

Demanding approval

On the ethics of Alain Badiou

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What is ethical experience for Alain Badiou? What can be said of the subject who has this experience? Let me begin by trying to pick out the formal structure of ethical experience, or what with Dieter Henrich we can call ‘the grammar of the concept of moral insight’,¹ and explaining how such experience implies a conception of the subject.

Ethical experience begins with the experience of a demand to which I give my approval. *Approval* and *demand*: that is, there can be no sense of the good – however that is filled out at the level of content, and I am understanding it merely formally and emptily – without an act of approval or affirmation. My moral statement that ‘*x* is good or bad’ is of a different order to the veridical, epistemological claim that ‘I am now seated in a chair.’ This is because the moral statement implies an approval of the fact that *x* is good, whereas I can be quite indifferent to the chair I am sitting on. If I say, for example, that it would be good for parrots to receive the right to vote in elections, then my saying this implies that I approve of this development. Practical reason is in this way distinct from theoretical reason. In Badiou’s terms, the order of the event (*l’événement*) is distinct from the order of being (*l’être*).

However, if the good only comes into view through approval, it is not good *by virtue* of approval. Ethical *noesis* requires a *noema*. In my example, my approval of parrots receiving the right to vote is related to the fact that – at least in my moral imagination – parrots make a certain demand, the demand for political representation. Ethical experience is, first and foremost, the approval of a demand, a demand that demands approval. Ethical experience has to be circular, although hopefully only virtuously so.

Leaving parrots to one side, in the history of philosophy (and also in the history of what Badiou calls anti-philosophy, namely religion), this formal demand

is filled out with various contents: the Good beyond Being in Plato, faith in the resurrected Christ in Paul and Augustine, the fact of reason or the experience of respect for the moral law in Kant, the certitude of practical faith as the goal of subjective striving (*Streben*) in Fichte, the abyssal *intuition* of freedom in Schelling, the creature’s feeling of absolute dependency on a creator in Schleiermacher, pity for the suffering of one’s fellow human beings in Rousseau, or for all creatures in Schopenhauer, eternal return in Nietzsche, the idea in the Kantian sense for Husserl, the call of conscience in Heidegger, the claim of the non-identical in Adorno, and so on.² All questions of normativity and value, whether universalistic (as in Kant in the categorical imperative, and his latter-day heirs like Rawls and Habermas) or relativistic (as in Wittgenstein on rule following and his latter day heirs like Rorty), follow from such an experience. Without some experience of a demand – that is, without some experience of a relation to the otherness of a demand of some sort – to which I am prepared to bind myself, to commit myself, the business of morality would not get started. There would be no *motivation* to the good, the good would not have the power to move the will to act. Kant calls that which would produce the power to act, the motivational power to be disposed to the good, ‘the philosopher’s stone’. What is essential to ethical experience is that the subject of the demand assents to that demand, agrees to finding it good, binds itself to that good and shapes its *subjectivity* in relation to that good. A demand meets with an approval. The subject who approves shapes itself in accordance with that demand. All questions of value begin here.

Let me take this a little further. If we stay with the example of Kant, then this dimension of ethical experience or moral insight – the capacity of being motivated to the good – resolves itself, in a rather complex fashion, in the seemingly contradictory notion of the

fact of reason. That is, there is a *Faktum* which places a demand on the subject and to which the subject assents. There is a demand of the good to which the subject assents, and this demand has an immediate apodictic certainty that is *analogous* to the binding power of an empirical fact (*Tatsache*). The difference between the apodicticity of a fact of reason as distinct from an empirical fact is that the demand of the former is only evident in so far as the subject approves it. It is, if you like (and Kant wouldn't), the *fiction* of a fact constituted through an act of approval. However things may stand with the doctrine of the fact of reason, Dieter Henrich argues, rightly I think, that the entire rational universality of the categorical imperative and Kantian moral theory follows from this experience of moral insight. The philosopher's stone would consist precisely in the link between the motivational power of the fact of reason and the rational universality of the categorical imperative. Now, because Kant's entire moral theory is based on the principle of autonomy, the fact of reason has to correspond to the will of the subject. The fact of reason is a fact, it is the otherness of a demand, but it has to correspond to the subject's autonomy. Hence, for Kant, the ethical subject has to be *apriori* equal to the demand that is placed on it.

It is arguably this structure that Heidegger repeats in his analysis of conscience in *Being and Time*, where conscience is constituted in the experience of a demand or appeal that *seems* to come from outside *Dasein*, but which is really only *Dasein* calling to itself. Heidegger writes, 'In conscience *Dasein* calls itself.'³ In this sense, the grammar of moral insight in Heidegger, at least in the analysis of authenticity, would be an existential deepening of Kantian autonomy. Heidegger recognizes as a 'positive necessity' the *Faktum* that has to be presupposed in any analysis of *Dasein*. The Kantian fact of reason here becomes the ontic-existential testimony, attestation or witnessing (*Zeugnis*) of conscience which is relativistically translated into the key notion of the 'situation'.⁴

We can see already, from this little sketch of Kant and Heidegger, that the claim about ethical experience being constituted in a demand which I approve is also a claim about the nature of the self or subject. The response to the question of ethical experience entails a response to the question of the subject of that experience. The self is something that shapes itself through its relation to whatever is determined as its good, whether that is the law of Moses, the resurrected Christ, the suffering other, the intuition of freedom, the call of conscience, the non-identical, or whatever. If the demand of the good requires the approval of

that demand, then that approval is given by a self. An ethical subject can be defined as a self relating itself approvingly to the demand of the good. For me, the ethical *subject* is the name for the way the self relates itself bindingly to the good.

This claim about the entailment between ethical experience and the subject can be buttressed by claiming not simply – and rather neutrally – that the demand of the good requires approval by a self in order to be experienced as a demand, but by asserting that this demand of the good *founds* the self, or is the fundamental organizing principle of the subject's articulation. What we think of as a self is fundamentally an ethical subject, a self that is constituted in a certain relation to a good. This is perhaps best proved negatively through the experience of failure, betrayal, or evil. Namely, as Badiou notes, that if I act in such a way that I know to be evil then I am acting in a manner destructive of the self that I am, or that I have chosen to be. I have failed myself or betrayed myself. Once again, such a claim is quite formal and does not presuppose specific content for the good. For example, my good could be permanent revolution, perpetual peace or paedophilia. This is why Plato is perfectly consequent when he claims that vice is destructive of self. Anyone, who has tried – and failed – to cure themselves of some sort of addiction, whether cigarettes, alcohol, permanent revolution or whatever, will understand what is meant here. The subject that I have chosen to be enters into conflict with the self that I am, producing a divided experience of self as self-failure and the concomitant overwhelming affect of guilt. Guilt is the affect that produces a certain splitting or division in the subject, which is something that St Paul understood rather well, 'For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.'⁵

Three applications: Levinas, Lacan, Badiou

Leaving Kant and Heidegger to one side, can this formal structure of ethical experience can be used to illuminate other moral theories? I think it can. Before turning in detail to Badiou, let me make some remarks on Levinas and Lacan, and attempt a small rapprochement between them. For Levinas, the core of ethical experience is, indeed, the demand of a *Faktum*, but it is not a *Faktum der Vernunft* as much as a *Faktum des Anderen*, a fact of the other. In *Totality and Infinity* at least, the name for this fact is the face of the other. Now Levinas's difference from Kant (or Heidegger for that matter) is that ethical experience

turns around the alterity of a demand that does not correspond to the subject's autonomy, but that places that autonomy in question, at least at the ethical level (although autonomy can be said to come back at the level of justice, politics and everything that Levinas gathers under the heading of 'the third party'). What Levinas tries to articulate in his work is the experience of a demand to which the subject assents ('tu ne tueras point'), but which heteronomously determines the ethical subject. The ethical subject in Levinas is constituted through a relation, an act of approval, to the demand of the good to which it is fundamentally inadequate. The Levinasian ethical subject chooses to relate itself to something which exceeds its relational capacity. This is what Levinas calls *le rapport sans rapport*, the relation without relation, the anti-dialectical core of Levinas's work that fails to respect the principle of non-contradiction – that is, how can there be a relation between beings that remain absolute within that relation? Logically speaking there cannot, and yet it is precisely such a relation between persons that Levinas wants to describe as ethical.

This dimension of ethical experience can be explored in relation to the theme of trauma in Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. What is a trauma? The source of trauma is a heteronomous event that comes from outside the self (for example, a terrorist explosion or an earthquake), but that lives on in the subject after the fact in, say, traumatic neurosis. Levinas constructs what he calls 'an ethical language', composed of several rather strange and hyperbolic terms: persecution, obsession, substitution, hostage and trauma. Focusing on the notion of trauma allows one to bring out the links between Levinas and the psychoanalytic dimensions of ethical experience, studiously refused by Levinas himself. But for Levinas, ethics is the dimension of a traumatic demand, something that comes from outside the subject, but that leaves its imprint, trace or mark within the subject. My heterodox but, I think, justified claim in relation to Levinas is that the condition of possibility for ethics – that is, for the ethical relation to the other – is found in a certain picture of the subject; that is, it is because of a disposition of the subject that relatedness to the other is possible. This is why I privilege Levinas's later work, *Otherwise than Being*, over his earlier work, *Totality and Infinity*, for it is here that ethics is worked out as a theory of the subject,

conceived as the other within the same, and not simply in terms of the relation to the other.

So, the grammar of moral insight in Levinas is that ethical responsibility begins with a subject approving of an impossible demand, or a demand that it could never meet. This makes responsibility infinite and splits open the subject through an experience of heteronomy. I decide to be a subject that I know I cannot be, I give myself up to a demand that makes an imprint on *me* without my ever being fully able to understand *it* (you can perhaps already see the psychoanalytic implications of such a claim). In other words, for Levinas, ethics is not ontology, which simply means that the ethical relation to the other that lives on as an imprint within the subject is not a relation of comprehension, of totality. So, the notion of ethical experience that I am trying to elicit in Levinas produces a certain picture of the subject as fundamentally split, between itself and a demand which it cannot meet, but which is nonetheless that by virtue of which it becomes a subject.

Once this psychoanalytically reconceived account of the Levinasian ethical subject is in place, it can



be shown that there is a rather interesting homology between it and Lacan. There is a formal structure to ethical experience common to each of them, although they obviously differ at the level of content, not to mention their rather different evaluations of the importance of Freud. What is the basic claim of Lacan's *L'Éthique de la psychanalyse*? Lacan's thesis is that the ethical as such is articulated in relation to the order of the real, which is variously and obscurely glossed as 'that which resists, the impossible, that which always come back to the same place, the limit of all symbolization, etc.' Indeed, this thesis is finessed in the following, crucial way: namely, that the ethical, which affirms itself in opposition to pleasure, is articulated in relation to the real in so far as the latter can be the guarantor of what Lacan calls, following a certain idiosyncratic and radical reading of Freud, *das Ding, la Chose*. The main example of *das Ding* in the ethics seminar is the Freudian figure of the *Nebenmensch*, the fellow human being, and I think what we might call 'a *Nebenmensch* complex' is at work in both Levinas and Lacan. That is, there is a Thing at the heart of the subject that defines the subject in terms of an 'interior exteriority', as it were, what Lacan calls something 'strange or foreign to me that is at the heart of me'.

However, more generally, what is interesting is how well the ethics of psychoanalysis fits into the structure of ethical experience and the subject that I have tried to describe. One might say that psychoanalytic experience begins with recognition of the *demand* of the unconscious, the impingement of unconscious desire. In the analytic situation, if the analysand has *agreed* to the interpretation of the symptom, the *Faktum* of this desire provokes an act of *approval* on the part of the subject. That is, the ethical subject decides henceforth to relate itself approvingly to the demand of its unconscious desire. This demand produces what I see as the categorical imperative of Lacan's ethics seminar, namely 'do not give way on its desire' ('ne pas céder sur son désir'); do not cease to approve of the demand that is unconscious desire. For Lacan, as much as for Kant, it is this act of approval that founds the subject, where he claims that 'tout le cheminement du sujet', the entire itinerary of the subject, articulates itself around the Thing that shadows the subject. This is why Lacan can claim that Freudian psychoanalysis, as much as Kant's critical philosophy, subscribes to the primacy of practical reason. The difference between Lacan and Kant is that between the heteronomous and autonomous determinations of the ethical subject. I will come back to Lacan below, but my psychoanalytic

question to Badiou is whether his ethical theory loses sight of this dimension of the Thing; that is, whether his privileging of love over law risks reducing the traumatic demand to the real to the symbolic order.⁶

Turning to Badiou, the structure of ethical experience described above can be applied to his wonderful reading of St Paul.⁷ What interests Badiou in Paul is the connection between the subject and the event. More precisely, Badiou's question is: what law can structure a subject deprived of all identity in relation to an event, 'of which the only "proof" is rightly that a subject declares it'. This event is the resurrection of Christ, something that can only have the status of a fable for Badiou. What interests Badiou is the notion of an event which is not empirically demonstrable in the order of being. The event demands an act of belief that Paul rightly compares to folly. That is, the event is a *Faktum* that is analogous but irreducible to an empirical *Tatsache*. Now, the structure of ethical experience in Badiou's reading of Paul can be formalized into the following four moments:

1. There is the universality of the demand of the good, or what Badiou calls the *adresse*, which is what Paul calls grace, *charis*.

2. The *charisma* of the subject consists in the declaration of this grace in an act of faith, or what Badiou prefers to call conviction. Thus, faith is the arising or coming forth of the subject (*surgir du sujet*), a subjective certitude that approves of the demand that is placed on it.

3. If faith is *le surgir du sujet*, then love (*agape*) is the practical labour of the subject that has bound itself to its good in faith. The practical maxim of love is 'love your neighbour as yourself'. That is, if the human being is justified by faith, then s/he is redeemed by love. Love is what gives consistency to an ethical subject, which allows it to persevere with what Badiou elsewhere calls a 'process of truth'.

4. Love binds itself to justice on the basis of hope (*espérance, elpis*). The hope is that justice will be done and the subjective maxim that this requirement of justice produces is, as elsewhere in Badiou, 'Continuez!' That is, continue to love your neighbour as yourself. That is, we might define hope as *political love*.

In terms of the account of ethical experience given above, it is the first two moments of this structure that are essential. Ethical experience begins with the experience of a demand or address, which is the event of grace, and the subject defines itself by approving of this event in a declaration of faith. Thus – and this is essential – *the Christian subject does not*

pre-exist the event that it declares. Subject and event come into being at the same time. As I have already shown, in ethical experience, the subject defines itself by binding itself approvingly to the demand that the good makes on it. For Badiou, it is this feature of Paulinian Christianity, its singular universality based on the *Faktum* of an event irreducible to an empirical *Tatsache*, that provides an exemplary figure for contemporary political militancy.

The place of ethics in Badiou's system

With this in mind, I would now like to turn to the more detailed account of ethical experience presented in *L'Éthique: Essai sur la conscience du Mal*.⁸ The eighty pages of Badiou's *Ethics* fall, very roughly, into two parts: (1) a refreshingly direct presentation and critique of the so-called 'return to ethics' in contemporary French philosophy; and (2) an exposition of Badiou's ethical theory in relation to the problem of evil. Consequent upon this division of the argument, the intention of *Ethics* is twofold: (1) to show how the contemporary inflation of ethics in French philosophy is a symptom of a more general nihilism; and (2) to provide a quite other meaning to ethics, by relating it not to abstractions, like Man, God or the Other, but to concrete *situations*. That is, for Badiou, what is ethical is the production of durable maxims for singular and determinate processes, what he calls 'processes of truth'.

The subtext of the opening chapter is a counter-critique of the 'return to ethics' in the critique of *la pensée '68* found in the work of Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, but also 'les nouveaux philosophes', Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann. Badiou rightly understands the critique of *la pensée '68*, based on a defence of human rights, democracy and individualism, as a reactionary response to the foundering of revolutionary Marxism in France. Badiou defends the anti-humanism of Foucault, Althusser and Lacan because it was complicit with the critique of (and rebellion against) the established order, whereas the critique of *la pensée '68*, with its defence of ethics, of the individual and human rights, is simply, for him, at the service of official Western ideology. For Badiou, with some justification, the contemporary return to ethics is essentially a return to Kant and to a Kantian conception of the subject of the moral law as universal and context-free and not situationally bound. Reading Kantianism a little too straightforwardly as an ethical formalism, Badiou basically runs a Hegelian-Marxist critique against this position by claiming that a neo-Kantian ethics is incapable of thinking the singularity

of situations and of being orientated to *praxis*. Beneath the de-contextualized pallor of contemporary neo-Kantianism, Badiou detects in its ethical universalism an implicit apologia for Western ideology in so far as all human beings are judged according to the same standards: Western standards. Badiou also tags on the more Nietzschean thesis that the traditional notion of ethics turns human beings into victims. It is an ethics of *ressentiment*, of blaming the other and self-blame (in the auto-laceration of conscience), of reactive rather than active forces, in Deleuze's sense.

Against the neo-Kantianism implicit in the contemporary 'return to ethics', Badiou poses three theses: (1) that the human being *identifies* itself, in the Freudian sense (we are always-already intersubjectively situated), through an affirmative thinking – by action rather than reaction – by 'singular truths', that is, truths that arise from and apply to singular situations. (2) It is from this affirmative, processual character of the human, and its ethics of truths, that one is to determine, and determine *positively*, the Good. Namely, that evil is derived from this good by privation and not *vice versa*, which is a view that Badiou attributes to Kant. Badiou reads Kantian ethics, with Hegel, as a form of ethical stoicism in an evil world devoid of value. (3) Badiou writes, 'All humanity enroots itself in the identification in thought of singular situations';⁹ that is, there is no ethics in general, there is only an ethics of processes whereby one deals with possible courses of action that arise in a specific situation.

The question posed in the second chapter of *Ethics* is whether the contemporary ethics of the Other, habitually derived from Levinas, disrupts this critique. Unsurprisingly perhaps, Badiou's response is negative, and it must be said that the critique of Levinas is rather violent and certainly contestable. However, he does make a good point in claiming that in order for the relation between the Same and the Other to escape from the narcissistic and aggressive logic of identification described by Lacan in the Mirror Stage, there is a requirement that the alterity of the Other be supported by an alterity or exteriority that transcends finite human alterity. This alterity is that of the 'tout-autre', namely God. This move enables Badiou to make his *coup de grâce* (although he is not the first to make it), namely that ethics as first philosophy is dependent upon an axiom derived from religion. Thus, Levinas's claim that ethics is first philosophy subordinates philosophy to theology. This is not wrong, although there are other ways of reading Levinas: for example, *my way*, where I try and read Levinas through the categories of psychoanalysis. But let's suppose that Badiou

is right, that ‘ethics is a category of pious discourse’, then wouldn’t Levinas simply be another in that long line of *anti-philosophes*, like St Paul, Luther, Pascal, Rousseau, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, some of whom he elsewhere praises? On this point, let me attempt a small criticism in terms of what are for Badiou the four conditions of philosophy: art, mathematics, politics and love.

For Badiou, quite simply, there is no God. This is also to say that ‘the One is not’.¹⁰ Hence, multiplicity is the general law of being, what Badiou means by *être*. Every situation is a multiplicity composed of an infinity of elements. Given this facticity of the multiple, the order of the event as the realm of the subject distinct from being is characterized by a return to the Same. For Badiou, the Same is not what is simply



given – *être* – but rather *ce qui advient*, that which comes to itself in relation to the facticity and alterity of multiplicity. What Badiou sees as the *être immortel* of each singularity is its capacity for the true, that is, to become this Same that constructs itself, that ad-venes to itself, through the processual character of Sameness. A subject is not something that I *am*, it is something that I *become*, that comes to itself in a process of becoming. Thus, for Badiou, there is only an ethics of truths, that is, an ethics of processes of truths, of the labour that allows truths to ad-vene to the world. Ethics in general does not have any validity. Thus, although Badiou’s ethical theory is highly formalistic, it only takes on flesh in relation to specific and by definition variable situational conditions. That which is ethical, then, corresponds to what Badiou adjudges as the four sole conditions for philosophy: politics, love, mathematics, poetry.

This brings me back to the question of religion. If it is granted that religion, at least for St Paul but perhaps also for Levinas, is anti-philosophical, then I do not see why it cannot be a condition for ethical action. Obviously for Paul, Pascal and others, like Luther and Kierkegaard, religion plays *precisely* this role and it is privileged *because* it is anti-philosophical. In this sense, at the very least, one would have to admit that in addition to the four conditions of philosophy that are also conditions for ethical action, one needs to add a fifth, namely religion. Yet, one might want to go further and claim that precisely because of the exemplary way in which the logic of the event plays itself out in relation to Paul, namely that Paul’s notion of grace shows most clearly the subjectivity of the event, religion is perhaps the paradigm of ethical action, a paradigm upon which the other four conditions should be modelled.¹¹

In terms of my account of ethical experience, Badiou’s ethics is an entirely formal theory, a grammar of ethical experience, and not a specific determination of the good. However, what is motivating this formalism is a theory of the subject that has strong normative connotations – located in Badiou’s Beckettian formula ‘il faut continuer’ – although the specific content given to the good is subject-relative. As

I have shown, every account of ethical experience has at its base a demand on the self to which the self assents. The ethical subject is the name for this structure. Ethics, for Badiou, cannot be premised upon any pre-given account of the subject, because the subject is not something that one is, it is something that one becomes. One can only speak of the subject as a subject in becoming or a becoming-subject. As Nietzsche, the shadowy twin to St Paul, would say: *werde was du bist!*

For Badiou, we are simply the sort of animals who are claimed by circumstances to *become* a subject. *What are those circumstances?* For Badiou, they are the circumstances of a truth. *What are they?* These circumstances cannot be what there is. What there is for Badiou is the factual-being-multiple of the world, a plurality irreducible to any theological principle, henology or even post-ontotheological *singulare tantum*.

Thus, the circumstances of the being-multiple of the world do not, for Badiou, place a claim or demand on the subject. A subject – which is that which becomes – demands something more; it demands that something happens that *supplements* its insertion into that which is. Badiou calls this supplement an *event*, hence the distinction between *l'être* and *l'événement*. Thus, the event is what calls a subject into being, into the creation of a truth, whereas being is that which simply is, which is the order of *episteme* in Plato, which is to be explained by mathematics. As Badiou states in



the initial thesis of *L'Être et l'événement*: 'ontology is accomplished historically as mathematics'.¹²

Let us just note *en passant* that this founding dualism of being and the event might raise certain philosophical worries. First, simply because it is a dualism and hence, in Heidegger's terms, splits the phenomenon of being-in-the-world. Second, in so far as it does split the phenomenon, Badiou's theory might bear a certain family resemblance to other dualisms, for example that of the Sartrean dualism of *en soi* and *pour soi* by which, Badiou confesses at the beginning of his little book on Beckett, he was attracted in his youth: 'I was a perfect Sartrean.'¹³ Third, the dualism of being and event risks reproducing the Kantian or early Wittgensteinian distinction of pure and practical reason, between the ontological order of knowledge, explicable through logical form, and the ethical order of truth, an ethical order which, like that of Kant and perhaps more particularly Fichte, is based on an infinite *Streben*: 'Continuez!'

The logic of the event – virtuously or viciously circular?

Badiou's theory of ethical experience and the subject of that experience turns entirely on his account of the event. I would now like to bring out the logic of this event, a circular logic, although hopefully only virtuously circular. On this basis, certain critical questions can be raised.

From the standpoint of being, the event is, one might say, *invisible* (I can't think of a better word, but this is not satisfactory). That is, there is only an event for the subject who assents to the event, who declares it, and who defines its subjectivity in terms of a fidelity to the event. The event is the event only *for*

the subject who pledges itself to the event. But – and this is important – this is *not* to say that the event is the *act* of the subject, or that the event is the subject's *invention*. Rather, the event is an event *for* a subject who carries out the act that *binds* its subjectivity to that event, who defines its subjectivity through a fidelity to the event.

The event is only visible to the subject who *decides* to pledge its subjectivity to that event. For example, the event of Christ's resurrection is just not visible as such to the non-believer, who sees only an empty tomb. This is *not* to say that Christ's resurrection did not take place – we have read enough Pascal to keep a rather selfishly open mind on such matters – but that it only becomes an *event* for the subject who pledges itself to the event, for the subject who has *pistis*, the conviction of faith. In a similar way, the event of the French Revolution does not *appear* as a revolution to the opponent of the revolution, say the supporter of the *ancien régime*. For the latter, the revolution is only visible as chaos and disorder. The 'event' of the French Revolution is not the same event for Edmund Burke as for Thomas Paine. Analogously, multinational global capitalism looks like chaos to its insurrectionary opponent, whereas it looks like order to the capitalist. To put this into a formula: *the event is not the mere act of a subject, but it only becomes an event through a subjective act.*

On the question of the 'reality' of the event, thinking of St Paul's faith in the event of Christ's resurrection, Badiou emphasizes that the only 'proof' of the event is the subject who declares it. What interests Badiou is a notion of an event which is not empirically demonstrable in the order of being. As

Erasmus – another anti-philosopher – emphasizes in his *Encomium Moriae*, if Christ's crucifixion and resurrection was an act of folly, then such madness is all the more true of the Christian who decides to make the leap of faith. The only 'evidence' for Paul's leap of faith is the presence of grace, which is hardly a strong empirical guarantee.

Of course, there are events *and* events, and Badiou's choice of Paul as a paradigm for the event is all the more compelling because his act of faith is so strange to the modern atheist. For example, I can imagine pledging myself more easily to the event 'French Revolution' than I can to the event 'Christ's Resurrection'. But that, of course, is to miss the point. The choice of Paul is intended to show the extreme subject-dependency of the event. Thinking of Wallace Stevens's poem 'The Idea of Order at Key West', an event is an idea of order, it is something that we impose on the world, the grid through which and in terms of which we see it. But the event is also what makes the world a world *for us*, that is to say, a *meaningful* world: 'She was the single artificer of the world/ In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,/ Whatever self it had, became the self/ That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,/ As we beheld her striding there alone,/ Knew that there never was a world for her/ Except the one she sang and, singing, made.'

How to distinguish a true from a false event – the question of hegemony

The eventhood of the event is the consequence of a *decision*. For Badiou, a subject is the always local occurrence of a process of truth, and the subject binds itself to a process of truth, an event, on the basis of a decision. Now, I have a couple of questions on this notion of decision. But let me try and formalize my argument in order to recapitulate what I have said so far and to make one further step:

1. First, the logic of the event, as I have tried to describe it, is very close to the description of ethical experience given above. The logic of the event corresponds to the structure of ethical experience.

2. The consequence of this argument is that *every* event is an ethical event. That is, every exception to the order of being belongs to the domain of practical rather than theoretical reason.

3. In this sense, the circularity of the logic of the event is not a problem, it is just the way it is, the very nature of practical reason. The event, like ethical experience, is virtuously and not viciously circular.

4. But if that is the case, then my question is very simple: how can one speak of the event as an event of *truth*, or a process of truth? Let me try and explain.

If the event is the consequence of a decision, namely the decision to define one's subjectivity in terms of a fidelity to the event, then this event is *true* only in the sense that it is *true for* a subject that has taken this decision (true = true for a subject). Now, if that argument is valid, *then how and in virtue of what is one to distinguish a true event from a false event?* That is, I don't see how – on the basis of Badiou's criteria – we could ever distinguish a true event from a false event. The only realm of superior evidence to which such questions can be referred is the order of being, which is *apriori* excluded from discussions of the event. As Badiou admits in his 'Dictionary' at the end of *L'Être et l'événement*, 'there is therefore no contrary to the true'.¹⁴ But if there is no way of distinguishing truth from falsity at the level of the event, then might we not be better advised to stop talking about truth in this domain?

One inference from this argumentation – let us call it the pragmatist inference – would be the following. We might imagine the pragmatist saying 'Sure, we cannot distinguish between a true and a false event. True just means true for a subject who decides in favour of this event. False just means that the subject decides *not* to define itself in terms of such an event, and perhaps to define what is true *for it* in terms of explicit opposition to such a perceived falsehood.'

Now, if one accepts this pragmatist inference – that is, if true just means true for the subject – then why not go on to conclude that every event is the consequence of what Gramsci or Ernesto Laclau would call a *hegemonic articulation*? That is, why not conclude that every event is the consequence of a *decision* to relate oneself to the situation in a certain way, and that every decision is a hegemonic act. Therefore, otherwise stated, my question is how and in virtue of what is one to distinguish between truth and hegemonic articulation in Badiou's theory of the event? Isn't Badiou's talk of truth in ethical and political matters simply, as Wittgenstein would say, *a way of talking*, and doesn't it risk obscuring the real question in ethics and politics, which is that of *power*?

Allow me a final series of questions on the decision. If the eventhood of the event is the consequence of a decision, then how might that decision be characterized? Is a decision something taken by a subject? Badiou, it seems to me, would happily say 'Yes'. But if that is the case, then doesn't the notion of decision have to presuppose some conception of the subject defined in terms of an active, virile *will*, as it does, say, in Carl Schmitt? That is, doesn't Badiou's concept of the decision have to presuppose some notion of an

autarkic will? Obviously, if this criticism is justified, then it would have significant *political* consequences, particularly as the very concept of the political depends on how we understand the voluntaristic power of decision.

The heroism of the decision – Badiou and psychoanalysis

Against this (and I am thinking of Derrida's reading of Schmitt in *Politics of Friendship*), can one, should one, not try and rethink the concept of decision, and hence the concept of the political in terms of a passive or unconscious decision, what we might call *the decision of the other in me*? That is, rather than thinking of the decision taken by the subject, might we not do better to think of *the subject taken by the decision*? In this sense, the decision is an event with regard to which I am passive, the decision taken by the other in me, a decision based not on a sheer autarkic act of will, or even a *Faktum der Vernunft*, as much as what one might call a *Faktum des Anderen*, a fact of the other.¹⁵

Such a position on the decision would seem to be entailed by the very logic of Badiou's position. There is, I think, the risk of a certain *heroism of the decision* in Badiou's work, a heroism enshrined in the central maxim of his ethics: *Continuez!* Yet this heroism can be avoided by another understanding of Badiou that can be seen by considering his relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In *Ethics*, Badiou provides a formal definition of an ethics of truths: *the ethical is defined as the free submission to a principle that decides to continue with a process of truth*. In relation to psychoanalysis, we might say that the ethics of the psychoanalytic situation consists in the decision to *continue* in the process of the transference interpretative situation under the normative constraint of a desire which is not to be given way on. More generally, the ethical is that which gives consistency to the presence of someone (the specific, punctual individual that pledges itself to a process of subjectivization) in the composition of the subject that effectuates the process of truth. This ethical consistency on the part of someone is a fidelity to a process of subjectivization that is in excess of that someone. It passes through the specific, punctual individual, but the latter cannot exhaust or fully know it. The someone is ethically committed to a process of subjectivization that exceeds its knowledge, and is, to this extent, *unconscious*.

But if this is the case, then the subject has to commit itself to a process of truth that is in part

unconscious. That is, the subject has to commit itself to a decision that has already been taken within me, *à mon insu*, as it were. This takes us back to Lacan's ethics of psychoanalysis. Badiou reads Lacan's ethical imperative from Seminar VII, 'do not give way on its desire', as 'do not give way on that of oneself one does not know'. For Badiou, the someone who embarks upon a path of subjectivization is seized by a process of truth that cannot be cognitively or reflectively exhausted. Thus, the someone has to be faithful to a fidelity that it cannot understand, which is one way of understanding the analytic pact of transference in psychoanalysis, namely to give oneself over to a process of interpretation of which one does not know the outcome.

Badiou claims, with some justification, that this is *an ethics of the real* in so far as the real is of the order of the *rencontre* for Lacan. It is that which we cannot know, what resists symbolization, where *das Ding* addresses and claims the subject without the subject being able to address and claim it. Of course, as Lacan shows in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the prime figure for *das Ding* in Freud is the fellow human being, *der Nebenmensch*; that is, in my language, the ethical relation to the other person is a relation to the Real.

In this sense, the heroism of the decision in Badiou can be avoided by showing that ethical decisions always confront elements of the Real that are irreducible to the conscious will. The decision is taken with regard to the other within me, the *Faktum* of unconscious desire. However, there is a problem in Badiou's understanding of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which I alluded to above when I said that his ethical theory risks losing sight of the dimension of the Thing. Badiou claims that his theory is an ethics of the real in so far as the real is of the order of the *rencontre* for Lacan; it is what we cannot know, that which resists symbolization, where *das Ding* addresses and claims the subject without the subject being able to address and claim it. This is the structure of *the fellow human being complex* installed at the heart of the Lacanian and Levinasian ethical subject as its Law.

Now, although Badiou describes his theory as an ethics of the real, my question is: *isn't this traumatic dimension of the Thing as the Law that divides the subject overcome in Badiou through his emphasis on love*? This is revealed particularly clearly in his reading of St Paul, where Badiou writes in his seventh theorem, 'The subjective process of a truth is the sole and same thing as the love of that truth.'¹⁶ That is, the way in which a subject relates itself to the event is

through an act of love that overcomes the dimension of Law, which is always identified with death: ‘the first of the names of death is the Law’.¹⁷ In this sense, Badiou’s moral theory would be structurally Christian, whereas Lacan and Levinas would be structurally Judaic in so far as their conception of ethics is based around a dimension of Law that cannot be overcome through the work of love.

Let me put the same criticism another way. On the one hand, Badiou would seem to grant that there has to be a dimension of what he calls the unnameable (*l’innomable*) in all ethical action: ‘the Good is only Good insofar as it does not claim to make the world good’.¹⁸ In this sense, the subject always confronts elements of the real, aspects of the situation that remain inaccessible to it. Yet, on the other hand, how is this claim consistent with the emphasis on love, which would seem to entail the overcoming of the law of the Real in an act of almost mystical identification with the *événement*? That is, in Lacanian terms, isn’t there a risk of a reduction of the order of the Real to the Symbolic through Badiou’s emphasis on love? This is revealed most clearly perhaps in Badiou’s seeming hostility to the death drive as the basic law of the unconscious in Freud and Lacan.¹⁹ Two things are revealed here: (a) the *structural Judaism* of psychoanalysis is confirmed through its preoccupation with the unsurpassable character of the death drive, the Law and the Real, a fact that would simply confirm my attempted rapprochement between Levinas and Lacan; (b) the *structurally Christian* character of Badiou’s work is revealed in what is perhaps its most attractive feature, namely its persistent and restless affirmation of life and its refusal of the tragic pathos of Lacanian psychoanalysis in the name of courage and energy. In this sense, Lacan would be closer to Levinas than to Badiou. But maybe for precisely this reason Lacan, Levinas and everybody else should try and be closer to Badiou. Let me try to explain myself by turning to the question of comedy.

Beckett as comic anti-hero – against tragedy

Returning to the question of heroism, I would like to wager a final series of questions on the figure whom I would choose to see as the real hero of Badiou’s work, not St Paul but Samuel Beckett. Let me quote from Badiou’s ‘Theses on the Theatre’:

I do not believe that the principal questions of our epoch are horror, suffering, destiny or despair. We are saturated with them and the fragmentation of these terms into theatrical ideas is incessant.... Our question is that affirmative courage, of local energy.

To seize hold of a point and to maintain it. Our question is therefore less that of the conditions for a modern tragedy than those for a modern comedy. Beckett understood this, whose theatre, correctly performed, is hilarious.²⁰

It is true, Beckett understood this very well; but have we really understood Beckett? Let me take a small sideways step to try and explain myself. Ethics, for Badiou, is that which governs our lives as subjects, what gives them consistency, and its only maxim is ‘Continuez!’ Submission to this ethical principle involves a certain asceticism, a certain renunciation, but this is only at the service of our desire, which sometimes seems close to Spinoza’s notion of *conatus essendi*. As is well known, and in fidelity to a largely German tradition that stretches back from Heidegger to Hegel and Hölderlin, Lacan’s prime example of someone who acts in accordance with their desire and who *continues* is Antigone. She exemplifies the position of being ‘entre deux morts’ which, for Lacan, best describes the situation of human finitude. Antigone is the heroine of Lacanian psychoanalysis – that is, she is possessed by that transgressive *ate* or madness that enables her to stand out against the conformism of the state, where all ethical action is reduced to what Lacan calls *le service des biens* (the service of goods), and achieve an authentic relation to finitude.

Now, I have problems with Antigone, not so much with her personage, but with its exemplarity. I have elsewhere attempted to criticize Lacan for employing tragedy as his paradigm of sublimation, arguing that the reading of *Antigone* in Seminar VII makes psychoanalysis the inheritor of a tragic paradigm that stretches back to Schelling’s Identity Philosophy.²¹ I criticize this paradigm for making finitude too *heroic*, where the tragic heroine achieves a certain purification of desire in the experience of being-towards-death. Inspired by Lacoue-Labarthe’s anti-Heideggerian reading of Hölderlin’s translation of the *Antigone*, I call this *the tragic-heroic paradigm*.²² I argue that a quite different picture of finitude emerges if we focus on the phenomena of the comic and humour. The picture of finitude that I want to recommend is not accessible in the form of tragic affirmation, but rather comic acknowledgement, the acknowledgement of the ubiquity of the finite, but also its ungraspability. My approval of the demand of finitude is not equal to that demand, but makes that demand even more demanding. To put this in a formula, I think that humour is a form of minimal sublimation that corresponds to the structure of depression in the Freudian sense, but which is not at all depressing. On the contrary,

Freud concludes his essay on humour by claiming that humour – dark, sardonic, wicked humour – is ‘liberating and elevating’. ‘Look!’, he concludes, ‘Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children – just worth making a jest about.’²³ Ethical subjectivity is comic rather than tragic.

To return to Badiou, what interests me in his work is the link between affirmative ethical courage and comedy as the form of aesthetic sublimation that would best exemplify this ethical stance. *This* is what Beckett understood so well and it is why his tragicomedy – which is how he describes *Godot* – uses the strategy of humour, hilarity and *drôlerie* to attain an ethical stance of courage and love of humanity. As Badiou rightly writes, ‘Beckett has to be played in the most intense *drôlerie* ... and it is only then that the true destination of the comic comes into view: not a symbol, not a disguised metaphysics, still less a derision, but a powerful love for human obstinacy, for an insatiable desire.’²⁴ Thus, for Badiou, it is the strange cast of characters who populate Beckett’s fiction and theatre that best exemplify the maxim ‘Continuez!’: ‘I must go on, I can’t go on, I will go on.’

I couldn’t agree more. And yet, I have a question on this interpretation of Beckett. For Badiou, Beckett practises a form of methodical asceticism that reduces all ethical considerations to the bare maxim: Continuez!²⁵ The problem I have here is that this makes Beckett sound like a stoic. Now, although there are obviously strongly stoical elements of discipline, denial, rigour and exactitude in his work, I don’t think that Beckett is *only* a stoic. That is, Beckett does not just say ‘il faut continuer’, but also ‘je ne peux pas continuer’. What is perhaps the most characteristic feature of Beckett’s writing is not just the decision to continue, but also the acknowledgement that I cannot continue. That is to say, *Beckett’s prose is characterized by an aporetic rhythm of continuity and discontinuity*, of being able to go on and not being able to go on. This aporetic rhythm is the very movement of Beckett’s writing, what he calls ‘a syntax of weakness’, a self-undoing language that cannot go on and cannot but go on, that continues *in* its failure, and continues *as* that failure. For example, ‘Live and invent. I have tried, Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried.’²⁶ Or a longer example,

What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later. Generally speaking. There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. I should mention without going any further that I say aporia

without knowing what it means. Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares? I don’t know.²⁷

But this syntax of weakness is at its most explosive when it becomes a *comic syntax*. For example, Clov to Hamm in *Endgame*, ‘Do you believe in the life to come?’; Hamm to Clov, ‘Mine was always that. Got him that time.’²⁸ Or again, as I began with talk of parrots, here is Molloy on Lousse’s parrot:

Fuck the son of a bitch, fuck the son of a bitch. He must have belonged to an American sailor, before he belonged to Lousse. Pets often change masters. He didn’t say much else. No, I’m wrong, he also said, Putain de merde! He must have belonged to a French sailor before he belonged to the American sailor. Putain de merde! Unless he had hit on it alone, it wouldn’t surprise me. Lousse tried to make him say, Pretty Polly! I think it was too late. He listened, his head on one side, pondered, then said, Fuck the son of a bitch. It was clear he was doing his best.²⁹

Beckett’s work is characterized by a syntax of weakness, a comic syntax that continues and then decides not to continue, simply to realize that it cannot not continue and that it must continue. It is this experience, like that of Vladimir and Estragon trying and failing to hang themselves in *Godot*, that is so comically tragic, or tragically comic. But if that is the case, then there are two conflicting norms in Beckett’s work: on the one hand, there is ‘Continuez!’, and on the other hand, ‘Ratage!’ The logic of Beckett’s work follows the aporetic rhythm of these two imperatives. The courage to continue does not simply derive from a stoical act of ascetic will, from some Spinozist *conatus essendi* or Fichtean *Streben*, but rather from the continual experience of failure: ‘Try again, fail again, fail better.’

Let me try one last time. There seems to be a residual heroism at work in Badiou, the heroism of resistance and militant activism: St Paul, Jean Cavailles, or Georges Canguilhem. But this doesn’t seem to be Beckett’s world, filled as it is with anti-heroic personages, a gallery of moribunds who seem riveted to the spot, unable to move: Murphy, Molloy, Malone, Mahood, Watt and Worm. But is such blatant inactivity another form of resistance? Might not Beckett’s heroes best exemplify what it would mean to be, in Badiou’s allusion to Mallarmé, ‘militants of restrained action’?³⁰ Now, I would quite like to be a militant of restrained action, particularly as it doesn’t sound too demanding, but what is it exactly?

The question of heroism is urgent because the stakes are not just ethical, they are political. As Badiou admits at the beginning and end of his *Abrégé de*

métapolitique, true politics is rare, the last good example being 1968.³¹ Perhaps this is true, but nevertheless what I suspect in Badiou is *the seduction of a great politics*, the event that would, in Nietzsche's words, break history in two. But perhaps the epoch of great politics, like the epoch of great art for Heidegger and Hegel, is over. Perhaps. And perhaps that is a good thing. Perhaps we have had enough of the virile, Promethean politics of the will, the empty longing for total revolution. To be seduced by great politics is to risk nostalgically blinding oneself to the struggles of the present. As such, the seduction risks being politically disempowering. What we have to *hope* for, in Paul's sense of the word, is the knowledge that it is, in Beckett's words, all quite hopeless. But such hopelessness is not resignation and could provide a bridge to another model of politics, what I would see as a micro-politics of continual interruption, interruptions both internal to civil society and internationally at a trans-state level. Such interruptions would be movements of dissensual emancipatory praxis that work against the consensual horizon of the state. Perhaps we have to content ourselves with smaller actions and smaller victories, an everyday and heroically anti-heroic militancy. We have to learn to expect much more from much less. To my mind, such a politics is not approached through the figure of the tragic hero – lofty, solitary, derelict and *unheimlich* – but rather through what Badiou calls the 'humoristic pragmatism' of Beckett. As Malone quips in what I would like to imagine as an ironic response to St Paul, 'For why be discouraged, one of the thieves was saved, that is a generous percentage.'³²

Notes

1. Dieter Henrich, 'The Concept of Moral Insight and Kant's Doctrine of the Fact of Reason', in *The Unity of Reason*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1994, pp. 55–87. I would like to thank Alain Badiou, Barbara Cassin, Charles Ramond, Sandra Laugier and other participants at a conference on Badiou held in Bordeaux in October 1999 for their critical responses to a French version of this paper. I would like to thank Jay Bernstein for first alerting me to the rich potential of Henrich's argument for contemporary moral theory and Peter Osborne for an acute critical reading of the first draft of this article.
2. The philosopher who doesn't really fit in this list is Hegel, who rejects the Kantian version of moral insight in the strongest terms as that 'cold duty, the last undigested log in our stomach, a revelation given to reason' (quoted in Henrich, 'The Concept of Moral Insight', p. 69). However, one might say that the notion of moral

insight in Hegel is the awareness of freedom as the self-consciousness of Spirit in its historical development, something to be learned by consciousness by recapitulating the experiences described in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In other words, moral insight would be identical with the achievement of rational self-determination.

3. *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Blackwell, Oxford, 1962, p. 20; German pagination p. 275.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 358; German pagination p. 310.
5. Romans 7:19.
6. A very similar line of criticism of Badiou can be found in Slavoj Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject*, Verso, London and New York, 1999; see ch. 3 'The Politics of Truth, or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St Paul', pp. 127–70.
7. *Saint Paul: Le fondation de l'universalisme*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1997.
8. *L'Éthique: Essai sur la conscience du Mal*, Hatier, Paris, 1993.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
11. For a useful critique of Badiou on this question of religion, see Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 'Cantor, Lacan, Mao, Beckett, *même combat*: The philosophy of Alain Badiou', *Radical Philosophy*, 93, 1999, pp. 6–13.
12. *L'Être et l'événement*, Seuil, Paris, 1988, pp. 9–10. The same thought is expressed in the *Court traité de l'ontologie transitoire*, Seuil, Paris, 1998, p. 189.
13. *Beckett: L'incroyable désir*, Hachette, Paris, 1995.
14. *L'Être et l'événement*, p. 561.
15. I have argued for such a view in detail in the final chapter of my *Ethics–Politics–Subjectivity*, Verso, London and New York, 1999. See also my 'Remarks on Derrida and Habermas', forthcoming in *Constellations*.
16. *Saint Paul*, p. 97.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
18. *L'Éthique*, p. 75.
19. A more detailed version of this line of criticism can be found in Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, pp. 145–67.
20. *Petit Manuel d'inesthétique*, Seuil, Paris, 1998, p. 117–18.
21. The most succinct version of this argument can be found in 'Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic–Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis', *Constellations*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1999, pp. 108–22.
22. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Metaphrasis*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1997.
23. Sigmund Freud, 'Humour', trans. J. Rivière, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21, p. 166.
24. *Beckett: L'incroyable désir*, pp. 74–5.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
26. Samuel Beckett, *The Trilogy (Malloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable)*, Picador, London, 1979, p. 179.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
28. Samuel Beckett, *Engage*, Faber, London, 1958, p. 35.
29. Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 36.
30. *Abrégé de métapolitique*, Seuil, Paris, 1998, p. 118.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 167.
32. Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 233.