Morality itself is a special case of immorality.\footnote{Nietzsche 1968, p. 254, §462.}

The second reconnaissance mission deals with ethics, which may be defined here as the means of greasing or oiling social relations so that they work more smoothly. More specifically, ethics assumes multiple others with whom and between whom social relations are problematic, thereby seeing its task as overcoming those problems in order to make social relations operate in a more improved manner. By defining this as greasing social relations, it should be clear that I am profoundly suspicious of ethics, a suspicion shared by Marx for whom ethics is a mystifying ideology that justifies that status quo and keeps the ruling class in position. That suspicion that is aroused whenever I encounter a certain cluster of unthinking phrases. It may be a discussion over global warming or environmental politics and someone will say, ‘ethically speaking….’ Or it may be the question of asylum seekers and refugees and another will say, ‘if we approach this ethically….’ Or I may suggest an ambit claim, an overdone proposal in order to make what I really want to propose seem perfectly reasonable; a moral warrior will look at me sourly and pronounce, ‘that’s not ethical’. Or I may be talking with an apostate lefty over a beer, and she will suggest I become involved in that oxymoron, ‘ethical investment’. The invocation of ‘ethical’ effectively seeks a closure to argument and an unassailable position with which we
must agree, for it really seems to mean what is ‘good’, or more often ‘I think this is correct and you had better not disagree, for my position invokes a higher order before which your position counts for nothing’. After all, who does not want to be ethical? All such approaches, I suggest, are actually moralising, telling people what they should or should not do.

Why the negative reaction? Is not politics inherently ethical? And does not the Left seek to take a better ethical approach to economics, society and politics? Do we all not want apply the oil can to our social relations, and indeed our sense of connectedness to nature, so that they may work better than they do? As will become clear soon enough, the reasons for this suspicion are both political and theological: among a good number on the Left, ethics has sidled up to politics, absorbing it in the process into a bloated hybrid; theologically, as ethics pushes to the front, other items become sidelined, especially the doctrine of grace, which, as I argued in the preceding chapter, may be seen as a theological version of the theory of revolution. In its place comes an emphasis on salvation by works, good deeds that will smooth the path to (social) salvation.

So I mount an argument against ethics, or rather, against ‘ethics’ as a lubricator for social relations, which then becomes a marker for that which is ‘good’. For some reason, the critical corner of ethics is crowded to overflowing, with voices raised, feet trodden upon and books produced at a furious rate. It seems especially the case among those on the Left (both mild and militant): Gayatri Spivak, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou are only some of those crowding the scene. And when I pick up a work by one of them, a trail of other names appears, although each one chooses a different collection with whom to deal. Turtles all the way down, except that in each the turtles are not the same. Since I do not wish to produce a heavy tome on ethics, I need to be even more judicious in my choice of sparring partners, drawing out the key elements of my critique and proposal from dialogue partners on the Left. In the following discussion, I begin with some definitions and then critique the two bleached forms ethics takes today – care of the self (Foucault) and relations to the ‘other’ (Butler and Eagleton), usually designated as the stranger or the neighbour or some such term. From that moment, I draw out my criticisms, using as a springboard Badiou’s outright dismissal of the ‘ethical ideology’ of the other as an apology for the ‘state of the situation’, for the way things are (although I am less enthused by his solution in which ethics becomes both encouragement and warning in post-evental militancy), as well as Žižek’s effort to exacerbate the alien nature of the other by smashing his way through the imaginary and symbolic other to the unknowable, traumatic and obscene other. I share their suspicions of ethics as it is parleyed about in these times, especially in the way it easily becomes moralising, offering advice as to how we should live our lives, but I take a different track.