

## Badiou's *Ethics*

A review of Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001)

SAM GILLESPIE

*Ethics* is the third book by Alain Badiou to be translated into English, and its reception will undoubtedly do little to diminish his reputation as a polemical and contentious thinker. A rather imposing quote from Slavoj Žižek on the back cover amply, if misleadingly, illustrates what the stakes of the debate are to be: "*Ethics* enacts a return to full-blown philosophy which strikes as a thunder into the morass of post-modernist sophisms and platitudes. ... A book that aims at the very heart of politically correct 'radical' intellectuals, undermining the foundation of their mode of life".

While Žižek's quote misdirects the reader into expecting nothing less (or rather, nothing *more*) than a smug polemic against the self-satisfied moralizing of contemporary cultural studies (for which terms like "post-modernist" or "politically correct" may actually still hold relevance), it cannot be doubted that *Ethics* wastes little time in making its point.<sup>1</sup> After having taken on neo-Heideggerians (in *Manifesto for Philosophy*) and belligerent Deleuzians (in *The Clamor of Being*), Badiou sets out to assess the validity of the ethical turn in contemporary philosophy, and no more than three pages into the book we find the following remark: "I will try to establish that in reality it [ethics] amounts to a genuine nihilism, a threatening denial of thought as such".<sup>2</sup> Human rights, Derridian friendship, respect for others, bio-ethics, the ethics of sexual difference,<sup>3</sup>

Lyotard's return to Kant, euthanasia,<sup>4</sup> Nancy's community, NATO's military interventions: however much these positions may differ, all presuppose a rather vague means for regulating specific situations under the banner of ethics (politics, science, society, female bodies, and so forth). If the latter could be called *singular* situations, each containing an internal possibility for human action, ethics is imposed from what Badiou calls the State of this situation — that is, from a position that governs or represents the situation's terms. The State is a metastructural doubling of the situation itself; it is what insures the consistency of any situation's presentation. And since intervention for Badiou can only come from *within* the situation, the operations of ethics are regulative, or normative; they inhibit human action as such.

Badiou's strike against ethics is two-fold. On the one hand, he argues that ethics simply presumes a vague foundation on which judgements concerning singular situations are to be made. Since it always operates at an indeterminate distance from the situation, ethics can only ever be limiting or restrictive. Against this, Badiou proposes a move away from the general tropes that ethics presupposes (life, the human, the Other) towards the singularity of situations as such. Yet Badiou just as readily argues that situations themselves contain the possibility for breaks and ruptures within their smooth running state of affairs: events that disrupt the situation's cohesion. In place of what he calls "consensual" ethics, then, Badiou instills his own ethics which extend from the events that transform situations. Badiou's events are rare, but they signal the possible advent of a truth such that the situation can be fundamentally changed: "...since the power of a truth is that of a break, it is by violating established and circulating knowledges that a truth returns to the immediacy of the situation, reworks that sort of portable encyclopedia from which opinions, communications and sociality draw their meaning" (70).

The above quote could designate the principles of action that inform Badiou's philosophy in its entirety. If truth is essentially undecidable from the perspective of the situation, it is nonetheless through subjective action that a truth can come to displace established knowledge. Thus, while *Ethics* is divided into five chapters, the book should be seen as distributed in two parts. The first three chapters constitute a vigorous attack on the assumptions that guide contemporary ethical thought. These

<sup>1</sup> The thrust of *Ethics* may actually be quite tame in contrast to the first chapter of Badiou's *Saint Paul: sur le fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris: PUF, 1997)

<sup>2</sup> *Ethics*, 3. All further references will be parenthetical within the text.

<sup>3</sup> A rather broad category whose proponents could include Luce Irigaray, Martha Nussbaum and Drucilla Cornell.

<sup>4</sup> In all fairness, Badiou doesn't even come close to discussing the more banal stakes of Pete Singer's defense of euthanasia for disabled children, animal rights, and so forth.

are most likely the parts of *Ethics* that many will respond to with disdain or indignation, and I won't labor their implications in detail. The second chapter in particular — a rather harsh denunciation of the centrality of Levinas in contemporary philosophy and cultural studies' fascination with otherness — will almost certainly strike a chord with many. Peter Hallward devotes much of his introduction to this chapter, bringing its implications to bear upon the work of Levinas, Irigaray, Spivak and Derrida. The final two chapters propose, on the contrary, a version of what ethics for Badiou *should* be, along with a more stirring exegesis on the problem of evil. If the first three chapters require little more than a familiarity with ethics in either its academic or socio-cultural forms, the final two almost certainly extend from difficulties inherent to Badiou's thought as a whole. It should suffice to say that while consensual ethics exists as a regulative principle of situations in general (whose limits are always restricted to the treatment of human beings as mortal animals or victims of mistreatment), Badiou's ethics are engaged with the singularity of a situation where human action is possible, they interrogate the limits of any system's possibility (15).

Now initially, situations are simply domains where knowledge, opinions, and interest circulate. Yet at the same time, situations are also what contain the possibility for innovation and transformation by way of the fleeting appearance of an event. "We must suppose, then, that whatever convokes someone to the composition of a subject is something extra, something that happens in situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for" (41). Very schematically, we could say that if every situation contains the possibility for there being an event *qua* void on which it is founded (or rather, on which it is *sutured to being*),<sup>5</sup> then it becomes the project for certain unique individuals to see the consequences of an event through to its eventual renovation of a given situation. And this process of transformation will be what constitutes a fidelity to the event insofar as it comes to instill a truth in the situation *qua* redistribution of knowledge. There are thus four essential terms used in Badiou's doctrine that are derived from his earlier philosophy: the *event*, the *subject*, *fidelity* and *truth*. As Badiou sees it, then:

1) *Events* always occur with respect to individual situations at the

<sup>5</sup> This draws upon Badiou's ontology as outlined, most explicitly, in *L'Être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) While it is too complex to summarize the intricacies of a set-theoretical ontology, it should be said that the void is the primary name of being for Badiou.

same time that they are supplementary, removed from any pre-given law or regulation of the situation as it has been defined. Moreover, if a situation follows the lawfulness of presentation (insofar as everything that matters in the situation is consistently presented through an act of counting), then the event is what names the void of the situation to the extent that it calls forth the unknown or uncounted elements of any situation. Examples of such unknowns could be clandestine workers (in the political situation of contemporary France), Cantor's proof of the existence of transfinite infinities (in the scientific situation of contemporary mathematics) or the twelve-note tonal scale (in the example of music after Schoenberg).

2) It is only through subjective action that events are brought to bear upon any situation: they contain no materiality in and of themselves apart from an act of nomination instilled by *subjects* who choose to be faithful (*qua fidelity*) to the consequences of any event. Now if truths cannot be decided from the perspective of the situation, then the status of a subject with respect to a truth procedure is equally uncertain. There is nothing from the perspective of the situation that can guarantee the validity or outcome of any procedure of fidelity. And if this is the case, there are no standards that can assure a subject's preservation. Now it is precisely this lack of any guarantee that allows for the possibility of an ethics in Badiou. For ethics will no longer be a regulative principle, but rather a brave attempt to see the consequences of an event through to its transformation of any given situation. Badiou's ethics of truths are constituted by a declaration of fidelity to the events that seize those rare individuals who choose to adhere to the essentially unknown principles of the event. Following the Lacanian ethical declaration "do not cede on your desire," Badiou's own ethics are stated as such: "Keep going! ... do all you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance. ... Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you" (47).

Finally, there is *truth* as such. A truth is what comes to bear a hole in knowledge (70) at the same time that it is from that hole that new knowledges can circulate within a transformed situation. "... it is by violating established and circulating knowledges that a truth returns to the immediacy of the situation" (70). The effects of such a reshaping of norms and opinions retroactively establishes that an event has occurred in the situation. Just as Cantor's diagonal proofs and paradoxes reshaped the manner in which mathematics is taught in elementary schools, so too has Schoenberg's serial method altered the lineage of modern music. At the same time, the French Revolution constituted a definitive break with classical monarchy, and an individual can encounter another individual to

whom they declare their love. These are just so many instances of the way in which subjective action can bring its effects to bear on any situation through the advent of a truth (the evolution of axiomatic set theory, musical tonality, democracy, the amorous coexistence of two positions of experience, etc.).<sup>6</sup>

If Badiou thus proposes his ethics of truth in opposition to the established ethics (of human rights, obligation to the alterity of the other, the disputed rights of animals and the unborn, etc.), it is because ethics must presuppose universality. There are no ethics of particularity. And if it is only *from the void* of any situation that there can be universality, then the only universality that can exist for Badiou is in the generic procedures of truth<sup>7</sup> — there is no universality of opinion or community because there is no external position from which situations can be ontologically completed. Which is to say, in keeping with the effects of Russell's paradox, *there is no universe*. Taken from the perspective of the coexistence of culturally different position, Badiou will resolutely claim that "this coexistence is not a unification — that is why it is impossible to speak of *one* Ethics" (28). Hence, there is no singular ethical subject, nor is there any single human situation for which there can be an ethics in general: there are as "many subjects as there are truths, and as many subjective types as there are procedures of truth" (28).

But beyond the immediacy of human interest and the smooth-running state of affairs, it cannot be denied that contemporary moral thought also concerns the altogether different problem of evil. And it is not for all that that the problem of evil ceases to exist when Badiou curtly dismisses contemporary "consensual" ethics. Evil exists for Badiou, but not in a manner from which ethics can be derived. Rather than extracting the notion of the good from a notion of evil (which operatively limits human action to being nothing more than a response to the evil of human suffering), Badiou argues on the contrary that evil extends from the possibility of the Good: "... it is only because there are truths, and only to the extent that there are subjects of these truths, that there is Evil" (61). While such a definition ostensibly critiques the norms of contemporary ethics, it just as readily calls Badiou's project itself into question. How is it possible to prevent the spread of disaster in a truth procedure if it operates outside the norms of the situation as such? Or, on a more moral

<sup>6</sup> As is well-known, Badiou believes that there are four conditions for which there can be truths: art, science, politics and love.

<sup>7</sup> A point made by Badiou in an interview with Lauren Sedofsky. See "Being by Numbers" in *Artforum* 33.2 (October, 1994) 123.

register of thought, if fidelity always operates up to the limits of any situation, what is to prevent a truth procedure from becoming a full-fledged destruction of the norms, opinions, and interests which a fidelity works to transform? In the absence of any vague notion of a "respect for life," it becomes a pertinent question.

Badiou is well aware that the singularity of National Socialism as a political sequence sets the tenor for any ethical or philosophical discussion of evil in conventional wisdom. Its historical singularity not only demarcates the limits for understanding evil (such that it essentially remains anterior to the limits of thought — witness the plethora of new historicist treatments of trauma and remembrance); it is also what constitutes the ground by which ethical action becomes obligatory (for example, insofar as military action against Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic is justified through comparisons to Hitler as the undeniable figure of evil). If the framing of National Socialism around radical evil proves to be untenable (or rather, weak and cowardly) for Badiou, it is because it fails to grasp Nazism as a singular political sequence from which evil could emerge. "It is impossible to think politics through to the end if we refuse to envisage the possibility of political sequences whose organic categories and subjective prescriptions are criminal" (65).

The evil that is derived from the possibility of the good has three names for Badiou. In the first instance, there is the *simulacrum* of a truth procedure, which refers the (false) event not to the void on which every situation is founded but rather to a plenitude or substance of the situation. In the exemplary case of Nazism, the event "Hitler" named not any void of the situation, but rather the particularity of the community of German people. The neutral address of the void, however, returned to the political sequence in excluded form. The designation "Jew" stood as the name for those whose disappearance created a void around which the community substantially designated itself. And this was only insofar as the humanity of those people was reduced to the brute animal existence of being-for-death, thus solidifying the community's particularity.<sup>8</sup> If an ethics of truth demands an immanence of the void, the simulacrum of a truth is a bottom founded on the plenitude of the situation's substance.

Badiou's second name for evil is *betrayal*: the simple yielding of one's fidelity to a truth to the service of opinion or interest. A revolutionary may declare their project to be a futile idealism, a lover may no longer understand what they saw in their partner, an artist may

<sup>8</sup> Badiou notes that the very presence of the void is directly produced through a "cutting into the flesh itself." (76)

succumb to the profits of the commercial market. Since the plenitude of the situation always promises more in the way of immediate gratification of human interests and desires, there is little that can prevent a subject from giving way on his or her fidelity to a truth procedure. As a "name" for evil, betrayal follows from Badiou's own ethics unproblematically: to betray one's fidelity is simply to be unethical.

Finally, there is the *disaster* of forcing an *unnameable* in the situation, the effort to totalize a truth for the entirety of the situation. Now truth renders opinions that were formerly taken for granted questionable: it displaces the representative value of the names of the situation. Were truth to be total, it would name every element in the situation, rendering it closed. There is little doubt that such attempts at closure would be disastrous. For every situation contains at least one part that cannot be named by truth (in love, there is *jouissance*; in politics, there is community; in science, there is Goedel's principle of non-contradiction, and so forth). If human interest is operative in the situation, the unnameable is the one part of the situation where interest cannot be yielded to the eternity of a truth. The unnameable is thus "the symbol of the pure real of the situation, of its life without truth" (86).

Badiou has written elsewhere that it is *a priori* impossible to predict the extent of disaster, and it's a telling sign for him that evil can extend from truth procedures. In fact, if we're to believe Badiou, it *has*. Anyone interested in pursuing Badiou's conception of evil in detail needn't look any further than to the final chapter of *Ethics* for a detailed exegesis. But they will likely find it unsustainable without a firm grip of what Badiou's philosophy entails as a whole. If the example of the simulacrum does little more than elevate the particularity of a situation to the dignity of a false truth (genocide being the sustenance of that particularity), it is just as apparent that the disaster of totalizing truth for all demands that there always remain a part of the situation that a truth procedure does not determine. From the perspective of opinion (and thus the situation), there is nothing to distinguish truth from the simulacrum, since opinion as such is blind to the void which only the action of a militant subject can reveal. The difficulty with such conceptions concerns the complexity, from the perspective of either the situation or the truth, of determining *which part* of the situation is to remain unnameable. If situations are divided between interests and opinions (which are philosophical negligible) and the truth procedure as such (which, drawn from the neutrality of the void, contains no criteria of specification), then where is unnameability decided?

As Hallward makes clear in his introduction, the equation of a situation with a mathematical set does little to stipulate what a situation as

such is. Yet Badiou's call for a return to the singularity of a situation would seem to require such a vocabulary of specification. Set theory offers a purely extensional theory of any situation — a set is simply the sum-total of elements that belong to it. What is lacking in Badiou is any coherent theory of relations among the members of that set (or situation), thus making it hard to say what a situation *is*, how or where it starts or ends.<sup>9</sup> Not only does this prevent engagement with an individual situation (for which consensual ethics would no longer be necessary), it offers little in the way of determining what, within a given situation, can and must remain immune to the grip of a truth procedure. There is simply no formal means for discerning the specific manner in which a situation can be a site for human action — eventful or otherwise. Furthermore, it appears that the only situations where there can be singular engagements are those in which events occur. The conclusion to draw from this is that situations without events are simply non-problematic for Badiou: they either operate without difficulty (by some singular, non-philosophical method of criteria) or they demand interventions for which subjective action, rather than ethics, will be the principle.

It should be emphasized that *Ethics* was originally published in 1993, and the above difficulties have not gone unnoticed by Badiou. Yet if it remains an open question of where the determination of a situation comes from, then Badiou's own ethics remains incomplete on two counts. What is initially lacking is any coherent account of the relation between being-*qua*-being and its presentation (or appearance) in the situation. Upon an initial reading of Badiou's earlier work, *Being and the Event*, one is initially struck by the observation that truth is an essentially empty category for Badiou: it resolutely operates at one remove from the domain of human experience. While this has the obvious advantage of freeing questions of innovation and novelty from presumptions of repetition and continuous wholes, it does little to engage an analysis of truth as it operates from the perspective of the situation.

And so, even if a newcomer to Badiou will find a good introduction to his thought in these final pages, they almost certainly will not be able to stop at this point if they wish to understand his philosophy in a sufficient manner. Having re-read *Ethics* in translation, I was struck by the fact that Badiou's position was less clear cut than I had originally thought. This book is not simply a side project for Badiou; hopefully it will be remembered for being more than a misinterpretation of Levinas. Yet if

<sup>9</sup> See *Ethics*, xxxii. This is a point that is made in greater detail in Hallward's *Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).

*Ethics* daunts its reader, it is most likely that the difficulties encountered extend from problems inherent to Badiou's philosophy as it was outlined in his massive volume *L'Être et l'événement* (published in 1988). These problems are stated in a preface Badiou has written for the English version of *Ethics* and they concern four concepts that are essential to Badiou's philosophy as a whole: the situation, the event, the subject, and truth. If these come to be employed as terms in the second half of the book, they are mere indications of a development in Badiou's thought as it moves from *L'Être et l'événement* to his more recent, and as of yet unpublished, work, as mentioned in his introduction.

Badiou is fully aware of the problems mentioned above concerning the specificity of a *situation*. If there can only be ethics of situations, then the ontology of a situation (which simply posits the multiple that constitutes a set) needs to be supplemented by a logic of "transcendental legislation" (which can account for relations among the members of that situation). The *event* is not simply vanishing for which only the name inheres in the situation. Badiou now insists that events are *implicative*, in the sense that the statements derived (or detached) from the event are what enables its determination in the situation. This would entail a turn away from the subtraction of an event to a theory of its *immanence* in the situation as such.

The *subject* needs to be seen as more than a mere undivided fidelity to the event, a local status of truth. In particular, what needs to be accounted for is how events can open up the space for those subjects who react against the possibility of innovation or novelty, how certain subjects can be declared to be *against* the event. The reactions of these individuals – it could be said – are as equally invested in the events, and thus equally subjective.

*Truths* are not simply generic subsets of situations, subtracted from any determination. Insofar as their effects are measured in the situation, they could be said to appear in the situation. But appearance is neither a simple ontological presentation, nor a subtraction: it requires a logic. "We need to understand how it [truth] deals with logical transformations" (lvii).

Still, these developments are only alluded to at the introduction to the book, and it will clearly be some time before their developments make it into either the French or English language. It is even a bit presumptuous for me to have even included them in a review for this book, given that *Ethics* may be the first opportunity for many to engage with Badiou's thought. At bottom, *Ethics* remains a minor book, or transitory point, in Badiou's oeuvre: it signals a transition from the bold assertions of *L'Être*

*et l'événement* to his current forays into a logic of appearance.<sup>10</sup> If the former book contained the bold assertions that mathematics is ontology, and that truth is undecidable from the position of knowledge, the forthcoming work could be seen to engage with the logical manoeuvres with which the pure multiplicity of being-*qua*-being comes to appear in any singular situation as such. Between the two is *Ethics*, which, as Badiou emphasizes, offers little more than a preliminary sketch of what has come to be worked out in greater detail. *Ethics* can be read in more than one manner, and I'm sure that those uninterested in Badiou's thought in general will most likely be happy to encounter an honest effort to speak out against the plethora of false philosophies and politics that have masqueraded themselves under the banner of ethics. For others, however, this will hopefully only be the first encounter to be had with one of the most important minds in contemporary philosophy. The publication of *Ethics* only marks a preliminary step in a project whose time is long overdue.

<sup>10</sup> Appearance moves beyond a purely subtractive version of ontology to think appearance as an intrinsic dimension of being. The best source, at present, is the final chapter of Badiou's *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1998) 179–200.