morality itself is a special case of immorality.

—Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*

Ethics may be defined as the means of greasing or oiling social relations so that they work more smoothly. More specifically, ethics assumes multiple others with whom and between whom social relations are problematic, thereby seeing its task as overcoming those problems in order to make social relations operate in an improved manner. By defining this as greasing social relations, it should be clear that I am profoundly suspicious of ethics, a suspicion shared by Marx, for whom ethics is a mystifying ideology that justifies the status quo and keeps the ruling class in position.¹ That suspicion is aroused further by those on the Left writing on ethics: Gayatri Spivak, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou are some of those crowding the scene. Above all, my suspicions focus on the framework of ethics, which has a distinctly ruling class pedigree.

1. “Law, morality, religion, are to him so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests” (Marx and Engels 1848, 490; see also 505).

In what follows, I begin with some definitions and then critique one of the two forms ethics takes today—relations to the “other,” the “stranger” or the “neighbor” (Butler and Eagleton).² From there I draw out my criticisms, using as a springboard Badiou’s dismissal of the “ethical ideology” of the other as an apology for the “state of the situation”—for the way things are—and using Žižek’s exacerbation of the other’s alien nature by smashing his way through the imaginary and symbolic other to the unknowable, traumatic, and obscene other. I share their suspicions of ethics—especially as ethics easily becomes moralizing, offering advice about how to live—but I take a different track. My critique begins by asking a preliminary question: how is the other, so often a given in ethics, produced in the first place? The answer is that the discourse of ethics does so, but in the process it obfuscates its arrogation of other discourses that also produce others and conceals the socioeconomic connections that enable such productions. The result is that ethics gives the impression that the other is a given upon which ethics may set to work. However, this concealment requires further interrogation, specifically in terms of its class dimensions. In order to do so, I turn to Aristotle, arguably the founder of the classical philosophical tradition of ethics. Not only was Aristotle clear that ethics pertains only to the male ruling class elite (ethics are simply not appropriate for the herds), but also the very terminology of *ta ethika* bears those class assumptions. Thus, the Greek *ethos* and Latin *mos* (the basis of ethics and morals) refer to custom, habit, the known status quo in terms of social relations. They certainly should not be disrupted, particularly if you happen to belong to the ruling, propertied class. In response to these structurally inescapable connections, I ask whether the term can be appropriated, emptied, and refilled by those opposed to ruling classes. In the end that may be impossible, so I suggest that a position opposed to ruling class custom and habit be pursued—*aēthēs* and *praeter morem*, unethical and unmoral. That is, I seek not an amoral position, which dispenses with ethics, but one that seizes ruling class ideology and turns it against itself. In the end, even these terms should be understood as place-holders, for an entirely other terminology may be more appropriate.³

The Other

As mentioned, much contemporary ethics concerns the stranger, the foreigner, or the other. But who is the other? The term appears as a collective singular, whether in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, religion, nature, disability, subculture, homelessness, poverty—everywhere I turn, others confront me. On the train I meet women, hear half a dozen languages, occasionally encounter a businessman or woman talking assuredly on the phone, may need to give up my seat for an elderly or disabled

2. I leave the other form, the care of the self (Foucault), to another occasion.

3. I do not spend time mapping the vast terrain of ethics, caught between universal norm and contingent act, also known as an ethics of goods or of responsibility and thereby a species of moralizing. Most reflection on the other is indeed a version of moralizing or preaching on how to be “good.” I follow the example of Adorno (2000), who persistently located the contradictions and problems that render any ethics highly problematic.

passenger, avoid the feral kids drinking and smoking in the toilets, and watch the nonhuman other pass by through the window. In short, nearly everyone apart from me is an overlapped alien. The train carriage is a burgeoning microcosm for ethics.

I would define such ethics as reflection upon and directions for ways to relate to these myriad others. Its purpose: to change the social relations within the world for the better. Before laying out my criticisms of this approach, I will critique two initially different but ultimately quite similar examples of such ethics—by Terry Eagleton and Judith Butler. I focus on them because they offer not versions of bourgeois or business ethics but versions from the Left.

Quailing before the Real: Terry Eagleton

In *Trouble with Strangers* Terry Eagleton (2009b) argues that Christian theology and socialism offer profound senses of human depravity as well as the capacity for ground-shaking renewal. They lead one to an entirely disinterested obligation to sympathy, compassion, and understanding as well as an obligation to one's fellow men and women. This is not the first time Eagleton has argued so, for in many recent works (Eagleton 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b)⁴ he has reiterated the same rather traditional Roman Catholic form of theology: the intrinsic nature of God, who created the world not out of need but love (God's existence depends on nothing outside God); the power of simple, intrinsic virtues in constructing a metaphysical response to the equally intrinsic forces of evil (capitalism, selfishness, bloodshed, and cruelty); ethics and love as selfless giving; the need for political forgiveness; the role of genuine hope, particularly through and for the *anawim* (the poor and dispossessed). Throughout this theology, ethics sounds a regular beat.

The most recent work of Eagleton has settled upon a three-legged stool: Marxism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and theology provide the same message concerning the depths of human depravity and the possibility of overcoming it. Or rather, while psychoanalysis well describes our fallen state, Christianity and Marxism have the best solution. This triangulation explains the choice of Lacan's Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real as a grid for *Trouble with Strangers*—a decision that becomes quite forced. Eagleton struggles to stretch the grid to fit ever more ethical positions: Shakespeare in the Symbolic; Kierkegaard's aesthetic, ethical, and religious as Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real; then leftovers from Aristotle to Kant. The real trap with the way Eagleton presents these categories is that they fall into a developmental pattern. Although he notes Lacan's dialectical reading of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, he understands them either as stages in a child's development, a potted historical narrative of bourgeois fortunes, or as a progressive narrative structure in which Christianity holds the trump card. The effect is obvious, for the Imaginary becomes immature, caught in the primitive mirror stage, and ethics in this category focuses on the self. The Symbolic is a step forward with its negotiation of the self and the other,

4. The scattered elements of Eagleton's theology now appear in a coherent statement in *Reason, Faith and Revolution* (2009a, 5–32). See the detailed discussion in Boer (2007, 275–333).

but even this falls short of the terrible place of the Real: the traumatic, indescribable kernel that both sustains and threatens to destroy our world at any moment. At this point the Christian doctrine of sin appears, which is not only the springboard for a theological solution but also the moment where Marxism's profound pessimism concerning exploited and alienated human beings comes into its own. For Eagleton, the Lacanian Real is "a psychoanalytic version of Original Sin" (2003b, 205). So psychoanalysis explicates our fallen, sinful state, but from there theology and Marxism are needed. The problem now is that Eagleton simply assumes, without any extensive analysis, that Marxism drinks deeply at the well of Jewish and Christian thought.

But what has this got to do with ethics? Is there a breakthrough, a deep and thorough transformation of ethics in light of the traumatic and terrible Real? Does the passion narrative of Christ's death allow us to stare that beast in the face? Does it provide a narrative of transition, the ultimate psychoanalytic cure? Do human beings get past the Imaginary's subjective concerns and the Symbolic's interpersonal obsessions to a moment when they are able to relate better with their fellow men and women? The answer is no: Eagleton does not deliver. All that appear are observations on disinterested goodness and virtue. Christ overcomes death and despair through being nice and not expecting to be rewarded for it—like lending my shovel to a neighbor and expecting no return. Christian theology offers simple, unprepossessing virtues that may overcome the depths of evil. Kindness, love, justice, humility, modesty, meekness, vision, courage, dedication, selflessness, and endurance—all these and more are marshaled to do battle with evil in a starkly dualistic universe (2003b, 120; 2003c, 74). But the greatest virtue is love, which he understands not as lust but as an indifferent, unconditional, impersonal, and especially, a public and political law of love that is concerned with enemies and strangers. For Eagleton, this is the key to ethics, a self-less and disinterested obligation to care for the "stranger." Here are echoes of the biblical injunction to show kindness to the stranger in the midst of the people, for the people too were strangers in Egypt (Exod. 22:21, 23:9; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19). In the end, ethics is at the core of the Christian message, found on the cross of Christ as an ethical act. Its concern is that other to whom one must show self-less love, a banal goodness that will overcome evil.

Apart from his failure of nerve, Eagleton offers a truncated theology that favors what is called salvation by works. Ethics becomes a code of life for a theologically informed Left (Eagleton 2009b, 195–96, 272, 291–92, 323). Ultimately, Eagleton deploys a tired argument common in the nineteenth century. A moral code, it was argued, can be based only on Christian theology. Casting anxious looks at anticlerical and secular movements, church and political leaders opined that Christianity's decline would undo the social glue of morals. Eagleton makes largely the same argument: values have disappeared as capitalism and empty consumerism have gained sway. No longer is there a robust metaphysical framework, and ethics is left to wander about in a moral wasteland. The solution is a recovery of the Christian message: indeed, a full-scale recovery of his early years among the Roman Catholic Left.

The Ethics of Ethical Failure: Judith Butler

Inspired by Foucault, Judith Butler (2005) seeks an “account of oneself” through which the subject becomes a problem for ethics. She argues that every account is an address, directed to “you” in particular. Ethics is therefore a thoroughly relational activity, arising in dialogue—that is, discursively: “the scene of address, what we might call the rhetorical condition for responsibility, means that while I am engaging in a reflexive activity, thinking about and reconstructing myself, I am also speaking to you and thus elaborating a relation to an other in language as I go” (50). Are both parties to this duality sustained and thus altered by the interaction, coming to a greater understanding? The key to Butler’s argument is that the accounts given are limited, broken, incoherent, and incomplete. Here, ethics begins. If my account is limited, then that should lead me to patience for an interlocutor caught in the same bind. Patience, tolerance, and an effort to understand—these flow from the awareness that both interlocutors struggle with comparable incoherencies.

Butler wishes to counter at least two positions. The one is from Nietzsche, for whom the awareness of oneself comes from a violence suffered, punishment inflicted, or allegation made, to which one must respond. Butler disagrees, arguing that an account need not arise from violence. That point leads to her second counter move: she seeks to negate ethical violence, which follows when one believes that one’s own position is inviolable, thereby enabling one to judge others who do not measure up. For Butler, when the universal seeks to force itself upon the particular rather than negotiating with and altering in light of the particular, then it engages in the violence of imposed indifference.

Negotiation, relation, dialogue, mutuality—these produce a modesty of ethical accounts, seek to negate the violence of imposed absolutes and universals, and become the workings of the subject, democracy, justice, patience, responsibility, agency, hope, and politics. Much hangs on the frail task of ethics. Above all, Butler’s ethics is the relation between self and other, I and you, “whether conjured or existing” (21).⁵ However, neither conditions the other in terms of absolute cause, for they are semiautonomous.

If one grants the premises of ethics—self, other, and the relations between them—then Butler’s account is very persuasive, not the least gain being an extraordinary unpicking of the inconsistencies in Levinas’s Zionism (Butler 2005, 90–96). But those premises are the issue. Ethics for Butler involves the betterment of society, the greasing of social relations so that the creaking, rusty parts may run more smoothly, justly, and less violently. And who does not want justice, tolerance, responsibility, understanding, and democracy, even if it does rely on the idea of conscious and relatively free agents? Ethics is the stuff of interpersonal relations, social interaction, and a political desire to change the world—gradually and patiently—for the better. But this version of ethics is really one of reform, a counsel against revolution, for that

5. This prevarication over the other, whether it is discursively constructed or a given, will become crucial in my later critique.

would be, according to Butler, the violent imposition of an absolute moral code and indifferent universal.

In the end, Butler comes quite close to Eagleton with his simple and modest virtues of goodness, justice, courage, and responsibility. I suggest that Eagleton's failure to deliver on a radical ethics brings him into the same camp as Butler, with the social reformers. For Butler's part, that moment explicitly comes when she argues that the most difficult ethical response to violence is to realize that one must not respond with violence but exercise patience and restraint rather than suddenly believing in the right to seek revenge (100–101). This is an argument Eagleton would love, for it is merely a secularized version of the saying of Jesus to turn the other cheek should someone strike you (Matt. 5:39; Luke 6:29). Ethics seems to take an inevitable theological turn even in Butler.

Blasting Away the Other

Self, other, and their mediation—these comprise the recent “ethical ideology,” as Badiou calls it. As a step to my own critique, I pass through Badiou and Žižek, both of whom take a wrecking ball to ethical debates. Despite common ground, their approaches to ethics are diametrically opposed. While Badiou argues that the problem is not the other but the same, Žižek pushes the other to its psychoanalytic extreme. For Badiou, alterity describes the status quo: “what we must recognise is that these differences hold no interest for thought, that they amount to nothing more than the infinite and self-evident multiplicity of humankind, as obvious as the difference between me and my cousin from Lyon as it is between the Shi'ite ‘community’ in Iraq and the fat cowboys of Texas” (Badiou 2002, 26; 2003, 51). All are different—so what! Ethics' concern for the other becomes a convenient ideology for the status quo, making us believe there is a problem and that all it requires is a little tinkering, a celebration of our differences, and a desire to live with understanding and patience.

Thus far I agree, but I am not sure of Badiou's solution. That turns on his well-known if problematic event and its truth, in which a life-shattering event is named and thereby gathers in its train a militant, faithful group. Events may be multiple, but each breaks through the given realm of differences oiled by ethics. What happens to ethics? As a liberal ideology of the current situation, ethics is tossed aside, but as an evental ethics it reshapes the ethical division between good and evil. The good designates what pertains to the event, marked by fidelity to that truth; ethics is thereby needed to provide courage to keep faith to that original truth. By contrast, evil leads one to: (a) delusion, as in confusing an event-simulacrum with a real event and becoming the terrorizing follower of a false event (the Nazis); (b) betrayal of the truth through exhaustion and renunciation; (c) disaster, or imposing a truth in authoritarian arrogance that claims all the answers (2002, 72–87, 91; 2003, 104–23, 126; compare Butler). So ethics—or rather, the ethic of a truth⁶—becomes a handmaiden to truth, offering discernment to avoid confusing a simulated truth for

6. For Badiou there is no ethics as such, but only an ethic-of (see Badiou 2002, 28; 2003, 53).

the real thing (be careful!), courage to be consistent and not tire (keep going!), and temperance so as not to impose a total truth (you're not perfect!).

I do not wish here to question Badiou's event, for others have begun to do so.⁷ However, his invocation of Good and Evil (with the capitals) is problematic, not merely for their theological residue, but especially because they reinstate the primary ethical schema. It is the absolute code, the one that has been betrayed by all those apologists for capitalism and its pernicious ideology and one that Badiou wishes to restore to its rightful place. Two counts may be registered against the schema here: first, the Platonism bursts through, where the Good remains an absolute value to which one aspires. A major problem with Plato is that he was an antidemocratic and ruling-class ideologue par excellence, the voice of the small propertied class which generated its surplus from slave and indentured labor (see Ste. Croix 1972, 1981, 2004; Wood 1997, 142–43; 2008, 50–98). So I remain puzzled why Badiou favors Plato and his creation, Socrates. More substantially, it is not that good and evil have been bowdlerized by betrayal, deceit, and simulation and that they need to be restored to their proper status, but that goodness itself is a problem (see below). I am far more interested in what challenges the good, what is designated evil, especially because I want to know who decides what is evil and for what reason.

Žižek begins similarly to Badiou: difference is part of our situation, and multicultural tolerance belongs to obnoxious liberalism. Yet Žižek responds differently, for ethics is the “Borromean knot” that ties the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real together (Žižek 2005, 4).⁸ In the Imaginary, the other is the person, mirror-like, who is like me, with whom I enter into relationships. Most ethics is focused here. However, in the Symbolic, the other becomes the “big Other,” the impersonal rules of conduct, whether the law, state, or unwritten moral assumptions. But in the Real, the other is inhuman, the terrifying thing with which no contact is possible whether in dialogue or by giving partial accounts, for if this other was recognized, everything would fall apart. These three levels are entwined with one another. So when ethics tries to deal with the other, it does so at the Imaginary level, with tolerance and patience. But this approach forgets two points. First, the forgotten third of this ideal dyadic relation is the Symbolic, which marks both the nameless and faceless others of social networks and the big Other of the law. Second, beneath the calm exterior of my partner or drinking buddy lurks the traumatic other of the Real, mediated by the Symbolic. With this obscene, abyssal other, no reciprocity is possible. I gain the impression that I can find reciprocity only because the Symbolic intervenes to render my other as a quarrelsome partner or piss-pot at the bar. One can read here an unresolved Balkan trauma for Žižek, where this situation was all too traumatically Real: the

7. For example, one may object that Badiou's theory smacks of a certain romanticism (Critchley 2000), or that it is difficult to distinguish an event from a pseudo event such as the Nazi moment or perhaps 9/11 (Surin 2009, 387–89; Žižek 1999, 138–40), or that the high-minded “perspective of the Last Judgment” leads one to eschew getting one's hands dirty in gradual politics or state formation (Žižek 2006, 321–23; 2008a, 389–92), or that Badiou's thought has totalitarian tendencies (Sharpe 2008).

8. A longer version of the same argument appears in Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard (2006, 134–90; see also Žižek 2001, 160–73; Žižek 2008b, 46–47). Note the difference with Eagleton's approach to the Lacanian triad.

neighbor—whether Serb or Croat or Bosnian, Muslim or Orthodox or Roman Catholic—with whom my children played, became overnight my sworn enemy, ready to slit my throat. Here the Real burst forth with obscene urgency. One gains the sense that Žižek’s perpetual obsession with the Real and his repeated stories and jokes from the “former Yugoslavia” are failed efforts to deal with that trauma.⁹

What is the proper ethical response? One does not engage with the Imaginary other, but with the hidden third partner, the mediating Symbolic, by going straight for the Real other.¹⁰ How? You smash the other’s face, so that you confront the traumatic other with whom no dialogue is possible. Facing the monster, the abyss, and even God (who belongs to the Real) is the first step to break radically with the status quo that is undergirded by the Real. Moving well past Eagleton, ethics requires ethical violence, smashing all the known codes of ethics.

I suggest that the varying takes by Badiou and Žižek on the ethics of otherness—breaking it up by an irruptive event for which ethics becomes a demoted assistant or calling on us to confront the obscene other—express a desire for ethical insurgency. Badiou challenges the ethics of the “there is” with a revolutionary ethics. Žižek undermines the ethics of otherness by pushing it to its disgusting extreme, to render ethics inoperable as it is understood and thereby revolutionary.¹¹ Yet I wish to take this insurgent impulse on a slightly different path.

Producing the Other

Thus far I have focused on four different contributions to ethics from the Left, finding Eagleton and Butler less promising than Badiou and Žižek. However, a crucial but curiously unaddressed question is how the other is produced in the first place. Here the alignments are somewhat different, for now Eagleton and Badiou draw closer together in assuming the other as a given. For Badiou the myriad others are unremarkable and therefore need no account of their production, while for Eagleton they are givens and thereby constitute the key problem for ethics. By contrast, Butler prevaricates, suggesting that self and other may be seen as either “conjured or existing” (Butler 2005, 21). For one who has consistently argued that bodies and sexes are discursively and performatively constructed, this is a curious moment of wavering. One would expect that the other is produced discursively, in the broken and limited accounts that human beings give to one another, but she does not take

9. See, for example, his sustained reflections in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (Žižek 2002, 117–26).

10. “The true ethical step is the one *beyond* the face of the other, the one of *suspending* the hold of the face, the one of choosing *against* the face, for the *third*. This *is* justice at its most elementary. Every pre-empting of the Other in the guise of his or her face relegates the Third to the faceless background” (Žižek 2005, 12, emphasis in original; Žižek, Santner, and Reinhard 2006, 183).

11. “We can now precisely locate the ethical act—or, rather, the act *as such*—with respect to the reign of the ‘reality principle’: an ethical act is not only ‘beyond the reality principle’... rather, it designates an intervention that *changes the very co-ordinates of the ‘reality principle’*” (Žižek 2001, 167, emphasis in original).

that option. Instead, she falters, loosening her rigorous discursivity and allowing space for a preexisting other. Only Žižek, then, provides a theory concerning the other's production, and that is a psychoanalytic one that plays the Lacanian triad of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real against one another.

But how is the other produced *in ethics*?¹² I would begin by observing that without an other—male or female, Muslim or Shinto, African or Indonesian, refugee or citizen, animal or plant—ethics would be out of business. In this situation it needs to be asked: who or what tells me they are “others”? Instead of ethics prescribing the way one should relate to a preexisting category of other, does not the discourse of ethics create the other in the first place? I cannot see why a person from China or Serbia or Greenland is alien, a stranger to me. I do not see why the tree out my window, the chillies on the veranda, or the kangaroos I meet are foreign to me—unless of course there is a discourse that constructs them as such.

Such a discursive production, however, never takes place in isolation, even though a strictly discursive approach would like to give that impression. To begin with, other discourses also produce others, such as the gendered other of feminism, the colonial other of (post)colonial discourse, the class other of political economy, or the sexual other of queer theory. In each case a specific discourse produces an other as part of that discourse's own operation. Of course, no discourse operates in pure isolation, especially those discourses I have just mentioned. Each is usually aware of the many overlaps between them, producing complex and multifaceted others. The problem with ethics is that it tends to conceal those overlaps, thereby arrogating non-ethical discursive productions of the other. Žižek provides an explicit example in his deployment of Lacanian psychoanalysis, for the dialectic of the Lacanian triad provides him with a specific construction of alterity that is then appropriated by ethics. It must be said that he deploys that triad to undercut the conventional ethical concern with improving one's relations with the other, pointing out that the other is not quite what it seems. Nonetheless, he draws that other from an alternate discourse and assumes its pre-given status as far as ethics is concerned.

A further aspect of the connectedness of discourse concerns its relations with its socioeconomic context. At this point I need to introduce what may be called the discursive link. By discursive link I mean the connection between a discourse and its socioeconomic context, which the traditional Marxist category of ideology renders explicit. Here the discourse of class is instructive, for the production of class takes place at the intersection between socioeconomic and discursive factors. That is, the various others of class—working class and bourgeoisie, serf and lord, slave and master—never emerge without the interaction of socioeconomic conditions and discourses (or, more traditionally, ideologies) that enables both the discourses themselves and the production of class others. Or to use traditional Marxist terminology, objective and subjective conditions are both necessary for the production of these others. Another example is the construction of sexual identities. As Peter Drucker has argued (2011), the construction of older lesbian and gay

12. On this matter Foucault was both correct and mistaken: he assumed that the radical question was to attack the givenness of the self (Foucault 1985, 1986, 1989, 2000); I suggest that the first step is the givenness of the other.

identities cannot be understood without the development of capitalism, as also the more recent rise of alternative sexual identities among disadvantaged and working-class young people—known as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) or “queer”—has taken place with the unwinding of Fordism and the dominance of neoliberal economic practices. One may designate such a discourse as a political discourse, a term that also applies to postcolonial, feminist, and environmental discourses insofar as they are explicitly aware of the discursive link in the process of producing others.

The question remains as to why the ethical proposals from the Left that I have considered do not make explicit this process of the production of alterity, preferring either to assume the other as a given or borrow its production from another discourse? I would suggest that the fault lies with ethics itself, for it systematically conceals both its relations with other discourses, arrogating their others, and the discursive link with its socioeconomic contexts. And the reason is the distinctly logocentric focus of ethical discourse. Two factors have played a role in this matter: the Foucauldian shift from ideology to discourse, a shift that was meant to breathe life into the supposedly tired category of ideology but had the effect of effacing ideology’s connectedness with socioeconomic factors; the “linguistic turn” in which language becomes the prime factor and discourse becomes logocentric. The outcome was that the Marxist heritage, which provided the springboard for such analysis, was discarded. That is, the ladder which enabled discursive construction was kicked away, so much so that any mention of Marxist analyses of class, gender, or sexuality is dismissed as so much “essentialism.”¹³ Ethics thereby conceals its own process of producing the other, giving the impression that others are givens, so that ethics may get to work.

Ethics and Class

All of which leads to the next step in my argument, where I interrogate ethics precisely on these matters. Here my suspicion is that if ethics seeks to conceal its process of producing others, both in terms of its relations with related discourses and in terms of its discursive link, then it must have reasons for doing so—reasons that will turn out to have unsavory class dimensions. My interrogation takes the form of an exploration of classical etymology, not so much to reinforce the assumption that all Western thought derives from those parts of Eastern and Southern Europe (Greece and Rome), but to turn that classicism on its head.

Ethics derives from the Greek *ethikos*, an adjective meaning “of morals” or “for morals”—a slightly tautological definition. Aristotle is the guilty party on this matter, for his treatises on morals, *ta ethika*, ensured that the word became fixed ever

13. The essentialism in question is usually a caricature, designating an unchanging and thereby fixed “essence” without considering, for instance, Marx’s early argument concerning species-essence, which is itself changed by socio-economic circumstances.

afterward and a discipline of reflection was spawned.¹⁴ But the adjective *ethikos* is actually part of a larger semantic cluster around the substantive *ethos* and the verb *ethō*, which bear the basic sense of custom and habit, as Aristotle himself explicitly recognizes (Aristotle 1955, 55, or see *Ethika Nikomacheia* 2.1).¹⁵ Other items of this cluster include the meanings of an accustomed place, an animal's lair (Homer), and then the disposition, character, and manners (in the plural) of human beings (Hesiod, Herodotus, and Thucydides). At this point the overlap with the Latin *mores* (plural) becomes obvious, for that becomes the translation of *ethoi* (also plural), especially in the sense of character and manners. Yet at the center of this Latin semantic cluster is *mos*, which comes close indeed to the basic sense of *ethos*. For *mos* too means habit, custom, common usage, and then even law, although it can also designate a slightly more capricious sense of humor and will.

By now my suspicions are properly aroused. They gain strength when Aristotle, early in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, opines that his detailed reflections on ethics are not for persons of low tastes, who are the vast majority: "The utter vulgarity of the herd of men comes out in their preference for the sort of existence a cow leads" (30, or see *Eth. Nik.* 1.5; see also 309–10 or *Eth. Nik.* 10.9).¹⁶ He means, of course, the slaves, peasants, artisans, and women who made up the vast bulk of the Greek *polis*. Needless to say, those sympathetic to Aristotle's practical ethics, to his wish not to shirk practical matters but make them central to ethics, find this move problematic. For example, MacIntyre (1998, 83, 98–99), who is usually quite astute on these matters, tries to purge, or claims that the Aristotelian tradition has already purged, these "inessential and objectionable elements" (xviii). I disagree, for such a move on Aristotle's part is utterly essential to his ethics.

In order to explain, let me widen the range of *ethos* and *mos*, or rather, invite their closest moral and class allies to speak up. I draw upon the excellent analysis by G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, who shows that again and again in the classical texts of Greece and Rome a range of apparently neutral terms have distinct moral and class dimensions (Ste. Croix 2006, 338–39; 1972, 371–76). Thus, terms such as good, beautiful, brave, blessed, timely, and lucky overlap with a host of other terms such as well-born, wealthy, noble, upright, elite, and pillars of society. And the opposite terms—bad, ugly, cursed, untimely, and unlucky—have their own moral and class connections: poor, ignoble,

14. Ethics for Aristotle is, to use terms from earlier, a form of moralizing: practical knowledge (and thereby a branch of politics) which seeks on the basis of reasoned deliberation upon chosen acts to enable upright and well-born citizens to conduct their lives and those of their communities well—that is, towards the end of happiness (a poor translation of *eudaimonia*) by means of the famous prudence (*phronēsis*) or mean in relation to the virtues (Aristotle 1955, 25–27, 55–56).

15. So also in the Bible, the supposed source of so much ethics, for only *ethos* appears (Luke 1:9; 2:42; 22:39; Acts 6:14; 15:1; 16:21; 21:21; 25:16; 26:3; 28:17; John 19:14; Heb. 10:25), meaning the customs and law, whether of the priests, the Jews, Moses, or the fathers.

16. For an excellent analysis of Plato's and Aristotle's class assumptions and a defense of Protagoras as a democrat and sophisticated political theorist, see Wood (1997, 142–43; 2008, 50–98).

cowardly, ill-born, the masses and dregs of society.¹⁷ All of which means that the apparently innocent Platonic questions—what is good? what is beautiful? what is ethical?—lose their class innocence and become questions pertinent only for a small, antidemocratic, slave-owning, propertied, ethnically specific and male oligarchy. In this light, it becomes well-nigh impossible to separate Aristotle's proposed ethics from the class assumptions that structure them, not merely because of Aristotle's own oligarchic leanings but because the terminology of ethics and goodness is inseparably a class terminology restricted to adult propertied males, thereby excluding women, slaves, indentured laborers, and impoverished peasants from its orbit.

So, if *ethos* and *mos* designate what is habitual and customary, the appropriate character and manners for human beings, then they begin to mingle with all those class assumptions from the Greek and Roman worlds where moral, social, and economic terms work together to designate one's place among the powerful ruling classes or in one's customary place among the ruled. The connection becomes stronger when I mention that what is customary and habitual at a social level and what is expected of one is not to disrupt social "harmony" but to follow all those ethical and moral expectations, assumptions, and laws that keep the social fabric together. Once again, Aristotle reveals the truth of the matter when he points out that, yes, ethics does derive from *ethos*, habit, and since such habits come not from nature, one must undertake training and practice so that one may learn the correct habits. It is hardly necessary to translate what those "correct habits" might be.

Unethical Insurgency

The other produced by ethics has taken on a somewhat different shape, especially when the class, economic, and gendered connections of that discourse are brought to light. Perhaps ethics has good reason to conceal these connections; or rather, in a universalizing move characteristic of ruling ideologies, it systematically effaces its specific location and claims to apply to everyone. So what is to be done with ethics? One option is to divest the term of its pernicious class associations and then fill it with new content. This has been the preferred option for those who wish to maintain the term for feminist ethics, environmental ethics, queer ethics, or indeed working class, revolutionary, or Marxist ethics. Ethics would then be appropriated for very different purposes. The trap here is that one cannot distinguish form and content so easily, for a form inevitably trails the dust of its former associations. That is, the enmeshment of form and content ensures that a term such as ethics is never quite free of its ruling

17. Ste. Croix (2006, 338–39) provides a long list of related terms from Greek literature: *hoi tas ousias echontes, plousioi, pacheis, eudaimones, gnōrimoi, eugeneis, dunatoi, dunatōtatoi, kaloi kagathoi, chrēstōi, esthloi, aristoi, beltistoi, dexiōtatoi, charientes, epieikeis*—all for the "good," propertied classes; for the "bad," unpropertied classes appear terms such as *hoi penētes, aporoi, ptōchoi, hoi polloi, to plēthos, ho ochlos, ho dēmos, hoi dēmotikoi, mochthēroi, ponēroi, deiloi, to kakiston* (see also Ste. Croix 1972, 371–76). One may gather a similar collection of terms with such moral, class, and economic overlaps in our own day: uneducated, trailer-trash, bogan (an Australian term with a similar sense), rabble, low culture, unfashionable, and so on.

class dimensions. To put it slightly differently, the framework of ethics as it has been classically conceived sets the terms of debate, and one cannot simply divest a term such as ethics from that ruling class framework.

For those reasons, I suggest a focus on what is opposed to the class assumptions of the semantic cluster of ethics—*ethikos*, *ethos*, *ethika*, *mos*, *mores*. That entails deploying the terminology of *aēthēs* (or *aētheia*), what is unaccustomed, unusual, unwonted, and unexpected—unethical. Or, in its Latin form, I prefer what is *praeter morem*, contrary to custom, and *sine more*, against custom—in short, unmoral. Undesirable terms in classical writers such as Thucydides, Aeschylus, Euripides, Virgil, and Terence, but this is precisely why the terms are so appealing, for they voice the position of those outside the restricted zone of ruling class ethics. Note carefully: I do not argue for an amoral position, beyond ethics. The universe may well be amoral, for there is nothing good or bad about a piece of rock floating in space, as Darko Suvin once put it (1979, 2). It may be objected that these terms too are part of ruling class discourse, designating the class other, and that they are still within the framework. In response, I suggest that the valorization of the realm of those opposed to the ruling class then becomes an act of subverting the very discourse of ethics and its class associations. That is, such a position may be regarded as a taking of sides, for these terms indicate what is disruptive, unwelcome, what shakes up the customary and comfortable social order—an unethical and unmoral politics. Of course, if the masses silenced in the elite literature of ethics were to be asked, they might offer a very different terminology.

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