

BOOK REVIEWS
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Language, Ethics and “The Merits of Being
Involved in Meaning” –
*Wittgenstein and Lacan at the Limit: Meaning
and Astonishment* by Maria Balaska

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Balaska, Maria: *Wittgenstein and Lacan at the Limit: Meaning and Astonishment*.
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Working through Balaska’s deeply perceptive, elegantly written, and profoundly honest book, *Wittgenstein and Lacan at the Limit*, a reader steeped in the recent academic literature about either or both of its main figures may come to feel herself placed at what is, itself, a certain kind of limit. The limit I mean is the limit of a familiar type of theoretical discourse about the constitution and structure of language and subjectivity as Wittgenstein and Lacan treat them: it includes the discourses that seek, for instance, to articulate how language and sense are constituted in the *Tractatus*, and thus what is really meant by “logical form” and “nonsense” there; or those that aim to comprehend the true relationship of our biological nature to language, culture, and the advent of freedom in Lacan; or, again, those that try to find, in either thinker’s works (or both), the precise location of the delicate logical buttonhole that would alone permit us entry, from within everyday language and life, to the absoluteness of an ineffable beyond. These discourses all treat of language and life, but handle these phenomena (so we might say) at arm’s length, theorizing the structure of each and the form of their relationship in such a way as to establish, ultimately, their mutual convertibility to one another, their mutual absorption into a third, more inclusive term (such as “nature” or “biology”), or adduce translations from the dense theoretical matrices of one thinker’s treatment of them to the other’s (for instance, from the terminology of logic to that of psychoanalysis, or back again). Balaska’s book, doing none of these things, rather succeeds in bringing out how an interconnected reading of the

Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and Lacan may speak to and inform our response to a certain kind of experience that is characteristic for both thinkers, and typical as well of those moments and occasions of our lives in which we may find ourselves drawn to reflect on what meaning is and how we relate to it.

On Balaska's argument, this kind of experience is one in which we may feel that language or meaning are failing us, that something has happened or is happening that our language gives us no way to express, or that our capacities or its capacities for making sense are here exceeded or lost. At these moments, Balaska argues, we are challenged to acknowledge the "groundlessness" of meaning: the fact that language and meaning have no basis or foundation outside our own lives and practices themselves. We may then react to this recognition, as both Lacan and Wittgenstein amply document, in characteristic modes of denial or deflection. One of these is the tendency to seek an absolute "metaphysical" grounding for language and meaning in a realm beyond the reach of both. Another tendency is the (more or less) opposite one: that of reducing the problem about meaning or its foundation to just a question of facts, for instance of the contingent form of prevailing social regularities or attitudes. Following the first temptation, we may seek to find for language as a whole a "foundation in the real": an exterior field of thought or substance sufficient to ground it and enforce its consistency,

or a level on which the experience of language's failure may be dissimulated and repressed on the assumption of its real (though inexpressible) foundation. Following the second temptation, we may aim to reduce meaning to socially regulated discursive practices or language-games; here the failure of meaning or language in the face of astonishment is just understood as a contingent feature of our particular practice, the failure within our own specific language of a *particular* signifier or range of expression to exist. In either case, we thus avoid the felt need to confront the ultimate groundlessness of meaning, and we thereby fail to engage with the genuinely indicative aspects of the experience of groundlessness itself. Nevertheless, Balaska argues, it is possible for us, eschewing both forms of deflection, rather to react to groundlessness in a way that engages meaning, what she calls an attitude of "reflection." We may respond, in other words, to the groundlessness of meaning in a way that takes personal responsibility for our own meanings, and finds ways to be creative with them. In doing this, we begin to recognize and occupy, on Balaska's argument, an inherent "ethical" dimension of language: we can then act through the recognition that the creative appropriation of meaning, lacking any exterior source or reduction to the facts, is rather the necessary space of our willing and acting, and come to more clearly orient ourselves in that space.

The experiences of "astonishment," as Balaska finds them in

Wittgenstein and Lacan and considers them more generally, are diverse. They include: walking on a “fine summer day”; the “peace of the evening” after a long, tiring one; the feelings of absolute safety and absolute guilt; the astonishment related by Ruth Kluger in her memoir of Auschwitz at the kindness shown to her by a young girl at the camp; the experience of the world’s existence as a miracle; and the significant character of a stove, appearing in such a way that, in Wittgenstein’s words in the *Notebooks*, “everything else pales before it” and presenting itself as “the true world among shadows” (p. 98, quoting from NB, 83). More important to Balaska’s analysis than any single similarity between these experiences or any unitary affective character shared by all is their shared tendency to produce the sense that language must fail in their adequate expression: that no words or descriptions could capture what is made manifest in them. In the “Lecture on Ethics,” Wittgenstein notes our inclination to see these as experiences of *absolute* value, experiences which we are tempted to put as (for example) bearing witness to the miraculous or to God. But we recognize the failure of these formulations when we recognize them as similes that we could not even in principle translate into facts; recognizing this, we recognize also that the attempt to express the experiences in questions *as* ones of absolute value must fail. At the same time, in realizing this, we also realize that *any* significant description must

here fail, and moreover that it was just this resistance to significant description that was wanted: the nonsensicality of statements which purport to describe these experiences as ones of ultimate value was in reality their “very essence” (LE, 11). By asserting or attempting to assert them, what was wanted was really just to “go beyond the world” and significant language. It is in this respect that, Wittgenstein says, the attempt at expression was witness of the tendency of everyone who has tried to speak of ethics or religion, the tendency to “run against” the limits of language, the boundaries of “our cage” (LE, 11–12).

In her discussion of the “Lecture,” Balaska distinguishes among three possible readings of this “running against” the limits of language and its significance for ethics (pp. 121–125). On the first of these, ethics is not to be understood as even possibly substantive in the sense of including any distinctive content or delimiting any specific area. It is rather just “about” our own tendency to express (what we may put as) the absolute, and the figure of “running against” the limits of language here just points to the necessary failure of any such effort. On a second reading, by contrast, Wittgenstein *does* aim to uphold the claim that ethics is about something, but the significance of the “running against” the limits of language is just that this “something” is ineffable – it cannot be expressed in language but must simply be appreciated or grasped in a non-linguistic way. Although most

existing interpretations of Wittgenstein's remarks here go in for one or the other of these readings, as Balaska suggests, both witness what we can recognize as varieties of the tendency to "deflect" the experience of the failure of sense rather than the possibility of responding to it by moving into ethics and language themselves in a more comprehensive and self-aware way. The first, in particular, makes the experience of the failure of sense into a fact just about us: about our own inclination to try to speak where we cannot. But the second exhibits the opposite tendency, that of seeking an ineffable "beyond" to ground our language and meanings. Seeing both of these tendencies as tendencies to deflect in this way, however, opens up a third alternative response to the experience or feeling of "running against" the boundaries, where we feel that no factual or descriptive language could do justice to what our expressions of the absolute are trying to express. On this third alternative, which Balaska defends, the kind of experience of failure of sense that we witness in the failure to speak meaningfully of the absolute, and which we also experience in the varied cases of astonishment, is *itself* what has "ethical merit." More specifically, it is just when we take the lesson of this kind of experience – that of the groundlessness of meaning – that we begin to open ourselves to the possibility of taking responsibility for our own language and creatively inhabiting its meanings. On Balaska's interpretation, this possibility is intimately

connected to "individuation" in the sense of the possibility of one's "personal assumption of meaning": it is only when one does not deflect, but rather faces up to the ultimate groundlessness of meanings, that one can pose the question of how one is, oneself, personally "involved in meaning" (p. 125). And it is here that Balaska sees the possibility of an "ethics of responsibility and creativity" on which we freely adopt the possibilities that we thereby make our own.

As Balaska rightly points out, this suggestion resonates deeply with psychoanalysis, and with the positive "work of culture" (in Freud's phrasing) that its engagement with language carries out. In the context of Lacan's development of Freud's ideas, this engagement has, largely, the significance of addressing the relationship of the symbolic to (what Lacan terms) the real: here as in Wittgenstein, this means that the work of therapy, or the place of ethics, has centrally to do with what happens where our language comes up against what we experience as the limit of its sense or intelligibility. In this respect, according to Lacan (for example in his 1959–60 seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*), psychoanalysis does not address ethics as an ideal, imaginary, or merely symbolic structure, but rather inquires into the possibility of ethics, essentially, from the "point of view of the location of man in relation to the real." This is the point at which the order of symbolic language, or of a patient's discourse, comes up against what is felt as its inexpressible or

senseless ground and condition of possibility. Since what is thus experienced as the basis of language is also what is specifically excluded from linguistic expression within a subject's discourse, one of the central goals of psychoanalytic treatment is to allow this inarticulate or mystified real – the assumed “signifier in isolation” – to become once again part of the general circulation of the patient's language, and in this way to free her for her possible engagement with the fullness of its possibilities. It is in this way, Balaska argues, that the experience or analysis of the groundlessness of meaning has the potential to be transformed into a freeing movement of linguistic engagement and creativity.

Here Balaska rightly disputes readings of the “real” in Lacan according to which it represents something like an *essentially* non-symbolic (and thus ineffable) ground (for instance in our pre-linguistic biological constitution) as well as those on which it is just a fiction, an illusory artifact or by-product of our discursive practices. It is only if the opposite but symmetrical tendencies of deflection represented by each of these kinds of readings are overcome that the real engagement of psychoanalytic therapy with language – and hence the point of its ethical work – can be understood. It is only then, Balaska argues, that psychoanalysis (here in parallel, Balaska argues, with the goal of philosophy for Wittgenstein) can succeed in freeing us from our ordinary servitude to language, the captivity of pictures that mislead or of the mystification our own uses

that, thus obscured, routinely confines us (p. 155).

With these rich and acute suggestions, Balaska's book succeeds, where many others have failed, in drawing from both Wittgenstein and Lacan the positive picture of a kind of linguistic and lived transformation that it is apparently reasonable to expect from a philosophical appeal to “ethics,” even in the wake of the radical distrust both thinkers share for the traditional formulations of that field. In this way, rather than just serving the aims of comparative scholarship or intellectual interest, Balaska succeeds in giving a reading of both thinkers that will allow for the further development of the ethical dimensions of their thought for the lived and practical questions of human life that we encounter in relation to our experiences of astonishment and the failure of sense. From a less practical and more philological perspective, one might see Balaska's readings as limited, in that she does not (for example) engage much with Lacan's works or seminars after 1960, and does not engage at all with the later Wittgenstein (after 1929). However, this is in fact not a significant deficiency, in either case, since Balaska succeeds admirably, as well, in drawing from the texts she considers the motivational and methodological principles (for example, of the therapeutic aims of psychoanalysis in Lacan's case, or of the liberating potential of linguistic reflection for Wittgenstein) which visibly orient both philosophers not only in their early periods, but throughout their careers. The result,

in both cases, is a refreshing and radical sense of the way in which these methods of psychoanalysis, or of philosophy in Wittgenstein's critical, non-theoretical sense, can indeed be seen as opening us positively to a deeper reflection on, and integration within, the ethical dimensions of life as we live them in our experiences of the limits of meaning.

If I am left with any reservations about the articulation of ethics with which Balaska credits Wittgenstein and Lacan, these concern only some of the figures of integrity, individuality, and the authenticity of the subject or individual which Balaska sometimes employs in presenting it. These figures of individuality are connected with an ethical ideal of the subject's or self's "responsibility" for meaning and seem, insofar as they do appear in Wittgenstein's and Lacan's texts, to represent there a kind of existentialist hangover that may actually be in tension with central insights of both thinkers about language and its uptake in our lives. For example, Balaska repeatedly presents the positive possibility that is, for her, the upshot of Wittgenstein and Lacan's ethical considerations as one of "individuation" and of one's "personal" assumption of meaning: I am able to relate differently to language, in the wake of my experiences of its groundlessness, by posing and engaging the question of how *I* am involved, personally, in it. For Wittgenstein this is related, Balaska suggests, to the claim of solipsism in the *Tractatus*, and to the sense in which an understanding that "the world is my world"

may allow for a consolidation and opening of the field and structure of my possible willing and action. On the other hand, though (and as Balaska recognizes), it is clear that the subject for which "the world is my world" in the *Tractatus* is not the empirical self of experiencing or even of thinking. If there is a subject in the *Tractatus* that is in a position to relate to the limit of language, is rather the metaphysical or philosophical one that is correlative or identical to that limit as the "limit of the world" (TLP, 5.632, 5.641). It is difficult, however, to see how such a self can be credited with anything like a "personal" or "individuating" assumption of meaning: how is it possible for a limit of the world, or anything that situates itself there, to "take responsibility" for "its own" meanings or develop these in a distinctively personal way? It is perhaps to be noted, as well, here, that Wittgenstein himself seldom, if ever, speaks of "responsibility" or its assumption in relation to meaning or ethics, and it is unclear (to me at least) whether the kind of ethical position that he calls upon us to take up (if that is what he is indeed calling for) is one that can really be understood in terms of the integrity of the individual or her assumption of responsibility.

Somewhat similarly, with respect to Lacan, Balaska emphasizes the senses in which the therapeutic or liberating potentials of psychoanalysis are understood, both by Freud and Lacan, to serve the ends of reintegration and the harmonization of the subject by accomplishing the recovery of the subject's language against the

standing danger of its dissolution or alienation. This is, as Balaska's reading witnesses, indeed an essential aspect of the psychoanalytic method, and to this extent at least one of the main aims of psychoanalysis may indeed be understood as that of a subjective recovery of meaning in something like the sense Balaska recognizes. However, on the level of the question of *who* or *what* is indeed the recipient of such a recovery, this recognition should be carefully balanced against Lacan's longstanding and polemically central rejection of various forms of "ego-psychology," and more broadly of any and all attempts to restore something like a self-sufficient ego or self at the center of gravity of a subject's language. In her discussion of how the "appropriation" of signifiers that are otherwise alienated or isolated can serve what she calls a more "individuated involvement with meaning" (p. 147), Balaska quotes a passage from Lacan's "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in which he indeed describes the goal of psychoanalysis with respect to the ego (*das Ich*) as one of "reintegration and harmony" (Lacan 2006, 524). However, the sentence that follows this one in Lacan's text seems significantly to complicate this by pointing to a "radical eccentricity" of the self with respect to itself that is in fact, for Lacan, the very truth that Freud discovers:

But if we ignore the self's radical eccentricity with respect to itself that man is faced with – in other words, the very truth that Freud discovered – we will renege on both the order and pathways of psychoanalytic mediation; we will make of it the compromise operation that it has, in effect, become – precisely what both the spirit and letter of Freud's work most repudiate. (Lacan 2006, 524)

More specifically, as Lacan says a few lines later, whatever its relationship to something like a recovery of the self from its (self-incurred) linguistic alienation, Freud's discovery of the unconscious, if it is presented honestly, can only be understood as that of a radical alterity within myself, an "other ... to whom I am more attached than to myself...since, at the most assented to heart of my identity to myself, he pulls the strings...", and this in ways (we may infer) that significantly and radically complicate my relationship to (my) language itself. As in the case of Wittgenstein's "philosophical" or "metaphysical" self, it is not clear to what extent it makes sense to credit a self thus structured with meanings of "his" or "her" own; and so, as a result, it is similarly unclear that what is at ethical stake here is (simply or only) the possibility of the self's recovering that ownership of its language, or its adoption of responsibility toward it.

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