

Jacques Lacan
From *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*

To the extent that a sensitive subject such as ethics is not nowadays separable from what is called ideology, it seems to me appropriate to offer here some clarification of the political meaning of this turning point in ethics for which we, the inheritors of Freud, are responsible.

That is why I spoke of master-fools. This expression may seem impertinent, indeed not exempt from a certain excess. I would like to make it clear here what in my view is involved.

There was a time, an already distant time right at the beginning of our Society, you will remember, when we spoke of intellectuals in connection with Plato's *Menon*. I would like to make a few condensed comments on the subject, but I believe they will prove to be illuminating.

It was noted then that, for a long time now, there has been the left-wing intellectual and the right-wing intellectual. I would like to give you formulas for them that, however categorical they may appear at first sight, might nevertheless help to illuminate the path.

Fool or, if you like, *simpleton*¹ (*demeuré*)—quite a nice term that I have a certain fondness for—these words only express approximately a certain something for which—I will come back to this later—the English language and its literature seem to me to offer a more helpful signifier. A tradition that begins with Chaucer but which reaches its full development in the theater of the Elizabethan period is, in effect, centered on the term **fool**.²

The **fool** is an innocent, a simpleton, but truths issue from his mouth that are not merely simply tolerated but adopted, by virtue of the fact that this fool is sometimes clothed in the insignia of the jester. And in my view it is in this happy shadow, this fundamental foolery, that one finds the true value of the left-wing intellectual.

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To which I will oppose the designation for that which the same tradition furnishes a strictly contemporary term and which is used in conjunction with the former, namely, knave—if we have the time, I will show you the texts, which are numerous and unambiguous.

At a certain level of its usage **knave** may be translated into French as valet, but **knave** goes further. He's not a cynic with the element of heroism implied by that attitude. He is, to be precise, what Stendhal calls an "unmitigated scoundrel" (*coquin fieffé*). That is to say, no more than your Mr. Everyman, but your Mr. Everyman with greater strength of character.

Everyone knows that a certain way of presenting himself, which constitutes part of the ideology of the right-wing intellectual, is precisely to play the role of what he is in fact, namely, a knave. In other words, he doesn't retreat from the consequences of what is called realism; that is, when required, he admits he is a knave.

This is only of interest if one considers things from the point of view of their result. After all, a knave is certainly worth a fool, at least for the entertainment he gives, if the result of the gathering of knaves into a herd did not inevitably lead to collective foolery. That is what makes the politics of right-wing ideology so depressing.

But what is not sufficiently noted is that by a curious chiasma, the foolery which constitutes the individual style of the left-wing intellectual gives rise to a collective knavery.

What I am proposing here for you to reflect on has, I don't deny, the character of a confession. Those of you who know me are aware of my reading habits; you know which weeklies lie around on my desk. The thing I enjoy most, I must admit, is the spectacle of

collective knavery exhibited in them—that innocent chicanery, not to say calm impudence, which allows them to express so many heroic truths without wanting to pay the price. It is thanks to this that what is affirmed concerning the horror of Mammon on the first pages leads, on the last, to purrs of tenderness for this same Mammon.

Freud was not perhaps a good father, but he was neither a knave nor an imbecile. That is why one can say about him two things which are disconcerting in their relationship and their opposition. He was a humanitarian—who after checking his works will contest that?—and we must acknowledge it, however discredited the term might be by the knaves on the right. But, on the other hand, he wasn't a simpleton, so that one can say as well, and we have the texts to prove it, that he was no progressive.

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I am sorry but it's a fact, Freud was in no way a progressive. And as far as this is concerned, there are even some extraordinarily scandalous things in him. From the pen of one of our guides, the little optimism manifested for the perspectives opened by the masses is certainly apt to shock, but it is indispensable for us to take note of it, if we are to know where we stand.

You will see in what follows the usefulness of these remarks, which may appear crude.

One of my friends and patients had a dream which bore the traces of some yearning or other stimulated in him by the formulations of this seminar, a dream in which someone cried out concerning me, "But why doesn't he tell the truth about truth?"

I quote this, since it is an impatience that I have heard expressed by a great many in other forms than dreams. The formula is true to a certain extent—I perhaps don't tell the truth about truth. But haven't you noticed that in wanting to tell it—something that is the chief occupation of those who are called metaphysicians—it often happens that not much truth is left? That's what is so scabrous about such a pretension. It is a pretension that so easily lands us at the level of a certain **knavery**. And isn't there also a certain knavery, a metaphysical knavery, when one of our modern treatises on metaphysics, under the guise of this style of the truth about truth, lets a great many things by which truly ought not to be let by?

I am content to tell the truth of the first stage and to proceed step by step. When I say that Freud is a humanitarian but not a progressive, I say something true. Let's try to follow the thread and take another true step.

Translation by Dennis Porter

Notes

- 1 . Words in italics are emphasized in the French version.
- 2 . Boldface words are in English in the original.