

BOOK REVIEW

KEEPING THE FAITH: ON BEING GOOD *AND* HOW NOT TO BE EVIL

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Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, New York, Verso, 2001. ISBN: 1-85984-435-9

‘Every truth’, Badiou tells us in his *Ethics*, ‘deposes constituted knowledges, and thus opposes opinions. For what we call *opinions* are representations without truth, the anarchic debris of circulating knowledge’ (E 50). Being then fully aware that the book review—as little more than an at best vaguely nuanced species of opinion—is fundamentally ‘beneath the true and the false’ (E 51), it goes without saying that what follows is, veracity aside, not in the least bit true. That said, *Ethics* occupies a decidedly singular position within Alain Badiou’s *oeuvre*. For starters, it’s the only of his thus far translated major theoretical works which might be read, for the most part, without immediate recourse to *Being and Event* (although it does serve as something of a necessary addendum to his magnum opus). This rather welcome fact is due in part to Peter Hallward’s introduction (which provides a concise overview of Badiou’s ethical and philosophical project) and, more generally, to Badiou’s concerted effort to eschew all overtly technical writing (*Ethics* was ostensibly written for a high school audience). Further, it is arguably (again, amongst his translated works) his most Lacanian book (or rather the book which thinks most closely alongside Jacques Lacan’s antiphilosophy). Lastly, it is very probably, in a career distinguished by polemy and invective, his most immediately provocative work. Indeed, it is difficult not to be at least momentarily taken aback by a book which begins by launching into a virulent attack against the contemporary discourse of human rights and whose axial assertion is that ‘the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned’ (E 25). In point of fact the whole of contemporary ethics—derisively designated by the author as ‘the ethical

ideology’—appears in Badiou’s eyes to be little more than a vast synonym for negativity: today’s ‘ethical ideology’ is a fundamentally statist edifice whose principle role is to ‘[prohibit] any idea, any coherent project of thought, settling instead for overlaying unthought and anonymous situations with mere humanitarian prattle’ (E 32-33). The task is then, reductively speaking, to invent a new ethics which would radically circumvent the state’s authority. And, by happy coincidence, it is precisely this sort of circumvention that Badiou’s philosophy has been offering all along.

Setting himself then firmly at odds with the dominant ‘ethics of otherness’ Badiou contrarily asserts his own ethics as fundamentally *of the subject* and accordingly (it means the same thing) as not of the other but *of the same*. Of course we need remember here that for Badiou the subject is neither transcendental nor substantial, but is rather a ‘finite local configuration’—albeit one touched by immortality—convoked through an (aleatory, unknowable) event. This means precisely (once again, in Badiouian terms) that his subjective ethics is equivalent to an ethic of *truth(s)*—which is what the event gives rise to—or of the *same*—which, emanating from the situational void (and thus from what is in-different to all situations and hence properly *universal*) is what truth *is*. To this effect Badiou’s is a philosophy that strictly opposes any *a priori* concept of ethicality: ‘there is no ethics in general’ he tells us, ‘there are only—eventually—ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation’ (E 16). Further, as Badiou’s subject only comes into being by virtue of a singular event—an event which is strictly immanent to a particular situation—and subsists only by maintaining a militant fidelity to the truth of the event, his subjective ethics is then ultimately a situated ethics, that is, an ethics of the situation. In sum—and in stark contrast to the contemporary understanding of ethics as natural, objective, a priori, a-situational and fundamentally of the other—Badiou’s ethics are of the event, of the subject, of truth, of the situation, and of the same.

Clearly then the core of Badiou’s ethics is nothing other than the eventual prescription of the subject, that is, the absolute necessity to remain faithful to a fidelity—to continue being a militant of truth—which he rather nicely summarizes in a single imperative: *continuez!* (in which one should of course hear Lacan’s ethical maxim ‘*ne pas céder sur son désir*’: don’t give way on your desire). Simply—and one cannot stress this point too strongly—outside of the fact of the event, there is no subject, nor truth, nor ethics—there is solely difference (which is simply what *is*) and an otherwise inconsequential biological species counted as human, ‘a “biped without feathers,” whose charms are not obvious.’ (E 12) So then in light of his theory of subjectivation Badiou accordingly reinterprets Lacan’s ethical imperative as the necessity to ‘seize in your being that which has seized and broken you’ (E 47), to remain faithful to an event, to hold on at all costs to a truth and continue being a subject. Of course, the reader of Lacan would likely wonder precisely what is to be found here that is new? Certainly the literally exceptional status of Badiou’s ethics resonates with Lacan’s own distinction between the moral and the ethical—between Creon’s Law and Antigone’s desire, between the good and the beautiful—insofar as morality, for Lacan, fundamentally serves to reinforce/reinscribe the statist order (qua ‘service of goods’) while ethicality is by contrast necessarily anti-statist (owing to the fact

that, as an ethical subject, we must first give ourselves over to ‘the cause that animates us’, a cause—desire; drive—which is in itself radically antithetical to order as such). Clearly then we are once more presented with those familiar divisions between ethical radicality and moral stasis, between revolutionary praxis and conservative polity, between truth and the knowledge through which it punches a hole.

And yet it also at this precise point that we discern a clear break with Lacan—who we should remember is not only for Badiou an antiphilosopher *par excellence* (witness the role played here by desire and drive) but also the term’s true father (*le nom du père*)—insofar as Badiou, by virtue of his decidedly non-Lacanian (non-Cartesian) conception of the subject, necessarily presents something of a recession of orders, seeing the ethical as coextensive with (indeed, equivalent to) the good, thereby leaving morality (which is in Badiou’s thinking implicitly tied up with that truthless realm of ‘opinions’) lying necessarily beneath both good and evil. Thus the beautiful descends to the good and the good—to invoke Badiou’s reading of that other archetypal antiphilosopher Saint Paul—falls from grace. If this however seems something of a negative gesture, we should remember that one of the great virtues of Badiou’s philosophy is on the contrary its fundamental positivity, which is something we can (unexpectedly perhaps) clearly discern in his conception of evil as an ‘effect of the power of truth’ (E 61).¹ Indeed, this simple progression—*from good to evil*—stands in marked opposition to the ethical ideology he so despises, in which good might be solely derived as an after-effect of evil (such good depriving itself of positive content in its reduction to the sole function of preventing evil) and which accordingly thinks ‘the only thing that can really happen to someone is death’ (35) (such negative movement accounting for the intrinsic nihilism of, for example, the discourse of human rights). Simply, if the good is ultimately truth, then evil is at base that which has a negative effect on truth; it is the corruption, in one way or another, of truth. This of course means that, as with the good, evil is knotted to the eventual subject, or, to paraphrase Voltaire, Badiou’s ethics of truth means in the end that ‘every subject is guilty of all the good he did not do’. Thus the human animal, along with its concomitant predilections—be they munificent, disinterested, or just plain nasty—exists, outside of the embrace of the event, fundamentally *beneath* good and evil.

On the plus side (at least for those aspiring immortals among us) Badiou has kindly gone ahead and determined there to be but three dimensions—three faces—of evil, which he designates, not without a certain dramatic flair, as *betrayal*, *terror* and *disaster*. Without going into too-lengthy an exegesis, the first face of evil (betrayal) denotes the failure of a subject to live up to a fidelity—which is it should be noted not simply renunciation but rather the determined act of becoming ‘the enemy of that truth’ (E 79)—while the second (terror, or *simulacrum*) presents itself as the gross imitation of the event, involving the convocation not of the void (whose in-difference allows for the universality of a truth) but rather of the plenitude of a situation. Badiou’s detailed example here is the

1. As Badiou states, ‘my philosophy desires affirmation. I want to fight for; I want to know what I have for the good and to put it to work’, ‘On Evil: An Interview with Alain Badiou’, *Cabinet*, no. 5, 2001, <<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/5/alainbadiou.php>>.

Nazi National Socialist Revolution which aimed to bring a particular community—i.e. the ‘German people’ as an abstract whole—toward their ‘true destiny’ (thereby avoiding the situational ‘hole’ to instead consider its whole, or rather, its full particularity), the construction of such a whole being only possible by literally “voiding” what surrounds it. (E 74) The third and final face of evil—that of disaster, or *totalization*—involves the ‘ontologization of the event’: put simply, no truth-process can name *all* the elements of the situation, for there must always remain ‘at least one point that the truth cannot force’ (E 85), which is precisely the *unnameable* element (of a truth), ‘the pure real of the situation’ (E 86). Evil is then in this third instance the forcing of the unnameable.² In sum, evil exists, *après l’événement*, in three guises: betrayal—the negation of the ethical imperative in the form of eventual treachery—terror—the convocation of the plenitude of the situation (as distinct from its void)—and disaster or the totalization of a truth through the forcing of its unnameable.

In the final analysis then Badiou’s ethics combines under its imperative (*‘continuez!’*) those ‘resources of discernment (do not fall for simulacra), of courage (do not give up), and of moderation (do not get carried away to the extremes of Totality)’. (E 91) Of these ‘resources’—which, we might note in passing, are fundamentally both subjective (that is anobjective) and asubject-ive (that is human)—the first, discernability, presents the most immediate problem: insofar as the event is radically unknowable there remains the dilemma of precisely how to discern when we are truly ‘immortalized’ in its wake, which is to say, how do we know when we are subject to good (truth) or subject to evil (the simulacrum of truth), or, conversely, to neither (and hence ‘unsubjected’)? This problem has in one way or another been raised in most considerations of Badiou’s *Ethics*,³ and indeed Badiou himself implicitly questions the resource of discernability at the same time as he raises it when he proposes something of an extended ethical maxim in the form of ‘keep going even when you have lost the thread, when you no longer feel ‘caught up’ in the process, when the event itself has become obscure, when its name is lost, or when it seems that it may have named a mistake, if not a simulacrum’. (E 79) Let us then reconsider the problem in terms strictly immanent to evil: do we not encounter in the intricately linked evils of betrayal and terror a potential paradox insofar as in our mili-

2. In the amorous situation for example it is sexual *jouissance* which cannot be named. Likewise, in the scientific situation non-contradiction is the unnameable (as Gödel’s theory of incompleteness dictates). Incidentally, one finds here another fundamental distinction between Badiou’s philosophy and Lacan’s antiphilosophy: whilst Lacan’s ‘truth procedure’ (i.e. the act proper) involves the foundation of a radically new situation, for Badiou a truth must be the truth of a given situation, that is, it must retain ties to the original situation (an absolute overhaul being nothing other than this third instance of evil, i.e. the ‘totalization’ of a truth).

3. For example Jean-Jacques Lecercle remarks that ‘I can find hardly anything within his system to protect me from Heidegger’s mistake, when he took the National Socialist ‘revolution’ for an event, and thought that a new process of truth had started. The risk is that the eventuality of the event will eventually be left to individual decision’, ‘Cantor, Lacan, Mao, Mème Combat: The Philosophy of Alain Badiou’, *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 93, 1999, p. 12. Simon Critchley likewise asks ‘how and in virtue to what is one to distinguish a true event from a false event? That is, I don’t see how—one the basis of Badiou’s criteria—we could ever distinguish a true event from a false event’, ‘Demanding Approval: On the Ethics of Alain Badiou’, *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 100, 2000, p. 23.

tant desire to be ethical subjects might we not all too easily betray a truth for fear of it being a simulacrum or contrarily remain faithful to a simulacrum for fear of betrayal? In point of fact the question is less one of discernability and more properly one of indiscernability, for insofar as truth need by definition be radically subtracted from knowledge it is accordingly relegated to the realm of pure subjectivity, which is to say, pure faith—the subjective faith involved in declaring an indiscernible event ‘to be or not to be’—and this pure faith is ultimately one and the same as that faith which constitutes the bond between betrayal and terror (namely the conviction—or lack thereof—that an event is in fact an event and not its simulacrum). Let us put it yet another way: truth, Badiou tells us, as contradistinct to knowledge, is utterly unforeseeable and solely a matter of *forcing*; the true becomes so only by virtue of a tireless militancy, the direct result of which (this absolute reliance on forcing) being that Badiou’s ethics—under those resources of discernment and courage—seems to have a decidedly *an*-ethical element (namely the potential indiscernability between event and simulacra, between betrayal and terror), which is finally to say that ethics is in a certain sense beneath itself.⁴

So where does this leave Badiou’s *Ethics*? Certainly he exposes and brings the reader a long way from the fallacy of our contemporary ethical doxa (where ethics appears objective, natural, a priori, of the other, etc.) as an ideology incapable of any conception of the good yet flush with the knowledge of suffering. And yet his own ethics (of the same, of the event, of truths, of the subject, of the real, of the good, of the situation, etc.) seem to rest on—to give a different accent to those final, immortal words of Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*—the indiscernibly fine line which separates ‘I can’t go on’ from ‘I’ll go on.’⁵ Perhaps then it all finally comes down, as Deleuze might have said, to a matter of taste, for when all is said and done Badiou’s properly decisive elements—both subjective (in deciding an answer to the question ‘to betray or not to betray?’) and constitutive (in his philosophy’s overall militant immediacy)—are arguably major drawcards of his thought. Indeed, insofar as Badiou ultimately presents little to no room for hesitation—there is no ‘what should I do?’, only ‘this is what I will do’—the fact that there is an element of ethical indiscernability—or an ‘ethical real’—appears to be at worst a necessary evil supplementary to a greater good (truth, creation, affirmation, etc.), at best the locus of

4. In her *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*, Alenka Zupančič makes a similar point regarding this an-ethical element: ‘the heart of all ethics is something which is not itself “ethical” (nor is it “non-ethical”)—that is to say, it has nothing to do with the register of ethics. This “something” goes by several different names . . . : for Lacan, it is “the Real”; for Badiou, “the Event.”’ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*, London, Verso, 2000, p. 235. It seems to me, however, that the real importance of the an-ethical kernel of the ethical lies properly in its subjective component, and thus not in the event itself but in its retroactive subjective recognition (i.e. the evental *decision*).

5. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, New York, Grove Press, 1991, p. 414. Of course, as his philosophy has evolved Badiou has made a number of rectifications to his ethics (*L’éthique* was after all published in France in 1993). The reactionary and obscurantist figures, for example, have—to an extent—respectively replaced those of treachery and disaster as properly subjective positions, whilst the unnameable has since been abandoned as being a ‘[concession] to the pervasive moralism of the 1980s and 1990s’, Alain Badiou, ‘Beyond Formalisation: An Interview’, *Angelaki*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2003, p. 133.

freedom itself. Indeed, this indiscernible element in truth complements rather nicely the idea of evil as totalization, an evil whose origins might be (theoretically, at least) traced all the way to Badiou's fundamental axiom (contra Parmenides) that the One (qua absolute) is not. Put plainly, truth, insofar as it obliges subjective indiscernability, is simply nothing without risk. Indeed if indiscernability, forced through an act of pure decision, marks Badiou's rigorous—and, not insignificantly, axiomatic—philosophical enterprise with a certain freedom (admittedly tempered somewhat by one's subsequent slavish devotion to the event and indifference to self-interest), it is only because his doctrine of the event stamps his world with an element of chance: his is a Mallarméan philosophy of dice-throws, of infinity and immortality, one that thinks radical newness and absolute change. And fundamentally—necessarily—his is a hazardous philosophy, a philosophy of risks. Indeed, in the final analysis, it is perhaps this fact, this absolute unknown, which alone endows the immortal subject with a certain humanity.

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