

Philosophy and the Pursuit of One's Desire: Mathilde's Project

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The present paper is a reading of Jean-Pierre Jeunet's recent film, A Very Long Engagement, mainly through the lenses of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory of the human subject—particularly his notion of the subject's desire, which constitutes every human subject as a singular being. Moreover, for Lacan the subject faces the task of taking up his or her desire as a prerequisite for truly ethical action. The character of Mathilde in Jeunet's film, it is argued, may be seen as being paradigmatic in this respect, insofar as she acts in accordance with her desire. This is demonstrated with reference to the narrative structure of Jeunet's film.

In his “ethics seminar,” Jacques Lacan (1997: 24) talks about “a liberating truth” that is sought in psychoanalysis on the part of the subject. He also characterizes such “truth” as “particular” and as being formally (and paradoxically) “the same in everyone though always different.” This truth, with its “intimate specificity,” he continues to say, has “the character of an imperious *Wunsch*.” He continues (p. 24): “The *Wunsch* does not have the character of a universal law but, on the contrary, of the most particular of laws—even if it is universal that this particularity is to be found in every human being.” What Lacan is here referring to, is the “desire” that makes each human being uniquely particular and simultaneously (and paradoxically) similar to every other human being in this very particularity.

Elsewhere Lacan formulates the relation between the subject and her or his desire more elusively (Lacan 1977a: 263):

Desire is that which is manifested in the interval that demand hollows within itself, in as much as the subject, in articulating the signifying chain, brings to light the want-to-be [*manque à être*], together with the appeal to receive the complement from the Other, if the Other, the locus of speech, is also the locus of this want, or lack... It is also what is evoked by any demand beyond the need that is articulated in it, and it is certainly that of which the subject remains all the more deprived to the extent that the need articulated in the demand is satisfied.

In other words, there is an unbridgeable gap between what one can say (demand) and what one needs, and this hiatus is what Lacan designates as desire. The Other alluded to must be understood as the unconscious (strictly, as “discourse of the Other”; see Lacan 1977b: 55)—the place or locus of the subject’s “lack.” This should further be seen in light of psychoanalysis’ founding principle, that human beings are “split” or “lacking” subjects. Far from affirming the supposedly autonomous, self-transparent subjects of the Western philosophical tradition—whether this be construed in rationalist¹ or “liberal humanist” terms—psychoanalysis is predicated on the insight that human beings are constituted by the split between conscious and unconscious. Crucially, according to Lacan (1977a: 234; 1977b: 55) the latter, which is brought into being by the repression of prohibited wishes (that is, cultural taboos such as incest-prohibition), is structured “like a language.” It is from this that the subject draws when he or she speaks, but because the unconscious comprises the realm of repressed or outlawed materials, it cannot ever fill the void signified by “demand.” The latter represents the individual’s repeated but futile attempt to express his or her desire.

Whatever the difficulties involved in articulating one’s desire may be, in the “ethics seminar” (1997: 314), Lacan gives desire a place of central importance in human life, elevating the following question to the level of an ethical judgment, perhaps even a “Last Judgment”: “Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?” He says this advisedly, given the fact that psychoanalysts are trained to “recognize the nature of desire” (1997: 314) and may therefore guide the subject as patient or client in uncovering the specificity of his or her desire. It should come as no surprise that Lacan gives desire ethical significance. It would not function, most of the time, at an unconscious level unless it was intimately bound up with ethical considerations—that is why it is subject to repression. This explains Lacan’s (1981: 34) claim that the status of the unconscious is ethical, which amounts to saying that it is the locus of the subject’s desire in an ethical sense. What the human subject “truly” wants is usually hidden from her or him through repression, and it is only rarely the case that subjects are enabled to appropriate this singularizing but decentred wish on their “own” part.

It therefore seems to me that Lacan’s insight concerning desire may be regarded as a justification of both psychoanalytical practice and the growing practice of philosophical counselling. Practitioners of both disciplines face this difficult task of assisting the analysand or client to discover what it is that makes each one of them unique—in short, to help them find their

own “desire” as a prerequisite for the kind of (ethical) action that would be consonant with it. As Lacan intimates (1997: 22), this is “only a preliminary to moral action as such...,” in other words, to the subject or client her- or himself acting in accordance with their newly discovered desire. It is not essential, of course, for psychoanalysis or philosophical counselling to intervene in the life of every individual, as Lacan’s (1997: 243-287) discussion (which will not be taken up here) of the example of Sophocles’ tragedy, *Antigone*, indicates. Antigone acted in accordance with her desire, which was intimately bound up with her love for her brother, even if it led inexorably to her death by execution, because it entailed acting against her uncle Creon’s political command not to bury her fallen brother’s body. As will be argued later, an encounter with what Lacan calls the “real” is capable of uncovering for the subject his or her singular desire. This could occur through an experience involving a loved one’s death, as in the case of Antigone. There are other, contemporary examples, however, which can serve as (less tragic) paradigms of “the assumption of one’s desire” in this Lacanian sense, one of them being the character of Mathilde (Audrey Tautou) in Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s recent film, *A Very Long Engagement*.

Before pursuing the narrative articulation of desire in Jeunet’s film, however, I would like to point out that one could transpose Lacan’s insights to a different register—one from which he probably learned a great deal, given his familiarity with it (Lee 1990: 5-6, 42-43, 80-81)—namely, Heidegger’s “fundamental ontological” thought in *Being and Time* (1978). More specifically, here Heidegger elaborates on the fundamental tripartite ontological structure of *Dasein*, namely *thrownness* (the fact that we ineluctably find ourselves in a certain given cultural situation or tradition), *projection* (our inalienable ability to be our own pro-ject, or to map a unique life-path for ourselves) and *falling* (the concomitant tendency to sink back into a suffocating, conventional—often fashionable—way of doing things). In a dense passage Heidegger (1978: 458) puts it, in terms of “care” as the relationship between thrownness, projection and falling, as follows:

Dasein exists as an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is itself an *issue*. Essentially ahead of itself, it has projected itself upon its potentiality-for-Being *before* going on to any mere consideration of itself. In its projection it reveals itself as something which has been thrown. It has been thrownly abandoned to the ‘world,’ and falls into it concernfully. As care—that is, as existing in the unity of the projection which has been fallingly thrown—this entity has been disclosed as a ‘there’.

What I have referred to in Lacan's thought as the unique "desire" of the individual, corresponds to what Heidegger terms the "projection" of Dasein on its own "potentiality-for-Being." This means that, although each human being is "thrown" into a cultural situation not of its own choosing, and although everyone tends to "fall" back on cultural customs and habits most of the time, the fact that every individual *is* fundamentally a *pro-ject* enables her or him to articulate a singular (creative, ethical) personal path. In this respect, one could also note that Heidegger (1978: 437-438) speaks of the "*repetition* of a possibility of existence," which, as "authentic," is neither captive to the past nor to the present as an attempt to revitalize the past, but instead "arises from Dasein's *future*" (which, as an aspect of human temporality, is always an open, non-determined future), in this way introducing something new. It is this *novel* aspect of being-human, the personal "*project*," that constitutes the manifestation of one's distinctive "desire." It endows the individual with a sense of distinctiveness and contributes to him or her experiencing his or her life as valuable and meaningful.

The narrative structure of *A Very Long Engagement* is, like Jeunet's earlier film, *Amélie*, that of a quasi-detective story. In both narratives the heroine sets out to solve a mystery or puzzle of sorts. Certain similarities (such as losing a parent or parents young) between the two heroines, Mathilde and Amélie (both portrayed by Audrey Tautou), notwithstanding, the kind of detecting in the respective narratives is very different in an important respect: in *Amélie* it is intent on solving a mystery that turns out to involve an apparently innocuous technical operation (that of repairing pay-photo-booths), while the detecting on the part of Mathilde in *A Very Long Engagement* is a matter of "life and death" in various senses of this expression. Mathilde, whose fiancé Manech (Gaspard Ulliel) is sent off to fight in the brutal trench war that would become known as the Great War (or World War I), finds it hard to accept that he is dead because none of the available evidence, which she tirelessly unearths, confirms tangibly that Manech's body was ever identified. He is "assumed dead," because he was among five condemned French soldiers who, by way of "execution," were sent out of the French trench—bizarrely called *Bingo Crepuscule*—into no man's land on the (understandable) assumption that they would all perish there. The hope that he is still alive motivates her persistence in a relentless search for clues that might point in the direction of finding him. At one point she slaps an uncomprehending ex-soldier, Poux, who provides her with information concerning Manech's movements in the final hours

before he went missing, for “taking [her] hope away,” only to be reminded by him, not long afterwards, that her subsequent actions indicate that her hope has been resurrected.

In short, Mathilde’s actions are those of a person who knows what she wants. These actions may seem irrational and obsessive to some, such as her uncle and aunt who, out of concern, encourage her to accept her loss and mourn Manech’s death, in the conventional belief that this would restore her to “health.” For better or worse, she has taken up her “desire,” or is in the process of articulating her own life as a distinctive “project.” Significantly, this entails the refusal of the conventional tendency to treat missing and/or fallen soldiers in a war as mere “statistics,” graphically captured in the number inscribed on a metal tag that each soldier wears on a chain around his neck.² Instead, Mathilde’s love for Manech elevates him above the level of statistics to the status of a “singular universal,” a term related to Lacan’s category of desire referred to at the beginning of this paper. Here, Mathilde’s singularizing desire is for Manech as an equally singular being. It will be recalled that, according to Lacan, every human being’s distinctiveness or *singularity* derives from her or his self- or subject-constitutive desire or “wish,” peculiar to themselves, but encountered in a different guise in *every* human being. Similarly, Manech—or, for that matter, every beloved person—embodies a “singular universal” in the sense of being loved as a unique individual (that is, constituted as being unique by being loved), despite sharing the generic characteristics of all other humans.

This is emphasized by Jeunet at the end of the film-narrative. With the help of the private detective, Mr. Pire, Mathilde has finally traced a totally amnesiac Manech to a convent where he was cared for after his eventual recovery from his wounds and severe pneumonia. Mathilde joins the young man who used to be her fiancé in the garden where he is working at restoring books, and after exchanging a few words with him sits down facing him. At this point the narrator says: “Mathilde looked at him” (a statement which is repeated). Why is this significant regarding Mathilde’s love for him in his singularity? Because, as Lacan points out in *The Mirror Phase* (1977: 2), the originary (mirror-) image with which the subject identifies—and by implication also the image of a beloved person—is “irreducible.” This means that it marks, in the register of what Lacan calls the “imaginary,” the singularity of the subject, albeit with a misleading semblance of unity.³ Just how spurious one’s vaunted “unity” is, is acknowledged in the film-narrative through Manech’s loss of memory: he *is* and *is not* Manech. Besides, this is the only

sane thing to do in war, namely to lose one's recollection of its dehumanizing horror and start anew on the path of becoming a human subject by identifying or having an "image," as confirmed by Mathilde *looking* at him. According to Lacan this iconic "identity" lays the foundation for the subject's sense of selfhood. Although one only truly becomes a subject by entering the symbolic sphere of language (being "subjected" to the laws of society), this imaginary identity remains inseparable from oneself for life.⁴

The second of Lacan's registers, the "symbolic," imparts something universal to the subject through the conceptual side of language. In other words, everything that can be said in language is potentially something shared by other human beings, unlike the iconic or imaginary irreducibility of their uniquely particular appearance. And Manech's salutation when he first apprehends Mathilde at the end of her long quest adds something universal to his iconic singularity. Significantly, the first thing Manech says to her when she walks toward him in the garden, with her polio-induced limp, is a repetition of the very first words he ever addressed to her when they were children: "Does it hurt?" Symbolically, this repetition augurs well for the future of their new relationship (new, given Manech's new identity). Moreover, it places them firmly in the symbolic sphere of linguistic exchange where, instead of being "imprisoned" in an imaginary (iconic) identity, new identities can be constructed, revised and refined.

Against this backdrop, it is illuminating to compare the respective heroines of Jeunet's two films. One could say that "desire" is the structuring principle of both narratives insofar as both heroines are exemplary in "assuming their desire"—in Lacanian terms—in a convention-transgressive manner. In Amélie's case, however, it is done with ingenuity and benevolence, without seriously challenging convention or the *status quo*, whereas Mathilde's pursuit of her desire challenges the *status quo* at several junctures.

The "anti-heroine" in *A Very Long Engagement* is a character named Tina Lombardi. That she pays with her life for pursuing her own, particular desire—to avenge her lover's death by tracking down and assassinating both the French officers responsible for it—enables the audience to appreciate Mathilde's endeavour (which does not fail to brush the shirt-tails of death, either) with more insight. When Mathilde visits her in prison before Lombardi's execution, the latter confides in her that she "regrets nothing" (itself a kind of cultural marker in French society through the familiar songs of Edith Piaf). But the crucial question would be whether Lombardi's consistently pursued desire and the vengeful actions dictated by it constitute an

ethical paradigm worth emulating. The answer, it seems to me, has to be negative, because, unlike Mathilde's desire-driven actions, they do not seem to lend themselves to such a community-engendering emulation, as testified to by a note from her lover enclosed in the pocket-watch she receives from Mathilde in prison. In the note, he entreats her not to avenge him and to find happiness elsewhere, clearly with the implication that such vengeance would inevitably turn out to be self-destructive. In psychoanalytical terms, Lombardi is a "hysteric," someone who, through "fragmenting" and perpetually subversive actions, remains forever outside a community. This does not change the fact that she seized her desire, as it were, for better or for worse. In fact, one might say that "desire" is foregrounded by Jeunet, no less than by Lacan, as the *sine qua non* of understanding human action—something that imparts to the narrative of the film a singularly ethical character, in the disconcerting Lacanian sense of the term "ethical." What does this mean?

Here a brief excursion into another neck of the Lacanian woods is called for—that of the so-called "real." The latter is the third of Lacan's three registers in terms of which the human subject is theorized (the other two being the imaginary and the symbolic), and is indispensable for understanding ethical action as such. One may put it this way: unlike the ordinary objects and events of quotidian "reality," the "real" is not susceptible to symbolization or representation. The point at which one comes up against the limits of language marks the advent of the real. It may be accompanied by the nagging feeling that a certain experience is not capable of linguistic articulation, no matter from which angle or how often one approaches it—for example the "event" of 9/11. Alternatively, if one could "think" (not imagine, for it is unimaginable) what would *remain* if the symbolic (linguistic meaning) and the imaginary (iconic meaning) were to be subtracted from or taken out of what we experience as everyday "reality," this would be the "real." I do not wish to imply that the "real" is like a Kantian *noumenon*: it is not, for behind every spatio-temporal phenomenon is a Kantian *noumenon*, which is not the case with the Lacanian real. It is nothing which is "there," but only announces itself where language and images fail or where the symbolic horizon within which things make sense is breached.⁵ What would this have to do with ethical action? In this respect the following remark by Lacan is noteworthy (1997: 20):

...my thesis is that the moral law, the moral command, the presence of the moral agency in our activity, insofar as it is structured by the

symbolic, is that through which the real is actualized—the real as such, the weight of the real... (p. 21)... Moral action is, in effect, grafted on to the real. It introduces something new into the real and thereby opens a path in which the point of our presence is legitimized.⁶

This seems to suggest that, to understand the ethical as opposed to mere conventional morality, one has to take into account the effects that this “real” has in the sphere of symbolically-mediated relations and objects. In other words, this is to take account of the effects that result from a symbolically *dislocating* confrontation with unexpected and uncontrollable “events” causes in the world of linguistically-mediated moral action. How could this happen? It could occur by being brought face to face with one’s own possible death, or with the possible death or permanent absence of a loved one, such as Manech in the film under discussion. The “ethical logic” of desire in relation to the “real” implies that human life does not automatically *have* “meaning,” but depends on something which surpasses it in a double sense. That is, life is not self-justifying but requires a moment of excess for its justification. On the one hand, this “excess” refers to the “real” as the brute, meaningless facticity of what merely “is” (the pre-meaningful, language-resistant “given”). On the other hand, it alludes to one’s desire and its potential ethical manifestation as that which “is not” insofar as it is precisely what would be “grafted on to the real” if the subject were able to “take up” her or his desire (something that is not at all self-evidently the case) and act in accordance with it.

An ethical act would therefore be one where, for the sake of such justification, life itself could paradoxically be sacrificed (as in the case of Antigone [Lacan 1997: 243-287], or of Hamlet, for that matter). Or, as an instance of ethical action, one’s relationship with a loved one may be sacrificed for the sake of the latter’s happiness, for example when a parent encourages a child to accept an opportunity to leave a restrictive home town in order to study abroad. Or it may be that—as in Mathilde’s case—action attains an ethical significance precisely insofar as its unpredictable outcome could possibly entail the “un-fulfillment” of the ethical agent, whose course of action is nevertheless pursued in a sustained manner. Not to act on one’s desire in such a case would be to live perpetually in an anaesthetized state of denial. In Mathilde’s case, not knowing what happened to Manech—a “singular universal” and the object of her desire—makes her unhappy. But to yield to the conventional acceptance of his disappearance without persisting in

her attempt to cast light on his fate, would be to deny her desire as well as the possibility that (as an ethical gesture) she may have to give it up, should it prove un-fulfillable.

Hence Lacan's injunction (1997: 311-325) that the subject should "act in conformity with" her or his desire. Only by following the path of one's desire is it possible to actualize, in the form of an ethical act, the effects of the real in human reality. And this is precisely what Mathilde does. Perhaps because of her childhood affliction with polio, she is in a position to have encountered the utter disruption of one's conventional life, or to have experienced the "real" first-hand, in this way realizing the capacity to "project" her desire single-mindedly.⁷ Most people whose lives are oriented by unquestioned convention would find it difficult, if not impossible, to discern their own desire so unfailingly, and would need either the mediation of a psychoanalyst or counsellor or the shattering, disruptive experience of confronting Lacan's "real." And even in the case of the latter, they would probably require the hermeneutic mediation of an analyst or counsellor.

From the outset, the complex temporal structure of the film's narrative is driven by desire—in the first place, the desire of the five condemned young French soldiers to be sent home to their loved ones, away from the insane surroundings of WWI's trenches.⁸ The name given to the particular trench where much of the action is set (referred to earlier in passing)—*Bingo Crepuscule* ("Twilight Games")—is a poignant oxymoronic reminder of the insanity of war.). In a similar manner the crippled heroine, Mathilde, is a living oxymoron reflecting both her inner strength and the disfiguring effects of the war.⁹ Add to this that Manech takes leave of his senses in the trenches, and the metaphor of madness and war is firmly established. Even the all-too-conventional practices of secrecy pertaining to war-related documents (documents that potentially contain crucial information concerning Manech and his fellow-condemned) are redolent with an air of insane "order." This may be seen to motivate Mathilde when she does not hesitate to remove such highly confidential military files (behind an officer's back) in an act of transgression fraught with danger to herself. It is as if her actions affirm that the "desire" of the living should be given ethical precedence over the interests of the dead.

In the final analysis, Mathilde may be seen as an exemplary ethical agent insofar as she perseveres in her quest for final, convincing evidence concerning the whereabouts of her beloved. Unlike her counterpart, Tina Lombardi—whose pursuit of her own desire, predicated on the total and

final “hysterical” rejection of every possibility of value or meaning in the absence of her dead lover, predictably leads to her own destruction—Mathilde is guided by her love for Manech and by hope. This is not the kind of pathological hope that would refuse conclusive evidence contrary to what is hoped for, however. Even when the person she tracks down in the end turns out to be *and* not to be Manech, she does not spurn this ambivalent gift of vindicated hope, but shows her willingness to start afresh. After all, as one of the characters in the film asserts: “There are as many amnesias as amnesiacs.” In other words, even in the course of a “normal” life such “amnesias” occur, but most individuals find the means to re-inscribe their lives in an ongoing personal narrative. Clearly, Mathilde approaches the gift of Manech’s re-discovery in this spirit.

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Notes

¹ Lacan (1977c: 166) reverses Descartes’s famous “Cogito ergo sum” as follows: “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think.” It goes without saying that this is a reference to the unconscious.

² Ironically, it is by switching Manech’s and his own tags with those of dead soldiers,

that a fellow-condemned comrade is able to get himself and the seriously wounded Manech off the battlefield and into a hospital. In this way, the technique of “control by numbers” is turned against the authorities.

³ This is why Lacan says that the infant “misrecognizes” itself in the mirror and why the image as basis for the individual’s sense of identity is at one and the same time indispensable for a sense of “self” and a mark of alienation (Lacan 1977: 2).

⁴ Unless, of course, pathological amnesia intervenes, in which case the subject has to construct a “new” identity (via the mirror phase or imaginary register and the symbolic or language), as in the case of Manech.

⁵ For an illuminating discussion of the “real” in the Lacanian sense, see Copjec, J.: 2002, 95-96.

⁶ Lacan here refers to the (“our”) activity of psychoanalysts, but it applies, I believe, to that of all people insofar as individuals are potentially capable of discerning the way in which ethical imperatives address them.

⁷ Mathilde’s desire is even conspicuously embodied in her oft-repeated (and all too human) little superstitions concerning Manech’s return or non-return from the war, all of which hinge on something not within her control (like peeling a vegetable or fruit or trying to reach the end of the path before the car appears around the corner). As such, they function as attempts to exercise some control over that which cannot be controlled, but at best influenced—human destiny (as opposed to fate)—and Mathilde does her utmost to exert as much influence on the outcome of events as humanly possible.

⁸ The telegraph wire—as that which could potentially deliver a presidential reprieve for the five condemned soldiers—features prominently in the opening sequence of the film and highlights the importance of communication between people as a matter, literally, of life and death. It also foregrounds the insanity of a situation where the telegraph is not utilized by a cynical officer when the presidential reprieve does arrive, in this way paving the way for the soldiers’ unjust, superfluous demise.

⁹ In his *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller encapsulates this insanity of war with the paradox that one could get out of flying suicidal bomber sorties only if one could prove one’s insanity, but as any attempt to do so proves one’s sanity, one has to continue with one’s bombing duties: hence, *Catch-22* in its sense of an insurmountable paradox.