

WHAT IS A PHILOSOPHICAL INSTITUTION? OR: ADDRESS, TRANSMISSION, INSCRIPTION¹

Alain Badiou

I would like to attempt here something of a deduction in regard to the destiny of all philosophical institutions. I would like to explore the possibility of submitting to the concept our institutional intuition. The danger is easily imagined. It is certainly less than that to which Saint-Just was exposed when he maintained that only institutions could prevent the Revolution from ending with the pure rising of its event. The risk I take is only this: by reversing a materialist order whose own effect is that of immersing thought in the density of the social and the organic, I propose that the determination of philosophy as such prescribes an institution appropriate to it.

What's at stake, uncertain and brief as it is, is the transcendental deduction of any possible philosophical institution. Concerning actual institutions, of first rank and unique to the world being the *Collège international de philosophie*, we accept that their problems, their worries, their internal competitions and their elected authorities, as is reasonable, are anything but transcendental.

We begin with the negative dialectic. The institutional prescription of philosophy does not take the form of causality. Nor does it take the form of an incarnation. No institution can pretend to be an effect of philosophy; none can suggest its body, nor make philosophy into a body, a Great Body, as the specialists of French institutional sociology say. Neither does the institution have only instrumental value, in the sense of directing philosophy toward its end. This for the essential reason that its ends are non-existent. I do not say that philosophy is without destination. But I don't think that we can distribute that destination within the domain of ends or finalities. Philosophy, far from proposing

1. Except for some final improvements, this is the text first presented, in 1989, as a colloquium intervention at the *Collège international de philosophie* itself. We know today, by way of its constant reforms and by way of the aporias that pertain to the name 'Europe', that the question of institutions impassions many philosophers. I cannot say that it impassions me, but, since this injunction exists, I support it, and so I give my concept.

TN. This text is taken from Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1992, pp. 83-90. I would like to thank Justin Clemens for his help in preparing this text and Alain Badiou for his permission to publish this translation.

ends, means always, in one way or another, to have done with ends, and even to end with *the* end. The greatest virtue of philosophy, however, is that, in not ceasing to conclude, it attests to the interminable imperative of continuing. It therefore requires no other means for abolishing ends.

No effect, no body, no instrument. What, then, is a philosophical institution? Of course, we could maintain that they do not exist, but, from the ancient schools of thought to the college that I extolled a moment ago, it is the opposite that is empirically attested. And on no account will I be entering into an interminable process of deconstruction, which would establish at the limit of the concept that these empirical institutions organize only a forgetting of their destination. No, these institutions exist and have an established connection with philosophy. But what connection?

I maintain that what the institution traces is not a *line* of causality; nor the *volume* of a body; and nor is it the *surface* of a planned operation. It is a knot, which the institution's job is to keep tied; and the only risk to this same institution is that this knot might be cut. A philosophical institution is a procedure for the conservation of a knot, at risk of the cut which would be the dispersal of its elements. A good institution is knotted, opaque, cannot be untangled: A poor one is segmented, dispersed, parliamentary. The first, the good, is tight and obscure. The second, dangerous, counts votes and separates functions in such a way that they can only reassemble in the barely philosophical form of the colloquium. Being the guardian of a knot is hardly compatible with this sometimes prudent, sometimes violent, management of factional equilibrium.

What is at stake in this knot? My subtitle declares: address, transmission and inscription. What can be said of these three strands of the knot, each of which holds together the other two that would accord with that figure bestowed on us to contemplate by my master Jacques Lacan?

Firstly I name 'address' not with regard to who or to what philosophy addresses itself but with regard to the subjective position that is proper to its address. Yet that which characterizes this position is purely and simply *void*. As a first definition, then, we can say that philosophy is without specific address. No community, real or virtual, is in relation to philosophy. No statement of philosophy is addressed as such to anyone. This is what we mean when we repeat that the question is what matters. The questioning is simply a name for the void address. The celebrated awkwardness [*maladresse*] of philosophy—its misaddress [*maladresse*—is in its essence, the non-address, the absence of address. All philosophical texts are in *poste restante*, and it is necessary to know in advance that something can be found there even though it has not been *sent* to you.

Secondly, I call the transmission of philosophy the operation by which it propagates itself on the basis of the void address. It is well known that this propagation is carried out by those, few in number, who, against all evidence, decide that it is they who have been addressed. Thus, those who endure the void of the address form themselves in such a void. This small number never constitutes a public, as a public is always precisely that which fills the address. Philosophy cannot be transmitted by way of this filling [*par les voies de ce plein*], of this over-filling [*trop-plein*]. As always, its transmission is not at all

dependent on the extension of a public, but on the figure, restrained and unfigurable [*infigurable*], of the disciple. The disciple is whoever endures this coinciding with the void address. The disciple knows it does not constitute a public but supports a transmission.

Lastly, I call inscription of philosophy all that changes the void of the address into a subsisting mark, all that philosophy writes. In itself, philosophy, as void address, is subtracted from the written, without being for all that devoted to the voice. Philosophy is that which, detained in the void of the address, obeys the temporalized injunction of the categories of being and event, on this side of the voice and the written. It is by remaining this side of the voice and the written that we name as always, thought, to which the void of the address accords. Inscription is the marking of this void, the interminable procedure of a subsisting suture with the subsistent, the effectivity of the void. Unlike the address, which is void, and transmission, which is proposed to some-ones, inscription is open and offered to all.

Notice that it may well be that the knot of which I speak cannot be knotted. If this is the case—henceforth undecidable—there may be some philosophies, but not *a* philosophy. Only the knot confers on philosophy the historicity of its existence. Only it decides that there is some philosophy that takes the form of a philosophy.

The historicity of philosophy thus demands that there be an address (in general this is covered by the proper name of a philosopher); that there are disciples (in general covered by the proper names of other philosophers who, when the time comes, after having endured the place of the void, will produce such a place); and that there are books, generally covered by those public instances which are the sequence of commentary, publications and reprints. These three instances are also that of the void (the address), that of the finite (its disciples), and that of the infinite (the inscription and its gloss).

Clearly, this knot is Borromean and therefore we consider it foundational to the *historicity* of philosophy. Without the knot, philosophy, reduced to the void address, would be only the point of indistinction between thought and being. In fact only the inscription collects, within time, the address and the transmission. And since it is only encountered in the book, inscription is that by which a new disciple comes to the void site prescribed by an ancient address. This book is encountered precisely as that which is offered to all, and which accords to the infinity of inscription. It is no less clear that only the address brings together transmission and inscription, since only it attests to that for which a disciple is a disciple, the void place that the disciple has occupied, and whose inscription perpetuates existence.

It is thus the void which, here as elsewhere, sutures the finitude of transmission to the infinity of inscription. And finally it is certain that it is solely transmission that assembles the address and the inscription, since the book can only be written from *the viewpoint of the disciple*, even if, in the circumstances of writing, the master makes a disciple of himself. But very often as we know (look at Aristotle, or Hegel, or Kojève or even Leibniz, or Nietzsche, or Husserl, check their archives, the transcripts of their lessons, the severe disorder of their notes and papers) very often, yes, it is the finitude of disciples that exposes the void address of philosophy to the infinity of inscription.

A philosophical institution is a proposition for the preservation of the knot. It is not the guardian of philosophy but of its historicity. Therefore it is the guardian *of* philosophies. It is the knotted plural of philosophies as resistance in time, which often means: resistance to *the* times.

What secondary imperatives are required by the first? What are the functions and the limits of an institution for philosophy such that, in accordance with its destination, it preserves the Borromean knot of the address, transmission and inscription: which is also the knot of the void, the finite and the infinite?

The first derived imperative is evidently that such institutions participate in the detection and existence of the three strands of the knot taken separately. And this, if I can say so, without separating them.

In what is of concern to the address, which is the suture of philosophy to being, there is nothing of the institution. This is because institutions are not those for which, as Parmenides says, ‘The Same, indeed is at once to think and to be.’²

This ‘same’ that is ‘at once’ is undoubtedly the mark of the void, and the void is precisely definable as that whose institution is impossible. So while we understand it as false that nature abhors a void, we are certain that institutions do have this horror. Their unceasing tendency is toward over-filling [*trop-plein*], and this is precisely what gives them their extremely limited natural allure.

But what the philosophical institution can and thus must do for philosophers is protect them from their misaddress, which is a consequence of their void address. It must give the void an address proper to it; it must be the address of the void address. What this means is that this institution must authorize him to find himself at home in it, he who nothing registers [*recommande*] and, above all, is neither registered [*recommandé*] nor registrable [*recommandable*].³ How can this institution recognize whoever presumes to philosophize, and therefore has no address? It cannot, it can only address them. It should, quite simply, test this indiscernible, providing its address. Permit me to call this first function of an institution for philosophy a *poste restante* function. It is thanks to this institution, contrary to that which goes by PTT, that our unregistered mail chances to arrive at its destination.⁴

In that which concerns transmission, it is clear that the institution must multiply the chances of having disciples occupy the void place of address. It must proliferate disciples.

2. TN. I have chosen to use the translation made by Louise Burchill in her translation of Badiou’s book on Deleuze. It better accords with the lines that immediately follow. For an explanation of Badiou’s usage of this excerpt from Parmenides see Louise Burchill’s note in *Deleuze: The Clamour of Being*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 137, note 1 to chapter 7.

3. TN. In this passage Badiou is playing on the ambiguity of the French term *recommande*. It is obviously meant to align with the metaphor of the post-office and so we have chosen to use the term ‘register’.

4. TN. PTT is the acronym for *Poste, Téléphone et Télécommunications* the state service co-coordinating delivery and maintenance of these services. Once upon a time Australia had an equivalent: The PMG, Post-Master General, affectionately known as Pigs, Monkeys and Gorillas. Today, broken in pieces, dispersed, neo-liberalized, the Pigs, Monkeys and Gorillas goes by a name somehow meant to evoke intensities, flows and desirings for astral travel and all the while free-floating on the stock exchange—‘Telstra’!

It is necessary therefore that it is an open house, vacant, where those whose destinies are tied to the void of a singular address, can pass through. What this 'general pass' declares is that there is no criterion for presence, or, as is the rule at the *College International* that participation in the seminars is absolutely free, that *closed* seminars do not exist. Permit me to call the second function of a philosophical institution a 'clearing-house' function.

Finally, in that which concerns the inscription, it is certain that the resources of the ordinary edition cannot suffice. These editions reason in terms of the public, not to say of publicity, and these do not conform to the essence of philosophic inscription, whose infinity is measured in centuries, and is not automatically exhausted in its first print run. In essence my claim is that an institution for philosophy prints, edits and distributes collections, editorials, marks and books. And as it is about the editing of that which is not registered or registerable, of distributing void addresses and of the obscure turmoil of disciples, all of this being for the public incalculable and dodgy [*louche*], at least this is what we hope. Permit me then to name this third function of a philosophical institution as having the function of a 'clandestine print-works'.

Such an institution organizes at its centre a *poste restante*, a clearing-house and a clandestine print-works.

But its second great task is to be the guardian of these three stands of the knot, tightening, while not, under the pretence of its disparate functions, cutting this borromean knot of the historicity of philosophy. For this, it is necessary that the guarantors of the institution, those who constitute its kernel always exist, and are themselves able to circulate while attending to the knot; that they have a care and concern for its 'holding together'; that they comprehend for themselves the paradoxical connections between address and transmission, inscription and address, and inscription and transmission. And that what they know to articulate is not the finitude of needs and opportunities, but the triplet of the void, the finite and the infinite. What they really desire to be, without discontinuity or visible caesura, are inspectors of the *poste restante*, tenants of the clearing-house and printers working in secret. I can hardly see for this task anything other than a kind of philosophers' convention, 'convention' being understood in the sense given to it by the people of the revolution of 1792; itself a collective body captive to the seriousness of the decision, which is as such the place of the decision, and which at the same time designates great committees, invested with great powers, all of which the convention oversees with gravity. The law of such an assembly cannot be that of majorities, for this law is that of the knot, of the historicity of philosophy, the law of the *current moment* for philosophy. Only this philosopher's convention can avoid the incessant cutting of the knot, the ruin of all historicity, the risk of the *flattening* [*mise à plat*] of philosophy, in short, that terrible and classic instant where the institution that was for philosophy deviates into anti-philosophy. We know the name of this danger: it is liberalism, which seeks to undo everything and by this ensnares all in dispersion, competition, opinion and the despotism of the public and publicity.

On one of his good days, Nietzsche noted that the laws were not made against the

criminals, but against the innovators. Undoubtedly the inspectors of the *poste restante* stray, the tenants of the clearing house leave and the clandestine printers are generally taken for criminals. Still, it is these innovators that a philosophical institution requires, and thus they are at risk of falling under the blows of the law, including those which the institution considers as its own necessary safeguards. But the conventional rigorous discipline—convent-like even—of a philosophical institution, supposing it were good, connects what it is to a knot, that one must guard, tighten, and must itself be retied with new combinations of the void, of the finite and of the infinite, which are themselves a cruel discipline put to the service of such innovators. Undoubtedly only chance can provide it. A good philosophical institution will therefore be that which proposes, in opposition to the criminal, who for philosophy can only be the declared enemy of all thought and therefore of all being, the very broadest power of chance, that is to say the void power of the address.

Let us conclude as one should, with a wish: when some philosophical institution is beginning to form its conventions and to settle as the new guardian of the knot, when philosophy is submitted to the ordeal of a collective decision, let us wish that no throw of the dice from the criminals can abolish the chance of its rare occurrence.

Translated by A. J. Bartlett