

Antigone: diabolical or demonic?

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*I feel as if I were a piece in a game of chess, when my opponent says of it: that piece
cannot be moved.
—Kierkegaard, Either/Or*

Introduction

In the academic year of 1959-60 Jacques Lacan carried out a close commentary of the text of *Antigone* with the aim of posing the question of the ethical dimension of psychoanalytical therapy. The basic intuition guiding his work of this (and the following) year was that an effective understanding of the psychoanalytical therapeutic process necessitated a firm grasp of the tragic dimension of human desire (1992: 313). One of the concrete, therapeutic problems he set out to address was a tendency he saw in certain schools of psychoanalytical thought to reduce the therapeutic problem of the cure to the simple moral operation of a “psychological harmonization” or a re-socialization (*ibid.*: 302). In the figure of Antigone, Lacan claimed to have pin-pointed the tragic dimension of human desire in such a way that he could effectively throw this facile and short-sighted moral understanding of the therapeutic

process into question. By questioning the moral categories at work in these psychoanalytical schools (e.g. of the patient's 'psychological stability', 'social-integration', 'well-being', and so on), and by re-centering the question of the cure on the tragic dimension of human desire, Lacan felt that he could re-pose the problem of the therapeutic aim of psychoanalysis as a thoroughgoing ethical problem.

Since the publication of Lacan's *Ethics Seminar* in English, Slavoj Žižek has taken up Lacan's reading of Antigone under the heading of an 'ethics of desire'. The basic idea that he adopts from Lacan is that, from a psychoanalytical perspective, true ethical action can only be conceived of in terms – *not* of a moral ideal or a set of values shared by the community – but in terms of a *diabolical* desire, that is, in terms of a desire so stringent and uncompromising in its ethical fidelity that it effectively disrupts (or breaks apart: *dia-bolon*) the moral standards shared by the community. Closely related with this theme of the diabolical dimension of Antigone's desire, Žižek takes particular interest in Lacan's famous reading of 'Kant with Sade'. What we would like to do in this essay is not simply to critique Žižek's conception of the 'diabolical' dimension of Antigone's desire, but to offer an alternative reading thereof. Instead of simply challenging Žižek's reading, we would like to conceive of Antigone's desire – not in terms of a diabolical, evil excess – but in terms of Kierkegaard's conception of the demonic. What we would like to draw attention to specifically in Antigone's defiance is the self-imploding power of her concentrated demonic silence. In other words, instead of focusing on the violence (or evil) of her ethical fidelity, we would like to focus on the way Antigone closes herself off from community and wraps herself up in a tragic fate that no one can understand or penetrate.

A note of explanation is required here. In the *Ethics Seminar* Lacan himself makes no mention of Kierkegaard or of the latter's conception of the demonic. For this reason it might seem rather difficult – perhaps even futile – to try to justify a Kierkegaardian reading of a text with little to no 'Kierkegaard' in it. In order to bridge the gap, as it were, we shall develop a good portion of our argument with the help of a text by Jean Wahl (a close academic acquaintance of Lacan's) entitled *Études kierkegaardiennes* ([1938] 1974). In one chapter of this text ('*Par l'angoisse vers la hauteur*'), we find a number of formulations of the demonic, or what Kierkegaard refers to as "inclosing reserve", that not only fit the case of Antigone quite elegantly, but which offer a means of reading Lacan's commentary upon the

play in a completely different light.

Žižek, Antigone and diabolical desire

In many of his articles and books Žižek accounts for Antigone's heroic defiance in terms of a desire that does not simply isolate Antigone from her family (Ismene) and from the community (Creon, Chorus), but a desire so uncompromising and inflexible in its ethical fidelity that it effectively ruptures the economy of common moral values shared by the Theban political community. In his book *Interrogating the real*, for example, Žižek describes Antigone's love for Polynices as a “mad” and “evil” desire, that is, as a desire so uncompromising that it can only appear, from the point of view of the common customs/values of the city (*Sittlichkeit*), as 'going too far', or as an “evil” excess (2005: 344). Once Žižek isolates this 'diabolical' kernel from Antigone's tragic gesture, he then attempts to furnish this gesture with a contemporary currency that seems a little less than fitting. In the passage cited just now, for instance, he compares the inflexibility of Antigone's ethical fidelity to that of a “proto-totalitarian figure” (*ibid.*). Elsewhere, he finds this same diabolical fidelity at work in the terrorist attacks upon the World Trade Center:

Sacriligious as it may appear, the WTC attacks do share something with Antigone's act: they both undermine the 'servicing of the goods', the reign of the pleasure-reality principle (Žižek 2002: 249).

The basic idea being put forward is that it is we – citizens and members of the moral community called 'the West' – who fail to measure up to, or to properly morally appreciate, the rigorous ethical standard of these sorts of manifestations of ethical violence. If to us, or “from the standpoint of the ethics of *Sittlichkeit*” (Žižek 2005: 344), these sorts of acts appear as 'going too far', or as “evil”, this is only because our common values and moral customs share nothing in common with figures like Antigone or Bin Laden. In order, therefore, to open up a critique on the values we share in the West, Žižek's basic idea is that we need to be prepared to “endorse” the “basic intention” of this diabolical dimension of human desire (2004: 83), and even to welcome its ethical violence as a means of disrupting the contemporary reign of neo-

liberal, humanitarian ideologies.

The question that we would like to pose is this: how far we are to take these contemporary comparisons of Antigone with totalitarianism, jihad and so on? How much will figures such as Stalin or Robespierre be able to help us in understanding the basic ethical motivation behind Antigone's act? Unlike the violence of the Jihadist movement, Antigone's defiance doesn't involve any political engagement in disrupting (and ultimately reconfiguring) the moral standards of her society. On the one hand it is true that her defiant action *does* effectively rupture the social fabric of the Theban community – on this point we see no reason to question Žižek's interpretation of Antigone as a diabolical figure. The problem is simply that this social or moral value-disruption is only an inessential consequence of her defiance, and not an essential component of it. In her defiance we don't find the same element of violent ideological opposition. She opposes herself to Creon to be sure – quite publicly and fearlessly, in fact – , but her action is not directly engaged in, or invested in, the value-disruption that it brings about. Her motivation in the whole affair is somehow adjacent to, or disengaged from the opposition that her defiance effectively poses to the moral and society integrity of the Theban community. Ultimately, Antigone is perfectly *indifferent* to the political question of the well-being of her City or of Creon's rule over it.

In contrast with global Jihad, with Antigone, we find a 'nut' that's considerably tougher to crack. The more one tries to isolate, or to ferret out, the core significance of her 'sisterly love' for Polynices – this love declared by the Chorus to be a “love invincible in battle” (Sophocles 1994: 77) – the more she retreats into a cocoon of tragic secrecy. On the one hand, of course, she has absolutely nothing to hide from Creon or her fellow Thebans: she not only openly opposes herself to Creon's rule, but she buries the body of her fallen brother with a sense of absolute moral impunity, freely and openly identifying herself with her crime (much like Bin Laden, perhaps). In spite of this naked publicity of her defiance, on the other hand, there is something maddeningly opaque and impenetrable in her act itself, as if the very publicity of her act is what effectively allowed her to confess nothing, or rather, to confess a crime *without confessing herself* in relation to this crime.

In order to account for this stubborn mutism, or opacity, enveloping Antigone's otherwise very public revolt, Kierkegaard's conception of the “demonic”, or the “inclosing reserve” (Kierkegaard 1980: 123) proves to be quite helpful. In the *Concept of Anxiety*,

Kierkegaard defines the “demonic” in terms of a category of psychological/spiritual life in which the individual retreats into herself and isolates herself from family, community and God. The idea is not simply that the individual struggles to communicate what she is feeling to others, or that the affective element of a mood, or a wave of anxiety, is too difficult to 'put into words'; it is rather that she folds in on herself, as if she were a snail enveloping itself in a shell of miserable and stubborn silence.

To give a simple example we could think of the way in which certain individuals somehow manage to spoil the atmosphere of a party or a social gathering without even having to say or do anything. On the contrary, it is their very silence, or their refusal to join in with the others, that makes it difficult for everyone else to enjoy themselves. This is not an empty, ineffable or wordless silence, but concentrated “muteness”, as Kierkegaard says (1980: 124), that makes itself felt in a powerful way. It is a silence that tinges the very atmosphere of the room, suffocating *both* the demonic individual as well as everyone else, almost as if it were being communicated like some sort of nameless contagion. The more the others might try to reach out to the individual, or to coax her out of her shell-like “inclosing reserve”, the more she resists the draw to join in and, sucked in as if by a secret tide, the entire group is eventually overcome by an anxious discomfort and an unspoken sense of embarrassment.

What we see Kierkegaard drawing attention to in the demonic, then, is not simply a resistance to symbolization or verbal communication, but a resistance between the individual (or something at work in the individual’s spiritual life) and a larger social order of shared meanings and values. When he defines demonic anxiety in terms of an “anxiety before the good” (1980: 119), what he has in mind is precisely the withdrawal of the individual beyond the reach of the well-meaning concern and sympathy of others. It is an anxiety before the 'common good', an anxiety that holds something back, 'in reserve', both from communication and any form of community:

Every individuality is demoniac, Kierkegaard says, which, without mediation, alone, by itself, is in relation with the idea, in particular relation with the divine. [...] It is a being that is folded in on itself, closed up in its individuality, living in its silence within the sacred domain of the particular. Demoniac is the spirit which closes in on itself, burrows down, and shuts up. (Wahl 1974: 234, my

translation).

In sum, the demonic individual finds herself in a state of suffocating and quiet isolation, as if he had been cast out – or excommunicated, if you will – both from family and community, as well as from a sense of God's presence.

It is the pregnant and stubborn resistance of the demoniac's silence that makes living with such individuals such an intolerable, hellish ordeal, both for the individual herself as well as for those close to her. For while on the one hand, the individual clings to her inner torment like a well-guarded secret, or some sort of dark, hidden treasure – “Leave me alone in my wretchedness[!]” (*ibid.*: 137) – , she is also inhabited, Kierkegaard says, by an equally powerful and contrary desire to disclose her secret to others, only in such a way that it is not a *content* or a meaning that is disclosed, but the secretive, closed-off quality of the demonic “inclos[ure]” itself. “It may will disclosure to a certain degree”, Kierkegaard writes, “but still retain a little residue in order to begin the inclosing reserve all over again. [...] It may will disclosure, but *incognito*” (*ibid.* 127-8). By means of a furtive glance, a provocative slamming of the door, or a dark, brooding silence, the demoniac manifests, not *what* she is going through, but the mute fact *that* she is inhabited by a nameless torment. In a strange way, she wants everyone around her to experience their powerlessness to do anything about her demonic secret, almost as if she were incarnating the proverbial 'elephant in the corner' that no one is to talk about it. Kierkegaard writes: “It is incredible what power the man of inclosing reserve can exercise over people, how at last they beg and plead for just a word to break the silence [...]” (1980: 125). While initially one might like very much to help such people and to reach out to them, the more the tension of the affective ‘atmosphere’ mounts, the more likely one is to lose one's nerve and cry out ‘uncle!’ And once one loses one's nerve, of course, all is lost, for all that one can do at this point is either to erupt in a display of furious exasperation, or to run straight out the door, leaving the demoniac alone to glory in her silent, isolated victory.

In the case of Antigone, we shall consider Polynices as that which Antigone cannot share in common with others. This is what we see Wahl referring to above in terms of a ‘sacred Particular’. She insists again and again upon the absolute irreplaceability her brother, this insolvable attachment that binds her to Polynices in his death – but no one understands her. Though she puts up with the common-sense reasoning of her sister, Ismene, ultimately,

the misery of her tragic isolation is incommunicable. This lack of comprehension, or breakdown of communication, does not seem to trouble Antigone in any way, moreover. Ultimately, she has no cause to justify her action, no reason to explain herself before Creon, nor any moral motivation with which to persuade Ismene to accompany her in her revolt. While Creon attempts to force her to give Polynices up for the greater good of Thebes, and while Ismene attempts in vain to reason with her sister and call her to her senses, these verbal 'exchanges' simply give Antigone the occasion *not* to exchange something, or to hold something back, in reserve, like a willful, stubborn child. In this way, though she does make something of a public spectacle of her love for her brother, her love remains silent and closed in on itself – an absolutely private, incommunicable bond.

Antigone as a demonic figure: three textual references

At this point we would like to consider three specific instances in the play that support our reading of Antigone as a demonic figure. The first moment in which we come to feel the suffocating weight of Antigone's silence is in an exchange between Antigone and the Chorus. After Antigone makes a loose comparison between her own fate and that of Niobe, the daughter of Tantalus – “...very like her am I...” – , the Chorus responds by lauding Antigone, proclaiming that “it is a great thing” for her to enjoy “the credit of a fate like those equal to the gods” (Sophocles 1994: 81). To this praise of the Chorus, Antigone then responds, quite unexpectedly, with the following fiery retort:

Ah, I am being mocked! Why, in the name of the gods of my fathers, do you insult me not when I am gone, but while I am still visible? O city, O rich men of the city! Ah fountains of Dirce and grove of Thebes of the fine chariots, you at least I can call to witness how unwept by friends, under what laws I come to the heaped-up mound of my strange tomb. Ah, the unhappy one, living neither among mortals nor as a shade among the shades, neither with the living nor with the dead (*ibid.*: 81/83).

An element of demonic inclosure betrays itself for a brief moment in this bitter reproach. While only a moment earlier, Antigone herself had suggested a similarity between her tragic fate and that of Niobe, when she hears this tragic comparison echoed back to her in an

expression of the Chorus' praise and sorrow, she recoils in anger and accuses the Chorus of callously mocking her. In order to understand what is going on here, it is essential to read Antigone's retort in light of Kierkegaard's discussion of the relation between the demonic and the "sympathy" of others (1980: 119). What Antigone gives expression to here is quite simply a refusal to *share* her sorrow, or to tolerate the com-*passion* of others. While she is direct, cold and to-the-point in her opposition with Creon and Ismene, here, before this, the deepest possible expression of Greek sorrow, a demonic fury flares up in Antigone as if she were saying: 'spare me your shallow, Greek tears, good people of Thebes! If you insist upon telling my story after I die, please, I beg you, spare us all the cheap hero-worship!' In this way Antigone is very much dissimilar from the classical, Greek hero who resigns himself to his fate. Instead of nobly assuming her fate as a simple, external fact that cannot be altered, Antigone has a strange way of clinging to her suffering and of making it her own, of wrapping herself up in it, almost as if she were deriving a private libidinal profit from the secrecy of her miserable fate. In spite of the noble, 'sisterly' bearing of her heroic act, or what Kierkegaard speaks of elsewhere in terms of her "sisterly affection and piety" (Kierkegaard 1944: 126), we find something demonic in this bitter retort, something closed off.

The second moment in the play that we would like to consider is drawn from Antigone's dialogues with Ismene. In both of the major exchanges between the two sisters, Antigone manifests an absolute refusal to justify or to motivate her action in any way. Though she does offer a *silent invitation* for her sister to join her as an accomplice in her crime, never once does she attempt to persuade Ismene into making such a leap. There is simply an invitation to action – with no moral injunction, no explanation or justification of any kind. And then suddenly, at a certain moment in Ismene's attempt to reason with her sister, Antigone definitively shuts her sister out, and makes perfectly clear that there is simply nothing more to be said:

I would not tell you to do it, and even if you were willing to act after
all I would not be content for you to act with me! Do you be the
kind of person you have decided to be, but I shall bury him!
(Sophocles 1994: 11).

What is 'communicated' here, in effect, is that communication between the two sisters has been definitely closed off. It is as if Antigone were declaring all betting closed on an invisible hand of cards that Ismene, in her common-sense hesitation, had never realized had been

dealt to her. What Antigone had desperately hoped for from her sister, in effect, was not a discussion or a debate, but for some sign of silent understanding, or silent accord: 'listen, either you get it or you don't, sister, and by the simple fact that we're still standing here deliberating about whether or not to do this thing, I can already see that you don't understand what is at stake'. Initially, then, Antigone had very much wanted to *share* something with her sister, but she was only willing to share it as a private, incommunicable secret.

This point is an especially important one, for when we attempt to account for Antigone's defiance exclusively in terms of a diabolical destruction of communal moral standards, as Žižek does, this notion of a potential 'secret society' existing between the two sisters is lost from view. All that Žižek draws attention to is the way Antigone's inflexible fidelity opposes her both to family and community. What Žižek does not seem to hear – just like with Ismene herself, in fact – is this silent appeal Antigone makes to her sister. In Kierkegaard, to offer a point of contrast, we discover a rather beautiful expression of the sort of 'secret society' Antigone had so desperately hoped for with Ismene:

Among such demoniacs there is a cohesion in which they cling to one another so inseparably and anxiously that no friendship has an inwardness that can be compared with it (1980: 137).

When, further on in the play, Ismene finally attempts to share responsibility for the deed, Antigone violently refuses, guarding her crime and her suffering for herself, as if they were the only treasure left to her. While Ismene had approached the question of taking such an action by first weighing the pros and cons, as it were, and had eventually come to a decision to endorse her sister's action (in spite of the costs), Antigone had never been looking for such an explicit, discursive agreement, but only for an unspoken, private and demonic one.

The third moment in the play that we shall consider is in Antigone's profoundly disturbing declaration concerning the irreplaceability of her brother. At the moment when she is about to be led away to the tomb, she declares that she would never have committed the same crime for a fallen husband or a dead child, but only for her brother. Her 'reasoning' – if one can call it that – is that her brother is absolutely unique and irreplaceable (owing to the fact that her father and mother are no longer living), while a fallen husband could (conceivably) be replaced by another husband, and a dead child could be substituted for by

the birth of another child. Clearly, this is not the sort of justification one might have expected from a hero said to embody “sisterly affection and piety” (Kierkegaard 1944: 126). Much to the contrary, as Lacan remarks, there is something unpolished and “raw” in Antigone's declaration (1992: 263). Far from actually explaining or clarifying her motivation, in fact, what she says here has a way of closing us off from any possible identification with her. Goethe confirms this observation when he remarks, in conversation with Eckermann (an eminent poet and friend of his), that Antigone's declaration is so “far-fetched” that it effectively ruptures the “tragic tone” of the play, and that the passage leaves such a “blemish” on the text of the play that he is led to doubt the passage's very authenticity (1898: 227). Though Goethe is perfectly willing to accept Antigone's crime against Creon and the Theban body-politic as an expression of her “noble motives” and the “elevated purity of her soul” (*ibid.*), he seems to feel the need to offer an excuse for Antigone here, as if he were apologizing for a dinner-guest who had deliberately made a wild tantrum or rudely burped during an important family meal. But what is it exactly that compels Goethe to go so far as to doubt the very authenticity of the text? And if it isn't out of a sacred sisterly love that Antigone sacrifices herself for her brother, what exactly are we to say that Polynices means for her?

According to Žižek's interpretation of the passage, Antigone's “tautological insistence” – ‘my brother is my brother is my brother...’ – is aimed specifically at closing off any further “dialogue” with Creon:

[T]o put it in slightly ironic terms, is Antigone not the anti-Habermas par excellence? No dialogue, no attempt to convince Creon of the good reasons for her acts through rational argumentation, but just the blind insistence of her right. If anything, the so-called arguments are on Creon's side (the burial of Polynices would stir up public unrest, and so forth), while Antigone's counterpoint is ultimately the tautological insistence, 'OK, you can say whatever you want, it will not change anything. I stick to my decision (Žižek 2000: 667).

The basic idea with this reference to Antigone as the ultimate “anti-Habermas” is that Antigone further exacerbates her crime by stubbornly resisting any point of contact with the realm of public discourse, much as terrorist groups refuse to negotiate with the governments of the West. Once we take stock of the “blemish” that Goethe stumbles on in Antigone's declaration, however, this reference to Habermas and the sphere of 'public discourse' proves

somewhat insufficient. For while Žižek is right to say that Antigone's declaration effectively shuts out any further possibility of dialogue with Creon, what Goethe recoils before here seems to have much more to do with the way Antigone dramatically divorces her 'sisterly love' from any sort of moral point of reference, *sacred or otherwise*. While Goethe had assumed that Antigone had defied Creon on behalf of the sacred rights of the dead or the dignity of the family, Antigone definitively closes off her gesture from being interpreted in this way.

There are two passages from Lacan's commentary of the text that are quite helpful in deciphering the passage. On the one hand, much like Goethe, Lacan highlights the great difficulty of accounting for Antigone's defiance of Creon in terms of a defense of the "sacred order" of the dead or of the dignity of the family (1992: 277-8). On the other hand, he draws attention to how the only thing that really matters for Antigone is a brutish, chthonian attachment to her brother's blood (*ibid.*), such that this chthonian bond takes on a greater significance (or moral weight) even than the sacred, familial values that this blood is normally understood to support. What Lacan draws attention to, in other words, has to do with the way Antigone absolutizes and "puri[fies]" (*ibid.*: 279) the blood of her brother from every conceivable moral point of reference. Why is she ready to sacrifice herself for her brother? Is it out of love for what he meant to her while he was alive? No. Is it because she identifies with the political opposition he posed to Creon, or because she wants to undermine Creon's authority? No. Is it because such a sacrifice is the noble and right thing to do, the sort of thing that sisters do for their brothers? No. Is it because the gods demanded this sacrifice of her? No. On the contrary, Antigone's desire and dignity hang, not upon who Polynices was or what he meant to her, nor upon a sacred and unspoken moral law that she must fulfill in order to appease the gods of the underworld, but, we should say, upon 'that in Polynices which was more than Polynices'. We should not forget, in this connection, how Lacan speaks of Antigone as being "between two deaths" (*ibid.*: 270). Insofar as she insists upon this irreplaceable link that binds her with her fallen brother, Antigone is, much like her brother, already 'symbolically dead', with no place left for her in the symbolic/social order. By remaining faithful to the symbolically dead body of brother, she comes to embody a sort of social contagion that must be eradicated in order to ensure the health and well-being of the city. All that remains is for her symbolic death to be consummated by a real death. In much the same way we can speak of Antigone's act itself as being symbolically dead, or as being

incapable of any sort of re-inscription within a larger frame of meaning/significance. This is ultimately what Goethe was recoiling before in the text of the tragedy, and what Lacan picks up in his reading of text: underneath the noble bearing of this beautiful and courageous young girl, what they both draw attention to is this barren and tenacious (under)side of Antigone's love, to this absolute attachment to a stupid, meaningless and symbolically dead substance.

How are we to understand this demonic fidelity to the chthonic bond of kinship blood? In itself, kinship blood is a perfectly contingent and meaningless fact shared between individuals of the same family. Though it functions as the contingent support of an entire economy of domestic moral values (e.g. affection, loyalty, security, and so on), and though these domestic values enjoy a greater moral significance than the values at work in the broader, civic community, they only retain this significance insofar as they are able to *transcend* the contingent support of the blood itself. Consider for example another, much more common example of the same demonic attachment to kinship blood. A man and woman marry and eagerly anticipate expressing their love for each other through the prospect of bringing a child into the world. They dream of raising and educating the child, of sharing their life-experience with it, of caring for and loving it. Once they learn that the husband is incapable of having children, and that the only option left open to them is to adopt, the dream that they had shared of having a child together takes a turn for the worse. While the husband might still be willing to consider undergoing the adoption process, the wife simply cannot tolerate the idea of having a 'stranger' for a child. Family, friends and spouse might struggle to convince her that, with time, she would come to recognize this 'stranger' as her own child, and that their dream of making a home together and of sharing their love with a child is not definitively closed off. But their arguments have no effect, and, after a period of considerable domestic turmoil, the wife tells her husband that they have nothing left to share with each other, and insists upon having a divorce.

As with Antigone, the mother from this example has no interest *per se* in posing a diabolical opposition to the dignity of motherhood or the sacred values of the family. Just as Antigone would have been perfectly content sharing a life with Haemon, and with having a home full of happy, 'replaceable' children, so too, our mother has no cause to oppose herself diabolically against the simple, common joys of motherhood. Instead, we should say that both women are consumed by a demonic attachment to something without which these

values no longer hold any weight. The problem, in other words, is simply that this host of domestic moral values only take on any significance for the two women in function of something which, when elevated to the status of a radically incommunicable absolute, becomes 'purified' of every recognizable moral point of reference.

Conclusion

What does the study of Antigone as a demonic figure have to teach us about the tragic dimension of human desire? What is the nature of the ethical problem posed by demonic phenomena? Aside from the technical and therapeutic concerns raised by Lacan in his *Ethics Seminar*, in what way does his reading of *Antigone* compel us to re-evaluate the moral categories developed within the philosophical tradition (e.g. utility, dignity, the Good)? While Žižek has addressed the ethical problem of desire in reference to the Kantian conception of diabolical evil, when we account for Antigone's 'love' for Polynices in terms of demonic attachment, we are led to the conclusion that the tragedy of desire that Lacan takes into consideration has much less to do with the active and willful disruption of the moral values of the community than it does with the fact that there is something at work in desire, or something proper to desire, which has *no interest in the Good* – that is, that there is something at work in desire which has no interest either in my own well-being or in the well-being those who are closest and dearest to me. Lacan is quite explicit on this point in his *Ethics Seminar*. Consider for example a remark that we find him making where he speaks of his understanding of desire in relation the conception of Supreme Good developed by Aristotle:

If you go and take a close look at it – and it's worth the trouble – you will see that Aristotle's morality is wholly founded on an order that is no doubt a tidied up, ideal order. But it is nevertheless one that corresponds to the politics of his time, to the organization of the city. His morality is the morality of the master, created for the virtues of the master and linked to the order of powers. *One shouldn't be contemptuous of the order of powers – these are not the comments of an anarchist – one simply needs to know their limit with relation to our field of inquiry.* (Lacan 1992: 315, my italics).

The point that we are led to make, in this light, is not that we need to find some way to identify with those who undermine and liquidate those values and moral standards held in common by family and community, but simply that we must recognize the tragic and unsurpassable limit that desire introduces into them.

Though Lacan focuses on the tragic dimension of desire in his *Ethics Seminar*, the limit that desire introduces into our moral values and ideals can arise in our lives in other forms as well. Though in the case of Antigone it arises on account of a very real and tragic loss, in other cases, this limit-beyond-measure can manifest itself in the form of comic trifles and absurdities. This is one point to which Kierkegaard's psychological insight was particularly sensitive in his treatment of the demonic. What truly characterizes the demoniac's pregnant 'secret', he writes, is that *any* object, however mundane or "insignificant", can be elevated to the status of a 'sacred' Thing:

Let the inclosing reserve be x and its content x , denoting the most terrible, the most insignificant, the horrible, whose presence in life few probably even dream about, but also trifles to which no one pays attention. [...] This [difference] must not disturb us, for the category remains the same; the phenomena have this in common – that they are demonic – although the difference otherwise is enormous enough to make one dizzy. (Kierkegaard 1980: 127).

What is so difficult to pin down in demoniac phenomena, in other words, is not necessarily the source of a deep and unfathomable anguish, but, first and foremost, the source of the 'sacred' status that is accorded to the demoniac's 'secret'. Consider the simple example of a minor, outstanding debt that is left unpaid by a friend for a significant period of time. With time and neglect, such a debt, or any another petty misunderstanding between friends, can come to acquire enough demonic force to destroy the bonds of friendship. Though I may struggle to remind myself that it is 'not worth all the fuss' – certainly not as much as a friendship – I cannot help but cling to the money that is owed me with a deeply incorrigible, wrathful greed, like a proverbial 'pound of flesh' that must be paid to me. With time it comes to acquire the uncanny power to ruin my entire day, distracting me from my work, consuming my every thought, and keeping me up through all hours of the night. And yet, fool that I am, I just can't bring myself to the point of having to remind my friend – again – of the petty sum that he owes me. Though I might try to call myself to my senses by telling myself that the unpleasantness is

really 'nothing after all', all the while I remain, very much in spite of myself, secretly invested in this sacred trifle, nursing it and cherishing it like a grave offense to my pride. Of itself, the miserable little debt is somehow transformed into a cancerous and all-consuming *idée fixe*. And even then, when, to my surprise, the debt is finally paid, I still feel consumed by the same dark, miserly wrath, as if something other than the debt were somehow lost in the transaction.

For anyone living together (or closely related) with such demoniac individuals, an inestimable degree of long-suffering and delicate/brutal honesty are required if there is to be any chance of getting him to enter the sphere of communication and social life once again. To make any sort of appeal to such an individual on the grounds his well-being or the well-being of those close to him is to miss the point of the ethical problem he confronts. The slightest interpretive 'forcing' on the part of a close friend or a loved one (or an analyst) is liable to have a similar effect as Ismene's common-sense reasoning did on her sister – total communication break-down. The more one tries to 'help a grieving process along', or to coax the individual recognize the comic absurdity of his petty squabbles, the greater his sense of desperation is likely to mount, so much so that he, like Antigone, might feel compelled to *prove* the reality of his desire – however comic – by means of a dramatic and attention-grabbing 'acting-out' of some sort, or by a suicidal 'passing to the act'.

Though, in the end, there is clearly no common or ready-to-hand solution to the problem when it is posed in this way, this is precisely the point that Lacan was bringing to bear against those in his profession who were short-changing the ethical dimension of desire (and the therapeutic process) by dealing in the 'common currency' of social integration and psychological well-being. Our aim here, in sum, has been to open up an alternative understanding of this ethical dimension of desire. While Žižek has interpreted it in light of the Kantian/Sadian conception of diabolical evil, we claim that it can (and should) be read in light of Kierkegaard's concept of the demonic. By taking Antigone as a sort of standard-bearer, we have shown how this ethical dimension of desire has more to do with a stubborn recalcitrance that has no interest in any form of communication with the Good – or with what Lacan speaks of, in reference to Aristotle, as the "service of goods" (1992: 303) – , than it does with a violent and diabolical opposition to the values of the larger ethical community. How is analyst supposed to deal with a patient who, on the one hand, declares that she wants to be happy and to get the most of life, while, on the other hand, her dreams and slips of the tongue betray

that she secretly harbors, against her own 'better' judgment, a demonic desire that closes her off from such a possibility? Is the analyst to side with the dupe or the demon? And if she sides with the demon, or with what Freud calls the hard kernel of the patient's desire ('*der Kern unseres Wesens*'), what means does she have at her disposal – if not her own desire as an analyst – to coax the stupid, stubborn little kernel from its shell?

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