



Volume Three, Number One

Badiou's Ethics: A Return to Ideal Theory

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Abstract:

In the *Ethics*, Badiou writes against ideal, abstract and rule-based conceptions of ethics. As in some pragmatic ethics, it implies denying the received moral vocabulary and focusing instead on agency. This explains why Badiou's *Ethics* is often read as a radical statement in today's normative landscape. This paper evaluates such a claim.

In particular, it questions the extent to which an ethical approach that idealizes the situation through the notion of "fidelity to the event" can truly be non-ideal and radical. Three points are problematic. First, one has to discover actual "events" that demand ethical action; but who can tell us what an event is? Second, one has to be "faithful" to those events; but it is unclear whether Badiou allows for "evil" events and why fidelity to the event is better than its denial or occultation. Three, how can a non-ideal and radical ethical approach be premised on the idea of truth, and which consequences follow for its capacity to provide normative guidance?

Put simply, this paper argues that while Badiou seems to perform a radical shift in contemporary moral reasoning, his contribution is more ambiguous. He seems to (i) reinstate an ethics based on naturalistic conceptions of good and evil; and, (ii) replace the role of reason in devising moral rules for the role of the philosopher that defines what counts as an event. Finally, while the results are modest, Badiou's ethics forces us to adopt a vocabulary that impoverishes the description of moral life, and fails to build an ethics that is sensitive to concrete situations.

1. Introduction

Contemporary ethical theory is in a state of disarray, trapped in a profound contradiction.¹ On the one hand, we are witnessing a revival of the “normative” especially due to the emergence of global ethics and a rediscovery of Western and Eastern virtue ethics. On the other hand, however, we (still) espouse a postmodern sensibility, which rejects the existence of God/Values and procedures that can robustly solve moral disagreement. Acknowledging this dead-end, some recent ethical approaches try to shape ethics from concrete situations, focusing on application problems, and refusing *a priori* definitions of good and evil. Badiou’s ethics is worth considering because it fits well said landscape. Against our postmodern times, it promises an ethics of truths based on concrete situations.

This paper scrutinizes Alain Badiou’s conception of ethics as primarily articulated in his book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (from now on *Ethics*), and later complemented and revised in *Logics of Worlds*. *Ethics* deserved much academic attention but, quite strikingly, nobody has yet attempted to place Badiou’s conception in the broader landscape of moral theory and thinking. That is, and perhaps because of Badiou’s reputation as the *enfant terrible* of contemporary philosophy, critics and acclaimers alike embraced without flinching Badiou’s self-proclamation of his take on ethics as novel and radical. But is this the case?

This paper argues that Badiou’s attempt to build a sort of existentialist ethics based on truths, fails to deliver a novel and convincing ethics. Furthermore, it both ignores basic moral categories as well as moral sensibilities, and signals a problematic return to ideal theory in ethics. Making good these claims requires a number of steps and arguments.

¹ The article follows Badiou’s practice of not including detailed references in the corpus of the text. A bibliographical note at the end of the paper explains the sources that ground the approach to ethics and Badiou’s work deployed, and a list of the sources explicitly used in the text.

Section 2 offers a comprehensive account of Badiou's ethics. It describes the critique to rival approaches, clarifies the meta-ethical vocabulary employed (i.e. what is good/evil?) and identifies the prescribed normative ethics (i.e. how should one act?). This overview should make clear that Badiou deems it necessary to refashion ethics by means of substantial conceptual innovation. Thus, the remaining of the paper evaluates the promises and burdens of such a move. Section 3 argues that because ethics is linked to truth, the account offered cannot be applied to ordinary concrete situations without conceptual stretching and contradictory reliance on rival moral resources. Sections 4 and 5 highlight that Badiou's meta-ethics is open to the traditional charges voiced against essentialist understandings of good/evil. These sections offer an internal critique that reveals how the truth of the event is repeatedly portrayed in naturalistic evaluative language, e.g. something good/better, progressive, universal, a productive novelty, a formal revolution, an ethics of life... This is shown in two different ways. First, there is an illegitimate ranking of different universal *Ideas* of good. Second, as articulated by Badiou, the concept "event" hides controversial historical and sociological interpretations of the truth of revolutions. Section 6 suggests that in the absence of a reliable procedure to identify an event, Badiou's ethics risks drifting into a form of either classical existentialism or Badiou's moral *fiat*. The section further shows that the ethics proposed is oblivious to many important morally salient features of concrete situations, such as the importance of consequences and the existence of conflicts among fidelities. Here the section moves Badiou closer than he would want to Kantianism. The upshot of the section is that Badiou's normative ethics offers no guidance whatsoever on what fidelity to an event requires. Section 7 develops this last point and suggests that Badiou's ethics of concrete situations lags behind important developments in ethical debates. In particular, it is argued, it is unsuccessful in describing and prescribing according to the features of concrete situations. A brief contrast with virtue ethics shows how there are moral approaches that can eschew a general ethics, be descriptively rich and tailor normative prescription according to the

particulars of the situation. Badiou's ethics is yet another example of ideal theory that barely scratches the surface of complex moral situations. Section 8 concludes by raising a central question concerning Badiou's strategy: why found an ethics on truth?

2. Badiou's Ethical Proposal

2.1 The Diagnosis

Badiou wrote the *Ethics* primarily against a specific ethical project:

“... a consensual law-making concerning human beings in general, their needs, their lives, and their deaths – and by extension, the self-evident, universal demarcation of evil, of what is incompatible with the human essence”.

In other words, Badiou writes against a general, abstract and speculative ethics based on human rights and multiculturalism, two perceived spin-offs of Kantian and Levinasian ethics. Indeed, both are built around *a priori* conceptions of human nature and good and evil. For Kant, morality prescribes treating every individual as an end in itself whereas, for Levinas, Man comes to exist already encumbered by the needs of the “Other”. Badiou reads both projects as offering a general ethics in the sense that “what to do” in a concrete situation can never *exceed* the *a priori* moral code. If we take the austerity wave in Europe as an example, a general ethics prevents us from radically changing the state of affairs because this would require violations of established human rights. In this light, ethics becomes a (conservative) enterprise about preserving and administering living beings! Badiou further claims that human rights conceive man as a victim and ethical action as the work of a saviour, e.g. the Western powers that exert their right to intervene in order to preserve life and end suffering. The upshot is that evil is primary for contemporary ethics, and good a derived product, i.e. something like “rights to non-Evil”; a state

of affairs only reinforced by a media culture of “distant suffering” to use Luc Boltanski’s expression.

A further consequence of Badiou’s approach concerns the role of politics vis-à-vis ethics. To appreciate it, we need to turn to *Logics of Worlds*, where he argues that democratic materialism is the conviction that “there are only bodies and languages”. Since our ethics is about conserving the rights of living beings (the *a priori* moral code) according to consensus building – democracy – the greatest enemy is that which denies such formal equality. In other words, what/whoever preaches intolerance and/or tries to create an alternative version of the good. Thus, as the account goes, contemporary ethics admits only of a politics of the possible, never of a utopian politics of liberation always conveniently labelled as another “totalitarian nightmare”.

This picture relates to Badiou’s third concern: the pervasiveness of “ethics” in social life, as ethics becomes increasingly a technical vocabulary that can be applied to professions, media, society, history... And yet, according to Badiou, this pervasiveness hides a deep nihilistic tone. Badiou seems to target a specific contradiction: those employing the word “ethics” everywhere are the same that hold fast to ontologies and epistemologies that reject the possibility of truth. But why? For Badiou, “being” is the domain of multiple multiplicities, i.e. difference. Yet, one cannot say anything truthful about difference because truth implies something *in excess* of what there is. He criticizes multiculturalism (and Levinas’ ethics of *alterity*) because it is obvious that we are different and while difference can be interesting, as “exotic tourism”, it is ultimately of no philosophical interest. Instead, what should truly matter for philosophy is to think truth again. Otherwise, we are left with opinions and human beings living like human animals.

2.2 The Proposal: An Ethics of Truths

Against this backdrop, Badiou builds a vision in *Ethics* around the capacity of Man “to be an immortal”, to escape a finite existence or an existence as a victim:

“Man is to be identified by his affirmative thought, by the singular truths of which he is capable, by the Immortal which makes of him the most resilient [résistant] and most paradoxical of animals.”

Although unnoticed in reviews of Badiou’s ethics, this particular anthropology is *necessary* to the economy of his work. To clarify, Badiou’s ethics has little to do with current academic work on “ethics”. Instead, *his* ethics is a natural continuation of a broader ontological project and can only be understood within the latter’s context.

The central distinction is that between “being” and “event”. This dualism encapsulates a theory of change in modes of being and thought. *Being* is infinite multiplicity, structured and ordered according to existing opinions and knowledges. Being is neither true or false nor good or bad; it is just the reproduction of existing forms. However, in the state of the situation, there is always something that cannot be accounted for in existing knowledge, i.e. a void/absence of something. The void accounts for the possibility of events, Badiou’s second term in his dualism. *Events* are ruptures, novelties/revolutions that destabilize existing knowledge, and force a change in the language of the situation.

The best example is found in love, more specifically falling in love at first sight. This example comes from Simone de Beauvoir in her novel, *The Blood of Others*. She describes a situation in which Jean crosses the street and notices a woman on the opposite sidewalk. From that moment

on, Jean knows he *cannot ignore the encounter*. He may deny it but cannot ignore that it *happened* to him. On the other hand, Jean can be faithful to it and follow it irrespective of the consequences. The point is that once he is faithful to the event, the way in which he understands the situation changes drastically to the extent he is forced to invent a new mode of being. Hence, “being” is nothing more than reproduction of existing forms whereas events trigger radical changes in such forms. In other words, the existence of “events” ensures that history is not just a succession of pure meaningless difference.

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For Badiou, events produce truths in one of *four* worlds, namely: politics, art, love and science. However, events do not produce truths *per se*. Recall that events emerge from a void. Thus, they need an *intervention* by a subject, i.e. they need to be named and followed by a faithful subject. In this way, truth lies in generic procedures resulting from fidelity to the event by a subject. Both event and a faithful subject are necessary for truths to emerge (this is paramount because it allows Badiou to avoid both the *structuralist* and *subjectivist* paradigms of truth):

“The subject affirms that something has happened and is prepared to bear the consequences, whether the event actually occurred may be undecidable, but the situation provides the subject with the necessary material to not only distinguish different events, but also recognize the problem posed by the event as different from the problem of the foundation”.

We are now in possession of all the relevant elements needed to describe Badiou’s ethics. In *Ethics*, *good* is nothing more than the subject’s consistent fidelity to the event. Since the event produces truth and what distinguishes human beings from animals is their capacity for truth, then fidelity to the event signals Man’s rising above *its interests and desires*, i.e. to live like the Immortal it can be. Conversely, *evil* consists in the perversion of the truth of the event and can

take three forms. The first form of evil is *simulacrum*. It occurs when the faithful subject upholds and commits to a fake event because the void of the situation is filled in a non-universal way, e.g. Nazism. *Betrayal*, the second form of evil, arises when the faithful subject denies the event, thus failing to be consistent with it, e.g. when a loving couple falls into conjugality. Finally, the third form of evil, *disaster*, entails the totalization of the truth of the event, e.g. when the truth procedure aims to impose the good on the world as when love “names” sex, or when politics “names” a community.

In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou expands and (partially) modifies the framework deployed in *Ethics* introducing three additional forms of subjectivity. The *reactive subject* denies the event from the beginning and, in doing so, produces reactionary innovations such as when political revisionists resist revolutions or scientists reduce important discoveries to existing knowledge. The *obscure subject* occults the truth by destroying the body that has constructed the present of a particular world. This takes place when God or Humanism are used to limit the operations of science or when political militants name a full body such as in Nazism or Fascism. Finally, the *faithful subject* resurrects the event, as when a loving couple has a second encounter and overcomes a betrayal or occultation of love.

Badiou’s ethical prescription can be summarized in the following formula: “Keep going!” Keep going means to show consistency in the fidelity to the event in such a way that we transcend the human animal we are. It also means keep going “to the limit of the possible”, irrespective of the consequences. Thus, the ethics of Badiou is a deontological ethics of life where living means to “live like an Immortal”. Where Badiou speaks of evil in *Ethics*, in *Logics of Worlds* he is more precise and contrasts the ethics of life (faithful subject) with the ethics of conservation (reactive subject) and mortification (the obscure subject). The faithful subject accepts that life is a given

and commits to a new life; the reactive subject preserves the existing life whereas the obscure subject nurtures “the hatred of every living thought”.

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Finally, it should be clearly stated that in *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou maintains the priority of the good over evil (even though he does not use this term), of life over conservation and mortification, since the last two require an existing present:

“... the denial of the present supposes its production, and its occultation supposes a formula of denial”.

Badiou believes his ethics to be innovative both substantially and conceptually. This paper aims to ascertain whether he manages to deliver a credible and innovative ethics of concrete situations. Each of the following sections will test a different dimension of his ethics. We start by questioning the constraints that truth imposes on the scope of ethics.

3. First Critique: The Scope of an Ethics based on Truth

Traditionally, ethics focuses both on metaethical questions such as “what is good/evil?” and on normative problems such as “how to live a good life?” Badiou addresses both questions as he defines good and evil (fidelity/infidelity to the event) and prescribes normative advice (“keep going!”). So far so good, but things take a strange turn when we consider the scope of this ethics, i.e. the spectre of actions covered. Let us look at the structure of the argument:

- (i) ethics is about concrete situations,
- (ii) ethics should make man “live like an immortal”
- (iii) ethics is always an “ethics of truths”, and

(iv) there are only four worlds – politics, love, science and art – where truth is produced.

If this analytics are true, then a fifth proposition follows:

(v) ethics/truth cannot exist outside of those four worlds.

This section claims that this last proposition – the core of Badiou’s ethics – is problematic on three accounts. First, Badiou unjustifiably reduces ethical action to political mobilization, forgetting that the latter does not do away with the need for (often immediate) individual moral behaviour outside political protest. Second, there is a mismatch between the problems the book *Ethics* starts with (multiculturalism, human rights and humanitarian intervention) and the type of problems and examples that Badiou speaks of (e.g. truth in love, science, art and only residually politics). Third, Badiou himself seems to struggle with such a narrow-scope ethics since he contradictorily applies it to situations outside truth-worlds; case in which he ends up endorsing a version of the ethics he rejects.

Read together the three problems reveal a common thread: since ethics is ordinarily understood to cover action and practice across all spheres of human action, reducing it to just the four worlds named by Badiou distorts the meaning of an ethics of concrete situations beyond recognition. Traditional examples concern dilemmas in friendship; what to do when armed forces in hostile environments came across bystanders that, if not subdued, may reveal their location to their enemies; whether a leader of an health organization should make public information on a global pandemic or whether German soldiers acted wrongly in following orders conducive to the mass atrocities in concentration camps. Upon reflection, these are behaviours and actions that fall outside the scope of Badiou’s ethics because they do not fit any of the truth-worlds.

This connects to the first problem. The above ethical examples could only possibly fit Badiou's world of politics since the world of love concerns a loving couple (not friendship) and art and science are clearly off the mark. If this is the case, then ethics stops having anything to say about friendship, an important topic that traditionally works as a metonymy for the constitutive role of social life in human beings. The other consequence seems to be that politics replaces ethics as the world in which action is generally evaluated. However, it is easy to notice that the world of politics is not the same as the world of ethics. For example, political militancy cannot answer the sort of individual moral dilemmas exemplified above because the latter require immediate concrete choices; not simply the participation in the subject upholding a given Idea of good (Badiou's world of politics). Thus, in Badiou's ethics, these questions remain unanswered and unaccounted for because truth and ethics emerge only in and with events.

The second problem emerges when we consider the misleading nature of *Ethics*. Consider how the book opens with a critique of human rights, multiculturalism and an ethics based on the recognition of the other. But here is the strange thing. Quickly enough, Badiou jumps to the ethics of love and art, highlighting the formal revolutions produced by Heloise and Abelard's love story or Schoenberg's atonal music. But what has fidelity to a love encounter or to the atonal music have to do with the contemporary ethics he so much criticizes? Little it seems, but this shift weakens Badiou's case since he criticizes a set of practices - humanitarian intervention or rights talk - that address specific problems by changing both the vocabulary of ethics and the problems it is supposed to address. In his translation, however, Badiou is never clear on what to do about those problems to which rights and humanitarian intervention constituted a solution, or how could his ethics could supply a contrasting solution. Instead, the preferred strategy is to focus on rare episodes that have nothing to do with the opening problems of the book and serve only to highlight the "Human Immortal" we can be in other spheres of action.

Put together these two criticisms highlight Badiou's reduction of the realm of ethics to exceptional moments in life: revolutions/events. This clashes, though, with our moral experience, which expects ethics to provide guidance in daily situations. Again, there is simply no argument – other than the need for ethics to speak truth – for such abandonment nor there is an evaluation of the adequacy of this strategy. More importantly, this seems to go against the logic of Badiou's opening claim according to which ethics needs to be re-founded in “concrete situations”. To be sure, “concrete” stands for “actual” or “in reality/practice” so that the discussion of events such as the French Revolution or Heloise and Abelard's love speaks indeed of concrete, not abstract, situations. On the other hand, however, how “concrete” is an ethics of “concrete situations”, when its situations are so rare that they may never happen in one's lifetime? Doesn't this expand the ordinary meaning of a “concrete situation” too greatly? Does this mean that in such cases ethics has nothing to say in one's life?

The final problem is born out of the tension lurking behind a novel conceptualization of ethics that blatantly clashes with our moral experience and ordinary use of “ethics”. Interestingly, Badiou applies his ethics to mundane situations similar to the ones I have sketched before. In *Ethics*, he discusses the choice that doctors have to make concerning the treatment of patients. Against the discourse of economic necessity prescribing treatment according to resource-availability and capacity to pay, Badiou claims that doctors should treat patients “*right to the limit of the possible*”. Obviously, a disregard for the consequences of applying such an absolute principle of action can lead to undesirable but avoidable outcomes. Far more importantly, however, is that Badiou's argumentation is contradictory on two accounts. He starts by suggesting that doctors should treat patients to the limits of the possible because the Hippocrates' oath so prescribes. He then argues that the clinical situation is just *a* clinical situation. Here is the double contradiction. The appeal to doctors' professional ethics collides

with the previous dismissal of deontological codes as an example of the sad pervasiveness of “ethics”. Second, it is hard to see how one could argue, assuming Badiou’s ontological and epistemological framework, in favour of an *essentialist understanding* of “the clinical situation”, i.e. that a clinical situation is necessarily and exclusively a clinical situation; not political, economic, aesthetic, moral or legal. Finally, there is the problem that this individual action does not need to be read as a political action as Badiou seems to imply. It is hard to see an event here or this situation as an instance for maintained fidelity to a past event. Since, outside of truth-procedures, there are only opinions and difference, it follows that the application of Badiou’s ethics to this case seems illegitimate while at the same time tributary to the constraints introduced by his vocabulary.

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The contrast between Badiou’s ethics and the discussion of this concrete situation is, to my mind, highly instructive. His ethics is clearly fashioned not as an ethics *per se* but as the ethics *necessary* to bring about the ontological and phenomenological project, i.e. to produce locally universal and eternal *truths*. This is undoubtedly a change in the traditional focus of ethics concerned with defining and prescribing the right *action* across human experience. Accordingly, a first cost of Badiou’s conceptual innovation comes from making ethics a rare subject that caters for highly exceptional moments; moments that do not concern ordinary human beings’ dilemmas but the participation of and in something that is larger than her. For this reason, it is quite puzzling to witness both the increasing application in scholarly work of Badiou’s ethics to discrete problems such as business ethics as well as commentators’ neglect of this foundational problem. This is certainly more important than usually recognized because once severed the link between ethics and truth, Badiou’s proposal collapses into something close to classical existentialism; an outcome that, as we shall see in detail, Badiou fought at all costs.

This section tried to show that Badiou's conceptual innovation produced a vocabulary that does not and cannot apply to many morally relevant situations in human life. The problem lies not so much in the layer Badiou adds to ethics (events of importance in and for world history) but in everything that he, without apparent justification, *subtracts* from the concept while maintaining it. Can Badiou's meta-ethics and normative ethics compensate for the narrow scope of the ethical?

4. Second Critique: *A priori* Good and Evil

This section focuses on Badiou's meta-ethics and tests the robustness of a central claim of the *Ethics*: the idea that nature is neither good nor evil. Instead, he proposes that good and evil only arise *a propos* the human capacity to act like an Immortal, i.e. the *stance* the subject takes regarding the event. The purpose of this section is to show how Badiou fails to eschew *a priori* ideas of good and evil in the construction of his ethics.

First, sub-section 4.1 responds to *evil* by arguing that Badiou's distinction between true and false events in the case of Nazism presupposes a content-dependent conception of evil, i.e. non-local universality. Such conception of evil betrays Badiou's broader view according to which, true events have to be *good* or *progressive* for pure humanity. However, if this is the case, then his ethics are contradictorily premised upon *a priori* ideas of good and evil. Furthermore, Badiou's thesis would require one to believe that *Ideas* exist independently of their historical occurrences, which once again seems to presuppose some sort of *a priori* values.

Second, sub-section 4.2 shows how Badiou violates his own postulates also in the case of *good*. This is done by demonstrating how Badiou cannot legitimately deem, as he tries to, a particular

conception of good – equality – as preferable to another one – liberty. Without an *a priori* set of values, there is no Archimedean point from which such a judgment could be cast.

The conclusion is that Badiou's proposed meta-ethics fails to deliver something new. It is certainly important to question the hype behind *Ethics* as well as to tone down Badiou's own claim to novelty. However, this paper is more interested in the perverse effects that the conceptual gimmicks generated to evidence this novelty. In this regard, Badiou's ethics create a moral language that would probably be condemned and opposed by the vast majority of human beings, e.g. after Badiou, one has to say that Nazism was a form of evil because the political subject named a fake event, not because it produced atrocious consequences. As before concerning the scope of ethics, not only there is no radical novelty here as it is completely out of touch with ordinary moral experience and sensibility. Let us then try to make good these claims.

4.1 True/False Events: *A priori* Evil and the *Universality* Requirement

Badiou upholds that nature is beneath good and evil and consequently we should abandon the idea of radical evil. He further applies, in *Ethics*, this conception to Nazism in order to highlight that an ethics primarily based on evil makes us oblivious to the fact that the Nazi horrors required a *political* sequence. Three points are worth commenting here. First, Badiou clearly overstates his case: it is commonly held that Nazism required criminal *politics*. Second, even if one would accept his claim, it is unclear why should Nazism be understood *exclusively* from the point of view of politics. Apart from a political sequence, it is clear that Nazism required a considerable, not to say massive, number of individual ethically *wrong* actions outside of any militancy of truth expressing enthusiasm in a newly formed political body. One does not exclude the other and it seems that Badiou's categorization of Nazism is made to fit his basic postulate that truths emerge only in his four conditions rather than fitting life, as we know it. Third, from

the standpoints of ordinary language and moral experience, it stretches the envelope too far to declare that Nazism was evil because the subject named, and was faithful to, a *fake* event; not because of the harm produced and the horrid concerted practices of extermination carried out.

Clarifying whether Badiou can distinguish between *true/false* events is a crucial step to establish the claim that his ethics can move beyond the *status quo* in ethics. Badiou illustrates the distinction between true (genuine) and false events by suggesting that Nazism was a fake event. In order to make his case, he draws a line between the form and content of events.

For Badiou, Nazism was *formally* an event as it: (i) produced something novel that was absent in the state of the situation, i.e. “the Jew”; (ii) commanded fidelity to that fake event; thus, (iii) erecting “*a simulacrum of the subject*”. However, *substantially*, Nazism failed to be an event because it filled the void of the situation with particularity as opposed to universality, i.e. by naming a “community, the “Germans”. With the analysis of Nazism, Badiou makes clear that for an event to be genuine, it must not only break with the situation but must do so for everyone; it needs to be “universally addressed”.

Badiou’s reasoning seems unpersuasive. Since he starts with a dualism between being and event and further assumes that truth emerges within procedures – it is not an essence – there is no point from which a substantive conception of the event may arise without contradiction. In other words, where does the “universality” requirement comes from and what does it entail?

In “An Ethics of Militant Engagement”, Ernesto Laclau superbly sketches this critique in more formal terms. At stake is the content of the void of a situation. According to Laclau, in set theory (as used by Badiou) the void is *empty*, meaning that it is included in all situations while not

belonging to them, i.e. the uncountable. Then Badiou, according to Laclau, magically equates an empty void with universality:

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“It only takes a moment to realize that the universal content is not empty. We are simply confronted with an attempt at an ethical defence of universality which proceeds through an illegitimate appeal to set theory. So much for Badiou’s claim that any filling of the void is evil. In the second place, we are sometimes presented with the argument that the subjects of the truth have means of differentiating between truth and simulacrum – criteria such as strict equality, universality, indifference to all qualities and values etc. But it is clear that the validity of these criteria entirely depends on accepting as a starting point the equation between void and universality. So the argument is perfectly circular”.

Thus, there is no *a priori* reason to privilege universality over any other value as the necessary substance of the event. This is an illegitimate and contradictory move, and consequently the distinction between true/false events collapses. We are left accepting that, within Badiou’s *Ethics*, Nazism is not a form of evil and therefore his ethics has no way of telling a subject that it is wrong/evil to be faithful to events of such nature. It would not work to argue that events that fully name the void always amount to a totalization of truth (the third form of evil) because it is impossible to conceive of any affirmation of truth that is not totalizing by definition, e.g. did the October Revolution name the landowners or eliminate them in the name of the masses?

To reach a deeper understanding of the implications of Badiou’s strategy, it is useful to contrast Nazism and Communism. Badiou sees Nazism as a form of evil because it can *never* be universally addressed. In whatever formulation, it would always name a specific political community, the “Germans” or the “Aryans”. On the other hand, Badiou believes that

Communism is a true event because it reflects an *Idea* that is intrinsically universally addressed: equality and abolition of hierarchy. Thus, it does not really matter the fact that all communist revolutions have named a specific “community” (the factory worker, the peasant...). Nor does it matter that the political sequences created by these events ended up crystalizing the body of the subject totalizing the Party or the Leader. According to Badiou, such historical failures are not proof against the “universality” of the Idea of Communism because the latter, in abstract, does not exclude any human beings *qua* human beings. Yet, such a line of argument entails a further out-dated and suspicious belief, i.e. *that the Idea exists untainted by its historical entries*. Furthermore, it requires that we interpret specific historical events, such as the October Revolution of 1917, which was a local revolution by the Bolshevik party leading to its totalization, as actualizing the *abstract* Idea of Communism. That is, we have to believe that it makes sense to compare in abstract terms and irrespective of the consequences produced, the Ideas affirmed in *concrete* events that named *concrete* communities... But then, isn't the definition and substance of the event determined *a priori* by an Idea? Doesn't the event become a placeholder for a specific type of Idea? And thus, isn't it illusory to pretend, as Badiou does, that there are no *a priori* values in nature?

4.2 *A priori* Good and Choosing between different Universal Ideas: Liberty and Equality?

We have seen in the previous section how Badiou's qualification of Nazism as a form of evil requires an *a priori* idea of evil. This section extends the argument but instead of focusing on forms of evil, it elaborates on Badiou's implicit use of *a priori* conceptions of good.

According to Badiou, in *Logics of Worlds*, to witness truth “is to experience an Idea”. An Idea is an invariant theme that was affirmed point by point. Politics, for Nina Power and Alberto Toscano:

“involve[s] the upsurge of what an inegalitarian and coercive system of representation forecloses, and the undoing of the rules that structured the initial situation or world”.

This is a shortcut to say that for Badiou the Idea of politics is Communism premised on the two features contained in the cited passage. But this seems problematic: why are liberal democratic revolutions not events to which we constantly need to be faithful? After all, through the spread of universal suffrage, liberal democratic revolutions have gradually named and brought into existence those that were unaccounted for in the previous state of the situation. What is more, liberal democracy’s address is universal, based on formal legal equality for all. Against this background, even if Badiou demolishes “democratic materialism” one should ask whether he can do so with ease.

Badiou accepts that there is an *Idea* of justice in Communism that is independent from the outcomes and historical realizations (“historical entries”) of Communism. *A fortiori*, because democracy also addresses a pure humanity, one should also remain faithful to the *Idea* of democracy (liberty and formal equality) irrespective of the fact that as things stand now some elements that *are* already there *do not exist*, e.g. the *sans-papiers*. In simpler words, why should one endorse reiterated versions of communism and deny the same for democracy (as Badiou does)? A similar reasoning could be made regarding the affirmation of human rights through 18th century declarations, which recognized different generations of rights including social and cultural ones (making them more and more *inclusive*). Indeed, it is difficult to dispute that human rights are universally addressed and they were affirmed in a number of *events*. It is clear that, for Badiou, rights are part of the problem as they prevent radical shifts in the state of the situation. But this should not deter us from asking whether Badiou has, in the first place, the resources to deny that rights declarations, or rights’ catalogues as part of liberal democratic revolutions,

constituted *events*. For example, the Civil Rights movement was the first episode to come to mind when I first considered Badiou's concept of event. But if Badiou's ethics cannot deny with certainty that the Civil Rights movement was an event, then he would have to tell us how to solve the problem of conflicting fidelities to different events... Once again, it seems that the problem of which event and *Idea* to be faithful to is solved from the beginning by axiomatic postulation.

To be sure, Badiou admits that the *French Revolution* was an event that affirmed three ideas “*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*”, but ended up subordinating equality to liberty. Once we acknowledge this, it becomes difficult to understand the nature of Badiou's critique to democracy or rights since they were proclaimed together with the Liberal Revolutions. Badiou could reply in two ways.

He could argue that rights establish a general ethics that prevents *radical* moral agency (he does that in the *Ethics*). True, but as shown above he cannot explain why rights movements are not events in the first place. And if this is the case, we are trapped in a deadlock of conflicting fidelities: on the one hand we should be able to think an *Idea* that may require a new moral code without rights, whereas on the other hand we should be faithful to the event of rights and liberal democratic revolutions. It is interesting to remember that rights advocates are often accused of heralding *idealist* propositions, in the same way communism is widely viewed as an ideal but unachievable state of affairs.

Badiou could also argue that equality needs to rule over liberty because of the massive injustices and inequalities produced (he does so in an interview with Fabien Tarby). Such a counter-argument, however, contradicts Badiou's conceptual apparatus. After all, how can Badiou claim that equality is a preferable universality than liberty? Recall that he rejects an *a priori* axiology of

good/evil so he is barred from distinguishing among better/worse universal ideas. In addition, notice that what he cares about is the *Idea*, and how different events bring into existence what is absent. From this standpoint, it is not clear how anyone can criticize empirical failures of democracy to abolish hierarchy that cannot be corrected/improved by further events resurrecting the *Idea* of liberty, i.e. event of the French Revolution. But Badiou refuses an improved democracy in both *Logics of Worlds* and his interview with Fabien Tarby. This can only be because the *Idea* of liberty is predetermined *a priori* and is deemed to be faulty in abstract terms; thus it cannot be mended by any future event. To see further the limits of Badiou's strategy, it is enough to reverse the historical record. Let us assume that we have a Communist *Idea* of justice that emphasizes substantive equality among individuals. This is an *Idea* that intrinsically collides with liberty and thus according to Badiou's reasoning if equality is needed to end the inequalities produced by liberty; so is liberty needed to put an end to the lack of freedom imposed by pure substantive equality. There is simply no way of breaking the circle without assuming *a priori* that there is *one* superior value. One wonders, however, who appointed Badiou the spokesperson for pure humanity?

Notice that the intention here is not to defend democracy or human rights but rather to show that if one starts with Badiou's commitments, i.e. a non-essentialist ontology and no *a priori* good/evil, one cannot have Badiou's preference for *one particular* idea of pure humanity in politics. In fact, Badiou's concept of truth establishes an *a priori* conception of political truths and the *Idea* they uphold without providing reasons for it. If this is the case, there is an *a priori* idea of good permeating his project: an event always has to be universal and emancipatory and this means, in politics, Communism! Not only does Badiou contradict the leitmotiv of *Ethics* as he also fails to defend the proposition that there can be (a single) pure universality. For the reasons sketched in this section, the originality of Badiou's ethics is severely compromised for its reliance on traditional *a priori* postulations of good/evil. Furthermore, the conceptual straightjacket

Badiou applies to ethics also greatly simplifies the morally salient features of our history. For example, there is no room to recognize that human rights provided resources for actual and truthful political emancipation. These limitations stem from Badiou's rigid dualisms as well as for the attempt to create a grand theory of moral and political change subordinated to a specific *Idea* of politics; one that obviously cannot account for the messiness and the conflicting potential of events in human life.

5. Third Critique: The Four Figures of the Subject & the Event - Good and Evil Reconsidered

In the preface to the English edition of the *Ethics* and then in *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou changes and refines the claim that the event is *good/progressive*. He pens, in the *Ethics*, the major difference like this:

“The subject cannot be conceived exclusively as the subject faithful to the event. This point in particular has significant ethical implications. For I was previously unable to explain the appearance of reactionary innovations. My whole theory of the new confined it to the truth-procedures. But when all is said and done, it is obvious that reaction, and even the powers of death, can be stamped with the creative force of an event. I had already emphasized the fact that Nazism was inexplicable without reference to communism, and more precisely to the Revolution of October 1917. I was then obliged to admit that the event opens a subjective space in which not only the progressive and truthful subjective figure of fidelity but also other figures every bit as innovative, albeit negative – such as the reactive figure, or the figure I call the ‘obscure subject’ – take their place.”

And confirms it in *Logics of Worlds*:

“I too shared for a long time the conviction that what resists the new is the old ... But this view of things underestimates what I think we must term *reactionary novelties*. In order to resist the call of the new, it is still necessary to create arguments of resistance appropriate to the novelty itself. From this point of view, every reactive disposition is the contemporary of a present to which it reacts ... But it [the body] is caught up in a subjective formalism that is not, and cannot be the pure permanence of the old”.

This section recasts the discussion on good and evil taking into account the changes and revisions Badiou introduced in *Logics of Worlds*. There Badiou presents a new vocabulary that muddles the picture. Rather than speaking in terms of good/evil and true/fake events and subjects he: (i) speaks of all events as novelties; (ii) distinguishes among different figures of the subject (the *reactive*, the *obscure* and the *faithful subject 2*) that bring about different types of novelties; and finally, (iii) ranks the different types of novelties and subjects.

The question we need to ask is what Badiou achieves with this new *mise-en-scène* and especially whether Badiou ultimately succeeds in building an ethics not premised upon *a priori* ideas of good and evil. *En passant*, it is obvious that these additional figures of the subject add realism to Badiou’s concept of event, since they fit ideas we are socialized in. Indeed, it is part of education (at least in Europe) to study revisionist versions of revolutions or classicist movements in art. Moreover, these movements are often given equal status (i.e. they all are epochal episodes that deserve mention in the history of each world) to that of more affirmative schools of arts or progressive readings of revolutions. In the article “Badiou’s Metaphysical Basis for Ethics”, Anthony Beards suggests in fact that Badiou has included these categories of the subject to make his (updated) ethics fit better existing social values of good and evil. Although it may be far-fetched to speculate about the reasons that lead Badiou to change his views, this shift sounds,

indeed, all too convenient as it promises to close the gap between conceptual innovations and deeply seated moral beliefs.

Upon careful reflection on the introduction of these new figures of the subject and different novelties, however, the balance is uncertain for two reasons. The first one, concerns the fact that Badiou still seems to uphold the idea that the truth of the event is a *productive* novelty. Only in this way, can one interpret Badiou's reading of Nazism *as a reaction* to Communism. This idea will be explored in detail later. The second one stems from the fact that Badiou clearly *evaluates* the different "presents" each figure of the subject brings about. He tags the present of the truthful subject "affirmative and glorious", the reactive subject's present "a little less worse" than the past and, finally, the obscure subject's present "concealed". Therefore, there is a *hierarchy* of progressiveness created by subjective figures within the subjective space opened up by the event (notice that the distinction between true/false events has been abandoned in favour of the idea that events open up a subjective space). But this move only resurrects the criticism noted above: on which grounds can one distinguish, from within Badiou's ethics and philosophy, reasons to name the faithful present *better* than the reactive one?

First, it is clear that the *event* now admits innovations that are both productive and conservative. This indeed seems to correct Badiou's previous difficulty in assuming reactionary novelties like Nazism. But the point is that by conceiving the event as a subjective space in which progressive and reactive novelties can be made and subjects emerge, the event as a necessarily progressive rupture disappears and so does the unequivocally progressive truth it produced. This means that the event is no longer a point in time with a given content, but a space of possibilities with four different values. As a result, one needs to look for other criteria to be able to claim that the truth of the event is that advanced by *the faithful subject* only. However, second, as long as the subjects are faithful to the event as a subjective space why would a reactive subject's present be worse

than that of the faithful subject? Badiou seems to assume that an innovation, which expands universal possibilities, is better than one that *denies* or reacts *against* them. Thus, while different subjective figures are available, only one of them produces the truth of the event. This move, though, is a question begging on different accounts as follows.

5.1 Why Truth? And Why Truth as “Production”?

Badiou’s response assumes that progressive innovations are better than reactionary ones because the former *expand* the present we live in. But why should this be a better present? It is difficult to catch a glimpse of an explicit argument across *Logics of Worlds*. It seems that a progressive innovation is better for Badiou because expanding possibilities of being in any of the four worlds always constitutes an affirmation of our capacity for truth. But given Badiou’s work in *Logics of Worlds*, all figures of subject speak to such human capacity for truth. Therefore, we remain aloof as to where the superiority of the truth brought about by the faithful subject comes from. This, however, only moves the question backwards as one is forced to ask what is truth, and how can we know that truth has to be progressive. This is a problem for Badiou, for as much as he speaks of truth, its origin is a mystery and the only thing we know is that events produce truths. Reviewing *Being and Event*, Peter Dews put it like this:

“Yet truth, on Badiou's account, cannot be demonstrated. It 'makes a hole in a knowledge' of the ontological domain. It is available only to the faithful”.

In addition, Badiou would also have to explain why our capacity for truth requires more than producing reactionary or obscure innovations. After all, let us not forget, innovations like Nazism are still innovations. But this is harder than it seems without an *a priori* idea of what good is. First, there is the lack of textual argument. Second, Badiou’s emphasis on the idea that truth is

associated with productive novelties is hardly universal. Indeed, it has a surprising Western flavour to it given the bias in favour of *production/action*, *novelty* and its relationship to the *good*. Other (mostly Oriental) philosophies and anthropologies emphasize instead the truth of serenity, immobilism, inner being, tradition... Moreover, consider Aboriginal art's refusal to think about itself in terms of innovation, i.e. of a break that institutes a before and an after. Therefore, Badiou owes the reader an explanation of the reasons behind this particular understanding of truth; of why enthusiasm rather than silence. In the end, it is paradoxical that the particular conception of truth at stake evokes exactly the postmodern taste (that he is so critical of) for cacophony, noise and action universalizing it in the name of truth. Third, Badiou mentions, more than argues, that there is "a certain order ... for reasons that *formalism* makes altogether clear" (emphasis added) in the figures of the subject and their destinations: production – denial – occultation. This sounds reasonable at first but since we are talking about evaluating the contribution of ideas in history, a formal or chronological explanation hardly seems to do the trick. This is because the success of such an explanation depends on whether the past can be read in a naturalistic way so that "production" and "denial" of events are chronologically presented in a *neat* fashion and independent of the choices of the historian and/or the sociologist. Here, it is useful to point out that identifying novelty and production across different worlds is not equally easy. For example, it is quite easy to identify a love encounter that disorganizes the experience of the individuals and changes it into something different, something new. However, what makes a work of art or a political revolution a productive novelty? Thus, the passage from individual to collective events brings accrued difficulties. We will delve further into this point below. For the time being, it must be borne in mind that the formal/chronological argument fails to explain, in the first place, why the truth lies in the first logical event: production.

The upshot of the above paragraphs is that Badiou ranks the “presents” brought about by different figures of the subject based on an *a priori* undisclosed bias in favour of productive novelties. This leads to a parallel ranking of the different figures of the subject too. For this reason, in order for such an ethics to offer plausible normative guidance, it has to tell *individuals* how to distinguish *in practice* a true event from a fake one; or in his new language, how to distinguish productive and reactionary innovations. Otherwise, how can we evaluate less favourably a scientist that *faithfully* rejected Einstein’s theory of relativity because she believed it was a wrong scientific conjecture? Or someone that rejects jazz as an event in the world of music, as Badiou explicitly does, because it falls short of producing a fully-fledged formal revolution?

5.2 The Concept of Event: Truth, Time, History and Sociology

The previous sub-section suggests that the ranking of both novelties and figures of the subject demands that a distinction can be made between productive and reactionary novelties. In order to probe deeper we need to turn to the concept of *event*.

It is hard to grasp the choice of events by Badiou as he refers to them in such a way one feels insecure for doubting him. For Badiou “it is always obvious” that the French Revolution was an event and “we all know” that the Chinese Revolution too was an event as well as the tragic love story of Abelard and Heloise, Schoenberg’s dodecaphonic music or Galileo’s scientific discoveries.

We know that events take time and constitute a break to a situation, instituting a before and an after. Furthermore, we have seen that the event opens a subjective space in which different types of innovations can take place, which means that different subjects have to exercise fidelity to the

event before it is even named as such. Badiou calls the creator or the inventor the first one to be “seized by it”. This means that there must necessarily be a struggle. Einstein must argue and provide reasons within the academic establishment to name the event, to have it intervened and recognized. Likewise, those sceptical of the novelty of Einstein’s relativity theory will also provide reasons and in doing so, produce a *different present* as Badiou puts it. However, all this takes place *before* the event becomes an event. Consequently, the idea of the event as an “encounter” does not fit equally well the worlds of love and the worlds of politics, art and science given that the instant of “falling in love” in the first is not enough to name the event in the latter. If this is true, however, the event becomes more sociological and historical than Badiou assumes; certainly, more dependent on some sort of social recognition. It will also always involve contested historical judgements made with hindsight whenever one decides to scan history for examples. Let us use one of Badiou’s examples.

Badiou maintains that an event in the world of music and art always produces a formal revolution in the possibilities of the “language” they use. Notice how, in this example, Badiou ties the event with a clear substantive criterion of universality open to the same critique we adduced when speaking of the universality requirement invoked to distinguish true from fake events. The same reasoning applies because nowhere are we provided with an argument of why a “formal revolution” is the truth of these worlds. Since Badiou tends to identify unanimously accepted paradigm-shifting episodes such as Schoenberg’s twelve-tone music or Mozart’s tonal music as events; one has trouble pushing the basic question back on the table: why is a “formal revolution” the standard for truth and no other substantive ideas of revolution in music or art? For example, Béla Bartók, who reacted against atonal music and ended up fostering folk music, is widely held as creative. Yet, for Badiou, the present he created is less heroic than that of Pierre Boulez, because Bartok *denied* the event. It is less heroic too than the neo-classicism of a subject resurrecting the event of tonality. This is surprising since it is difficult to understand how the

resurrection of an event can create a heroic present superior to that created by reactionary novelties. To be sure, it is hard to distinguish resurrection and reactionary novelties in the first place. Badiou holds them differently because the truths produced by events are eternal but how can we distinguish between imitation, reactionary innovation and resurrection of a formal revolution?

It is perhaps without surprise that one learns that for Badiou there has not been a single formal revolution in music after dodecaphonic music as he refuses to consider jazz an event. In his opinion, despite being innovative, jazz has not managed to produce a formal expansion of the possibilities of music. Within Badiou's categories, this judgement would make him a *reactive subject* as it is plausible that eventually, if not already, jazz is bestowed the status of an event. We are back to the line of argument put forward above. It is hard to dissociate the event, in worlds beyond *immediate* human experience and individual naming of the event, from some sort of sociological recognition.

Four additional remarks, extracted from his conversation with Fabien Tarby, bring this point to its full fruition. First, Badiou says that the subject of art – a series of works – draws us in a way that incorporates us into the truth of the event. But in making these claims, Badiou assumes mysteriously that the reason why we are drawn to listen to John Cage has to do exclusively with its truth – the formal revolution in music – and not to questions of taste, sociologically and historically constructed. Second, and contradictorily, Badiou seems to recognize this sociological dimension when arguing that in art:

“... nothing has been decided triumphally. There isn't any major orientation, which is why there is a proliferation of schools and experiments in a situation where anything is possible”.

This speaks to a struggle, to a fight for recognition, and more importantly to a difficulty of Badiou's ethics to speak of situations that do not have the support of widely held opinions across history. Consequently, this jeopardizes the idea of the event's purity and surprise. Third, and in turn, the need for recognition makes it much harder to defend a *developmental/saltational* conception of change in modes of being and thought as advocated by Badiou. Since Badiou speaks of these "jumps" as truths and not as historical and sociological phenomena, one has but to believe that Badiou knows their truth; and that this truth does away with questions of diverging interpretations of the historical and sociological record. Nevertheless, there is a gap between Badiou's implicit acknowledgement of some need for sociological recognition and the presentation of the event as a pure automatic and immediate truth independent of history. The final remark builds upon the implicit functionalist logic at stake and moves from Badiou's thesis that an event produces a "definitive truth" of the previous state of affairs "at the same time it puts an end to it", e.g. dodecaphonic music both ends and displays the truth of tonal music. But how can this be "absolutely evident"? Only if there is a functional reading of formal revolutions, which sends us back to the conclusion advanced above: one has to rely on Badiou's unveiling of the truth of music as a succession from tonal to atonal music because truth in art (including music) comes from "what counts, or doesn't count as a form". And this question in turn requires one to believe that that is indeed the *truth* of art and that is the proper way in which to read the history of art.

Discussing the case of politics in similar terms, using Spinoza's definition, Daniel Bensaïd calls events *miracles* ("an event the cause of which cannot be explained"). He points out that what the October Revolution is cannot be understood without Stalinism. He then asks why Stalinism is not an event since it claimed it carried out the socialist revolution to its true logical outcome forcing us, the reader of history, to find out, which was the true revolution after all: The October

Revolution or Stalinism? This only shows how difficult it is to separate the *Idea* from its historical entries and the latter from particular historical and philosophical interpretations and *a priori* values.

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In Badiou's choice of events, only some of the socialist episodes are named as events; others like Stalinism are reactionary innovations. But who can decide what is the action and the reaction in this case or the case of historians' revisionism of the French Revolution? Similar problems were noted already regarding Badiou's claim that Nazism was as a reaction to the October revolution. But why is not the October Revolution a reaction to some other previous event? Why does Badiou stop the historical causal analysis in this case?

Badiou could still invoke against this sort of arguments the added precision in the definition of the "event" introduced in *Logics of Worlds*. There, Badiou stipulates a precise phenomenology of the event, i.e. a site with maximal intensity of existence (a singularity) which produces maximal consequences (strong singularity) so that both the singularity and its consequences exist maximally. What does this jargon actually mean? Events are episodes that erupt powerfully and produce glorious consequences even after they vanish. For instance, the Paris Commune event started on 18 March 1871 and was a strong singularity because it brought the workers into political existence with long-lasting consequences as it:

“... destroyed an essential form of subjection, that of proletarian political possibility to bourgeois political manoeuvring”.

Conversely, for Badiou, the episode of 4 September 1870 establishing the Third Republic that would last 70 years, as opposed to the Commune event that lasted two months, is not a strong singularity because it had no *duration* “hijacked by bourgeois politicians”. One needs, naturally, to

believe that Badiou's interpretation of history is true. In any case, this play with formal categories is rigged from the beginning as it entirely depends on what we consider the truth of the event to be, in such a way that we examine the duration of the different episodes according to that very same idea. If we define the event in function of the consequences it produced – Einstein's relativity theory triggered a paradigm-shift in physics – then the naming of the event will take place when it is already a theory deserving scientific credibility in the academic plateau. With hindsight, this is hardly surprising, but once we start questioning meticulously, as done throughout the paper, Badiou's concepts of truth, universality, Idea, good and so on, it is easy to see that his phenomenology of the event is not particularly helpful.

Altogether, the contents of section 5 place the building blocks of Badiou's ethics in crisis. It was argued that the openness in *Logics of Worlds* towards recognition of different figures of the subject could not explain why a productive novelty is better than a conservative one. Equally, it also fails to provide adequate criteria to distinguish the resurrection of a novelty from a reactionary innovation. The bottom line of this critique is that in order to make such evaluations, Badiou relies in a hidden *a priori* understanding of what is good and evil. This creates further problems for our moral sensibility as it ends up calling evil both the Nazi reactive subject as well as the reactive scientist that thinks that a novelty that turns out to be a true event is fake. In Badiou's categories, they occupy structurally the same position and are a form of the same figure of the subject. Of course, one could reply that *Logics of Worlds* speaks of the obscure subject in terms that are more precise. It defines it as that which opposes "all living thought" and thus upholds the mortification of life. In short, the obscure subject destroys the body that has constructed the present of a particular world. In politics, this amounts to name a full body such as in Nazism and Fascism. But this doesn't do away with the objection. First, and as pointed out before, it is hard to believe that any political revolution does not name a full body in the attempt to destroy the body responsible for the state of the situation. This appears to be a big hole in Badiou's ethics

because if he criticizes the projects of general ethics for being concerned with the conservation and administration of life; any radical proposal has to dispose of this paradigm and its body. Hence, going back to the previous example of imagining a coup that would dismantle the financial capitalist structure, one would hardly believe that the new state of the situation would still name them. If it did, it would never be radical, i.e. a hole in our established knowledge. Second, and relatedly, this only means that the obscure subject is a figure that is at odds with the whole concept of event and an ethics of events. But for that reason, this is a category that cannot be deployed to capture contested political sequences. Hence, we cannot cast either the negative judgment associated with the desire for the “mortification of life” which Badiou associates to the obscure subject. Overall, Badiou’s ethics is still in need of a vocabulary that allows us to evaluate political sequences that produce particularly horrific outcomes.

Finally, the detailed discussion of the concept of event, with special emphasis on its temporality, further muddies the waters by showing how difficult it is to identify one. All lines of argument seem to go back to Badiou as the spokesperson for pure humanity - for what counts as a universal novelty - for the necessity that this is what counts as truth and that we cannot disagree on historical interpretations of the episodes that actualized such universal and eternal truths.

6. The Normative Guidance of Badiou’s Ethics

After analysing and evaluating Badiou’s meta-ethics and concept of event, this section asks what kind of a *normative ethics* can be deduced from such premises. In order to determine “what is the content and the structure of the normative guidance Badiou’s ethics of truths offers each one of us?” two steps are needed. The first one requires understanding the event as *the* rule to follow. Given that it is difficult to determine where the truth of the event comes from, Badiou merely replaces the truth of events for the truth of (his) *a priori* moral ideas. This hardly appears a radical

ethics. Sub-section 6.1 shows this by contrasting it to classical existentialism and approximating to Kantian ethics.

The second step concerns application problems. Sub-section 6.2 claims that Badiou's normative ethics are disappointingly abstract and blind to the many different morally salient features and conflicts in concrete situations.

6.1 Rules, Events & Existentialism

At its core, Badiou's ethics is deeply similar to the existentialism of Sartre and others. For example, it shares the language of the ethical choice as an encounter that compels the individual to decide whether to be faithful. Furthermore, both are radical in their rejection of consequentialism and the assumption of full responsibility for the consequences brought about by one's actions. What matters is fidelity irrespective of the consequences produced. Existentialist ethics, however, is distinctive on two accounts. It applies to everyday life and it is radically subjective in the sense that there is no good/evil outside of the authenticity of the commitment. In "Existentialism Is a Humanism", Sartre defends the position that existentialism has an ethics with the following content:

"You are free, therefore choose, that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world ... still, it is I myself, in every case, who have to interpret the signs ... There are no means of judging. The content is always concrete and therefore unpredictable; it has always to be invented".

Badiou cannot accept existentialism since he considers the idea of a radically autonomous subject an illusion. Moreover, it is also clear that Badiou rejects the existentialist axiology that determines good and evil exclusively according to the idea of *authenticity*. For Sartre, as long as subjects act authentically they always act rightly. Evil amounts to acting in bad faith. He narrates this point by recalling the following objection: “your values are not serious, since you choose them yourselves”. To which he responds: “One can choose anything, but only if it is upon the plane of free commitment”. Taken literally, this would imply destroying the possibility of any truthful/objective/non-personal meaning in human action and history; a consequence Badiou fights with all his energy.

It is the concept of the event and its relationship to the good/evil distinction through the idea of fidelity that give Badiou’s ethics the objective dimension of the ethical. For Badiou, only fidelity to the event, i.e. to an episode that produces a rupture in the state of the situation, brings about good. Recall that we have identified the ways in which this rupture/novelty needs to have a specific content; it needs to be progressive, emancipatory and universal. However, through a series of critiques it was shown that Badiou cannot defend a pristine idea of universality and novelty of the event. This carries different implications. Since identifying an event becomes almost impossible, Badiou’s ethics facilitates the emergence of a radically autonomous – classical existentialist – subject that starts *naming* events rather freely, in oblivion to Badiou’s strict ontological and phenomenological coordinates. This fits the way in which existing scholarship appropriates Badiou’s work. The opposite reading is also possible. Since Badiou cannot do away with *a priori* conceptions of good and evil and cannot provide a reliable method to identify events, then one ought to take Badiou as the world’s moral legislator endorsing his teachings and the rules (the past events) he identifies. This point is crucial. Since Badiou’s concept of the event and the truth it produces has *substantive* content, Badiou moves away from an ethics of fidelity *tout court*. Instead, his ethics becomes closer to deontologism. While he rejects a general ethics

that cannot allow ruptures to the *a priori* moral code, Badiou's ethics, as reconstructed here, offers a strikingly similar picture. This is particularly clear in the case of politics where only fidelity to the *Idea* of Communism brings forth true events or productive novelties. All things considered, it is hard not to think of Communism as the new functional equivalent of Kant's "kingdom of ends". Of course, Kant's human dignity does not allow his project to become an available political ideal as Badiou's Communism, but if one thinks of the way in which the latter employs an *a priori* conception of the good, it is tempting to assume a similar desire to deduce from somewhere (reason?) a universalisable moral ideal. And since ultimately, the *Idea* determines the true event, the latter becomes structurally a clear-cut, albeit abstract, *rule*, i.e. you know what, unlike in existentialism, is good and evil.

6.2 Application Problems

Even if we think that Badiou's position comes untouched from the different critiques sketched throughout the paper, it seems fair to say that the difficulties with the identification of the event and its features make Badiou's ethics confusing for the individual that desires to follow it. Indeed, if the event is undecidable and unpredictable and, simultaneously, "only decided as such in the retroaction of an intervention", to *what* exactly should we be faithful to and *when*? Given the exceptionality of events, Badiou's ethics are rarely applicable and thus out of touch with ordinary life. For example, in the world of music, Badiou identifies only two events since the 18th century. Furthermore, the problems in identifying what an event is may create injustices in the moment of evaluating a subject as good/evil and/or faithful/reactive. After all, as pointed out before, the scientist that identifies a fake event shares the same form of evil as Nazis.

But let us assume that Badiou's event helps the "some-one" identifying an event thus providing her a clear normative object to pursue. The next step would then be to probe into the type and structure of normative guidance that this ethics of events offers. Unfortunately, the normative prescription is just this: "keep going" and "realize it [the event] to the extent/limit possible".

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In this context, and because ethics (including Badiou's) is in the business of guiding behaviour, it is worth asking what does it mean to keep going and realize the event to the extent possible in the different worlds Badiou is interested in, e.g. which particular steps should a militant of political truths engage in? Badiou cannot really answer this question for two reasons. First, for obvious ontological reasons, his politics cannot have any content (it is only a truth-procedure). Second, and consequently, the truth of politics seems to be premised on the *affect* genuine engagement produces: "enthusiasm". But can enthusiasm produce and make hard social choices?

This brings another issue to the table. When does the event end and turns into an established knowledge? This is important to rethink what is the void/absence of the situation. For instance, Badiou currently focuses on the political episode of "*sans-papiers*" but can we really say that they are absent from the situation, i.e. they do not exist? What would mean to have them existing in the state of the situation: open borders or less radical arrangements would be enough? The question is natural since the *sans-papiers* have been already named and a number of rights apply to them despite being often violated. This would be important to clarify the limits of the subject's engagement (as to avoid the charge of being a "too demanding ethics") but there is no clue whatsoever.

In other words, what Badiou's event offers, as put by Daniel Bensaïd in his piece "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event", is a "politics without politics" or "prescription rather than programme". Bensaïd further reveals, with wittiness, the product of the contrast between the

purity of Badiou's ethical formulae and the constitutional proposals put forward by *L'Organisation Politique*, the body founded by Badiou to engage in the practice of politics. According to Bensaïd, the proposals were "banal" focusing on institutional design (suggesting different forms of government and the abolition of some political positions). "Enthusiasm" and political militancy of truth based on revolutions say nothing to what and how the void is to be inscribed and pursued, exactly the two most difficult questions in ethical and political theory.

What is surprising is the lack of originality of Badiou's proposal. Political philosophy and ethics alike are full of works extolling the virtues of revolution, emancipatory politics and the affirmation of a conscious global ethics. Contrary to what Badiou often assumes, even the latter is a program for struggle that may require the violation of an *a priori* moral code. In fact, there are full libraries in the history of ethics and political theory devoted to ideal theories and the affirmation of ideal principles such as universality and/or equality. Against this background, it is not easy to understand how Badiou's prescription can amount to little more than a very limited deontological command which pays no heed to the particular circumstances of the situation.

One can think that Badiou cannot prescribe more because he does not believe that we can say anything truthful beyond "keep going ... realize it to the limit possible" but then, why bother going through such a demanding, conceptually idiosyncratic body of work? The point is that since the devil always lies in details, the novelty and contribution of Badiou's work for ethical theory would have to come from its contribution to speak to the details of the concrete circumstances of ethical situations. This is more the case as political and ethical theory is moving precisely in the direction of non-ideal theory trying to adjust prescriptions to different scenarios of compliance, existing rules and norms as well as identifying steps to bridge the gap between the actual and the ideal.

Badiou's reliance in normative commands strangely similar to those of Kant or religious morality contributes to simplify the complexity of ethical choices. For Badiou adheres to a strict form of deontology.

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Let us think for a second on the form of evil Badiou names "betrayal", that is, when a subject fails to show consistency in the fidelity to the event. This can be the case of a disillusioned revolutionary that grows sceptical of the turn that a given revolution took or believes that the horrific consequences brought about justify the abandonment of the event or perhaps because she believes upon greater reflection that the event is a false one. In Badiou's categories, there is no space for this faithful change of mind as the ethical choice triggers an all or nothing judgement. Any subject that betrays the event, irrespective of the reasons and motives it may have to do so, produces a form of evil. Under the name of an ethics of truth, what we see is the development of a very traditional authoritative interpretation of events denying individuals the right and freedom to uphold and form a different, morally reasoned, understanding.

Moreover, this does not fit the complexity of moral situations. After all, it would be odd, according to our received moral vocabulary and sensibility to say that a revolution in which thousands die is *preferable* to one in which few people die. Here, it is enough to think of the reasons that make the Portuguese Carnation Revolution so emblematic, i.e. no shots were fired and rifles were filled with carnation flowers. Against this, Badiou's claim that the subject that faithfully produces the truth of the revolution only to withdraw from it later engages in a form of evil –*betrayal*– seems just a *pure* ethical position void of serious practical reflection. Recall that Kant wrote in a similar way:

“... and the essentially good in the action consists in the disposition, let the result be what it may”.

And Kant is still criticized for not being able to account for situations in which respect for the moral law may bring about worse outcomes. Like Kantian ethics, Badiou's proposal also fails to see consequences as morally relevant from a descriptive and normative point of view.

This brings us back to the point raised before - of the troubles of determining what is the true affirmation of the *Idea* in a revolution - and the need of conceiving the *Idea* and the subjective commitment in pure and binary terms in order to be able to create the concept of event. But as Kant is guilty of creating a general ethics that does not allow the violation of "human dignity", so is Badiou of creating a moral vocabulary that does not allow the violation of "the truth of the event". To my mind, the poverty of such an ethics lies in this. It comes close to say that in a war, as in a revolution, it does not matter the havoc one brings about because, as long as the *Idea* is being affirmed, that "some-one" will be on the right side. Thus, fidelity to the event excludes any judgement on human reasonableness! While this conclusion is morally repugnant, the purpose is to point out that I consider any moral vocabulary that cannot *see* reasonableness in human action to be profoundly lacking. Such a vocabulary as Badiou's only simplifies the real number of choices that need to be made in complex ethical situations.

Finally, another dimension of the lack of normative guidance Badiou's maxims offer comes from a potential conflict of fidelities. Imagine that you are a scientist in love: what does it mean to be faithful to the truth of love and science? Or how should you harmonize a political militancy of truth "to the extent possible" with a similar prescription to be faithful to a love encounter? Not only there is no reply as there is no conceptual room for such conflicts in the first place. Once again then, the conceptual work of an ethics of events is blind to important morally salient features of concrete situations. In other words, it cannot describe moral situations in the rich terms that our moral experience and acquired moral traditions do. Consequently, Badiou's ethics

also fails to overcome current difficulties in moral theory such as those arising from conflicts of rules or conflict of virtues.

At this point, one question should be assaulting the reader's mind: how can such an ethics be heralded as an ethics of *concrete* situations against the general ethics of Kant and Levinas? In the name of a mysterious truth, Badiou comes up with an ethics of events that forces us to abandon everything for the event with no other guidance than a few commands and a number of events. Thus, not only is Badiou's ethics *ideal* but also it is simply too demanding. As Peter Sloterdijk wrote about Kant's categorical imperative, its sublimity may well lie in its inapplicability. In this account, Badiou's work is conservative, as most debates in ethics and political philosophy aim to move away from all too abstract ethical formulations and single foundational moral principles. In order to reject all ethical work currently being done in non-ideal terms Badiou would have had to explain in which way we cannot obtain and make "local" headway in ethical choices.

What his vocabulary captures is the functionalization of ethics to the task of producing rare truths and subjects; an ethics that is so formal and abstract that it cannot meaningfully address most problems in human life and experience. It is ironic to point out that Badiou's great enterprise is against the question of *meaning*, which makes it impossible for universal truths to arise; but in carrying his project out, the product is an ethics of little *meaning* to human beings. Perhaps, the real question is the one at the core of Badiou's project but one that he does not care to address explicitly: why should we abandon the sociological and philosophical constructivist projects in favour of the ontological and phenomenological ones that only limitedly tap into *human praxis*? At least, someone ought to tell which practical questions ontology can solve given that ethics is eminently a practical discipline.

7. The Place of Badiou's Ethics: Anthropology & Virtue Ethics

Despite its grand gestures and bombastic denials of contemporary ethics, Badiou's own take is surprisingly conservative in many accounts. This section examines further dimensions of ideal theory in Badiou's ethics and links them to its failure in moving moral theory ahead.

Badiou criticizes Kant and Levinas' *general ethics* pleading instead in favour of an ethics of concrete situations. But what exactly does he mean by a general ethics? Badiou criticizes both the *a priori* grounds of Kant and Levinasian ethics and the fact that they posit an essence of Man that does not allow ethics to be inventive, to go beyond a specific essence of Man. This is necessary, in practice, to rebel against an oppressive specific political-legal arrangement.

While Badiou's critique is accurate, in order to be able to keep Kant and Levinas in check, he draws on a highly debatable anthropology. Namely, that only our capacity for truths enables us to overcome a morality based on suffering that expresses contempt for the targets/victims. The problem here is that there is no argument as why this is *the* appropriate descriptive and normative basis for an ethics of human action except for a quote of Nietzsche. Just as Kant and Levinas, Badiou premises his theory on an essentialist understanding of Man, which elevates him above a suffering body. This postulate, however, denies that suffering is the most widely accepted source of moral impulse as recent work in ethical theory has shown. Moreover, such a "no harm" principle as the basis for ethics cuts across different cultures being present in both the West and the East. This seems to suggest another potential *ideal theory* dimension of Badiou's ethics, based on an anthropology that is at odds with moral intuitions. That is, the options for grounding morality are not just theoretical and *a priori* (Kant's reason and the Levinasian pre-experience "Other") as Badiou had us believe; morality can also be grounded in history and the evolution of human emotions and ultimately empirics. Thus, one wonders whether the *contempt* that an ethics of suffering supposedly evinces does not lie in the eye of the beholder. In such a critique there is

no intention to revive traditional protests against anti-humanists like Foucault, accused of not caring about human suffering. The point is to wonder why not, starting with “what we have” and “what is known to us”.

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What Badiou does not tell us is that there are ethical approaches that both: (i) accept a rupture in the good/evil entries of our moral vocabulary; and, (ii) provide a vocabulary that is able to describe situations accounting for many more morally salient features. Both pragmatist and virtue ethics, for instance, emphasize concrete situations. For lack of space, let us concentrate on virtue ethics only. It is true that Aristotelian virtue ethics posits a fixed human nature and defines “good” in terms of *eudaimonia*, but this does not mean that *every single action* has to be good or virtuous. The goal is human self-flourishing *across a lifetime* implying that human beings commit mistakes and learn from them. Furthermore, to be virtuous means to exercise the virtues, i.e. courage, temperance, truthfulness... but this exercise has to meet the virtue of *prudence* (*phronesis*). Thus, even if there are ideas of good one needs to pursue in the virtues, one also needs to know *when* to pursue them, which entirely depends on the concrete circumstances of the situation. Consequently, Aristotelian virtue ethics qualifies as an ethics of concrete situations in Badiou’s terms.

For instance, a virtue ethics approach could accommodate, as in the movie *Sophie’s Choice*, a mother’s refusal to decide when compelled to choose which kid to save and which one to send to a concentration camp. Even knowing that evil would arise from the action, the longer-term goal of self-flourishing ensures that such an action can be seen as morally good. Thus, if we go back to the example of the faithful subject that produces a bloody revolution, *phronesis* could show ways in which fidelity could be harmonized with other important values of human existence such as the need to pursue truth. This is a purely heuristic experiment to demonstrate how the vocabulary of virtue ethics is descriptively (and normatively) much richer than Badiou’s

ethical concepts. As stated before, Badiou's ethics raises concerns not for what it adds, but for what it subtracts from moral sensibility and experience. In conjunction with the conceptual and ontological straightjacket, Badiou's proposal cannot easily be complemented with more comprehensive moral traditions. For example, the idea that fidelity is a virtue is explicitly rejected since there is no subject before the event.

8. Conclusion

This paper examined in detail the most important dimensions of Badiou's ethics with the double aim of testing its self-professed novelty and its descriptive and normative power. In both accounts, Badiou's ethics was repeatedly found lacking. The conclusion that follows articulates a critique to the *strategy* pursued by Badiou in the elaboration of an ethics of concrete situations.

Founding ethics on the idea of truth comes at the price of an ethics that is incapable of speaking to most instances of human action. Furthermore, the price of Badiou's super theory is to functionalize human praxis to truth-searching. The outcome is just another instance of *ideal theory* in which the complexity of moral situations is abstracted from and straightjacketed in rigid conceptual categories. Categories that prevent us from saying that Nazism's evil lies in the violence it produced, and forces us to say that a moral agent is evil if she gives up on the event of Cultural Revolution once she becomes disgusted with the consequences it produced.

This is not a question of disagreeing with an ethics that "takes lives" as I believe that Badiou is right on this point. What is ethically questionable is whether one should remain faithful to the event whatever the consequences. No ethical situation, if described in its complexity, is an all or nothing gambit and all of us are faced with micro-decisions that may well test our fidelity but on

the other hand make us human. Paraphrasing Badiou, the Immortal human would benefit from being desacralized by the Animal human.

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You should “keep going”, Badiou says, for the sake of truth, universal and eternal. But as shown, Badiou does not even bother to defend a concept of universality (and its twin “pure humanity”), thereby ignoring Carl Schmitt’s famous passage that appeals to humanity are always made in someone’s name. After all, humanity does not speak. Interestingly, then, while Badiou criticizes Habermasian communicative action because opinions are not truths and truth requires an encounter (it is not communicable), he fails to take seriously the fact that Habermas’ communicative action is a procedure to find truth. Thus, Badiou does not argue properly against the universality that Habermas proposes (those affected have consented to it); he simply asserts that truth requires an encounter. But what type of procedure to solve disagreement is this? And how can one ensure that my encounter with *truth* is and should be read as Badiou does it? In this context, it is useful to recall Bernard Williams’ words in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*:

“We have other ways, historical and sociological, of understanding it [conflict]. The aim of theory is rather to resolve it, in the more radical sense that it should give some compelling reason to accept one intuition rather than another. The question we have to consider is: How can any ethical theory have the authority to do that?”

Therefore, while Badiou offers a much-needed vocabulary for heroism, for praise of actions that challenge the *Zeitgeist*, it does so by developing a reductionist approach to ethics that makes truth the prime value. But why truth? This is a question never answered and, in a way, this is only fitting, as ultimately his work requires faith and conversion. Furthermore, as briefly mentioned, other ethical approaches commend heroism and creative moral agency without sacrificing other values and important dimensions of human life. Thus, Badiou’s ethics seems to have been

written to fit and bring about a much broader ontological project that proposes a theory and praxis for change in modes of being across history that, while falling within social developmental hypotheses communicates to a tradition to which is foreign, i.e. ethics.

If something, Bernard Williams's suggestion that we should abandon (or at least seriously scrutinize) the idea of pursuing ethics through philosophical theory gains new force when paired with the rationalism of Badiou's construction. Ultimately, it is a paradox to speak of an ethics of concrete situations based on moral reductionism and conceptual rarefication in which, just to name a few examples, one has: four truth worlds (not three or five), four subjective figures (not two or six), lack of consideration for motives and all values and instances of ordinary lives and a dualism (being/event). If producing an ethics of truths requires such simplification, I simply ask: "Why should anyone be interested?"

Acknowledgements

Dave Eden and my former student Stephen Wilson provided the initial stimulus and excuse for engaging with Badiou's work in the first place. Gonçalo Vilaça, Walter Rech and Marina Lostal withstood with heroic stoicism several preliminary expositions of Badiou's ethics and philosophy. Marina also helped with issues of style. Juliette Kennedy generously shared many views on the relationship between Badiou and mathematics. I also want to thank the participants of a talk I gave in late November 2013, "The Place of Badiou's Ethics", at the Erik Castrén Institute of International Law and Human Rights (University of Helsinki) for the lively discussion and detailed comments. Finally, I am grateful for the remarks made by the anonymous referees and editors. All errors remain mine.

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Bibliographical Note

This article follows Badiou's practice of not providing full references in the text. These paragraphs offer a rationale for the sources mentioned in the text and those forming the background of the approach deployed.

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My work strives to offer a deep and reasoned engagement with Badiou's *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* complemented by *Logics of Worlds* and having as background *Being and Event*. I found the recent interview with Fabien Tarby *Philosophy and the Event* to be the best entry point in Badiou's work. This book is also extremely useful because it offers Badiou's take on recent history from an eventual perspective. It is good to see the language of event being applied to jazz, physics and cinema just to name some examples.

The most studied aspect of the *Ethics* is its relationship with the broader ontological project. Andrew Beard provides such a critique in the article "Badiou's Metaphysical Basis for Ethics". Ernesto Laclau's "An Ethics of Militant Engagement" offers a powerful critique and reconstruction of the distinction between true/false events. Benjamin Noys' "Badiou's Fidelities: Reading the Ethics" builds a typology of the fidelity concept across a number of works. Still directly on Badiou's *Ethics*, Brian Anthony Smith's "The Limits of The Subject in Badiou's Being and Event" suggests from a mathematical standpoint that Badiou's use of the axiom of choice does not establish the subject's goodness even though this work has to be re-read in accordance with Badiou's changes to the concept of subject in *Logics of Worlds*.

Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy edited by Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens and containing papers by Badiou is a good read on Badiou's place in 20th century philosophy. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano's piece "Politics" offers a good overview of Badiou's world of politics and Quentin Meillassoux's "History and Event in Alain Badiou" describes, even if

uncritically, Badiou's philosophy of history and theory of radical change. For a critique, read Daniel Bensaïd's "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event" raising a powerful challenge against the poor historicity of Badiou's event.

A number of works are important as context for my discussion (of the place) of Badiou's ethics. Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* is a great statement of the limited contribution analytic philosophy made (and continues to make) to ethics. Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* provides a good account of the dominant moral traditions as well as the need for historicity to be taken into account in ethics. Reading Luhmann's *Social Systems* and/or *Law as a Social System* offers an indispensable contrast to meditate on the question "social theory or philosophy?" that so often comes to mind when reading Badiou. Luhmann and Badiou share interesting features (despite many and stronger differences) since they both: (i) work out a theory of change and stasis; (ii) focus on different worlds/systems; and, (iii) have suggested that their disciplines needed refashioning after hard sciences' recent discoveries, i.e. Luhmann imported autopoietic biology, cybernetics and information theory into sociology and Badiou mathematics and logics into philosophy.

Jean Paul Sartre's lecture "Existentialism Is a Humanism" is a defence of the proposition that existentialism has an ethics. Simone de Beauvoir's novel *The Blood of Others* offers the best encounter with existentialism in general and provides an intuitive approach to the idea of encounter/event. Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is worth a close read in order to ascertain some striking parallels with Badiou's ethics.

Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics* remains a central source for virtue ethics. Andrew Linklater's "The Harm Principle and Global Ethics" describes the convergence towards "suffering/harm"

as the source of the ethical impulse. Wang Qingjie's "Virtue Ethics and Being Morally Moved" offers a bridge between Western and Eastern conceptions of moral sympathy.

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